Words

Jason Ellingson*

*Iowa State University
Words

Words. Beautiful, sensuous words. Words to fall in love with. Words to hate. Words that arouse you—sexually, spiritually, emotionally, devastatingly. Words full of power. All words possess power. A simple word like "nice" can destroy a man. But is it really the word that destroyed the man? Or is it the way the word is spoken? Is it menacing and cruel? Or soft and cavalier? Is it diabolical? Or dynamic? Holy cow, Batman. How powerful are words?

My sister called me last night. I could tell she was bummed. (Interesting word "bummed." Do you know what it means? Read on. Try and get it from the context of the sentences.) My sister always calls me when she gets really upset or really happy. (The word "really" is non-essential. It can be replaced with "very," "incredibly;" check a thesaurus.) It seems the night before she was yelled at by Dad. She said all she was doing was holding our cat up in the air, when he suddenly told her to stop. She said the cat liked it, and he barked out, "Fuck you."

My sister is used to being yelled at, but never like this. She ran upstairs and began to cry. My dad yelled for her to come down, and she slowly did. When she got to the bottom of the steps, he apologized for cussing at her. My sister didn't tell me the actual words of his apology, and I could tell she didn't care. She was still mad at him. With good reason, I think.

I asked her if he had been drinking. If anything ever happens at our house, that's the first question that is asked. "Was Dad drunk?" or "Had Dad been down to The Swamp?" (What a wonderful name for a bar. Don't you get the feeling of high-class individuals daintily sipping cultured beverages as they discuss proper social etiquette? Or are you like me, knowing exactly what that place is like?) For years, our family has had to endure this alcoholic apocalypse. (Strong words, I know. Strong feelings write them down.)

You see, it has usually been me who deals with my father. Until I came to school, I handled all the problems. Including my dad finding out about my mom's extracurricular marital activities and throwing her out. He realized that she had never been happy with him. (Funny, we kids are starting to feel that way, too.) My parents had always fought. They got into a big one the night before their wedding, and didn't speak to each other at all during the ceremony. The unhappiness continued. My parents started to get back in sync when they found out they were
going to have me. But my father got drunk one night and put my mom and him in the ditch. She was five months pregnant with me, and had to lie still in bed for a week praying she wouldn't lose me. Dad said the roads had been slippery that night.

After I was born, my mom decided that there would be no other kids to tie her to him. But the families insisted that my parents couldn't have only one kid, so when I was six, my brother and sister were born. And shortly after, my mother had her tubes tied.

Back to words. Powerful words. Words that can cut through a person's soul. Words connected together to create a powerful image. Words. That hurt. It's a funny thing about words. Especially spoken. If someone swore at you on paper, it wouldn't be near as bad as if they cussed in your face. A piece of paper can be tossed, burnt, destroyed. A verbal utterance can rattle through your brain for decades. It can haunt you in your dreams. It can impair your social identity for the rest of your life. It can also be forgotten.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. " What a crock. If there is anything that can be damaging to a person it is a good vocabulary. A verbal holocaust for some. Friendly fire for others. Look merely at our society. Everything is politically correct. A person must be sensitive to what he or she utters because it may hurt someone else. Where are the warning labels on dictionaries?

My sister was hurt. It took only two words. I don't think it was even the “you” that upset her. A word that rhymes with “duck” caused my sister to cry. Powerful words. Two words that will never be forgotten. I know. My father has uttered many things in my presence.

I pause. The right words don't seem to come all of a sudden. I've whirled (nice, huh?) off this diatribe in nothing flat so far, but it's hard to put into words what you feel. Half the time, I can't write it down fast enough. Speaking would be much easier. My father knows that. (Ooh, the rhythm is coming back.) He loves to talk. He always has an opinion about everything. Usually any comments he has for me are conveniently uttered after he has had a few beers to drink. Don't be fooled by the stereotype of a drunk with slurred speech. My father would hastily disagree. He was always clear and concise with his disapproval of me.

A disapproving daddy you say? (Can you say it? Alliteration is so wonderful to pump up a pertinent point. See?) When my mother left, I became second in command at the age of eleven. The house, the
cooking, cleaning, and kids were my responsibility. Forget about being a rebellious teenager. I was the dutiful son/servant, depending on who you asked. I have no regrets for those chores. They were labors of love. Corny, I know, but true.

I gladly gave for my family, and they returned their love as best they could. But my dad expected more I guess. I never really seemed to please him. Report cards with straight As received a smile but something was missing. I began to feel I was letting my dad down, but I realized I was working my butt off (slang for “working very hard”). I continued to do all I could, but I began to realize something. Actually, it was realized to me.

My father often came home late from The Swamp and proceeded to complain about the divorce and how much he still loved my mom. It was then that he was most dangerous. Many times, my father lashed out at me for the dishes not being washed or the floors not vacuumed. “You have nothing better to do, can’t you wash the dishes?” “Do I ask too much of you? If so, go live with your mother!” Verbal threats flew across the kitchen. “Just keep it up and I’ll drop you.” “I oughta deck you.” “Dammit, you’re this close to getting hurt.” Sometimes a few punches flew. But physical pain leaves after a while. The ringing ceases and the tears dry up. All that’s left are words: “lazy,” “spoiled,” “worthless.” Words to hold onto and never forget. Always rattling around in your head. Are they fact or fiction? Fatal perhaps.

A part of me died every time I heard those words. I fought to forget those words, to erase them from my mind. But they continued to gnaw at my sanity, and they were reinforced by other alcohol-induced utterances. “Your grandma thinks you’re lazy, too.” “Every other kid can help his father. Why do you think you’re so damn special?” I scrubbed the pans, scoured the stove, cooked and cleaned until I couldn’t anymore. Then my father would come home stumbling and tell me my value. “Dammit, sometimes I wonder if you’re good for anything.” I felt cheaper than a can of beer.

Words. Powerful words. Like “escape” or “freedom.” “Revenge.” “Honesty.” “Hurt.” Those nights I would try look at my father with love, but as soon as he called me worthless, I began to die. I began to question my father’s love for me. How could a parent treat his child this way? He, who had helped bring me into this world, seemed to be trying to take me out. “Go to hell,” I wanted to say, but I think he was already there. “Shut up or I’m leaving.” He probably would have helped with the bags.
No, I bit my tongue. I refused to allow my father to turn me into him. There was already too much hurt in my family. It amazes me that my father could hammer his thumb and barely blink an eye, but hurt him inside and your life was ruined. I didn’t want to hurt my dad. I just wished he could have dealt with his pain instead of dealing it out to me. I wish he could have seen how much he hurt me. I wish he could have kept his mouth shut.

Words. Stupid words, ignore them. Wise words, remember them. Big words, recite them. Little words, respect them. Hurtful words . . . forgive them, I guess. All words carry meaning, but a speaker can alter it. So can a listener. I have tried to deal with my father’s verbal violence, and so far, I have come up short. Words cannot be forgotten. They are tied to emotions, whether real or alcohol-induced. Powerful emotions produce powerful words.

“Rage.” “Pain.” “Love.” Four-letter words. Remember, we’re not supposed to use four-letter words. We’re also suppose to love our family. Respect them. Cherish them. Certain days, though, “father” feels like an empty word. No good feelings, no bad memories. Just emptiness. Apathy.

Words. Can encourage or enrage. Can excite or execute. Can lift up or lash out. Can caress or choke. Words are the most powerful weapons we possess. Some people are master tacticians. Others are helpless victims. My father has said many things to me; many emotions revealed; many jokes told; many rumors discussed; many, many arguments fought; but there’s one thing my father has never said to me with any emotion. Three words. Tres Palabres. Three syllables, no less. A total of eight letters that could have made it all bearable and perhaps understandable. Those words, of course, are “I love you.”

But even as I write this, I think there are two words that I may never hear that will forever leave a chasm between us unless uttered—“I’m sorry.” And it’s not even the “I’m” that I am really hoping for. I still can’t look at my father. My father raises his fist to threaten my brother and sister, and I become sick.

No, my brother and sister have never felt the physical abuse from my father, but they will never forget the emotional hell he puts them through. Words can cause so much pain. Sometimes I really wish they could kill.

*Jason Ellingson*