

**Choosing My Words . . . and My Silence**  
**By David Short**  
**Good Shepherd Institute for Mission**  
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*"It takes great tact and discernment to say things at the right time and in the right way."*  
St. Mary Euphrasia

I wrote my first article for The Institute for Mission fifteen years ago. It was entitled "Everyday Values" and spoke to my desire to make Good Shepherd values a part of my daily life – to weave them so deeply into my behaviors and attitudes that I could not treat them simply like a piece of clothing that I could put on or discard when it suited me.

In that original article I noted that values aren't just characteristics like being tall or having brown eyes. To be considered "honest", one has to tell the truth. Similarly, our Good Shepherd value of reconciliation doesn't describe a state of being but rather an action. Reconciling with others is an intentional act.

So fifteen years later, how am I doing? Depends on the day. Sometimes, it depends on the minute. I hope I live by my values more often than not – but I guess those that I work and live with would have to confirm or refute this.

I will admit that every time I think I'm doing pretty well, a Mary Euphrasia quote comes along and stops me in my tracks:

*"Never write any words but words of kindness and cheer. There is enough suffering and hardship without adding to the burden."*

*"Listen to nothing and say nothing which could tarnish, however slightly, another's reputation. When some problem arises, condemn nobody, defend the absent."*

Ouch. Clearly, I still have a lot of work to do.

There are so many things in my world that I can't control – the weather, traffic, politics, the fact that I look more and more like my father the older I get. But I can control my words. Not one single word comes out of my mouth that I don't shape and give utterance to. The words I use are my choice – be they bitter or sweet.

We sometimes wonder where "old sayings" come from. Even if we don't know their origin, many of these sayings stand the test of time because they speak some word of truth.

*"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched."*

*"A stitch in time saves nine."*

*"Don't judge a book by its cover."*

And then there's, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

It seems Mary Euphrasia wasn't the only one to encourage thoughtfulness before speaking. But why is that lesson so hard for me to learn? I make a choice every time I speak to either add something positive to my environment or to add something negative.

Without a doubt, there are things in this world that we must speak against in the strongest terms: abuse, discrimination, human trafficking, etc. Silence in the face of such atrocities is the opposite of Good Shepherd.

But in my day-to-day existence, in my conversations with colleagues, friends, and families, and (gasp!) even in social media, can I decide to be a positive force with my words – or at least decide through silence NOT to add to the negative?

I've come to realize that my struggle against negative words has to be fought one day at a time – or more realistically, one conversation at a time. Ok – sometimes it's sentence by sentence. But as with any habit, I CAN make a change. I WANT to make a change.

There's a Thomas Merton quote about peace that I really like: "If you yourself are at peace, then there is at least some peace in the world." I'm sure I'll never have the power to change macro-level issues, but if my little bit of positive energy can join with someone else's positive energy -- and then with your positive energy – then "little by little, we will all be transformed" (another wise Euphrasia saying).

May our words – and sometimes our silence – show the world that we are Good Shepherd.