

Diffusing the Power of Words

Words. As a child my brother always knew how to use them to pierce my heart. When I was 5, he convinced me that I wasn't really part of the family. He told me that my parents had found me in a basket behind a dumpster and had only brought me home because no one else would have me. His argument rested on the fact that with my dark complexion and cocoa eyes, I looked nothing like the rest of my pale skinned, blue-eyed family. I continually worried that if I wasn't really good, they'd kick me out. When I was 13, I was socially awkward and had no interest in boys. My brother used this to the hilt. He'd spit out, "dyke" with a venom that felt both toxic and frightening. I wasn't exactly sure what the word meant, but I knew that it was related to being gay and therefore really bad. And I knew what happened to "those kind of people." I'd watched my classmates humiliate, degrade and ostracize a girl in my class because someone started a rumor that she was gay. And I'd heard my brother and his friends brag about beating up fags on the weekends for entertainment. I worried that he might be right and lived in terror that I too would be humiliated, shunned and beaten. I also hated myself for giving off those vibes and did my best to pretend like guys in order to look "normal."

Words hurt, in part, because they carry the weight of some kind of threat. Epithets like, "faggot" and "carpet muncher," imply that there's something wrong with us and that we don't belong in our families and our communities. We are social animals. We're dependent on others for our physical well-being. These messages remind us just how close we are to being abandoned, rejected and physically hurt. They make us aware of how dangerous it is to be alive.

Unfortunately, hateful words don't just tap into issues of physical and social survival, they tap in to the core essence of who we think we are. If they only related to physical reality, we'd view them like we view the warning lights in our cars that alert us when the gas tank is running low or when the temperature gage is running high. We'd take an appropriate rational action when we heard them and then move on.

The real power of words lies in the meaning that we give them and the feelings that we associate with that meaning. Hateful words hurt because we believe them. We buy into the underlying message that says, "There's something wrong with you" and feel self-hatred and shame. When I was thirteen, being called a "dyke" scared me because I didn't want to be rejected or beaten. But more than that, I hated myself because I believed that being a dyke was akin to being some sort of freak and therefore might somehow deserve whatever ostracism and physical violence might come my way.

One part of effective self-defense is using hateful words as warning signs that help us make decisions to keep us safe. Diffusing the power of hateful words is a second critical aspect of self-defense. When strangers yell epithets at us on the street, most of us hold on to that definition for at least a while. And even though we are likely to condemn right back when religious and/or political leaders condemn us and blame us for the fall of civilization as we know it, it's hard to not feel at least some of the punch those negative judgments carry. Shame often lingers somewhere beyond the threat. The sense of shame is often even more intense when co-workers, acquaintances, friends and family members drop subtle or not-so-subtle anti-GLBT comments around us because they tend to linger and take up space like silent but deadly farts.

The only way to diffuse the words and messages is to transform the underlying shame. In order to do this, you need to take a deep look within yourself and find the roots of your shame and self-hatred. One way to do this is to begin to listen to the tapes that play in your head. Every time you hear a message that is critical, write it down. Later, when you have time, ask yourself who gave you that

message and how old you were when you first started hearing or sensing it. Write this information down next to the message. Then search for truths that counter that message and write these truths down below the original message. It is often helpful to say variations on affirmations, perhaps saying something like, “Even though my brother said I was stupid, I know I’m pretty smart.” After you write this affirmation, list the truths that challenge the negative message. It can also be powerful to imagine giving back the message to the person who gave it to you. As you do this, be patient with yourself. Many of those messages are deeply ingrained in your psyche. You might find that you have to give the message back a number of times before you actually let it go. This sort of process will help you come to a more centered and life giving sense of who you are at the core. The more you are able to diffuse the hateful words that get hurled at you, the less power those words will have to hurt you.

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