

***The Power of Little Words***  
Patti H. Clayton (July 16, 2010)

I'm looking for good metaphors for small things having a lot of power. Mustard seed-sized kernels of faith that have been said to be able to move mountains. The flapping of butterfly wings that set off tornados halfway around the world in chaos theory. I am playing with the notion that some of the most powerful levers for hindering or advancing paradigm shift are to be found in some of the smallest words. "Which community partners are you going to **use** this semester?" The difference between asking "what are your students doing **for** your community partners this semester" and asking "what are your students doing **with** your community partners this semester." Between doing research **on** our students and doing research **with** our students.

Studying environmental philosophy in graduate school, we considered the power of the very little word "it." "Look at that bird – I wish it would turn its head so I can see the color of its eyes." Language that ontologizes the one so labeled as an object, a means only rather than also an end, a thing. "Thing language" its called. Language that denies the full being of the other. Language that diminishes the possibility of connection between us.

What does the language of "for" and "on" reveal about the way we ontologize our students and our community partners ... and in what ways does it serve to reinforce an underlying technocratic paradigm? If I am interested in what I can do "for" you, does that signal that in my mind you are one in need, rather than a fount of gifts? Does it signal, in Parker Palmer's terms, that I assume scarcity rather than abundance in the community we are together?

I want to deny that interpretation. I don't really mean "use" you when I say that – of course I mean "work with you." But do I? What is behind the choice of one little word instead of another? And whatever I *really* mean, what do you really hear? And what does that signal to you, and to others, about the way I see you and the way I see myself in relation to you?

One of the places anthropocentrism lives is in some uses of the little word "it." One of the places technocracy lives is in some uses of the little word "on" and the little word "for." One of the places democracy lives is in some uses of the little word "with." And in the one labeled with one of the littlest words of all – "I" – is the power, and thus the responsibility, to honor the power in -- and to choose carefully -- the little words I use ... and thus the nature of the world I co-create. "With-ness," of course, does not reduce to language; but the words we use have the power to call the question. The words we use have the power to erode or to nurture "with-ness" as a way of being in the world.

I want to listen for the little words. I want to choose them and to use them carefully, mindful of what I am sending out into the world with them. I want to explore their power together.