

# The Sacred Word (a summer church service)

Orchestrated by Reginald O'Hare Gibson

Delivered at First Parish Lexington Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2009

## the word (a performed invocation)

By Regie O'Hare Gibson

*O an ochre song called you from the corners of post existence  
you appeared a silent apparition of language  
and i became pregnant with the word.*

*And the word took flight on crimson oceans of light.  
Oceans of light screamed prayer into vermilion angles of wrangled space.  
Angled space sank like an obsidian siren into the mad mouth of my pocket.  
My pocket dangled a jangling death from the tongue of a stone victrola.  
A stone victrola coughed a murder of crows shrieking translucent blue music.  
Blue music circled the bells of my waiting and insistent speech.  
My speech oracled itself toward the sword of your memory.  
Your memory cast the shadow of my castrated breath.*

*My breath cried the kiss of an ochre song calling you from the corner  
of post existence. You appeared a silent apparition of language.  
I became pregnant with the word*

**(O)** And the word was born. The was born still. The word stillborn in the center of turbulent awakening. The word became sunlight carving her arpeggio into the archipelago of flat unfolding blackness. The word became.

The word became the shards of dead stars shedding the egg of plant and planet became constellated tongue of demon and deity lamenting the birth of its form the word became the misspelled literature of tree floating through the abysmal womb of the I. The word became the primordial hymn still ringing through this ancient azure stone.

**((O))** And i saw the word. Saw the word knocked and snorting her death in syllables and drinking her liver in the dilapidated taverns on death-dwelt corners without name. Her fingertips ripped cracked and bleeding raw from clawing the insides of forty ounce coffins, The word manifested herself as man riddled by the mystery of lead and left to die face up eyes open watching his life bleed from a hole in the head back to the I. I saw the word as a broken vowel. The hungry howling dying child dragged to death decapitated and nailed to wood. The word was beaten mercilessly for being a man who loved other men. The word was resurrected after three days from the muddied river bottoms of a nation's bloody conscience. The word inverted self womanifested as violated female flesh slicked with the slime of patriarchy the word was entered by her father so many times she to learned believe his sickness was sacred.

((O))) and i loved the word and danced seven insistent salsas till three a.m. with the word and the word was no longer afraid or ashamed to throw her head back and her arms skyward and in white flashes of teeth and sweat licked hair mouth incomprehensible mumbling timed to the rumblings of unsounded sound. The word sucked my tongue as i dreamt this the word spit hibiscus balm into my mouth. The word and i loved that night and i cried and died inside the word that night and the word became pregnant with the word the word grew inside the word the word gave birth to the word and the word became a brown child's finger wiping tears from her fathers eyes the word became a brown child's kisses blooming in spite of the hurricane the word became the word reached out to embrace brown thin wrinkled hands of brown thin wrinkled woman who stirs pots of five a.m. grits in cornerstone called Mississippi the word lives inside the universal thin spaces of in/exhalation traverses earth trapped in condominiums of skin forgetting and refusing to remember she is I AAAAAAMMMMMMMMMMMMM

### **Psalm I: In the Beginning**

A personal poem composed and read by Richard Cambridge

It was hard at first, the lessons God taught him.  
Like a warrior without a sword, he was  
without words. There was nothing he could do.

He was a young man— a boy really— who  
wanted, more than anything, to be a poet.  
God said, That's fine: give me back the talent.

This is the way it is if you love me.  
Give it back. No Questions. Faith it.  
The young man gave back the talent. God said,

Good. I'll make you a living epistle.  
That's the way God is, always lifting things  
to metaphor. The kid wanted to be a poet

but a living epistle sounded neat. He liked  
the way God talked— like a poet!— so he  
agreed. He didn't know what he was in for.

The Twenties were the worst. The Teachable  
Twenties, God called it. That's when God beat  
the shit out of you for ten years. Then the Tireless

Thirties when you put into practice what you  
learned; then the Fiery Forties when the passion  
kicks in; and so on God went, naming the decades

in simple terms like the way God does when  
in the Teacher mode. But The Twenties were  
the worst. God went on about Potters

and Clay and the kid wound up in pieces,  
his mind here, his heart there, his soul a pile  
of shards on God's floor. God saw it was Good,

swept up the kid, put him in a bowl of tears  
until he dissolved into mud. From the kid's  
point of view, it was horrible. His mind was mush.

It was worse than his worst trip on acid.  
All he wanted was chocolate bars, the pain  
was so bad. Then the shaping began— God's  
Hands all over him, around his heart, between  
his legs, painful and sweet, so...*intimate*,  
God's hands on his body— molding, shaping.

Then came The Fire. We won't even talk  
about The Fire. Some things are Mysteries.  
God has a reputation to maintain.

When it was over God breathed into him  
seven times. Seven because that's the way  
God does it when it has to be perfect.

The boy woke up, a young man. He spoke of  
many things in parables and rhymes. He  
was just beginning to learn his lessons.

### **The Sacred Word** (A Homily)

By Regie O'Hare Gibson

For many years I have walked with that poem. There is still something of it that pulls at my viscera. I recall that it came out of a meditation and contemplation of recurring dream images, familial experiences, guilt, grief, love and new fatherhood. And I suppose that because I remember laboring over each word, reciting it reminds me of the importance of words. Not to say that words in and of themselves are important. But because words, as imperfect and often inadequate as they may be, are the ambassadors communicating on behalf of our deepest longings, desires and impulses. And because of this, the act of intentional speech is an act of creation— and all creation is sacred. All humanity is sacred and thus when we use our words to reach out and connect with another sacred being, or the source of that sacredness we become participants in a sacred act.

In the Bantu languages there exists a concept of sacred speech. The concept is called Nommo. Nommo is the power of the word to create. This concept also has physical counterparts which are water, heat, breath— all the elements in the mouth that make speech possible. Nommo, to the Bantu speakers of central and southern Africa, is the power of the spoken word to create change. They hold that words are packets of energy that bring life into being. **SACRED WORDS**

This is a strange concept to many of us Americans. So many of us have been led to believe that our words are merely pack mules—lexical beasts whose only function is to carry the burdens of our facile and quotidian conversations. Or, we have learned not to trust language since so many of the words we daily experience are intended to make us believe we are uninteresting, unloved, and unsacred, so we can be more easily reduced to unthinking, unfeeling, uncomplicated agents of consumption.

We are often unmindful of how our words affect others.

How often in my appalling smallness have I used my words dismissively to those who love me and said hurtful things to end conversations I was uncomfortable holding. How I wish to this day I could recall those hurtful things (even those I meant). But I cannot. All I can do is try to remember the West African warning about being careful when speaking. It says: “One should never speak venom. For when one speaks venom some of it sticks to one’s lips and one is poisoned by one’s very own words.” Therefore, even our most critical words must be arrows dipped in the finest honey. They must heal even when they wound.

### **SACRED WORDS**

As a poet, there have been times at which I have meditated upon from where my words come. Or, perhaps more precisely, what life experiences have driven me toward the impulses of which certain words represent. Among my earliest memories are those of my great-grandparents Robert and Tyree Jordan. Great granddad a retired railway worker was an easy-speaking raconteur who would often talk and sing to himself. (Of course, I being young, thought it was funny to see this old cat, walking around a shotgun shack he’d built singing and conversing with himself. I later came to understand he was illiterate and had always made up songs and stories as mnemonic devices to remember important things. The family used to joke that the more detailed his story the less likely it was to have actually have occurred). My great-grandmother was a tough-talking tower of brown religiosity. A woman who would thank the Lord every other sentence she uttered and belt out Christian spirituals between spits of chewing tobacco and swear words. Once, when I was about 5 years old or so, my great-granddad was in the kitchen making coffee and singing what I would later come to know as the blues. My great-grandmother was in the front of the house folding clothes and singing what I would later understand as gospel. And then it happened. For all of 10 seconds their songs merged with each other. That is to say, the secular and the sacred connected in such a way that it was impossible to separate them. This opened a hole that I could not help but fall into.

After all this time, I still have no name for this experience. Perhaps it is this *duende* of which we poets are often so fond of speaking. But I believe this experience is why I found poetry. I needed to capture whatever that sound was— recall that brief stunning, oneness, when the disparate spoke with one voice and distinctions ceased to be important. I have been trying to

journey back to that sacred space. Trying to find words that speak the sacredness of that experience. **SACRED WORDS.**

When I use the word “sacred”, I refer not to the religiously narrow sense of a deity or divine or Supreme Being. More importantly I mean *the human being becoming the supreme manifestation and womanifestation of our most divine selves*. For me, sacred words are those that begin connecting this smaller self (I) to the greater self (I).

Among the most sacred to me are the words: “What” and “Why”. So much of our searching begins in these words: these twin breaths of the same impulse. They are the voice of the question that both quells and boils in the seeker’s blood. We meet today in community because of them. All seeking begins with this way. All relationships begin this way. *Why am I here? What does it mean to be human? Why do I long for this community? What is my place in it?*

Think of your most sacred words. Words that have a special resonance for you. What are our most sacred words if not invitations to relationship? Are they not borne out of our desire to know a respective other in a deeper sense? Richard and I have a friend named Lee who speaks over 20 languages. He coined the term: Echo-phoneticize. By this I take him to mean that when we speak with intent we do so to see what echoes back to us—hoping that what comes toward us will give us the true sound shape of our own souls.

In the Greek Scriptures of the Bible, (one of the many good soul-shaping books we have) we come across the term: Logos. “In the beginning was the LOGOS”.

Among other definitions our Christological understanding informs us that this term logos means simply “word” or “divine law.” But the ancient Greek understanding of logos is actually closer to *discourse* and *disputation*. I rather like that. In the beginning was the great *disputation*. The great *argument*. The flurry of *questions*. The *colloquy* convened for the purpose of finding out what is. (If that doesn’t get the UU blood pumping, then as they say: “Grit’s ain’t groceries, Eggs ain’t poultry, and the Mona Lisa was a man.)

The Irish Poet W.B. Yeats said: “Out of our arguments with the world we make politics. Out of our arguments with ourselves we make poetry.” I love the idea of arguing with the self so as to find what is sacred to ones self. Like Jacob at Peniel we wrestle with our own angel hoping for a blessing a sacred word or words that will bring us to transcendence. And like Jacob who had his thighbone knocked out of joint by his angel we too will know how much we have been blessed by how badly we limp.

I have often thought, especially over the last 8 years, that if I am wrestling with my angel and my demon to find the words most sacred and representative of my impulses, (Progressive. Agnostic. Deist. Christian. Unbeliever. Mystic.) so too might our country be involved in that same struggle (Republican. Democrat. Red. Blue. Liberal. Conservative.). I have wondered how the future will look back on this critical time. What will they say? What words will they use to describe our collective battling with ourselves? Well, I would like to conclude this homily with a poetic speculation I’ve titled “When They Speak of Our Time They Will Say...

## **When They Speak of Our Time They Will Say...**

By Regie O'Hare Gibson

They will say it was a time when truth abandoned our words.  
And running sores passed for a false prophet's mouth.  
When television super shrinks conducted group psychosis  
and when drugged up teenagers lived in a haze of oblivion.  
They will say this was when we hamster-wheeled inside  
the jagged jaws of death that stood hovering above us licking  
its murderous lips. When blues and jazz meant nothing  
to the asterisk of adolescent faces lost in the footnote  
of pop cult hysteria.

They will say it was the hour of the falling towers, when haloes  
of metal rained screams on our cities, and smoke blackened the skies  
until the sun was a jaundiced memory.

They will say it was a time when English spoken with the wrong  
accent meant an uncertain fate, and both red and blue states  
forgot that God is colorblind.

They will say it was the time morality drank Hollywood's hemlock  
as intellectual cowards bowed to the power and promise of gold.  
They will say a horrible darkness whispered our names until we  
closed our eyes and trembled with fear until we became the  
darkness we feared.

They will say that it was the time of: WAR IN THE NAME OF...TERROR IN THE  
NAME OF... FREEDOM FOR THE SAKE OF... PEACE so there would be no more:  
WAR IN THE NAME OF...

They will say this was a time of shrunken bellies and refugees  
and of blood plagued by the ache of disease  
and of islands floating away like rafts of human bodies.

They will say this was the time of the bullet bite, the misogynous lyric and the anti-truth  
when we all we danced to the beat of our children's cracking skulls.

But, let them also say this was the time we fought against a self-inflicted genocide. That  
something human in us stood up to resist Orwellian Jack-boots.  
That finally, in the rumbling throat of Ray Charles we heard what America *could* become and  
that in the bite of Mark Twains wit we finally got the punch line finally realized manifest  
destiny is a human sized hole in our history.

Let them say it was when we said yes again and again and again to the pages of Neruda's  
verses resounding with: *Peace for the coming twilights, peace for the bridge, peace for the wine, peace for*

*the letters that seek us and rise in our blood entwining the old song with land and loves, peace for the city in the morning when bread rises...peace for the ashes of the fallen...peace for all the living: peace for all waters and lands.*

Let them say this was when the woman stepped forward with the words “I am that I am”, and we men broke ourselves of the need to break women.

Let them say this was the time we struggled against fist and fallacy, that this was when truth found our tongues again and we were unafraid to open our mouths and speak it.

Let them say that we were a people of faith in a time when faith was in crisis. That we were a people of hope when it made no sense to hope at all, that we still believed love could be as simple as the images our ancestors painted on caves—images birthing our first human words like: water and flower, sun, moon and star, and wind and rain and river and fire -- because even as earth shook beneath our shoes we knew there were things that would not change.

Let them say this was a time we reached through the malignant maelstrom of electronic chaos and the mad invocations of the soulless who use their words to promote and then profit from the poisonous pathology of our time, and we found others there, with our own eyes and words and hands reaching back.

## **Closing Words**

By Regie O’Hare Gibson

Sometimes wisdom comes to one in the strangest guise. I was visiting a friend several years ago and after many hours of good food and great conversation I popped in a movie before I went to bed. The title of the movie is “Second Hand Lions”. I figured it would be a silly tale about two elderly gents on a farm. It was so much more. In this film, Uncle Hub played by Robert Duvall gives a portion of a speech to Walter, played by Haley Joel Osment he says:

“Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things we need to believe in the most. That people are basically good. That power and money, money and power mean nothing, that honor, courage and virtue mean everything, that as long as we strive for the highest good, good always triumphs over evil, that true love never dies. Whether they are true or not, we should believe in those things because those are the things worth believing in.”

It is important that we reclaim our spiritual lexicon. That we liberate our most sacred words from continuing to emaciate in cages of an angry ideology. We don’t know whether words like honor, integrity, wisdom or fidelity are sacred in and of themselves. We don’t know that these qualities even exist. But we must strive to live our lives as though do exist and are sacred for then they will be.

beloved, friend, amend, scripture  
sacrifice, trust, us, helper  
fear, sing, spring, space  
magic, promise, honest, grace  
touch, life, light, death  
woman, womb, tomb, breath  
thought, man, hand, heart  
grief, ascension, redemption, spark

faith, earth, birth, kiss  
son, daughter, water, exist  
home, family, memory, voice  
music, gift, uplift, rejoice  
whisper, time, sublime, speak  
dance, live, give, seek  
bless, revive, alive, reveal  
listen, peace, release, heal

Let us remember this when the impulse toward being our lesser selves is strongest. When we are weary of being a raw wound in a world of razor blades and salt. Let us be the word that holds and heals. The word that conjures and quiets. The word that consoles and consecrates. Let us be, as Richard has said, “living epistles”.

Let us, we brief instances of the eternal, be the flesh and blood of our most sacred words.

May it Be.