Endangered language

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the December 6, 2000 issue

Like Many people with nothing better to do, I often read obituaries. It is the print equivalent of walking through a cemetery, where whole lives are summed up on headstones and buried along with their times. I love reading about flying daredevils who rode the wings of biplanes in the 1930s, or Kentucky farmers who plowed their fields with teams of matched mules. Since the occasion for meeting these people is to mourn their loss, the effect can be distressing. *Wait*! I want to shout. *You can't go yet*. *There are still things I want to know*.

In recent years I have been noticing a lot of double obituaries. In January 1996, one headline read, "Red Thunder Cloud, 76, Dies, and Catawba Tongue with Him." As far as anyone knows, Thunder Cloud was the last living speaker of his ancestral language. He taught it to his dog, but no one else was interested in learning it. According to his friend Foxx Ayers, that is because the Catawbas, like Thunder Cloud himself, feared that they would be ridiculed for speaking in their native tongue. "I wish now that I'd learned," Ayers says, but the dog cannot help him.

Last year a reporter for the *New York Times* found Natalia Sangama *before* she died. She is the last living speaker of Chamicuro, one of 500 languages that once thrived in the Peruvian Amazon. Today only 57 survive and half of those are on the road to extinction. "I dream in Chamicuro," Sangama says, "but I cannot tell my dreams to anyone. Some things cannot be said in Spanish."

According to linguists who track such things, at least half of the world's 6,000 languages will probably die out in the next century. Modern communications, migration and population growth have brought about a loss in cultural diversity that parallels the loss in biological diversity as wilderness areas have been cleared. Missionaries have also played a major role. In the school she attended as a child, Sangama remembers, missionaries used to make her kneel on corn if she spoke Chamicuro.

Only 5 percent of languages are "safe," experts say—those that are spoken by at least a million people and also receive state backing. Meanwhile, hundreds of

languages are down to a few elderly speakers, whose grandchildren have no interest in learning what sounds to them like primitive speech. This is how a language becomes extinct, says Doug Whalen, president of the Endangered Language Fund at Yale. “It’s like seeing a glacier. You can tell it’s coming even though it’s kind of slow.”

The problem with losing a language, of course, is that the ideas uniquely captured by it are lost along with it. Take “baptism,” for instance. If a word like that were to become extinct, then what substitutes would be available? “A kind of ritual bath that is believed to symbolize spiritual cleansing, as well as incorporation into the mystical body of Christ.” That is a little wordy, if you ask me. What about “grace”? If that word were dead, then what other words might do? Good luck? Unearned favor? Divine beneficence? The idea is still in there somewhere, but the lost language is simply not replaceable.

By the standards applied to other languages, Christian language is only half safe. We still have a million speakers, but we no longer receive state backing. Far more seriously, many of our grandchildren have no interest in learning what sounds to them like primitive speech. If they still use words such as “mission,” “covenant” or “grace,” the contexts in which they speak them are far more likely to be those of business, real estate or banking instead of the church. It is not impossible to imagine the day when some ancestor of mine will read an obituary that announces, “Alma Johnson, 76, Dies, and Christian Tongue with Her.”

One difference between the Catawba, Chamicuro and Christian languages is that the latter is a written language as well as a spoken one. Even if everyone who speaks it dies, the language will survive in books. In the case of Christianity, however, I am not sure that the existence of literary remains equals true survival. This language we speak dates back to the Word made flesh, who embodied royal words such as justice and compassion, and who called us to follow by doing the same thing. If interest in our language has waned, then perhaps it is because there is so little linkage left between our words and our lives. People can hear us speaking our ancestral language, but they cannot figure out what it means by watching how we treat one another in the flesh.

Languages really do die. It happens all the time. If we want ours to live, then we must somehow convince our children to speak it—either by requiring them to learn it the same way we require them to learn English or Spanish, or by introducing them to

realities so holy that they beg to know what such things are called. But that is only the first step. The second step is to give them enough quiet confidence to survive those who may ridicule them for speaking such an ancient tongue. Whether or not they are ever made to kneel on corn, shame still has great power to silence those who do not speak as everyone else speaks—or live as everyone else lives. The best defense against such shame is a strong community of faith where words and deeds come in matched pairs.

I hope that our language never dies. Much more important, I hope that the way of life our language describes never dies. If it does, then I hope someone mourns our loss. I hope someone reads the obituary and wants to shout, “Wait! You can’t go yet. There are still things I want to know.”