



## WORDS

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I am a photographer. And because I am a photographer, I feel extraordinarily competent to talk about ... words. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I've taken about 100,000 pictures a year for the past two decades, that's a lot of words. So today I'm going to share with you what I've learned about the subtlety of words.

And if I make you uncomfortable with what I'm about to say. Good. That's the point: To be thought provoking, to start a dialog, to use more words. We are often made uncomfortable by what we're not good at. And, as a society, we're not all that good at communicating. If we were really good at it, there would be no war. If I were really good at it, I would figure out how to get my children not to argue. Well, maybe.

And because we are so busy talking, we keep saying the same old things, in the same old ways. We chug along, posting on Facebook, tweeting our friends, having conversations with our spouses, but we don't really consider how our words affect how we perceive each other, how the words we choose to say affect people, even subtly.

I photograph a lot of weddings. It used to be that the officiant would say, "I now pronounce you Man and Wife." For some reason they never said, "Woman and Husband". Now at least they say Husband and Wife. Although half the time they follow that with, "I would like to introduce Mr. and Mrs. His First Name His Last Name". And the woman's identity has now become my favorite three-letter abbreviation, Mrs..

And then there are the titles we bestow. Apparently it's very important for us to know the marital status of women, but not of men. That's because we define a woman by whether or not she is married. A 25 year old unmarried woman is still Miss, while her male counterpart is always Mr..

How about we just make it Ms. all around. Ok, it might feel strange to call your parents old family friend Ms. McDermott when, for the last 40 years you've called her Mrs. McDermott, but how about from now on, when we meet new people, we respect women's privacy the way we do men's and try on Ms. for a while.

Play a game with me here for a moment. What if... men took their wives last names when they got married? Does that sound ridiculous to you? Then why do we think nothing of asking a woman to do that? Do you know why that tradition started? So that it was clear that the wife was the property of her husband.

Some people say, "They're just words, it doesn't matter, I still know who I am." But tradition values a man's name more than a woman's. And what is implied by that I think you can figure out yourselves. I preferred not to honor that tradition and kept my own name; and gave it to my children. And while some of you may think it's not fair to my husband, he didn't mind a bit.

A lot of times, what we think is just making conversation is actually setting up unrealistic expectations. When you ask a woman *when* she is going to have a baby, it implies that she is *supposed* to have a baby, because of course, that's just what women do. Have babies. I did. But the funny thing is, rarely does a man get asked the same question. That's because we don't define men the same way.

Clearly, I love words. Here's my favorite, Mankind. But wait, if 51% of all babies born are female, wouldn't it make sense if the word was Womankind? Oh my goodness, I bet the men out there are squirming at the thought of being labeled as a woman. But do any women squirm at being labeled a man?

Of course not, because that's just how it is. That's the way it's always been, the way it will always be. Or...how about using the word Humankind instead. Ridiculous you say, that's absurd, you say. But I'm pretty sure we are not a race of all men. Remember, it's the subtly of our language that influences us. Mankind, implies that men are in charge, Humankind, honors all people.

What about how we all call grown women Girls? I know it's just casual talk, guys and girls, but we use the word girls a lot more than we use the word guys. I walked into a restaurant once and the owner said, "Welcome girls." He didn't say "Welcome Boys", to the group of men

who arrived behind us. Yes, I called him on it, "I'm over 18, I'm not a girl anymore, thanks."

How about the word Ladies vs Women? Oh, the subtleties. Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen. That sounds ok to me. But how about the Ladies Hockey team, or the Women's hockey team. To me Lady sounds like someone who is delicate and diminutive, a person with no power. That's why calling a hockey team "ladies" sounds ridiculous.

Ah, but they're just words.... Anybody's hackles up yet? I'm just getting started. How about the adjectives we use to describe people? When men go for what they want, they are called Ballsy, when women are aggressive or assertive they are Bitchy. Aggressive men are rewarded, women are shamed.

Old Maid/Old Fox, both terms for unmarried, older people. What do you picture when you think of an Old Maid? I think of the card game I had when I was a kid. There was picture of a dotty old lady with white hair in a bun, and a cat on her lap. How about Old Fox? I think of a silver haired, handsome guy chasing after younger women, and getting them.

There's a heavy one. If a woman sleeps around, she's a slut, right? But a man who does that is *obviously* a ladies man. We *never* define women by the way they use their sexuality do we? Of course not, just like the way we don't define women by their marital status or by whether they are mothers, or aggressively go after what they really want.

You can tell me that words aren't powerful, but I won't believe you. You can tell me that words have nothing to do with the fact that women make only 83 cents for every dollar a man makes, but I won't believe you. You can say that calling women *girls* is not diminishing them in any way, but it's not true. It's very subtle and very powerful.

Tell me that a child, hearing her mother called girl and her father man, won't remember that, when she is evaluating her own self worth years from now. What if it was the other way around and women made one dollar for every 83 cents a man makes? Would it make a difference to my son if he heard his father called boy, and his mother woman?

What do you think would happen if we choose our words thoughtfully and respectfully and with the intent to make all children feel equal in the eyes of society? Words are powerful. If you don't believe me, I can think of a few choice words, which if said in the heat of an argument, might make

you pretty angry. Words can be powerful when you are angry, and they can also be powerful when you're not even paying attention.

Remember those subliminal messages they used to flash on the screen at drive in movies, images of popcorn and soda, shown for just a fraction of a second? All of a sudden you had to run to the snack bar because you were SO hungry? Our language is like that, subtle and powerful. So I suggest we use it wisely. I just read a quote somewhere recently that gives great advice, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out."