

Terry the house painter came at his usual time. He tipped his hat, smiled and set to work. We offered him coffee and went about our business. Then came a crash and suddenly he burst into the room waving a gun. His face had changed. You could see something evil in his eyes. He grabbed my wife and pulled her from the house. "Why," she screamed... But Terry, our trusted friend for many years, had gone quite mad. They struggled and she managed to break away. Without warning Terry raised the gun. There was a bright flash.... At that instant John-Michael, our two-year-old, cried out in the next room. It was 3:30 in the morning. The shot fired in his mother's distant dream had awakened him crying, while I, just inches away, didn't miss a wink.

Mother and child are not separate. During pregnancy the two share the same nutrients, oxygen and hormones. They participate and share in each others emotional and cognitive ambience. Few experience this subtle dialogue. Those that do usually believe it's severed at birth. This is simply not the case. The dialogue continues, a deep relationship, beyond the borders of the body, time and space. This is the great gift of the pre-verbal child. Theirs is a world of deep intuitive knowing, boundless affection and an open invitation to rediscover the fresh immediacy of being alive.

I will never forget those pre-verbal days. John-Michael would come toddling along and suddenly... stop short. Something new had caught his gaze. This time it happened to be moss. You know, that stringy stuff we put in our potted plants. He began to reach and then, looked up, eyes filled with passion, burning with curiosity. Friend or foe he wanted to know? In that glance an exchange took place, one so quick it was complete before words could form. My perception of moss caused a subtle change in us both. A spontaneous field of meaning was created, and like the shot in his mother's dream, was shared by both. It wasn't facts or figures but a "silent knowing". My ambience created order and safety for John-Michael and I, by watching, listening and feeling, rediscovered the wonder of seeing the world through eyes that are innocent. All in a glance. All without words.

Armed with his new insight my little munchkin charged ahead. Moss went flying in all directions. He pulled, tugged, smelled and tasted, all the time building a full structure of knowledge that would last a lifetime. Usually, out of fear, we say no, don't touch that, you'll get dirty or poke your eye out! But the little darlings persist and sooner or later all of this, the sight, sound, smell, the taste, and the "silent knowing" is tucked neatly away as a precise pattern of neural connections. Then he looks up again and we give whatever it is a name.

What's in a word, that sound that comes to stand between us and the "real" world? Why have words become so important? What gives them the power to shape and control our lives?

How can we use this incredible resource to build a better world?

Words are symbols or triggers that stimulate a subtle replica of the original experience within the brain. Once in place the actual moss is not necessary. All that is needed is the symbol and the full sensory pattern; the texture, taste, smell and emotional ambiance of the original experience is projected as an image in the mind. That's right! Researchers at the University of California at San Diego recently released photos confirming that simple word recognition is accomplished primarily by the visual centers of the brain, not the thinking or memory centers. Words are experienced as images and without these inner pictures, words would have no meaning at all.

Literally, "the ability to make mental images" is called imagination. Yet, the actual powers of imagination go far beyond this to include the creative inception of all new forms and possibilities. We take imagination for granted, assume that it is there, hard-wired into the system, standard equipment you might say. But this is not the case and that is why we are in trouble. Like all human potentials imagination must be awakened, nourished and developed or we lose the capacity.

How important do you think words would be if our children never developed the capacity to create these inner images? Imagine, if you can, not being able to imagine. Without imagination the world would remain exactly as it has been. There would be no new possibilities, no creative power, personal choice or freedom. We would be stranded in a world without hope. This is the world many of our young people face for we have virtually eliminated imagination from early childhood.

Limit the need, range and use of words and you control how and what people think. Limit make-believe play in the early years and you limit the ability to plan ahead, control attention, conceive of new alternatives and solve problems. Give children a constant supply of finished images and representational toys and you eliminate all need to create. Why bother? Its all been done for them. Without the external challenge, the developing brain has no need to build the neural pathways required for inner imagery. In this subtle but profound way the brains of our children are different from every generation that preceded them.

Doing it all for them is a subtle form of control and television is the perfect tool for this control. Television confines physical activity. It isolates, limits and unifies experience. It eliminates the need for descriptive words and floods the brain with a compelling form of counterfeit imagery.

But the problem goes deeper than television. Changes in the American family, lack of leisure time, over-crowded schools, falling academic standards, the demise of meaningful family dialogue, the devaluation of language itself have all conspired to put an end to

imagination. And when imagination goes, personal freedom goes right along with it. They are inseparable.

The American Dream, all creative dreaming for that matter, is based on an inner vision. There is idealism. That too is based on an inner perception, an insight of what can be rather than what has been. When we live in our memory we live in the past, the "has-been". But when we live in our imagination we live in our potential, the "what-can-be". Idealism, innovation and hope take root and blossom only in imagination. No problem ever found a solution which did not arise first as an inner image, an insight. And words, especially descriptive words, are the keys that unlock this creative power.

Until very recently I never gave much thought to the flow of words that continually splash around in my head. Most of the time they seem to come and go as they please. But now I see that words are the building blocks that organize my thinking.

We all know the basic nuts-and-bolts kind of thinking... monkey see - monkey do, memorization, the what goes in - comes out variety. Let's call this level-one. It's the thinking you don't have to think about very much. It sort of just happens. We spend most of our life in level-one, collecting impressions, attaching names and filing them away. Most of the rattle that goes on in our heads is confined to level-one. We "think" this is thinking, but it is not really.

Then there is level-two thinking. It's only here that we become critical and creative. In level-two the mechanical flow of sensory-snap-shots triggered by words is directed inward, into a place in the mind we call "imagination". Imagination isn't really a place but rather a "field of mental energy." Here the innate intelligence of the mind acts upon itself by breaking apart the fixed mental habits found in level-one thinking. This frees the mind to envision new forms, patterns and possibilities.... like putting elephant ears on a hippopotamus, seeing ourselves as president, winning the Super Bowl or dancing more perfectly than anyone has ever danced before.

This creative energy of the mind has within it balance, beauty and proportion. In a flash of insight or direct perception these qualities organize new patterns as the old mental habits are dissolved. Leading scientists and mathematicians have implied that logic and reason begin within this creative field of imagination, as existing patterns are given new order within the mind. Perceiving musical harmony is a good example, when the mind distinguishes sounds that "fit together" from those that don't. This innate capacity to perceive and organize new forms is creative intelligence, and very different from the mechanical mental cogs found in level-one. Some have hinted at yet another level, beyond thought itself.

Here, when the mind is perfectly still, awareness stumbles upon and perceives directly the unifying patterns, the binding forces that connect all of life, the essence of wisdom.

Nearly all of what we call "education", career training, the corporate world and most personal relationships are all confined to level-one. Research suggests that the brain structures needed for this level are well established by age two. The unfolding of the imaginative structures are, given the appropriate model and nurturing, well established by age seven. By age eleven the patterns needed to proceed into pure abstractions "should" be in place. By the late teens or early twenties the depth and range of human perceptions literally span the universe. Yet, most of us spend our lives quite convinced that level-one is all there is. We missed the key which unlocks the door to these unlimited dimensions of the mind. We never developed our imagination.

Imagination is a state of mind and the entry point to a world of pure creative intelligence, where anything and everything is possible. It's a "free play" of mental images, the birth place all new things, and words are the tools which give us mastery over this most creative capacity of all.

To understand and use imagination one has to be shown what it feels like. All of early childhood used to be devoted to this "free movement" of the mind. It was called "make-believe play". Then came practice, and finally the inner vision could be used to change the outer world. This experience of transforming the outer world to match an inner vision, whether as a building, a painting or a pumpkin pie was, and still is, the essential foundation of true self-esteem.

So, what's in a word? Why is all this important? Just as environmental changes now threaten entire species with extinction, vast dimensions of human potential, including imagination (and with it personal freedom) can disappear in a single generation.

Leading specialists have estimated that as many as 80% of our nation's children, regardless of grade level or economic background, can be diagnosed as learning disabled by using one or more of the standard criteria. 15,000 children with attention, listening and language difficulties are being referred for assessment each week. A federal review concluded that advanced reading exams for today's ninth-graders are easier than fourth-grade tests in 1964. Of those who graduate from high school, less than 40% can comprehend what is printed in the local newspaper, the sales of which are declining rapidly. All forms of "hard" journalism are fading from the scene. According to Robert MacNeil of the MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour, "the idea is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action and movement".

Constant visual stimulation devalues the meaning of words, it retards the capacity to create inner images and blinds children to their own infinite possibilities. The failure to develop imagination during early childhood is the root cause of our national education crisis which is now impacts our economic competitiveness, national security and personal freedom.

So the next time your child seems unable to pay attention, is bored, unable to express him or herself, organize ideas or plan ahead, follow directions, or doesn't seem to listen or concentrate, can't remember, understand or express things orally... and when they try... you know, like, it was kinda, well... just like on TV..., take a moment and consider the importance of those sensory snap shots we call words. You know, the stuff that dreams and the American way of life are made of.

It is not too late. There is a simple solution, one that can prevent a further closing of our children's minds. It is the discovery of imagination and the descriptive words that make it all possible.

Now close your eyes. In a moment the darkness will give way and you'll see a man walking toward you. It is a cold autumn day. Leaves are blowing across the damp path. You can hear them crunching as he steps closer. Down he reaches and pulls tightly on the long brown overcoat. The light woolen scarf tucked around his collar is blowing in the breeze. Puffs of white smoke rise from his pipe. He's closer now, just inches away. You catch his glance and look away, but then, turn back. Yes, it's Albert Einstein. His two bright wonderful eyes twinkle like a young child's. His hand reaches into a coat pocket. He finds a small copper lighter and puffs on his pipe again. The warm light flickers against his face. He smiles and leans closer. "Imagination," he whispers. "It's more important than knowledge..." He winks, slips the lighter back into his coat pocket and tips his hat. You turn to look as he walks away, but then... suddenly, he disappears.

To be continued: