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Aloha and Adios

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Foreign languages have never been my strong suit. I studied French in middle school, but managed to send a waitress running screaming from the room when I tried to order a meal in Paris. I switched to German when I was in college, and just squeaked through the entrance exams for divinity school, where the ability to sprechen auf deutsch was considered a theological prerequisite. Words like weltenschaung didn't help me much, however, in the actual practice of ministry. When our adopted son was about eleven, we took a family trip to Korea, to visit his home land, and because we'd been studying Taekwondo, we all knew how to count – hana, dulh, set, net tashut, uahshut – and we could also say ap chagi and dwi chagi, front kick and back kick. Fortunately, we didn't go anywhere near the De-Militarized Zone where we were warned one false word could trigger an international incident.

I still haven't given up on Spanish, a language which employs the subjunctive to a far greater degree than English. The subjunctive occurs whenever there's a degree of imprecision or uncertainty in what's being said. For example, "Hopefully, Mary will come to the party next Friday," or "Ojala, Maria venga a la fiesta el viernes que viene," and won't be washing her hair that night. I've pretty much given up on learning this tense, though, not just because it's hard but because all my statements in Spanish already have a high degree of ambiguity and imprecision, so the subjunctive just seems like an extra layer of confusion.

All of these experiences have forced me to ask the question of how much vocabulary and grammar you really need to know to travel or get around in the world. And I've come to the conclusion that beyond a few obvious phrases like "Where's the bathroom?" and "Do you take Visa?" the successful traveler really only needs four basic words: Hello, Goodbye, Thank You, and I'm Sorry. These simple utterances will cover almost all the difficulties that are likely to confront the average tourist, whether you're visiting India or Iceland, speaking Farsi or Greek. More than that, these basic words cover most of the rudiments you'll need on your existential journey, the contingencies you face in your wanderings through life. You won't need a Scrabble player's dictionary to get you through your turbulent youth or mid-life crisis. Although it is nice to know that "aa" is the Hawaiian word for "lava," you can have an ample and satisfying existence without knowing that. But it is necessary to know how to say hello.

Now I immediately have to backtrack and qualify myself. Because it may surprise you to learn that the use of "hello" as a standard English greeting is of very recent vintage. The word didn't even appear in print until the mid-nineteenth century and actually didn't come into common usage until the invention of the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell suggested that we answer the phone by saying "Ahoy" but Thomas Edison called his switchboard operators "hello girls" and the matter was settled. Yet the original meaning of "hello" was something more like "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot." As in, "Hello, Earth to Gary!" Are you completely nuts? It was an expression of surprise and alarm, a signal to stop and reconsider. A far older greeting etymologically is the salutation "howdy," which is a

contraction for “how do you do?” and which comes closer to my meaning. To navigate in this world, we need to be able to share a how-de-do, a “Que pasa?” a “Wie gehts?” or “Comment allez-vous?” that brings us into relation with other people and the wider world.

It’s all about engagement, making connections. The Jewish thinker Martin Buber is one of my favorite philosophers of religion. And in his book *I and Thou* Buber suggests that “Basic words do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken, they establish a mode of existence.” Putting this same thought another way, linguist Deborah Tannen makes a distinction between what she calls “rapport language” and “report language.” Women, she claims, tend to use more “rapport talk,” using conversation to establish interpersonal bonds, whereas men do more “reporting,” engaging in discussion mainly to convey information. Buber gives some fascinating examples of how so-called “primitive” people use vocabularies that are rich in rapport and relationship. For instance, “we say ‘far away’: the Zulu have a sentence-word instead that means: ‘where one cries, ‘mother, I am lost.’ And the Fuegians [of the Yaghan tribe who live at the tip of South America] surpass our analytical wisdom with a sentence-word of seven syllables that literally means: ‘they look at each other, each waiting for the other to offer to do that which both desire but neither wishes to do.’ (Which sounds a lot like the Republicans and Democrats in Congress, doesn’t it?) Buber continues:

We greet those we encounter by wishing them well or by assuring them of our devotion or by commending them to God. But how indirect are these worn out formulas (“Hail!” no longer suggesting anything of the original

bestowal of power) compared with the eternally young, physical relational greeting of the Kaffir, “I see you!” or its American variant, the laughable but sublime, “Smell me!”

I personally like the Sanskrit “namasate,” which derives from the verb “namah,” meaning “to bow” while “te” means “you,” just as it does in Spanish and so many other variants in the Indo-European family. Wikipedia, that ultimate authority, explains that Namaste literally means

“I salute [your] form,” which implies an understanding that all beings in this existence are part of the surface phenomenology of Maya and that beyond the surface, so to say, all beings are part of Brahman, or the One ultimate essence that underlies all.

I’ve also seen it translated loosely, “I greet the place in you where, when you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.” That’s the hello we spend our whole lifetimes trying to learn to say, and every person we meet, every time we come together offers another opportunity to practice addressing that ultimate Thou who is the apex and convergence of every unique you.

So hello is one of the four basic words we need. Thank you and I’m sorry should be a little easier to grok, because life really is a continuous blessing and “if the only prayer we ever uttered were the words Thank You,” as the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart once commented, “that would be enough.” Gratitude is the art of savoring this brief moment we’ve been

given, while repentance is necessary because we're always messing up. One of the many stupid lines from that ridiculous novel *Love Story* was the bit about "love meaning never having to say you're sorry." On the contrary, love (or staying in a mutually healthy relationship) requires having to eat crow several times a day. And this point may have some of you wondering why I haven't included "I love you," among the other essential phrases we need in our traveler's kitbag. *Te amo!* *Ich liebe dich!* *Je t'aime!* Well, the truth is, I just haven't found "I love you" to be all that useful. *Ojala que Maria venga a la fiesta* but I never seem to get invited to that particular party, and in marriage it may be that "thanks" and "I apologize" have more staying power than any amount of pillow talk. Love (or at least romance) is a feeling that comes and goes, but common courtesy (words like "Please," and "Thank you," and "Excuse me") should be daily habits that express a fundamental respect and regard for one's partner. *Gracias, Perdon, Entschuldigen bitte, Danke schon.* Whether you're traveling the country of marriage or the territories of work or friendship, you'll find these words endlessly useful and restorative.

This brings us to the last lesson in our vocabulary lesson, *adios* and *adieu*. I think goodbye may be the hardest single word we have to master, and also the most important. The Buddha taught that non-attachment is the key to release from suffering, to living in the present, to achieving wisdom or enlightenment. Because impermanence is the nature of things. Life is transitory, evanescent. We create grief for ourselves when we cling to people and moods and sensations that are ever changing. Holding on too long, too tightly, becomes painful and counterproductive. Yet I'm convinced that there is such a thing as good

grief, healthy heartache. Change inevitably creates anxiety. Loss should produce tears. But the tears are a part of the healing. The mourning is necessary for the letting go that forms the pathway into the new living. Change is tough, it feels risky, but it opens up the space where fresh possibilities emerge.

So as we gather on our final Sunday together, bidding each other a bon voyage, I say thank you for these precious years together. I'm grateful for all the kindness you have shown to me and Dori. I'm sorry I lived so far away and couldn't be more involved in your daily lives. But despite the distance, this has been my church, the place I've felt welcome and empowered to speak the truth in love.

And here, at this parting of ways, what is it that you need to say to move forward with creativity and grace? What are you grateful for? What are your regrets? And how will you give glad greeting to the next leg of the trip? Every ending brings a new beginning, and the Unitarian Congregation of Taos is heading into new territory. That creates some uncertainty. Yet it's a truism that in smaller congregations like this one, ministers come and go, but the congregation endures. In fact, many church consultants compare small congregations (those of under 70 members) to cats. Like cats, they are self-sufficient and independent. They are not owned by anyone. They don't take direction well. Their primary allegiance is not to a pastor but to each other, to the bonds of friendship and a shared history. They offer an intimacy and informality that mega-churches can't. They tend to stay small because that "do it yourself" style of lay leadership is their strength. And like cats, they have nine lives. They will

never grow into dogs, but they nevertheless always seem to land on their feet.

So I have confidence that you cats will be fine on this next leg of the journey. It's another land, another country, an explored vista waiting to be discovered, as bright and lovely as anything in the Road Scholar brochures. Sure, you'll forget your toothbrush. Sure, your flight will be delayed. But don't be worried. It's all okay. For the savvy traveler--with Hello, Goodbye, I'm sorry, and Thank you in your phrasebook--the trip will be worth the ticket.