

In the Beginning Was the Word

But not the concept

By Dan Ofstedal – October 20, 2025 ¹

“Welcome to the Grand Illusion”—Styx, The Grand Illusion

“Silence is the language of God; all else is poor translation.” —Rumi

The “Word” of John’s gospel was Logos in Greek—a term that meant far more than speech or language. For the Stoics, Logos was the *divine reason* permeating the cosmos; for Heraclitus, it was the hidden order behind all change. Later, Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart saw the “Word” as the creative principle through which God continually “speaks” the world into being.

It is only much later that the “Word” became literalized—shrunk from the infinite intelligence of the cosmos into mere language, into words that divide rather than unify. And this brings us to an ancient paradox about speaking truth:

“Those who know do not say; those who say do not know.” —Tao Te Ching

If that epigram is true, I’m in trouble. But here we go anyway...

I believe that many who actually live in a high state of consciousness feel no compulsion whatsoever to talk about it. They express only through their being and actions.

But there is power in words. They can make us laugh, make us feel, educate us, and—yes—lead us to profound insights. Words have been a great benefit to us all, and to humanity. The mind’s gift is to name and describe, to shape the world into meaning.

Yet somewhere during the evolution of the human mind—and during the first few years of each individual human life—we forget that any word uttered, written, or thought can never completely describe the actual thing it points to. “Pine tree,” for instance, evokes an image, but each tree is utterly unique—and even that same tree tomorrow will not be what it was today.

Our habitual use of words numbs us to reality, which is always new, always alive. In using words and concepts, something’s lost and something’s gained: we gain communication, but lose immediacy and our sense of amazement and wonder.

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“The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.”

This ancient opening line from the Tao Te Ching distills a truth that applies to all language: the moment we name something, it ceases to be what it truly is. Words point to the truth, but never contain it.

Language divides what in reality is whole. As soon as we label something—a tree, a person, a feeling—we turn it into a mental object. We see the concept, not the thing. We interact with our *idea of reality* instead of reality itself.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this comes from an ancient Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. “Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically.

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three wild horses. “How wonderful,” the neighbors exclaimed.

“Maybe,” said the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again offered sympathy.

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

The day after, military officials came to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son’s leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.

“Maybe,” said the farmer.

This is where the story traditionally ends. But who knows what happened next? Was it “good” or “bad”? The story, in truth, never ends.

And we can’t run the counterfactual: perhaps if the son had been conscripted, he would have been a hero and gained fame and fortune. And again, would this have been good? Maybe.

Every label we apply—“fortunate,” “tragic,” “blessed,” “cursed”—freezes a moment in time, as if we could capture the living flow of reality in a single word. We can’t. Life keeps moving while our concepts stand still.

This is not merely philosophical; it’s deeply personal. We use words to describe people too, and once we do, they can no longer surprise us. We think we “know” them—our spouse, a friend, even our own child—but what we know is the image our mind has created. We see through memory, not through presence.

Perhaps that is why, in the gospels, Jesus distances himself from his family of origin.² When they came to see him, he gestured to his disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers.” He had outgrown their story of him. To them, he was still the carpenter’s son. They simply could not see what he had become.

Children, before they learn words, live in a seamless world. A baby experiences everything freshly—without dividing reality into categories. The Indian sage J. Krishnamurti said, “The day you teach the child the name of the bird, the child will never see that bird again.” Words begin to replace wonder.

Of course, children need language to grow, to communicate, to navigate the world. The paradox is that words are both necessary and limiting—indispensable tools that simultaneously veil what they reveal. We cannot live without them, but we can learn to hold them more lightly, to remember they are useful maps, and not the territory.

Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”³ Perhaps he meant: unlearn what language has taught you. See reality in its virgin state, rather than through the filter of words.

“When the sage points to the moon, all the fool sees is the finger.”

This is another favorite aphorism of mine. Perhaps the best example of a word being a hindrance rather than a help is the word “God.” Whenever the word “God” is spoken, the mind conjures an image—a bearded man out there somewhere, a glowing light, a cosmic presence—which separates us from the direct experience of the divine.

Even a word meant as a guide can become an obstacle. I can’t help but notice that many well-intentioned religions are staring reverently at the finger—analyzing, venerating, even fighting over it—while missing the moon.

Mystics through the ages have tried to point beyond words. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote that God cannot be grasped by thought, only by love. Perhaps it is better to speak only of what God is not—and leave it at that.

When Meister Eckhart prayed, “God, rid me of God,” he was asking to be freed from all images of the divine so that the divinity of reality itself could be known. The true moon needs no pointing.

“The map is not the territory.”

The human mind takes the seamless wholeness of reality and chops it into bits—words, ideas, symbols, categories—and then arranges them into meaning: stories. These stories can be beautiful, tragic, or absurd. They can inspire and instruct, but they can never be the truth they describe.

Stories give meaning to our lives, but they are never reality itself. The moment we label an event, we freeze it. Life, meanwhile, keeps moving.

Now take a look at your own life. What label will you apply to what happens next? Can you laugh at yourself as you do so? Can you hear God laughing with you? (Yes, I'm anthropomorphizing God here—something else to laugh about.)

Stories like the Taoist tale reveal how, on the level of Truth, all stories are folly—because they fracture the whole into parts. When we do this, we “miss the mark.” “The wisdom of the world is folly with God.”⁴ The thinking mind will never figure it all out.

“History may repeat itself, but reality never does.”

When two people witness the same event, they may have entirely different experiences. That alone tells us something profound: our stories are not reality—they are what we add to it.

Reality is continuous, seamless, alive. It has no beginning and no end. It only flows. Hop on for the ride—and leave the stories (at least the unhappy ones) behind.

In this freshness, in this timelessness, lie the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no “better than,” no “less than.” Only divine order and perfection.

And here is the “pinch me” moment: We are already living in this sea of joy, this state of grace, right now—and in every moment, whether we know it or not. It is only our words and stories, our endless mental chopping of reality into digestible bits, that create apparent separation in our minds.

So what does this look like in practice? Picture yourself stuck in traffic, already late. The immediate reaction: “This is terrible. This ruins everything.” But what if you pause? What if, instead of layering story upon story, you simply remember that this moment is just as perfect as any other. The traffic hasn't changed. But you've stopped turning it into a tragedy. You've glimpsed what the farmer knew: it's just what is.

Again and again, we must “change and become like little children,” see through our stories, and awaken to the kingdom already here.

¹ Tao Te Ching, Chapter 56. Of course, we think this applies to others' words, not to our own.

² See my paper entitled “Jesus on Family and Freedom”, which draws from Mark 6:1-6; Luke 14:26; and Mark 3:21-35.

³ Matthew 18:3

⁴ I Corinthians 3:19