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Language as Aperture

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Languages—verbal and nonverbal—are rich in multiple perspectives and shape our apprehension of the world. The richness of languages can serve to expand our consciousness and bring us to the threshold of the transpersonal.

The only true voyage of discovery would not be to visit strange lands, but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others—to behold a hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.

—Marcel Proust

VERBAL AND nonverbal languages shape human thought and consciousness. Could we have developed the kind of intelligences we have if our ancestors had not invented image-making, music, body language, and dance, as well as spoken and written language? And, if photography, cinematography, sound recording, radio, television, and the computer had not been developed? Languages can freeze human knowledge and potential or they can provide the means to break free of past constraints; they can limit our realities or expand them.

Between direct perception and our responses to it lie the mediating processes of language. When languages first began to develop they were as much an integral part of nature as birdcalls and whale songs. As we evolved, the development of the often abstract signs and symbols increasingly used conditioned our conscious awareness. From prehistoric times, humans have felt a need to reexperience and rethink, to tell and retell our stories and express our feelings in order to make meaningful and memorable that which could otherwise appear meaningless and chaotic. In this context, languages as thinking tools become the defining means for making sense of raw experience. The way we use language becomes the framework for our actions and decision-making, our personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal understanding—our whole living attitude toward the world and our relationship to it.

Skillfully used in combination, words can connote ideas in multiple dimensions beyond words; but we can also think and communicate in sensory modes that include visual and kinesthetic realms. If we grow up hearing and learning to speak only one verbal language, it is a surprise to learn another language and come to realize that each language offers a unique view, a selected segment of reality. This is a major reason for learning more than one language. One language carries one view of the world; a second language exponentially expands that view. Active use of both verbal and nonverbal arts can open innumerable windows. What we can say and the way we can say something in one language often cannot be said in another language. This is true when comparing verbal languages and it is true when comparing communication modes—languages in the broad sense—as in the visual and performing arts. The dancer Isadora Duncan said, “If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to dance it.” And the painter Georgia O’Keefe stated, “I found I could say things with shapes and colors that I had no words for.”

Words more than images break reality into small pieces. Each thing named is so much more than its name. Many visual artists have realized that you must forget the name of what is observed if you really want to see it—that is, if you want to see it without prejudice.

Not only different languages but also differences in how languages are used make huge changes in meaning. Poetry allows for content that uses the sounds and meanings of words but goes beyond them. The shades of meaning conveyed by the spoken sounds of words can vary enormously according to the interpretation of the speaker and the context of the words. Each musician interprets a given piece of music differently. Even the ways in which languages are written change what they mean and who can read them.

The transpersonal—so all-encompassing, so vast—preeminently lends itself to multiplicity of expression. During this period of massive change fueled by expanding layers of information overload and world-shrinking communication technologies, we would do well to both learn from and transcend personal and cultural habits of thought. The multiple realities reflected in different languages—verbal and nonverbal—also alert us to deeper, more universal layers of reality. Although languages are not reality but about reality, their richness can serve as a doorway to the transpersonal.