

Column: "Words that Leverage People"



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My day begins with my wife saying to me, "Wake up, it's six already!"

Between my home and the local bus stop, I pass by a police station. Whenever I see a police officer standing guard, I say "good morning" to him. The officer returns the greeting with a smile. Such pleasant exchanges in the morning start the day on a good note, as if to promise that a good day is in store.

It is often said that words serve three functions. One is the communication of information, another is the communication of emotion or intent, and the third is moving people's hearts. In most cases, however, words are uttered not for just one of these functions, but in an intricate combination of the three.

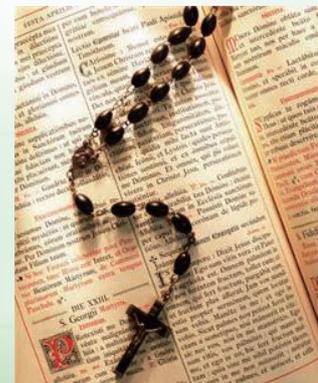


Let me cite an example. On an autumn afternoon at around three o'clock, an inpatient in a wheelchair goes out in a hospital courtyard accompanied by a nurse. The patient asks, "I wonder what the time is." If the nurse replies, "exactly three, I would say," the communication between the two is in no way successful. Silence will ensue, at least for a while. What the patient really wants to convey, though not uttered directly, is the sentiment that "it feels slightly chilly." An experienced nurse may have understood what was implied and responded by saying something like, "shall we return to the ward, or would you like to use a blanket?" Such a remark would move the patient's heart, convincing him/her that "the nurse cares about me," fostering a relationship of trust between the two.

The traditional Japanese expression *kotodama* (lit., "word spirit") refers to the belief that uttered words have ramifications for real-life occurrences. In other words, pleasant words will lead to good events, and unpleasant words to bad ones.

Chapter 1 verse 1 of the Gospel According to John in the New Testament opens with the following remark: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Verse 4 of the same chapter continues, "In Him was Life."

The awareness of the gravity of words apparently runs across all humankind, regardless of ethnicity, geographic region or history. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to pay more attention to our words.



Here in Japan, verbal bullying is escalating. Expressions that hurt others emotionally or demean their dignity are more common, and seemingly said with a certain nonchalance. The originator may deny any intention of harm, but to the recipient, the act is nothing but verbal

violence. *Hamono kotoba* (*lit.*, “knife words”) is an expression that refers to such speech. “Knife words” can even drive people into taking their own lives.

By contrast, there are cases wherein someone’s life is profoundly affected by a simple compliment. Such words are referred to as *inochi kotoba* (*lit.*, “life words”).

The world-renowned Hungarian composer and pianist Franz Liszt met Ludwig van Beethoven just once, when the former was a boy. The encounter took place in 1823, when Liszt was 12 years old and Beethoven was 53. Liszt was studying piano in Vienna, and gave a performance in front of Beethoven. Upon listening to Liszt’s piano, Beethoven, whose hearing was already suffering at the time, reputedly hugged Liszt and said, “Your music has a living soul.” These words greatly inspired the young pianist, who went on to create numerous piano masterpieces. His ambitious oeuvre even includes transcriptions of Beethoven symphonies for solo piano, a formidable challenge even for two pianos. The compliments by Beethoven most likely expanded Liszt’s outlook enormously, giving him both courage and energy. This is a prime example of “life words.”

I invite you to use “life words,” and suggest that we begin by exchanging morning greetings. My hope is that we will discard “knife words” and use “life words” as much as possible. If all of us could use “life words” that care for the feelings of others and maximize their potential, we could forgive, encourage and love each other— thereby developing richer human relationships and filling the entire world with peace.

