

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

They gave it a thumbs down, the other *Speaking* column I wrote. And perhaps it was too negative because I was writing it more for me than for you. After the tragedy, like so many other people, I put my words to work to give voice to my feelings and to help my spirit heal. Many of my writing friends and colleagues did the same, as each of us tried to share words with each other and with you to build community, to ease suffering, to share opinions and perspectives, to advocate a course of response, to help in some way, perhaps — just to do something.

This has been a time when the casual greeting, “Having a good day?” could not be answered. When people really meant it when they asked, “How are you doing?” When people paused thoughtfully to reply.

My father repeatedly shared, “I just can’t find the words to say how I feel.” This struggle for words that we all have shared points to our great human need for self-expression. How can we refer to what can’t be named? How can we share feelings which can’t be described?

I was at the Root Connection, our local community-based organic farm, picking flowers, when I overheard a mother explaining to her children. “Look at this one. It’s a *platycodon grandiflorus mariesii*. It’s also called Marie’s balloon flower. See the way the flower bud swells like a balloon. An here’s an open flower with its starry petals unfolded.” The words she was giving them were way over my head, but they were descriptive, specific words that gave great depth to the story of this flower, which naming it simply a balloon flower could not.

We are always telling children to “. . . use your words.” We want them to express their anger and curiosity in words, so that we and others can know their minds and respond appropriately.

Even television spots are reminding us that the words we use to refer to others will be heard and repeated by our children.

Children, too, are searching for words. How can they ask the questions they must ask in order to get the answers they need to feel secure and hopeful? How can they communicate what they really feel, what their minds are focused on?

We must give children words to help them make sense of their world, even when the world seems without sense. We must give them rich and beautiful words, many words that mean almost the same thing, but not quite. We must equip them with a plethora of words to use to share their feelings and to shape the opinions of others, not simple labels, but descriptive words that can be tools for negotiation and bridges to understanding.

And to do that requires us to do something we already know how to do. We need to talk with children and read to them. We need to share some of our questions and feelings with them. We must find the hopeful parts of ourselves and use direct and eloquent ways to make children feel safe. We must listen to their words and give them new and increasingly complex words to more accurately express themselves.

And, just as we tell children to use their words, we must be careful to watch our own. Our children are watching and listening.