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Dear Colleague:

There are times when we feel we are a divided society, nation-scale and at the scale of the university, and long for a common language that can, at least occasionally, unite us. It's comforting to know that the problem, however exacerbated now, is not exactly new for it had confronted other peoples, other times. To English thinkers of the eighteenth century, the nation seemed riven along the lines of regional dialect and the specialized vocabularies of multiplying trades and professions. Wordsworth yearned for a language that the English people could all share at the deepest level of their being--human nature. For him, this would be the language of rural life, a poetic lyrical language. Enlightenment figures, by contrast, preferred the cultivated language of reason, shorn of the excesses of emotion, for only such a language could transcend local biases and be widely shared. William Hazlitt (1778-1830) offered a third model--the dramatic model, with its suggestion of engagement if not confrontation, and the promise of mutual understanding based on real sympathy, not merely politic, papered-over compromises. Hazlitt's model, in its highest form, was the Shakespearean drama, in which kings and beggars, wisemen and fools, men and women, young and old, engage one another in one world (the great Globe), each speaking with a unique voice--each uniquely eloquent, even if it be the voice of Caliban--and yet somehow comprehended by the other.

Somehow. There's the rub. How? I think of two necessary conditions: First, and by far the more important, a willingness to listen and--a prior stage--a willingness to be physically present and available to one another; second, a technique of discourse, which Shakespeare had to the level of genius. Shakespeare wanted to communicate with everyone--intellectual aristocrats and just plain folks. A modern politician, confronted by such a challenge, would intuitively descend to the lowest common factor, use few words and these the simplest. Shakespeare, by contrast, went to the opposite extreme. His vocabulary was by far the richest of any English writer (25,000, with Milton a poor second). He indulged in Latinisms, which greatly pleased the intellectuals, but he also spoke street language, which greatly pleased the cobblers and seamstresses. And he very cleverly--unobtrusively--translated the Latinisms into plain English. Example: "But falls into abatement and low price/Even in a minute (Twelfth Night)". Abatement is immediately rendered into "low price." This ability to make the most subtle language understandable must be a reason why modern children, not otherwise great readers, can enjoy Shakespeare--his world of real complexity and passion. (See Ted Hughes's introduction to The Essential Shakespeare, Ecco Press, 1991).

Best wishes,

