

CHOOSE DISCOURSE*Lynda L. Hinkle*

Choice has become a loaded word in American culture, linked with abortion as irreversibly as peanut butter is with jelly. A faith in choices, once considered a non-negotiable American value, has become instead a hot button political football that can stop a candidate (think John Kerry) in their tracks.

But what is it to choose? Not merely in the reproductive sense, but generally speaking? The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that a choice is "Selected with care and judgement, well-chosen, fit, appropriate." Yet, who knows what is appropriate anymore? This is not a simple world where we have all agreed upon common values, beliefs, ideals, or even the meaning of words. Discourse, according to Foucault, is one of our ultimate and most important choices...we must agree on the meanings of words at least to an extent sufficient to make culture and society continue to run. If the author is dead, at what point does the speaker also die? Can culture withstand a loss of shared discourse? The Bible, that coterie of warning stories that, whether you believe in it or not has so shaped the Western mind, warns us about the destruction of shared discourse in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel -because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth (New International Version Genesis 11: 1-9).

Recently, I took a trip to Montreal for an academic conference, a truly bilingual city like nothing American can boast of. Most people in the downtown area speak both French and English, though upon getting lost outside city bounds I frequently ran into people who spoke only French.

Because I am, ultimately, an American, I speak very little of other languages--

despite my desire to do so I am not terribly talented at learning them. Attempting to communicate to a French speaker that I was desperate to locate my way back to the Via Ville-Marie, I realized that I spend a lot of time negotiating the difference of meaning of words even at home, even among speakers of the same language. For instance, the word choice spoken to some of the people in my life is a signal for powerful political identification for the desire to retain abortion rights. To some, it is a rallying cry against "liberalism" and the opposite of "life". To my father, who has lived his life never leaving behind his strong working class values and ethics, choice means something that richer people have...he is more likely to use the term in the negative as in "we had no choice." To me, choice has come to mean a grocery store mentality....so many choices, too many choices, the options of the spoiled child culture that, like my 12 year old stepson, feels entitled to "enough toppings" on his ice cream.

For the purposes of this edition of MP, choice means many things to many of our authors. We do not need to agree on a finite definition of choice, we only need to agree that we will be open to listening to each definition and that we, as authors will clearly define our terms. Within the broad warehouse of discourse, we must at times find our way to the manifest and carefully examine the wealth of meanings contained within every word we utter. As such, when we selected (or if you will, chose) the theme of "choice" for our issue, it was with the hope that we could reach beyond the abortion dichotomy and rescue the term for the many others uses it was intended for, while also hopefully exploring why/how that term is most often used in our political discourse.

It is our hope that this issue will stimulate you, our readers, to consider the choices you -we-are making regarding understanding one another and locating the places where our definitions intersect.