

CSLSC June 2021 Conference

Searching for Words: Language and Meaning in a Discordant World

A Theme Statement:

All of us have experienced the dramatic way in which the use and meaning of language and the visual have changed in our culture over the last twenty years. These profound changes have altered the way we talk, the way we learn, the way we teach, and the way we offer witness. This conference will explore the fracture of our common life, consider the mystery of language and icon in the context of historic and living faith, and imagine an expression of truth that offers hope and reconciliation.

Introduction: Have you ever thought about how you would teach a very intelligent, cogent, and self-aware fish about water? It would be a real challenge. So it is for us to think about the phenomena of language. In many respects we, as human beings, live in language. We are surrounded by language from the moment of our conception to the moment of our physical death. There are many other aspects to our life, but language is present all the time. Perhaps this strange question will cause us to think about how wondrous and mysterious it is that St. John begins his proclamation of the Good News by stating that the “Word,” the “Logos,” the “Word-Deed,” the “Rational Structure of the Universe,” the “Creative Word of God,” the second person of the Holy Trinity came to us, became flesh and blood, and “pitched his tent” in our midst. This “Word” and these “words” astound us.

At the same time, we live surrounded by the visual and the aural and the sonic. We “see.” We “hear.” We hear and understand the word-less language of music. Our language of knowledge is shaped by words that point to “seeing” and “hearing.” The same witness tradition that proclaims Jesus as the Word also proclaims Jesus as the “Icon of the invisible God.” This is also startling. Jesus, the Logos become flesh, is also the Icon or image of the invisible God. Word and Image are deeply linked. Word-Deed-enfleshed and Icon-enfleshed are one. Logos and Logo are now one.

A conference designed to challenge us to think about language and icon, meaning and creativity, and the deep mystery to which these words point is bound to be hard to “articulate” and grasp. Even in our effort to express, in thought, our experience of the distorted meanings of our culture, our words fail us. We hang onto, as we should, words that have come to reveal deep meaning to us about the human condition, about the nature of reality, and about the one true God who created us for His joyous

purpose. We encounter the Word in and through words infused with spiritual power and authority. We join together to ponder the Word with words. We seek, pursue, and long to dance together with meaning.

We are shocked and often afraid of the visual images that crowd into our consciousness and deeply alter our interpretation of our world. We confess, we have lost the ability to understand the deep meaning and significance of the visual. Often we are deeply moved by the power of music but we struggle to articulate what music means and what it communicates about the structure of reality. The visual arts and the word-less art of music arrest our attention through sight and sound but we have lost a way to receive their meaning or recognize how vital these forms of art are to meaningful life.

We grieve that our world is so broken and so many of our friends are living without meaning. And, we are confused by the ways in which language, visual expression, and music are used to divide, to hurt, to coerce, to entrap, and to destroy. We wonder: how can we think and feel through language about the mystery of Word and Icon so that we can begin to understand how to use language and the word-less language of the visual and aural for the sake of God's eternal Love-Word-Icon?

A Philosophical Meditation: In our current cultural moment, language and meaning have become untethered from the ordinary experience of reality outside of our individual consciousness. The prevailing assertion of the present appears to be rooted in the following set of assumptions:

1. Each individual is absolutely free to define their own life and their own destiny with all meaning understood in "self-referential" terms;
2. This assertion of our selves is free from all restraint caused by or imposed upon the autonomous self from history, culture, perceived sources of power, or any institutional structure;
3. In this setting, all value words are reduced to expressions of emotion severed from any claim to express reality or truth beyond "my truth" and "my reality." As such, value words are merely expressions of power and are inherently coercive and oppressive;
4. Language itself is ultimately useful only to the extent it conveys my individual assertion of myself as free from any coercive and oppressive power that would rob me of my freedom to define myself to myself and to the "Other;"

5. The visual and aural expressions of human creativity are ultimately useful only to the extent that they convey my individual assertion of myself as free from any coercive and oppressive power that would rob me of my freedom to define myself to myself and to the “Other;”
6. Language, icon, and the word-less language of music are all thus reduced to the expression of “my” emotions and “my” power.

The net effect of these assertions is the notion that all language and icon and the effort individuals make to interpret reality to each other is “private language” and accessible to others only to the extent that they share my experience and are thus members of my “tribe.” Individually, a person can become a member of a tribe only by affirming, without reservation, the particular understanding of life shared by that tribe, or by fully identifying with that tribe by submitting their individual will to the overarching will of the tribe. If this assessment is true (in that, if it faithfully reflects our experience in our culture) then:

1. language *as* language has lost its meaning: the assertions of meaning within our “talk” to “Others” are largely meaningless unless accompanied by tribal identification or the threat of force;
2. Icon *as* icon has lost its meaning: the assertions of meaning within our “talk” to “Others” concerning images are largely meaningless unless accompanied by tribal identification or the threat of force;
3. Dialogue in the pursuit of truth outside and beyond my experience or my free identification with my chosen tribe becomes impossible;
4. There is no truth beyond my tribe;
5. There can be no truth which could call into question my allegiance to my tribe;
6. *My* tribal language and *my* tribal icons can be the *only* meaningful language and, consequentially, all other tribal languages and icons are, by definition, oppressive and incoherent.

If the above is an accurate portrayal of our situation, then reason, marked by the use of a shared language which allows for the search for truth beyond myself, is inaccessible as a resource for conflict management or common life. Emotional identification with “Others” beyond my tribe is impossible because there are no shared human emotions. Willful activity in the free pursuit of a common human community in which love and forgiveness serve as the shared bonds that link us together is impossible because all efforts to communicate with other tribes for a larger purpose are deemed coercive and oppressive. The possibility of human community shaped by transcendent and sacrificial love is denied.

The transcendent contradicts my autonomous self. The assertion of an ultimate reality beyond my immediate tribal experience threatens my very selfhood.

The C. S. Lewis Study Center asserts that despite these cultural changes, the human being is still engaged in a profound search for dialogue, meaning and purpose. The wisdom of human experience points unmistakably to the human capacity for relationship as the necessary context for the experience and acquisition of meaning that transcends our immediate circumstances. A meaningful life, in the wisdom literature of human experience, embodies loving relationships that grow and mature over time. These relationships involve the nurture of emotional life, intellectual curiosity, and creative activity for the purpose of shaping and building a more virtuous environment for the next generation.

In such a vision, language and icon must reflect each arena or sphere of life with clarity, nuance, and metaphorical depth to capture, however imperfectly, the mysterious transcendent Reality in Whom we find ultimate meaning. Within the experience of those through history who point to Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of the transcendent “personal” mystery called God, the meaningful life is found in relationship with this gracious and loving God. This is the Triune God who demonstrates His power to heal our self-inflicted wounds, defeats the powers of destruction and death, and graciously loves us into an eternal relationship that is the means of reconciliation for all levels of our experience.

Language and icon are understood as the gifts of a gracious God. Language and icon reflect the reality of relationships that can be healed, restored and reconciled, thus breaking the tribal separations built by our brokenness. Within the new relationship shaped by grace, language and icon express and give witness to the deep meaning of existence and the hope of a transformative relational community.

Conference Vision: We have designed this exploration to

1. be marked by creativity because language and icon are alive with dynamic power;
2. expand our imagination because the language we employ to sketch and stretch our cultural boundaries is fragmented and torn;
3. nudge us toward learning a new language shaped by Incarnate Love as both Logos and Icon;
4. help us to re-enter and re-center our ordinary lives with an extra-ordinary awareness of the depth of meaning in which we swim in our shared longing for wholeness.

Conference Structure: This conference will attempt to explore aspects of community wrought by God’s grace that can provide, by its very embodiment, hope for a fractured world. In the first

plenary, we will explore the nature of truth. We will wonder about the nature of the gift of language itself.

In the second plenary, we will search for insight in the Biblically shaped thought of C. S. Lewis. We will examine the intimate relationship between imagination, meaning, and language. And, we will point toward the Incarnation of Jesus, the Word-become-flesh and the Icon of the Invisible God, as the ultimate cipher of Reality.

In the third plenary, we will explore the way music and visual art both claim the capacity to reflect upon reality. They can disclose hitherto unknown aspects of what is ultimate to those who understand their “wordless” languages. How can visual art and musical art be understood in a context where the linkages between language and meaning are strained to the breaking point? Our journey into these word-less languages will open the door to an afternoon of creative exploration. The arts will be put on display during the evening session which will focus on music, drama, and our joyous gathering around Aslan’s Table for story, poetry, and song.

In the fourth plenary, we will explore the deepest assertion of the Christian tradition: that in Jesus the Christ, the Logos (word, reason, discourse, Word-deed of God) and Icon (image of the invisible God) become flesh and blood for us. Can a Trinitarian understanding of language help us recover meaning and provide clues to a new pedagogy for an “a-literate world”? Are there every day and practical ways parents, teachers, care-givers, and “ordinary saints” can incarnate truth, such that, our language and our understanding of the visual and aural are reinvigorated? Can we learn from great communicators to become winsome expressions of Word and Icon?

Our conference will end with celebration and commissioning. Praise, calling, celebration of the community of grace, and commissioning will resound the themes of our conference. Even in the midst of a crisis of meaning we are called to be witnesses to Word and Icon through all our gifts now under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit all to the Glory of God.

Conference Goal: If we, who gather together, are touched by the gracious Spirit of God, then we will say, with feeble language, that we have been enveloped into a deeper life of prayer and a community shaped by dialogue with and within The Word-Icon, which will, in turn, empower us to love those who hate us, sacrifice for those who seek to coerce us, and be faithful witnesses to those around us in places where truth is under siege.

Searching for Words: Language and Meaning in a Discordant World

CSLSC June 2021 Conference Schedule*

[June 15, 2021 Travel and arrival at the C. S. Lewis Study Center, Northfield, MA]

June 16, 2021

- 9:00 – 10:00 Registration for Pre-Conference
- 10:00 – 4:30 Pre-Conference for Prep and Independent Day School Faculty and Staff
(David and Joanne Dowdy)
- 10:00 – 12:00 Session 1
- 12:00 – 1:00 Lunch
- 1:00 – 3:00 Session 2
- 3:00 – 3:30 Break
- 3:30 – 4:30 Session 3

- 3:00 – 5:30 Conference Registration

- 5:30 – 6:00 Welcome and Introductions

- 6:00 – 7:00 Dinner

- 7:30 – 9:00 Opening Session
 - 7:30 – 8:00 Meditation: The Mystery of the Word (Brad Davis)

 - 8:00 – 9:00 **Plenary One** – Human Beings and the Gift of Language: Naming, Being, and Doing (Scott B. Key)
 - 9:00 – 9:15 Dialogue and Discussion

 - 9:15 – 10:00 Reception

June 17, 2021

- 8:00 – 9:00 Breakfast

- 9:00 – 9:30 Music and Meditation: The Word that Acts

- 9:30 – 10:45 **Plenary Two** – Language and Human Nature: C. S. Lewis and the Quest for Meaning – Steven Beebe

- 10:45 – 11:15 Break

- 11:15 – 12:30 **Plenary Three** – The Faithful Artist and the Prophetic Hermeneutic of Hope in an Age of Despair – Cameron Anderson

- 12:30 – 1:30 Lunch

1:30 – 2:30	Coaching Creative Activities: Brad Davis, Deb Davis, and others - Leaders Creative Writing – Brad Davis Project-Centered Teaching – Deb Davis Music, Drama, and Visual Art
2:30 – 5:30	Free Time
6:00 – 7:00	Dinner
7:00 – 8:00	Musical Offering: (TBA)
8:00 – 8:30	Dramatic Reading: (TBA)
8:30 – 9:00	Break
9:00 – 10:30	Aslan’s Table (Brad Davis)

June 18, 2021

8:00 – 9:00	Breakfast
9:00 – 9:30	Music and Meditation: The Word that Mediates
9:30 – 10:30	Plenary Four – How to Communicate Like C. S. Lewis: Communicating in a Discordant World – Steven Beebe
10:30 – 11:00	Break
11:00 – 12:00	Concluding Celebration (Brad and Deb Davis)
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch and Goodbyes

**Schedule and Speakers subject to change. Updates will be noted on this page as they become available.*