FORUM

The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.

Language Play, Personal Intimacy, and Imaging God

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As I was reading David Smith and Barbara Carvill's *The Gift of the Stranger* recently, one of the several emphases that struck me deeply centered on Comenius's view of education: "It was not incidental, but essential to his educational scheme, that learning should proceed pleasantly, and that play and enjoyment should be an important part of it" (49).

The words *play* and *enjoyment* were like slaps around my ears as I recalled some of my foreign language education. My main memories of my first college class in German, for instance, are of extreme vigilance and tension. I spent much time trying to calculate—counting the number of students between the student responding and me—to which problem I would be asked to give the answer (I now realize that the methodology was almost entirely grammar-translation). If any student made the slightest mistake in substance or sound, the instructor's voice struck in cold correction and scorn. That class was the first one of my day and, in fact, the first of my college career; it set me up in a particular way to move on—trying to fight off self-consciousness and fear.

Such memories have led me to advocate using language play to lighten and brighten the atmosphere in any class that focuses on language. "Take five or seven minutes—it's a wonderful way to start class—and play a language game," I urge teachers. "If you're teaching English, use games in English. If you're teaching French, use games in French." Furthermore, I urge teachers to ask students and their families to invent or add to language games. As David Crystal points out in *Language Play*, people representing many different age brackets, social backgrounds, educational levels, and degrees of intelligence can come up with good games.

The kind of language play that I most enjoy depends on the presence of two or more intended meanings. For example, consider Tom Swifties. These consist of a quoted statement and a conversational tag; the tag includes an adverb that has at least two meanings: "'Oh, I miss the streets of Paris so much; I simply can't get them out of my mind!' Tom said *ruefully.*"

Sometimes, of course, we encounter samples of language for which two or more meanings are possible but for which one meaning is not intended. I once saw this headline reprinted from a newspaper in Hamilton, Ontario: "Large church plans collapse." This has at least two possible meanings: (1) plans for a large church collapse, and (2) a large church plans to collapse. This headline got my attention, since the second meaning describes an action that most of us would say churches should try to avoid. The first meaning is, however, the intended one, the one that works in context. So I chuckled over the incongruity of the second meaning, or even—because of anecdotes I've heard—over the possibility that with some churches the second meaning might not be so incongruous. But I did not enjoy this double meaning as much as I would have if I had been able to see it as having been intended.

I must depend on others to answer the question of how easy it is in languages other than English to pack up two or more meanings in a word or phrase. In English, it is quite easy, largely because English contains many homonyms and near-homonyms. But English also allows many phrases to be interpreted in more than one way: "Trying to get them to join that diet club was a losing proposition."

I believe that linguistic forms carrying intended double meanings take on special significance when examined from a Christian perspective. Consider just some of what we do with God's gift to us of language. We convey to others all kinds of information about the real world and worlds that we imagine. We request all kinds of information from others about the

real world and worlds that they imagine. We move others to feel, think, and act in many ways. We express many emotions. And we establish, maintain, and repair all sorts of social relationships.

However we divide up and classify the meanings that are involved in all such linguistic actions, in these actions we almost always operate with one meaning at a time. But when we invent language play such as I am focusing on, we hold in our minds at least two meanings at the same time. If we share this play with others, and if they recognize our intentions, they too will hold at least two meanings in their minds at the same time. If we put such bits of play into print, we will then have to project the holding of meanings to other places, people, and times. I see such inventing and sharing as an extension and celebration of the potential of language.

In this view, which brings out how play is based on a sharing of meaning, language play is remarkably like metaphor, at least in how Ted Cohen sees metaphor as creating intimacy. According to Cohen, three aspects are involved in the creation and understanding of a metaphor: "(1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community" (6).

Examples of language play with two or more meanings are very similar to the process described by Cohen. The speaker issues a special invitation, often not concealed. Sometimes the speaker says "Listen to this; I heard this just yesterday." Sometimes the context is one of joking or play. Sometimes the speaker signals language play by a grin or a laugh. The hearer then has to engage in "something more than a routine act of understanding" (Cohen 7); he or she recognizes, evaluates, and appreciates the multiple meanings. Finally, as the speaker and hearer recognize that an invitation has been extended and acted on, they draw closer to one another.

Cohen notes that this process of drawing closer to one another "is not . . . an invariably friendly thing, nor is it intended to be" (9). People can seek to get closer to others in order to wound them more deeply. Clearly, though, Christians should want to use language play to lead to enjoyment—to smiles, laughs, moments of communal joy.

Beyond this, I see the pleasure we feel on sharing language play dependent on two or more meanings as related to our imaging God. I develop this point humbly and tentatively, in the spirit of communal Christian exploration. And I am eager for advice.

In reading Augustine's *Confessions* recently, I was impressed by

points about God's omniscience and about divine timelessness. Augustine writes about God's "not needing to know one thing, then another, but knowing all at once . . . without any succession of time . . . " (282).

Certainly there are aspects of Augustine's treatment that are challenging and debatable. And his treatment could lead one to wonder about the need for and nature of communication among the persons of the trinity. But what struck me most of all about this sentence is that, according to it, all three persons of the godhead know everything it is possible to know. Each person is aware that the other two know everything (and perhaps each rejoices in this awareness), and they all know everything, in our terms, all at once.

I suggest, then, that when people share some language play depending on two meanings, they are in a special way imaging God. In such a situation, there are two or more persons. All hold two or more meanings in their minds. All know that the other or others hold those meanings, and I think all take pleasure in this fact. Finally, both the holding and knowing occur at the same time. They make up a community of simultaneous knowing. And that, I believe, provides a foretaste of glorious things.

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