

Trying To Find the Words

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I've tried to find words worthy of this moment in our history. It's hard to talk about this time we're in. It's just...difficult. Our government is failing us. A continuation of a centuries-long pattern for some of us, and also, a current travesty of its own.

It's hard to talk about, feelings are too raw; our feelings impair our ability to find the words. The words fail me. It feels like the language I use, English, fails to offer adequate words.

When I'm asked how I'm doing, often in passing, I don't really want to respond. There isn't a simple or brief way to respond, that's honest. In my mind I'm thinking, 'do you really want to know?' Words fail me.

I've not yet found a brief way to say, 'I'm: angry, grateful, outraged, worried, inspired, wary, resolute, planful, disquieted, on guard, loving, shocked, strategic, and hopeful despite...' No brief term covers it when people, in passing, ask how I am.

Other tongues, other languages, have created expressions for what English often can't. Many languages other than English have divined brief terms to express complicated feelings. Situationally precise feelings, instantly knowable senses, deeply recognizable and resonant conditions. Despite there being no comparable term in English.

We need the words, we should have the words. During these most troubling times. As we bear witness to government perpetrated crimes against humanity. Even as we witness, stunned, the dismantling of generations of civil justice. We should be able to verbalize our feelings and our response. We could use the help of other languages these days,

We also need to remember to take care of ourselves. We need to take care of ourselves and each other. We need to remember to eat. To share meals and share our hearts. We need to stay in touch with how it feels to have the sustenance to keep going.

English doesn't always offer easy ways to remind us of the feeling of being nourished. Which could contribute - in the shock of the times we're living through - to our forgetting to eat,

Other languages aren't always deep or fancy about it but their words beckon us to the table. In Italian, 'abbiocco' refers to the feeling of sleepiness after a good meal. One word, evocative of whatever jumble of English words we might use to express an after-Thanksgiving semi-comatose state

Or more significantly, one word that might bring to mind what we see an infant do after feeding, and what it feels like for us to see that baby in a state of quiet peace while we watch that child and think about all the transformations that meal allows that baby's mind to undergo.

How that young brain is bubbling with cognition; and blooming with growth, particularly during sleep. One word, 'abbiocco', zooming in to a moment and out to generations. Connecting a feeling, to a moment, to a nourishing purpose, to an intergenerational stream, to a seeming pause that is full of dynamic change. All in a word.

A word in another language about nourishment, can seem weird at first. In Hindi, 'jutha' is a term for food that has been partially consumed by someone else. Maybe your first response to a word like 'jutha' is like, 'um, what?!?' Partially consumed food?!?

And then your mind takes you to experiences and feelings...You remember what it feels like to wait for the rice bowl to be passed down the table. And it gets to you, and there's still enough for you to have your serving. And enough still to pass the bowl down the table.

Your mind takes you to seeing the slices still remaining in that pecan pie. And the comforting conspiratorial knowledge that you'll be tiptoeing to the kitchen later for another slice. 'jutha', the ultimate residual evidence that you've shared a loving experience, a meal, with others you care about.

The shock, the gasp we are experiencing, in this time of tyrannical brutality, can make you feel you're drowning in ugliness. Can make you forget just how much more there is in this world. But sometimes the English language I use can fail me. Is it me, my lack of English proficiency? Or is it the language itself?

I need more words that tap a moment. That pull me into another perspective. Simple words that convey almost inexpressible, yet widely understood, feelings. We need to find the words, the simplest most meaningful ways, to reintroduce a kind of grateful wonder about the world around us.

English doesn't necessarily have it, but other languages do. Some of them instantly transport you. In Japanese, 'komorebi' specifically refers to sunlight shining through leaves on branches. One word, 'komorebi', and your mind goes from thinking about words, to seeing an image.

An image almost too hard to look at, because the sun's rays flicker at you through the screen of leaves. An image so beautiful, so natural, something not designed specifically for us, but something we happen upon; find ourselves gifted by the natural force around us. Simple and sublime.

Something that feels like a right, like we have a right to experience it; a right we all have – and must protect. An image that conjures up a peaceful presence in a world full of wonderful surprises. Part of a private journey, a discovered moment on a walk.

An image in our mind, that's actually more like a film sequence. A word, 'komorebi', so universally experienced that it reminds you that we are all linked together in a shared humanity, even when inhumanity is occurring.

We need language that helps us remember. Remember the duality or multiplicity of things. Especially when things seem so unilaterally unhinged.

We need to note things like our scale and valence in this world. We need to remember how big our impact on the climate is, and also, how small we each still are in the context of nature's power. We should remember with a kind of humbling responsibility and awe.

We should remember everything around us is not there for our comfort and yet we can still regard them appreciatively. In Icelandic, 'gluggaveour' describes weather that looks nice when you look out a window from indoors but is pretty insufferable when you actually go outside. Our understanding of our own fragility, human fragility, even in the face of something that seems appealing; that's an important humble for us to hold. It invites us to respect rather than seek to dominate.

'Gluggaveour'... perhaps this word reminds us that everything ain't about us. Maybe a word like that keeps us in mind of the way that we can think we know something, think we want something, think an idea will automatically benefit us, and yet fail to take all the factors into account.

How we can be at risk of suffering the consequences of our hubris; of our Anthro-centric view of how the world works. It's helpful to have a word that prompts us to recall we can see the beauty and abundance around us, while also reminding us that this abundance is not just for our selfish and effortless enjoyment. Especially now, we need this language.

Being at a loss for words, feeling loss and not having the words. Our language – be it our grasp of language or the limitations of our language – may be unable to convey our experience or our feelings. Our language remains trapped inside because we are

gasping air in – in our shock - without letting air out; and your voice only works when you exhale.

In air trapped muteness, we allow our story to be what someone else says it is. But when our voices join with others... a multiferous tale is shared. Diversity, of cultures and languages among us, help us know us. Other languages, other ways of conveying messages, tap into something we really need right now.

Some languages have words that feel both unknowable and yet known in the deepest parts of you. In Japanese, 'ikigai' describes the combination of doing what you love, what you're good at, what you can be well compensated for, and what the world needs. One word, describing something even more reciprocal than a basic sense of purpose.

One word, that sees you from the inside – your own motivation. And from the outside – how your contributions are valued. Your joy, linked to your ability to make the world a better place. The impulses of energy firing in your inner circuitry linking up directly to the main server that improves the world, or something like that. If we only had the words...

Other languages also capture this deep link. They find ways, with a word, to say something like, you are cherished and, at the same time, it's not all about you.

Zulu use the term 'ubuntu' to signify the interconnectedness of people. You are only you through your connectedness to other people. When someone in my community says, in English, 'I see you', they are expressing one bead on this full beaded bracelet that is Ubuntu. I see you; I recognize, acknowledge and appreciate your presence.

Ubuntu might take this even deeper. I feel connected to you, I appreciate our shared existence and – more fundamentally, you would not be except for the ways everyone else connects to you. You exist in others' gaze. The ultimate form of adult peek-a-boo, but with a link deeper than an optic nerve.

And we inherently know that those links transcend even life and death. Our English language might not have a word for it. But we know how it is to feel that connection even after someone has passed. Or that specific yet universal sense one has when someone is still alive but not present in our lives anymore.

It feels deeper than 'missing' someone, but English doesn't offer the word. In Portuguese, 'saudade' refers to a deeply emotional state felt when thinking about someone who is absent. A deeply emotional state, embracing: warmth, appreciation, regret, humor, poignancy, bitterness, reverie and sadness, and something more.

It's hard to find the words; language evades me, or maybe my language never even offered the vernacular. In especially trying times it feels hard to find the right terms to

describe even the little things, the feelings that come from the simple pleasures, the small joys.

It's hard enough to feel that you're even permitted to notice joy, not even the tiny sort. And it's made harder when you don't have the words. Some other languages have words that capture those little momentary selfish delights. In Catalan, 'soccarat' is the crunchy bit at the bottom of a rice pan where the rice has slightly burned and stuck to the pan.

It turns out many languages have a word for these cherished rice bits. Japanese, Korean, several other languages have a word for it. So, there must be something about this little joyful rice encounter. Or maybe about the general importance of personal moments of joy.

The experiences that manage to remind us that we're sensitive organisms that notice things. The situations that remind us we're human. That our lives are made of many moments, some monumental accomplishments, some minor successes, some great disappointments, some minor shortcomings, all making up a compendium of full lives.

The little things define us as much as the big things. But sometimes our lack of words makes it hard to notice all that we are, makes it hard to see the panoply; to lovingly laugh at ourselves. Maybe it feels like too much is at stake, or that we can't expose our flaws.

But maybe we should, maybe understanding the humanness in ourselves is part of understanding...other...the beauty of other. The little things that we might see as flaws, that make us human, I'm not sure there are apt words in English.

In Japanese, 'tsundoku' means buying books without reading them. One word, for a very specific snapshot in our lives. Simple, funny, real, human, could be anyone. Something you alone likely know the truth of. Such a specific context, yet so...human.

Our humanness can mean that the flaws we think we alone own are, in reality, shared; are actually more like a species marker, a lingering signal coded into a universal gene. A re-emergence of a condition that transcends identity or culture. In Scottish, 'tartle' refers to that moment when you go to introduce someone to someone else and you forget their name.

Our foibles: once thought to be a lonely curse of ours alone and then, through the language of other tongues, revealed as just part of existing on this planet. Maybe this should offer us some comfort, some broader sense of connection beyond our ken and deep in our most human core.

Consider that our realization about our humanness allows us to feel awe, feel exhilaration, feel ecstasy. There's a certain way of feeling that's some combination of those things, combined perhaps with a humbling sense that we are bearing witness to magnificent things.

English doesn't really have a word that evokes feelings like this; that channel the experiences which transport us like that. 'Gokotta' is a Swedish term that refers to communing with nature at dawn. It is connected to the practice, the daily ritual, of rising early and going out predawn, in order to experience that moment as the full glory of day greets the natural world. It is a way of inviting humbling awe and exhilaration; it is a way of living

Inviting and anticipating a feeling, anticipation becomes as definitional as the feeling itself. It's part of the package. 'Taarab' in Swahili refers to the uniquely sweet syncopation of music and poetry occurring simultaneously. It is the witnessing of a minor singularity, an event of coalescence.

The coalescence of our natures, expressed so aptly in other languages and so gapingly lacking in English sometimes, is such an important reminder. A reminder that our genes are almost completely shared. An etymological revelation that tells us what we already knew, yet so easily forget.

We so easily forget that every human shares 99.9% identical genetic material. And this makes our inner and outer experiences something we share. Other languages can be exquisitely good at expressing how genotypically consistent we are.

All you have to do is hear the definition of a word in another language and you feel it speak to you; at some genetic level, at a level as primal as a yawn or a hiccup. In the Philippines, 'gigil' is the intense urge to squeeze something because it is cute. Don't lie now, you know you've felt that urge.

It seems so easy for some people to forget, or deny, how we are all connected. Across our different expressions of words, of self, of loving, of melanin, of heritage, beliefs, and identities. Connected.

I think that, to some extent, English language can betray us, betray our shared humanity. Leave us inadequate in our endeavors to express shared experiences; and then contribute to our senses of isolation and polarization.

Can lead us to justify the most heinous treatment of others; by denying hard-won rights, squeezing off access to resources, beating and caging those who are deemed unworthy other, sanctioning at the highest governmental levels... the killing of those who dare to stand for our shared humanity.

We deserve better leaders, better accountability, just...better. A message as important as this deserves the most compelling way of saying it. Deserves the most powerful invocation from any spoken source. Is there a way for us to narrate our sacred expectations better?

In our present-day, daily interactions, would it help if there were better words that expressed the whole of us? How much we belong to each other? In Spanish, our 'pertenencia'. How much the expression of our shared belonging serves as an antidote to this dehumanizing moment?

Even in our daily interactions. Are we permitted our simple stumbles as well as our inspired moments? What words are in our quivers, to convey, for instance, how our minds betray us one moment and outperform our expectations the next?

For every Scottish, 'tartle': that moment when you forget that name you know so well. For every one of those there are also moments which Portuguese speakers call, 'desenrascanco', referring to the ability to solve a problem or make something work despite lacking the tools or resources that should be there. The alchemic talent to be under-resourced and yet accomplish amazing things. Something I've seen again and again in the communities I've had the honor of being part of.

Consider the idea that our mix of flaws and talents makes for a beautiful existence. I'm just not sure English has the words to ground us in that wisdom. In the wisdom that beauty comes from something other than perfection.

Other languages can convey this, and it can recalibrate our ability to appreciate the world. In Japanese, 'wabi-sabi' is a term that celebrates the beauty in things that are imperfect and impermanent. A cracked and then repaired teacup, a partially melted snowflake. Something traversing an adversity that causes flaws and, in doing so adds to its beauty. Those things remind me of what it means to endure trauma's scars as humans.

Our ability to move through trauma, to grow through hardships and not be the person from before; the person who never experienced any trauma. And in that imperfect journey, become something... more.

What narrative can embody this? What word captures a whole scene in the documentary that chronicles our lives? What word can magically prolong our sense of anticipation or describe the tragicomic nature of life?

The Yaghan language of Tierra del Fuego has the word, 'mamihlapinapai', which refers to the meaningful look shared between two people who both desire to initiate

something, but neither wants to take the first step. An almost excruciating yet warmly familiar experience. Full of pre-kinetic potential energy. Balancing on the precipice of something wonderful or opportunity lost.

Doing the thing we hesitate to do; accounting for the cost of inaction...Moving past the false safety of the known and opening up to something else...There are so many new things we are offered; to see, and be, and learn in our limited number of solar laps.

And so many things we must retain and learn from. What word in English, teaches us how to accumulate learnings? In West Africa, 'Sankofa', literally means go back and get it, referring to the importance of learning from the past.

In the US, where our historical record keeps rhyming so often, particularly in the percussion of transgressions against others, how does our narrative language help us keep our past in mind so that we can know our present, eschew the harmful repeat, and set our direction toward a better future?

The English language can mistakenly confuse its dominance for eloquence. Leaving us with a dull palate just when we need the most redolent vocabulary. As for me, I guess I need to get a bit more poly- into my -glot. Because these days especially, words fail me in English.

Struggle has defined this past trip around the sun. The type, valence and impact of that struggle have not been borne equally across all shoulders. Maybe the strongest litmus test of a group of people – of a society – is the extent to which people seek to support others even when they themselves feel the bite of suffering.

It is not enough to scheme to endure; it is not sufficient to wait out the storm. We cannot mitigate our own risk when the risk is so great for so many. Even in our state of fatigue, we must fight back.

We must remain vividly aware of what's at stake. I'm certain that, in the early part of 2025, I was not the only person who kept pondering the poem, 'First They Came', penned after WWII by Martin Niemöller:

"First, they came for the socialists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist."
"Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist."
"Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew."
"Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

If Sankofa guides us, we would recognize this refrain. What narrative strategy would halt its progression? Is it a victory to maneuver such that a tyrant overlooks you?

And remember that, while we are searching for our own words a thunderous silence will mark the unheard voices of those who have been chained, expelled... erased.

When we find our voices, they must convey our deep sense of 'qadarin' for all lives. The Somali term, 'qadarin' refers to holding someone in high regard, honoring them and valuing their life. This regard goes beyond appreciation and comes close to reverence; no equivalent English term really captures it. And no amount of fear or bullying can force a sense of 'qadarin'.

The past year has been marked by the imposition of fear. Fear is potent, but it is also unsustainable. Fear is a cancer which, ultimately, destroys its despotic host. This is cold comfort. Catastrophic harm has already been done. We need to resist any more harm. We need to resist.

Our resistance is beautiful and it comes from an unshakeable sense of humanity and compassion; even as the ground is being seismically shifted beneath us. The things we believe in cannot be uprooted by the tiny shaky hands of a tyrant.

We must be advancing our values, especially, on these rainy days. The things we believed in when it felt like there were more possibilities, when there was less suppression, for some of y'all anyway, must continue to be the things we believe in when suppression is amplified.

If we believed in the power of imagination, creativity and prevention back then, on those sunnier days, then surely it is an even more important thing to invest in during grey days of struggle and fear.

If we believed in the value of diverse voices leading to better organizations, better leadership tables, better hive minds, then this should be an even stronger priority now; when the obstacles to doing good work are even greater. If we believed that communities have always known best, than that must be even truer today

Part of the work for us, in this moment, is to see beyond this moment and remain connected to our better selves. The beliefs we cultivated in previous times were designed to retain our humanity through times like these.

We can be smart, tenacious, powerfully galvanized and effective in our counter-strategies. And our advantage will be that we build on a foundation of hope rather than fear. We tap into the hope that was easier to seed and grow during better times. And its cultivation was precisely for a time like this.

Not only to get us through this time, not only to barely survive. Our hope keeps us whole, inspires us to retain our kindness and humanity, even when fear whispers to us to have doubt. Even when inhumanity seems to be in its ascendancy.

Hope is ours, It is the light by which we navigate our resistance today and the spark that powers our ongoing healing and recovery.

Our advantage is hope, not the kind of hope we wait for someone else to provide us with. Our advantage, our hope, is tangible, real, forged by us; we made it. something we've cultivated, held close so it would be available for our use, now.

Hope reconnects us to our wisdom, our Sankofa, our desenrasco, and our Ikigai. Hope reminds us about the beauty that continues to exist all around us, our Gokotta, the komorebi, the wabi-sabi. Hope vaccinates us against someone else depriving us of our joy; in its grandest form or in gigil or soccarat. Hope helps us know our power. Our shared power; our ubuntu

Hope gives us permission to be good to ourselves. Our stumbles, the time we take to replenish, those are okay. Struggling, through hope's lens, adds clarity to our purpose – Because we know what we're struggling against – and through hope's telescoping view, we add meaning to our purpose – because we know what we're fighting for.

It's all... a lot. It's complicated. But, as you probably know, no matter how soothing a simpler message might seem, hard times are not resolved by easy answers. It is in the harder-to-translate places that we must seek to lift our voices and have our power be truly known. It can be hard to find the words; you can see how I'm struggling. Maybe you are too.

By 'qadarin', if you do choose to tell me how you are today, how you feel, what you care about. I will make space to fully listen. Take the time you need, find the words that work for you, say what you need and want to say. Speak from your heart, from your soul, from the 99.9% that links us all. Find your words, our ancestors and our young people are watching; are listening...

Find your words: they will be heard, and they will reshape our reality.