



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Why should we learn another language?

Vivienne Allen © 25 February 2024

I had intended to read one of Clay's talks entitled, Why should we learn another language? From Sept 2020 in its entirety but after I read it I realised that a lot of it was about Clay's personal journey. I have experience with my own journey regarding this topic so I've added some of my own thoughts and picked out parts of Clays' speech that are relevant and added some from other sources,

What has this topic got to do with any of our Unitarian principles? A lot.

1st Principle; The inherent worth and dignity of every person – after struggling for 15 years to learn Spanish I've come to appreciate how difficult it is for immigrants to learn English and now I'm far more tolerant of people who struggle to communicate in English.

7th Principle; Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Learning a language has opened up connections to other people and their cultures.

The language I'm speaking right now is on its way to becoming the world's universal language, for better or for worse. Let's face it, it's the language of the internet, the language of finance, the language of air traffic control, of popular music, of diplomacy. English is everywhere. Now Mandarin Chinese is spoken by more people, but more Chinese people are learning English than English speakers are learning Chinese. So after telling you all that, why should we learn a foreign language other than if English happens to be foreign to you? Why learn a foreign language when it's getting to the point where everyone in the world will be able to communicate in English?

[John McWhorter, linguist and a professor from Columbia University](#) gives three reasons for learning another language:-

1. if you want to imbibe a culture, if you want to become part of it, if you want to 'get' the culture, learning their language is a ticket to being able to participate in the culture of the people that speak it.
2. If you speak two languages, dementia is less likely to set in, and you are probably a better multitasker which means that bilingualism is healthy.
3. languages are an awful lot of fun. Much more fun than we are often told. For example, languages have different word orders. Learning to speak with different word orders is like learning to drive in the other side of the road.

I can only give you examples in Spanish. In English we say; I gave the keys to you. In Spanish you have to say; to you I gave the keys or, to you the keys I gave as Spanish is more flexible about word order. Another example; in English we say; He brings it to me whereas in Spanish I would say; to me it he brings. So you can see how you could get tangled up with starting a sentence and forgetting to put in some of the essentials – I can get to the end of a sentence and realise I've forgotten the main bits that should have gone into the beginning. False friends are another trap. False friends are words that sound very similar in your mother tongue but unfortunately mean something totally different. In Spanish there are lots of them. Maybe you're in Spain and you need some help from a pharmacist and you say; Estoy constipada, Tengo constipación. You will probably be surprised when the pharmacist hands you some Asprin as you told her you have a cold. So you try to apologise and say, Lo siento estoy embarazada. Now, you're really going to get some funny looks especially if you are a man, as you've just told them you are pregnant. Yes, embarazada means pregnant.

We live in an era when it's never been easier to learn a language. After visiting Spain for the first time, I fell in love with the country and their culture and wanted to learn their language. I started by attending nightschool at Auckland University and then completed three levels at Auckland University over three years. Even though I enjoyed being in the classes with young people, I think I learnt more from online courses, podcasts, programmes and one-to-one lessons from my Chilean teacher than from attending University. Nowadays, you can lie down on your lounge floor with a glass of Chardonnay and teach yourself via very good

online courses or play podcasts while you are on a long drive or walk, all from your phone. When I started learning 15 years ago most of the resources were on CD or tapes I borrowed from the library. Next week I'm about to spend a month in South America so I wanted to practise my speaking before I go. I still have a lesson every week from my Chilean teacher Carlos, but I've added in some extra speaking practice from an online company where I can choose from multiple teachers or cheaper options where you talk to everyday people who just want to earn a bit extra. At the moment I'm talking with Maria from Mexico twice a week at a time that suits me. Maria is a TaeKwonDo teacher in business with her husband and they have a teenage son who is a chess prodigy. They travel all over Mexico to chess competitions with their son. I'm having a great time finding out more about her life.

I'm now keen to learn some Te Reo because it is the language of Maori and I would like to at least learn to pronounce it properly and to learn some words that I can use in everyday life.

Clay said that:-

Language is the most direct connection we have to other cultures. Being able to communicate in te reo will foster in me an even greater appreciation for the traditions, spirituality, arts, and history of the 16.5% of the population who identify as Māori and have left their indelible mark on this country. Greater understanding, in turn, promotes greater tolerance, empathy, and acceptance. Perhaps the most important reason for me to study te reo Māori is I am a Unitarian committed to promoting social, economic and environmental justice. Language and power go hand-in-hand. Those whose first language historically is te reo are more likely to live below the poverty line in substandard housing, be treated inequitably by the justice system, be incarcerated at a much higher rate than other population groups, have inadequate health care and shorter lifespans, be victimised by crime, be offered fewer employment opportunities, attend poorly funded schools, suffer low self-esteem, and be kept at a distance from decision-making that impacts their lives. None of this was by accident. It was by design.

From 1860 when colonists dominated the population, they actively sought to assimilate Māori, which meant first killing off their language. And they nearly succeeded. Despite the emphasis on speaking English, the Māori language survived. Until the Second World War most Māori spoke te reo as their first language. They worshipped in Māori, and Māori was the language of the marae. More importantly, it was still the language of the home, where parents passed it on to their children. Political meetings were conducted in Māori and there were Māori newspapers and literature. The Second World War brought about momentous changes for Māori society. With plenty of work available in towns and cities, Māori moved into urban areas in greater numbers. Before the war, about 75% of Māori lived in rural areas. Two decades later, approximately 60% lived in urban centres. English was the language of urban New Zealand — at work, in school and in leisure activities. Māori children went to city schools where Māori was unknown to teachers. Enforced contact between large numbers of Māori and Pākehā caused much strain and stress, and te reo was one of the things to suffer.

Back to me;

I've been very upset recently about some of the comments from people who are against the use of Te Reo in our society. Simon Wilson from NZ Herald said this; Te reo and other elements of tikanga Māori have been embraced by businesses, private schools and provincial institutions. Why is the Government so out of touch with this?

Year 13 students were farewelled with the traditional haka last week. Which school? I'm going to guess it's most schools in the country. At Palmerston North Boys' High, a self-described "traditional" institution, the haka is such a massive effort, inside the crowded school hall, you wonder why the building doesn't collapse.

But the one I'm especially thinking of is St Cuthbert's College, a private school for girls in Epsom. It's the top-performing school, academically, in the country.

The St Cuthbert's haka is beautiful, noble, incredibly thrilling, all of that. It's famous, at least in the leafiest suburbs of this city. We're used to te

reo and tikanga Māori in sport and entertainment. Few would be uncomfortable with the national anthem being sung in te reo. The younger you are, the more certain it is that you'll know how to perform a haka and sing ***Tutira Mai*** – and very likely enjoy them both.

But the reach of this lovely language goes much further now. It's embedded in many, perhaps most, service industries, not just in the public sector but throughout the private sector too.

It's my impression most people are on board with this. Whether you think of yourself as a New Zealander, a citizen of Aotearoa, a Kiwi or something else, the chances are you value the way te reo and tikanga are being incorporated into our lives. They express something important about who we are.

Why bother to instruct Waka Kotahi to give its English name priority, despite a Curia poll showing it's the best recognised of all the Māori names for Government departments?

Waka Kotahi will once again be primarily known as the NZ Transport Agency or NZTA. Although not Transit NZ, which it was from 1989 to 2008, or the National Roads Board or Main Highways Board, which it was even earlier.

The names are a bit of a clue: As a society, we evolve. Usually, that means going forward.

Now I'm going to share a few of my experiences teaching English and learning Spanish;

So there's a myth when it comes to language and that myth is that children are exceptionally good at learning languages and that we lose that gift when we grow up. We have good reason to believe in this myth. Many of us have had this experience. I studied French and Latin at school but when I visited France many years later was teased by a French waitress when I tried to order. I have studied Spanish for the last 15 years but when I tried to talk to Jos's niece's 12year old daughter in Spanish she looked at me painfully and replied in perfect English. She is fluent in four languages, English, French, Spanish and Catalan and can't comprehend why I'd want to try to speak to her in broken Spanish.

We forget that these children have been exposed to 1000s of hours of language whereas I've only had a few hours a week to practice my Spanish but if you put adults into full emersion language learning they do as well as children, if not better. So we are better at learning languages than children because we know how to learn. It is much more difficult for people who don't know how to go about learning a language.

Many years ago I trained as a teacher of English as a Second language and taught a class of immigrant young people who were very quick learners. However, I also found teaching exhausting so went back to work in the IT sector for the rest of my career. I did volunteer to teach English to some refugees one-to-one but I ended up learning more than I taught. The first was a young woman from Eritrea, illiterate, had never been to school, couldn't read or write in her own language, couldn't even write her own name properly. I tried to teach her for over a year but failed for quite a few reasons; one lesson a week wasn't enough, and her husband kept interfering in the lesson and trying to correct my English. He disagreed with the word feet, in his opinion the correct English was two foots. The second woman was an older woman from Afghanistan, again illiterate but I gave up after a few lessons when I realised she couldn't see properly and couldn't hear properly. She needed to get some help with these things before starting to learn. The third was a young woman with a young baby from Argentina, had been to school and we could speak some Spanish together but I soon realised that she was lonely and what she really needed was to meet other young mothers so I helped her join Playcentre.

About 8 years ago, Jos and I were in Medellin, Columbia staying with my ex-teacher Saray and her kiwi husband Ron when Saray introduced us to her young friends Jose and Isabel who were moving to NZ the next week. We were also returning to NZ so invited Jose and Isabel to come and stay with us until they found suitable accommodation. Jose could speak a little English but Isabel none. They had saved enough money to enrol fulltime in an English academy for six months while working part-time in some menial jobs. Both were highly educated and experienced 30 year-olds, Jose in marketing and Isabel a civil engineer. Because of their backgrounds they knew how to learn, what to do to find jobs and to learn English. They soon moved out of a Spanish-speaking flat into one

with people that only spoke English so that they could practise speaking English at every opportunity. It still took them a few years before they obtained jobs equivalent to those they had in Columbia. Isabel now works as an Engineer on the northern motorway project and Jose has spent 5 years working as a Marketing Manager. They both have very good English but Isabel still has a very strong accent which she'll probably not lose. By the way, Clay married them on our deck about 7 years ago and they will become NZ citizens next month. We have enjoyed our friendship with them and hope that we have been helpful to them also.

I also have some young Spanish friends, Jonathan and Henar who I met around 10 years ago when they came to help me in our garden in Titirangi, in exchange for accommodation. Now, if I'm in Spain I visit them and catch up with their lives and their families. What a joy. 18 months ago I was in Spain to visit Jonathan and Henar in their home town of Valladolid, which is north-west of Madrid. A lovely city where tourists rarely go because it doesn't have any famous buildings or ruins. I arrived by train around mid-day on a nice warm day of around 25 degrees and wheeled my suitcase until I found a parkbench and could start googling for my hostel. Google was having trouble finding the way so I rebooted the phone and checked again on Booking.com. I suddenly realised I've mistakenly booked a hostel in Valladolid, Mexico not Spain. Panic! Luckily I found the last bed in a six bed room in a hostel in the centre of the city. Google took me to the hostel which was 4 stories up an ancient wooden building with no lift so I was exhausted when I arrived and vowed to pack lighter next time I travelled. The hostel covered one floor of this ancient building – I know it was ancient because the similar building next door had been gutted ready for renovations and I could see the old wooden structure. The owner of the hostel seemed to be a pleasant woman and the place was exceptionally clean, the smell of disinfectant everywhere. I hadn't had a chance to check any reviews as I was just relieved to have found a bed for two nights. I spent the next two days wandering around the city, meeting up with both Jonathan and Henar and their families. Henar took me to a famous tapas bar to sample

a selection of their award winning tapas and insisted on paying which was nice.

On the morning of my departure, I decided to stay in bed and read because everyone was racing for the only bathroom. When there was only a young German couple left in the room, I started packing my bag. The German boy had jumped from the top bunk into the bed of his girlfriend and they were looking at their travel guide and talking to me, in perfect English, about their plans when the owner walked into the room and started shouting to them in Spanish. The Germans couldn't speak Spanish so I was trying to interpret for them. The owner was upset that they were in the same bed and was kicking them out of the hostel. Right now! Then she would turn to me and say, Cariño, ¿quieres una mazana? An apple? Did I hear that right? She asked me if I'd like an apple, then she added; Sí, de un árbol en la finca de mi padre. Yes, from a tree on my father's farm. I decided it was time to leave, packed up quickly without a shower, accepted the apple and quickly made my way down those stairs leaving those poor young Germans to deal with her.

You too could have some interesting experiences from learning another language.

I highly recommend that you learn another language – it won't change your mind but it most certainly will blow your mind. Good luck .