

Power of Naming

In profound ways, many experiences have invited me to examine the “power of naming.” It is a power which both reflects and shapes how we see and how we act.

“*Wastebasket/Resourcebasket*” — Holding up a wastebasket, an invention of over 100 years ago, our speaker asked us these questions, “What if this had been named a resourcebasket? If it had been named differently, would we not have seen it differently, and thus related with it differently?” Had it been named a resourcebasket, would not what was deposited into it have been perceived as valuable, instead of as something to be buried in a garbage dump?

In that period of U.S. history, the chosen name reflected the perception that resources were unlimited and that waste was easily disposed of and forgotten. Is not this form of perception still apparent today?

“*Rich/Poor*” — During course work at Maryknoll in New

York, a classmate from Africa invited us to look at how the words rich and poor are used. He observed that, while the United States is usually named *rich*, his experiences included locking doors, being able to make little eye contact with others as he walked down the street, and learning to watch over his shoulder wherever he went.

On the other hand, in his native land of Tanzania, which is frequently named as *poor*, he experienced a deep, joyful sense of community; open doors; and freedom to stroll about without fear. His question to us: “Who is really rich?”

Other Examples — Later, I recognized other examples of the power of naming. For example, “developed/underdeveloped” are commonly perceived and defined in relation to economic wealth — a fundamental value in a free market, consumer-oriented society.

But, what if a country’s wealth was evaluated relative to the quality of life and the qual-



ity of relationships? Within such a perspective, what if the indicators of a country’s Gross National Wellbeing (GNW) received equal or greater value than indicators of the Gross National Product (*GNP, a U.S. economic marker*)? GNW would name, reflect, and shape a markedly different world than GNP (*as well as comparable indices in other countries*).

Naming is a power used everyday, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously. Gradually, I have become increasingly aware of my part in this power, a power used by choice, consciously, or by default, unconsciously.

In this new millennium, I reflect on how I will use this power in striving to build and nurture a just, peaceful society? To that end, one of my New Year’s resolutions is to continue to “watch my language.”

What about you? Do you have any special focus for nurturing a peaceful world in the coming years?