CREATING LANGUAGE THAT RE-CONECTS US WITH NATURE
By Susan J. Tweit

“Language is meant to be a playful, ever-shifting creation, but we have been taught—and most of us continue to believe—that language must obediently follow precisely prescribed rules that govern clear sentence structures, specific word orders, correct spellings, and proper pronunciations,” writes naturalist and author David Lukas in his new book, Language Making Nature. Lukas’s point is both breathtakingly simple and audaciously earth-shaking: If we hope to reconnect humans with nature, he says, if we hope to infect others with our delight, awe, and whole-hearted kinship for the world outside our skin boundary, we must re-invent our language to express those feelings and experiences. Instead of building walls between us, our language must begin to restore bonds.

To do that, Lukas points out, both the words and the way we use them must change. “In its heart and soul, language can also be a revolutionary force, and it can be used to expose lies, but you cannot have a revolution if you use the language of the conquerors,” he writes. Amen!

When I write about plants—rooted beings I consider kin—editors routinely red-ink my use of the pronoun “who” in reference to these leafy lives, preferring the standard and de-personalizing “it.” I disagree. To me, plants and the rest of the living world are “people” in their own right, even though in proper English, other species are shunted to the less-than-human ghetto as mere “things.”

In proper English, even nature itself, that ever-shifting web of interconnected lives, is considered “it.” That flat pronoun yields no hint of a living system continuously responding to the changing environment, cycling through life and death and evolution. That’s just wrong. The de-natured pronoun de-natures life; it classifies living systems as commodities rather than members of our home community. “It” and “thing” are not us. Our depauperate, unimaginative language makes it far too easy for us to mindlessly abuse and exploit nature and those legions of beings who make up the worldwide web of lives.

So when I heard Robin Wall Kimmerer—botanist, author, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation—suggest at the 2015 Geography of Hope Conference in Point Reyes Station, California, that we adopt the genderless Potawatomi pronoun “ki” for other beings, with the plural form “kin,” I wanted to stand up and applaud. She was speaking my language. A language I hadn’t ever thought about changing. Although I did invent a word once. When my late husband and I collaborated on an entry for an art show, we needed a word to express what inspired our work—his abstract sculpture and my writing and ecological restoration. After some thought, we came up with terraphilia, which we defined as something broader than E.O. Wilson’s “biophilia”: An intrinsic affection for and connection to the earth and its interwoven community of lives. “Without that connection,” I wrote in our narrative, “we are lonely, lacking, no longer whole.”

The idea of a wholesale, nature-friendly revision of the English language grew on me as I read Language Making Nature. Lukas, who has written nature guides and has been a columnist for Sunset Magazine and the Los Angeles Times, draws on his teaching and writing experience—and some fascinating research—to provide a tool-kit for inventing and modifying words, finding in the process new ways to express our connection to each other, other species, the community of nature, and this earth. The book is mind boggling, a little over-
In a series of mostly short chapters interspersed with quotes and examples, Lukas dips into linguistics, the history of the English language, anthropology of names and places, and word forms and word use. He offers playful chapters containing exercises on making up and using words in new ways. The exercises draw on a wide variety of sources, including Chaucer, classical Greek and Latin, Old English and other “root” European languages, call and response forms, chants, colors, body language, place-forms, textures in nature, and other species.

As with any paradigm-shifting concept, Language Making Nature isn’t perfect. Nor, I think, did Lukas mean it to be. We learn more thoroughly and deeply, he points out, if the material is presented in ways that are uncomfortable, not easy to decipher, and that shake up our perceptions. True. But to reach as wide an audience as possible, it’s important to tend to the aesthetics of the package, especially the title and book cover. Language Making Nature doesn’t succeed there. The title, rather than being intriguing, is simply confusing. The book’s cover, a close-up photo of what appears to be a granite boulder, is so visually busy that the title itself is hard to pick out; inside, Lukas’ writing sometimes trips over itself. Those may seem like superficial quibbles, but they can deter readers. If you want to reach readers, you’ve got to appeal to them first.

As with his previous books, Lukas published this one himself, and honestly, I wish he hadn’t. There are drawbacks to traditional publishing—it’s slow, the gates are sometimes closed to new ideas, and it doesn’t guarantee the book will reach readers. But what it does do well is expose the work to new eyes; editors, designers, marketers, and publicists know their jobs and their audience. Working with a team willing to step back and give the work a critical look likely would have produced a more immediately appealing and accessible book.

That said, Language Making Nature is well worth the read. But don’t stop there. This book is not just an intellectual exercise; it begs to be used. Read a bit, and then practice. Play with creating new words and sounds and rhythms and forms. Speak them out loud. Write them down. Think with them. Together, Lukas seems to say, we can create a language that reconnects us with this living planet, the only home our species has ever known.