

The Word became relationship



(Illustration by Tallulah Fontaine)

Fawlty Towers is getting a reboot. If you've seen the original series, you'll know it's one joke stretched out over 12 episodes. John Cleese's Basil Fawlty is the proprietor of an undistinguished hotel in the seaside town of Torquay. He's surrounded by foolish people—some of his staff, several of his guests—but he has to find a way to contain his barely suppressed rage enough to be polite to his guests and communicate with his staff. His attempts and failures to do so constitute the endless cycle of wild flailing and ultimately explosive violence that make the series agonizing, hilarious, and gripping viewing.

But what if it weren't a comedy? What if *Fawlty Towers* were actually a profound portrayal of human life, in which communication is largely impossible and conventions of civility are always on the point of snapping, whereupon violence inevitably ensues?

Think about what it's like to try to communicate with a relentless puppy that just won't calm down, a youth group that won't listen to instructions, a terrorist who won't be reasonable, or a roommate who's like a brick wall. In all these situations,

violence lurks just beneath the surface. Words aren't helping. You're perilously close to a place beyond words. Civilization is about learning ways to resolve tension and conflict without violence. But sometimes the best of us can teeter toward becoming profoundly uncivilized.

Which is why some of the most moving stories are about how two people can make a journey from a standoff of frustrated and scarcely suppressed violence to a relationship of genuine peace. Virginia Axline was a primary school teacher in 1940s Ohio who went back to college and studied with psychologist Carl Rogers. She developed the practice of child-centered play therapy, which offers warm, nonjudgmental acceptance to children and patiently allows them to find their own solutions at their own pace.

In her famous book *Dibs*, she describes a child of that name who seldom speaks, is often withdrawn, and frequently lashes out in violence. Over the course of a year, by listening and not judging, Axline induces Dibs to find words for his feelings and begin to interact with his family and peers. She never asks questions like, "Did you have a good time?" because they require a particular answer, which can leave a child trapped. She never says, "See you next week," because she won't make promises that might not be kept. Gradually trust and space and permission develop, and eventually the words emerge and the violence ceases. The book is subtitled *In Search of Self*, but I'd call it *Establishing Relationship* or even *Finding Words*.

"In the beginning was the Word." This sentence says that communication—the desire to share and relate, the urge to engage and listen and receive and open up—is at the very core of all things, indeed the reason for the creation of all things. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In other words, the essence that created existence, the forever that conceived of time, the everywhere that brought about here is at its heart about communication—nonviolent communication, partnership, relationship, togetherness. In fact, that's the purpose of existence—to communicate fully with one another and to communicate back with God. There's nothing more important than that.

But here we run into two problems. First, not all communication is healthy—some words are cruel and destructive. (This was true even before Twitter.) Second, words are sometimes only words. Words aren't always rooted in feelings, actions, or integrity; sometimes words are just lies.

Which brings us to the next important sentence from John, a sentence about communication and how it turns into trust and relationship: “And the Word became flesh, and lived among us” (1:14). Here lies the fulfillment of the whole reason for the existence of all things. Everything that happened before this moment is backdrop and preparation. Everything that’s happened since has been echo and embedding. This is the central moment, in which God’s original desire to be with us becomes more than words. Jesus appears, fully human, but Jesus is also fully divine. Jesus is the perfect communication of God to us, and Jesus is the perfect communication of us to God.

The whole of Jesus’ life is like Axline’s year with young Dibs. Jesus is creating an environment for us where we can live beyond cruelty and lies and finally find ways to dwell beyond violence in patience, understanding, and trust. He’s in search of our self, listening and not judging, offering open enquiry and not closed questions, inviting us to wonder and discover and allowing us to find our own solutions at our own pace. Jesus is the Word of God that offers us the epitome of communication, through which we may find a relationship that lasts forever.

Cruelty and lies enter Christ’s story soon enough. They catch up with Jesus in the end, when his communication meets the world’s violence, and for a moment violence prevails. But the light of communication and relationship shines in the darkness of violence and promises that, if we can only find time and patience, we will eventually see trust and relationship emerge from even the most violent of our failures to find words. *Fawlty Towers* remains a comedy; it doesn’t become a tragedy.

Christianity is, finally, a story in which communication prevails over violence. This is the wonder of the incarnation. The Word becomes more than words. And it inspires us to let the Holy Spirit of patience and tenderness turn our own violent frustration and anger into relationship and trust—and eventually to let those words become flesh, in embodied gestures and commitments of solidarity and love.