Sometimes, I think, you can look at a person and know they are full of words. Maybe the words are withheld due to pain or privacy, or maybe subterfuge. Maybe there are knife-edged words waiting to draw blood.

Madeleine Tien (2016) **Do not Say We Have Nothing**.

……I love to feel that my own voice is on track; that can happen within a metrical shape where you’re stepping out to a set tune or it can happen in a less regulated way within a free shape. The poem I began with as a writer, ‘Digging’, was truer to my phonetic grunting from South Derry than to any kind of iambic correctness from the books. Every writer lives between the vernacular given – whether it be the vernacular of Oxford or of the Caribbean – and some received idiom from the tradition.

*You are a poet for whom the sound the words make is crucial.*

Completely. It’s the key to getting started. In saying that, a poem must have the right sound - I don’t mean sound as decoration or elaboration, as ‘verbal magic’; I mean something to do with what might be called the musculature of your speech, the actual cadencing of the thing as it moves along. When, for example, I wrote the opening of the first poem in my first book – ‘Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun’ – I just knew I had got stuck in in earnest.

from Dennis O’Driscoll (2008) **Stepping Stones Interviews with Seamus Heaney**. London: faber and faber Limited.

The written rhythms of others do not offer the only incantations: there are compelling oral ones as well. One example, conversations with friends. …… Jerome Bruner, whose style adds grace to **The Process of Education** and **On Knowing,** has said that conversations with friends are one of the most important and constant forms of drafts for any writing he does. ……..

The most powerful form of incantation, however, comes from one’s own written words –sheer words themselves in clusters, islands, clumps, lists, strings, sentences. The advice here from the writer seems to be, ‘When mute or in doubt, start generating words on the page; then through examining what you have produced automatically or semi-automatically, you may discern a pattern or theme in the seeming written chaos.

Janet Emig ‘The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing’ in Emig, J. (1983) **The Web of Meaning Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning and Thinking**.

Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton Cook

Put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don’t make any conscious effort to improve it. (you’ll be doing that as you read, of course…but that comes later.) One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you’re maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up the family pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed. Make yourself a solemn promise right now that you’ll never use ‘emolument’ when you mean ‘tip’ and you’ll never say **John stopped long enough to perform an act of excretion** when you mean **John stopped long enough to take a shit**. ……I’m not trying to get you to talk dirty, only plain and direct. Remember that the basic rule of vocabulary is *use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colourful*. If you hesitate and cogitate, you will come up with another word –of course you will, there’s always another word – but it probably won’t be as good as your first one, or as close to what you really mean.

The business of meaning is a very big deal. If you doubt it, think of all the times you’ve heard someone say ‘I just can’t describe it’ or ‘That isn’t what I mean.’ Think of all the times you’ve said those things yourself, usually in a tone of mild or serious frustration. The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning. Given that, why in God’s name would you want to make things worse by choosing a word which is only cousin to the one you really wanted to use?

Stephen King (2000) **On Writing a memoir of the craft**. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

**The notion of giving something a name is the vastest generative idea that ever was conceived.**

Susann K. Langer

Language gives us the power of naming, but naming g is never just designation. When we name, we are implicitly classifying, an act of mind that requires comparing and contrasting, sorting and gathering. To name the little, white, fluffy, four-legged thing a *lamb* is to do the following: to identify it, to see it as one thing rather than another, to differentiate it from the vaguely similar boulder nearby on the hillside, to see that it is comparable to other such creatures that form a class of which it is a member. Also implicit in classifying is the recognition of the negative. As Kenneth Burke puts it, to declare ‘this is A’ is simultaneously to assert that ‘this is not A.’…..

…the fact that naming implies the negative is the basis for the ancient claim for language as an instrument of knowing; all acts of mind depend on the power of sorting and gathering that languages gives us, a power that entails recognising the negative... …Both perception and this kind of naming proceed by direct, intensive insight: we grasp the whole as a form. No point about language is more important for the composition teacher to grasp: language represents by abstracting in two modes. Abstraction can be achieved by generalisation, by a dialectical process of forming concepts; or it can be accomplished by imagining –by images of all sorts. The two modes are distinguishable, but in actuality they are interdependent, just as the two halves of the brain are in continual interaction. The two main functions of language –to articulate and to fix – are radically analogous to these two modes of abstraction.

Ann E Berthoff (1981) ‘Instruments of Knowing’ in **The Making of Meaning metaphors, models and maxims for writing teachers.**  Upper Montclair NJ: Boynton Cook

**The word fixes something in experience and makes it the nucleus of memory, an available conception.**

Susanne K. Langer

Like other animals, we have our instincts, but we are rational beings, not creatures of instinct. Rationality entails being able to consider, to contemplate, to ‘interpret our interpretations.’ Language stabilises the images of our experience so that they are available to us as points of reference, sources of the analogies by which we think. Unlike animals we are historical beings; we are not bound to the particular moment. We are =free the Recognise and to envisage alternatives. Language enables us to have knowledge *about*, not just *of*. This power of language to make the fleeting moment recallable, to make experience seem substantial, is called ‘*hypostasis’.*

Ann E Berthoff (1981) ‘Instruments of Knowing’ in **The Making of Meaning metaphors, models and maxims for writing teachers.**  Upper Montclair NJ: Boynton Cook

**Language exhibits the principle of discursive thinking.**

Language is an articulation of names: its tendency is to *run along* (the root meaning of discourse), bringing thought along with it. We can thus symbolise not just things but their relationships. Syntax is as essential to language as naming. Language can be analysed as an empty structure, its function of bringing thought along ignored, but semantics is fundamentally inseparable from syntax.

Ann E Berthoff (1981) ‘Instruments of Knowing’ in **The Making of Meaning metaphors, models and maxims for writing teachers.**  Upper Montclair NJ: Boynton Cook

**Language has two functions. It is converse with another, and it is converse with oneself.**

Alfred Lord Whitehead

Language is the symbolisation of thought that is always both public and private, personal and social. The capacity for language is innate, but it must be realised in a social; context. The ‘tendency to see reality symbolically’ is a biological necessity, since we are not simply creatures of instinct, we need other, supplementary powers. Language –and all symbol-making activity – is a biological necessity. So is social organisation, and language should be seen in this context. This does not mean that we should think of language as ‘essentially’ a communication medium, especially since that theory generally entails the notion that we ‘have’ thoughts, which we then put into language. What it can do for our thinking is to remind us that dialogue is an essential model for the composing process. It is in dialogue that meanings are created and discovered and shaped; it is the foundation of Freire’s ‘pedagogy of knowing’: ‘Dialogue is the encounter between men (sic), mediated by the world, in order to name the world.’

Ann E Berthoff (1981) ‘Instruments of Knowing’ in **The Making of Meaning metaphors, models and maxims for writing teachers.**  Upper Montclair NJ: Boynton Cook

1. A great many children who cannot yet write are able to converse fluently in favourable conditions.
2. Those conditions include a relaxed situation, and someone they know and trust who will be receptive to what they say.
3. The speech in which they will be fluent in such situations will be expressive speech as we have defined it.
4. Expressive writing (as we have defined it) is the form of writing that most nearly resembles expressive speech………
5. Narrative versions of our own experience are *compositions* and as such subject to ‘embellishment’; fictional stories often display, however indirectly, aspects of the writer’s own experience. Thus ‘autobiographical/ fictional narrative might be seen as a continuum.
6. When we talk about our own experiences, I believe we usually do so in a way that suggests we want our listener to share the feelings we have about these experiences……In offering evaluations, we are looking for corroboration, since to have out=r value systems ‘sanctioned’ by fellow members of our society ….
7. …….The change from expressive narrative (gossip about events) to poetic narratives (verbal objects) is therefore seen as one of increasing organisation for unity. ‘Organisation’ may include the ordered disposition of sounds, words, word-meanings, sentences, events, feelings, thoughts, images.
8. …. It has been pointed out that the ease with which in expressive language we move from the transactional side of the borderline to the poetic, and back again, gives to that form of discourse a flexibility which serves its particular purposes of exploring and developing interpersonal relationships. Expressive writing for such purposes is not a form of discourse transitional to any other form; its development throughout the years of schooling will be to mature forms of expressive writing.

We hold to our conviction that the quality of learning could be improved if fuller use were made of the heuristic potential of expressive writing. The alternative hypothesis to which teachers must be working might be phrased as follows: “If you limp around long enough in somebody else’s language you may eventually learn to walk in it.”

James Britton ‘Notes on a working hypothesis about writing.’ In Gordon Pradl (ed) (1982) **Prospect and retrospect Selected essays of James Britton**. Montclair NJ: Boynton Cook.

**word**

Words seem simple things to define, but they lead a tricky life. It is helpful to think of words in three ways: as a unit of sound or of graphic form; as a unit of meaning; and as a unit with a grammatical role. Words always have all three characteristics at the same time. The word *hunt* has a sound-shape when spoken, and a graphic shape when written; it ‘means’ something – the kind of definition we look for in the dictionary; and it always has a grammatical role as a ‘part of speech’ – it will either be a verb, or it will be a noun. Dictionaries tend to treat *hunt*-as-a-verb as a distinct word, separate from *hunt*-as-a-noun.

Kress, G. ((2000) **Early spelling: between convention and creativity** London: Routledge

By now I was near the wall that runs along the side of the railway track. A word to describe that wall would be *impenetrable*. See. I might not be able to spell but I have a huge vocabulary. I collect words – they are sweets in the mouth of sound.

Sally Gardner (2012) **Maggot Moon**. London: Hot Key Books.

Roland Barthes places words together in pairs – ‘copy / analogy’ ‘model / plan’ ‘poetics / poetry’. ‘Then’, he says, “between the words passes the knife of value.” In juxtaposing words, phrase, contrasting modes of discourse, a space is created, an opposition which generates possibility rather than closure.

reference to Roland Barthes trans Richard Miller (1975) **Roland Barthes**. London: Macmillan

486. When one means something, it is oneself meaning, so one is oneself in motion. One is rushing ahead and

so cannot also observe oneself rushing ahead. Indeed not.

487. Yes: meaning something is like going up to someone

Ludwig Wittgenstein trans, G E M Anscombe (1968) **Philosophical Investigations**. Oxford: Blackwell

First words must mean something to a child.

First words must have intense meaning for a child. They must be part of his being.

How much hangs on the love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book! *Instinctive*. That’s what it must be. The reaching out for a book must become an organic action, which can happen at this yet formative age. Pleasant words won’t do. Respectable words won’t do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child’s being. “A child,” reads a recent publication on the approach of the American books, “can be lead to feel that Janet and John are friends.” *Can be lead to feel*. Why lead him to feel or try to lead him to feel to feel that these strangers are friends? What about the passionate feeling he has already for his own friends? To me it is inorganic to overlook this first step…

…Back to these first words. To these first books. They must be made out of the stuff of the child itself. I reach into the mind of the child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material…..

First words must have intense meaning.

First words must be already part of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself,

whatever and wherever the child.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963/ 1980) **Teacher**. London: Virago.

Describing I pause, and pausing, attend. Describing requires that I stand back and consider. Describing requires that I do not rush to judgement or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present. Describing is slow, particular work. I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying or generalising. I have to stay with the subject of my attention. I have to give it time to speak, to show itself.

I have to trust that what I am attending to makes sense; that it isn’t a merely accidental or chance event. To discover the subject’s coherence and how it persists in the world, I have deliberately to shift my own perspective in relation to it. I have to see and hear how it may change according to to context or time

*Meditation: On Description* in Carini, P.F. (2001) **Starting Strong : A Different Look at Children, Schools and Standards**. New York : Teachers College Press.

And the crazy thing is that the common sense brigade think that they're the practical ones, and that approaches like the one I'm advocating here are sentimental moonshine. They could hardly be more wrong. It's when we do this foolish, time-consuming, romantic, quixotic, childlike thing called play that we are most practical, most useful, and most firmly grounded in reality, because the world itself is the most unlikely of places, and it works in the oddest of ways, and we won't make any sense of it by doing what everybody else has done before us. It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time. Everything else is proofreading.

Take the national curriculum. The authors of the York study remind us that it lays down that children aged five to seven "should be taught to consider: a) how word choice and order are crucial to meaning, b) the nature and use of nouns, verbs and pronouns" and so on; that children aged seven to 11 "should be taught word classes and the grammatical functions of words, including nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, articles", as well as "the grammar of complex sentences, including clauses, phrases and connectives ... " Think of the age of those children, and weep. It simply doesn't work.

What does work, the York study maintains, is writing in a meaningful context: writing as a practical hands-on craft activity. One of the implications of this is that teachers have to be confident about writing - about play, about delight. Too many are not, because they haven't had to be; and the result is the dismal misery of the "creative writing" drills tested in the Sats, where children are instructed to plan, draft, edit, revise, rewrite, always in the same order, always in the same proportions, always in the same way. If teachers knew something about the joy of fooling about with words, their pupils would write with much greater fluency and effectiveness. Teachers and pupils alike would see that the only reason for writing is to produce something true and beautiful; that they were on the same side, with the teacher as mentor, as editor, not as instructor and measurer, critic and judge.

Phillip Pullman (2005) ‘Common Sense has Much to Learn from Moonshine’ in The Guardian. 22.1.2005