

Deep messages: Language and love

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

When I read in the newspaper recently that the U.S. Navy had decided to lift its ban on women serving on submarines, I remembered a woman who told me a story about how she communicated with her husband when he was serving aboard a submarine in the 1970s.

Family members were able to send messages to the sailors, she told me, but they could only be eight words long. Since the Navy counted Bible verses as only one word, loved ones on shore filled their messages with them.

“All the wives loved the Song of Songs,” she said. These women would send messages like this: SOS 1:2—and the husband, deep below the surface of the ocean, would look up Song of Songs 1:2 in the Bible. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” he would read, or maybe SOS 4:7: “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you,” or—in another message to a beloved submerged beneath miles of water— SOS 8:7: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

I love the thought of those women flinging the words of the Song of Songs into the sea like a lifeline. I love the thought of those verses entering the submarine like a secret code. I love the thought of the sailors hunched over their Bibles like devoted scholars, reading for a word addressed to them. I love the way so many prayers could lie coiled and hidden in a single verse: I miss you. God be with you. Please come home. I love that the messages said SOS.

I wonder if a Bible verse still counts as one word for the U.S. Navy, and if, when a woman first begins serving on submarines in 2012, she will have an ardent correspondent on shore searching the holy book for an SOS powerful enough to reach the beloved sailor.

Centuries ago, St. Augustine wrote of how difficult it is to bridge the distance between human beings with words. I know inside myself what I want to say, he wrote in a book on catechesis. But, he lamented, when I try to put it into words, to

communicate what is inside me to someone else, “My words cannot suffice to my heart.” Anyone who has ever reached out to another with language knows what he means. Do our words ever suffice to what is in our hearts?

This did not stop Augustine from trying to communicate, and it doesn’t stop us from sending out our own SOS messages. We update our Facebook pages, tweet our moods, blog our opinions. We try to bring what is inside to the surface in ground-down language that looks like it might indeed be trying to slip past the defenses of a submarine: r u listening? r u there? This codelike language may not suffice to our hearts. But it is, in its own way, an SOS, a reflection of our desire to connect.

So much of human life is an attempt to reach out from the fragile bridge of language to others, to the future, to God. It is holy work, this searching for the right words to cross the distances between us. This is no doubt what led early 20th-century poet Matthew Arnold to predict that poetry would eventually replace religion now that the “facts” of religion had proven to be defenseless in the face of scientific knowledge. Since religion can no longer do the work for us that it used to do, Arnold wrote, we will have to turn to poetry “to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.”

Arnold’s predictions of the death of religion did not materialize in the way that he imagined. But he was not wrong that our longing for language rich enough to give voice to our fiercest hopes, complex enough to be truly consoling and expressive enough to be received by another is a deeply religious longing.

It is a spiritual discipline to find the right word to set down next to another word in a way that reaches across boundaries and distances. Haunting every word is the presence of the word God spoke to reach out to us. In a culture in which words are flung out not as lifelines but as invective, it is an act of resistance to measure our words against the reconciling work of the Word that gives life and hope.

Language cannot do all the work of love—and thank God for that. If our prayers and our relationships and our hopes depended upon our ability to find words that sufficed to our heart, what would become of us? The distances between us cannot be crossed by words alone, even the ones we find in scripture or in poetry or in our hearts. As the women who sent SOSs to their loved ones in the deep knew, it is our shared, embodied life that gives words their meaning.