
LIVING HYMNS AND ITERATIONS

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23 For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. 24 Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. (Mark 11:23-24 King James Version)

How appropriate, I think. I couldn't have selected a better verse. I am here because I desire to believe.

Is God speaking to me?

PRELUDE

(The fifteen people I walk in on do not all look up at the same time. Maybe I missed the service? Mark 11:23 is obviously the end. The pastor reads my brow,

"We will take a short break between Sunday School and Worship.

The pastor rushes to greet me during the interlude. I had followed in an older White man in blue polyester working trousers and those sunglasses that fit on over the eyeglasses. He steps in front, intercepting the pastor.

"I had just been feeling all week|weak like I should come this Sunday. So I thought to myself, why not? And here I am

attempting to salvage some sort of spirituality,
some sort of salvation.

Oh Reader,

Forgive me my improper punctuation. It's just, I don't want to end the informal tone of the aside that the parenthesis provides. I don't want to distinguish between the storyline and the tangents. I don't want to erase the lines of construction. I don't want to make it comfortable to inhabit this text. I don't want a quotation mark to separate him and me, self and other, author and reader. You and me. It's just not as tidy and simple as all that.

I don't want to lose the traditions and narratives I've been brought up on.

I want to loose the traditions and narratives I've been brought up on.

I want to keep all that baggage. All that tortured Christian background. (OK, tortured is an overstatement I'll admit.) I want to convert it into something useful.

I don't want to just abandon it there.

I want to turn it into a living tradition.

A living hymn.

I want to live a hymn.

You know John Cage, he takes that hymn and chops it down into notes. He chops the words into vowel sounds. He eliminates the melodies that let us listen without really listening. He forces us to hear (Brooks, 1993).

He modifies the hymn, the tradition, enough that we must live it within each iteration.

A man with greased blond hair walks by and spits out a hello. I had already noticed his hands previously raised in praise, covered in bandages. Bandages wrapped around chopped fingers and the side of his palm. He doesn't offer his hand.

Just as well.

So, whose perspective are you writing it from; do you know what a Pentecostal might say?

No. It is only my fantasy of what it might be, based on what I've read and observed and desired. That's all it can ever be.

I am writing my own scripture.

I am praying to my self.

This is my prayer.

The 4-year-old White girl with the curls waddled up and streaming off the top of her head, wearing a hand-knit shawl. The 3-year-old African-American boy, dark-skinned with a tall, wide forehead, and short shaved hair, wearing a white/black checkered suit-coat.

“Have you ever been to a Pentecostal church before?”

Do I stick out that bad? I try to downplay my Methodist background, joking about it as boring.

Which wasn't a stretch. Countless hours I spent closely examining the little wooden circle cutouts made to hold the tiny plastic grape juice cups. Or the short yellow pencil, usually liberally applied to the back of a lickable-but-don't-you-dare collection envelope, or, preferably, to the much larger back side of the obligatory visitor sign-in sheet. Despite my Sunday morning ritual of cries and howls at our home, we marched, in uncomfortable shoes and tucked-in shirts, to this chamber of monotony.

The church building was the Methodist God of my childhood. Transcendent. Removed, interior, and inescapable. I never could figure how God would make it into that church sanctuary, even if he wanted to. The heavy wooden doors. The opaque plaster ceiling. The stained glass. To me, it seemed that if he were out there, somewhere, he surely would have been screened off by the same forces that strove to stave off the rest of the world. This allowed them to operate their own authority, cold and silent beneath the sermons about love and brotherhood. That was God to me, a phantom figure mysteriously removed from this incestuous sty. He might have known we were in there, but he definitely couldn't see in. He existed only as the gap between what was said and what was done. What else could explain the fact that he never did anything?

We consistently shuffled to a front-right wooden pew, behind the piano. My family always sat there because I threw such a fit if we didn't. It was by the windows, which represented my only hope for making it through the service alive. They were large stained glass windows, twenty-feet tall in my memory. I couldn't have cared less though except that there were two panes, one at the bottom-left and one at the bottom-right, that opened. Thank God for a breeze that came through now and then, reminding me that there was a place without the stench of stale gossip and side-cast judging eyes. I spent a lot of time looking out that window. Not that there was anything to see. One tree stood in front of the two-story painted-white concrete-block exterior wall of the Sunday school wing. But it was enough to know that there was someplace outside, and I could see it from the inside, despite all architectural attempts to the contrary. By some benevolent practical necessity, a window had had to be opened. If anything could have made me believe in God, surely that was it. It's probably all air-conditioned now.

But now, here I am standing in a back-right wooden pew. The church has a high cathedral ceiling, one central aisle and pews to both sides in a straight linear fashion. After all, it's on a Chicago lot. The only windows are the stained glass ones marching down both of the long walls. They are small, and far above our heads. Transoms. They let in no light. Maybe they are blanked off from the outside.

What brought me here to this Pentecostal church, first of all, is my own desire to see God alive. Or maybe I just want to be comforted by the fact that there are people who can see him as alive, even if I can't. In my fantasies of God, he is not removed. Pentecost put God inside of each one of us. Not as someone to pray to, but as a force, as a coordination that allows us to have confidence in our own wills and desires. That is, God's will is ours. The distinction between God and self and other and landscape become blurred, or overlapped, or removed. Like the quotation marks. Reality becomes mystical. Tradition becomes lived. Belief becomes faith.

A hymn for three voices. Three strands, to be read simultaneously? Three narratives, parallel, overlapping. They are all true fictions. Three parts of the Godhead. The Trinity.

Cast

Holy Spirit: pastor's wife, imminent, emotional, emancipatory, abused. Her voice quivers with the revolutionary potential of an active, experiential spirituality. Her mannerisms imply a precarious socius.

Father: pastor/author, God (with a capital G), transcendent, critical, distant, abusive, third-person objective (transparent) authority. His voice has the tenor of a carefully measured calculation. His mannerisms delimit the borders of belief.

Son: self, author|reader, human, sinner, thief, accused, crucified, forsaken. His voice is tangential and untrustworthy, lacking the evidence of a shared cultural background of truth. His mannerisms are sleights of hand, re-interpreting a Christian tradition for personal meaning.

HOLY SPIRIT: A MULTIPLICATION

"But consider that many leading historians of antiquity believe that it was the spread of Christianity (often fueled by religious experience), which ultimately led to the downfall of the Roman Empire. While Western civilization is often the celebrated rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity, it can hardly be considered paradoxical, that much of what is rationalist-Enlightenment thought, rooted from ancient philosophical foundations, was defeated by the phenomenological and experiential forces of a living

God mediated through a new community of believers in Jesus Christ. These were believers that often emphasized the immediate presence and activity of God through the Holy Spirit, even as one after another was killed, murdered, slaughtered, and martyred for their faith. (Millner, 2003)

An everyday spirituality changes the real; to do so is necessarily revolutionary. But by revolutionary I do not mean to imply it is Utopian. We have enough false heavens for which we sacrifice our present. You know, above the clouds the streets are lined with gold.... What if instead we had not a god beyond, but a god within. Not a god of the afterlife, but a god of life. Not a god of tomorrow, but a god of today. Verily, I say unto you, there is more potential in the end of sacrifice (of today, of desire, of meaning) than in the deferred tomorrows of orthodox economies.

"A horrible meaning cannot be replaced by a vacuum of meaning, but only by a better meaning (Griffin, Beardslee, & Holland, 1989, p. 52).

The man with the bandaged hand is standing in the front row, left side, with his arms raised. He is doing his best to ignore me, to not feel my gaze, to continue on as if I were not here. But his self-disciplined glances towards me are hardly not noticeable from the middle-back right of the pews. Apparently, he is dis/comforted by the advice of the pastor,

Be aware of the thief, but don't worry about him."

"Let us praise the Lord.

The congregation erupts in color confetti and spots of light. We are shouting joyously, praising, arms raised, a collage of voices and phrases. A consensus formed from individual responses moving in the same direction. Variations merge to construct a singular hymn.

This is what praising should sound like, I think. People actually seem thankful, relieved, grateful, redeemed.

Redeemed.

There is a word I didn't think of much in my old Methodist church. Redemption was just a theoretical limit one could never achieve until death. Instead, each day we lived as sinners, wallowing in guilt, crying out for continuous forgiveness for our continual sin - that of being human. We were born guilty. We remain guilty. Maybe that's why there was never any real praise there. Our guilty status would make praise to God an insult. It would imply that in some way we had escaped the burden of our guilt, that we had been redeemed. Of course, it's also good for business to make sure you dole out sufficient poison in the cure.

"We don't need just a simple plus, you understand.
 The canned music background sounds surprisingly good with her voice over the top.
We need to multiply.
 Something about her. Her voice, her demeanor, seems so out there, so strung out, so wiped out.
We need a multiplication.
 Is she abused?
The Lord will multiply our gifts.
 Yes, a multiplication of gifts.
Multiple voices.
 I wish I could describe her voice.
Multiple paths.
 It is shaky, powerful, emotive.
Multiple experiences.
 It comes from outside of her.
Multiple iterations.
 I can still hear it clearly, months later.
I call on the Lord
 I want to hear it again.
 Her singing has become a refrain, drowning out any other thoughts, the outside world.
to cast out devils.
 She is creating a space, a space inhabitable where he is to lay down his words.
I call on the Lord
 She is spiraling up. Her arms are whirling. Her voice is whirling.
to heal the sick.
 I feel my emotions being tapped. She is taking me with her. Are tears coming to my eyes?
I call on the Lord
 Every once in a while I feel my body rise up into that oppressive weight of air hovering over me.
 It is my medium.

At least, that's how I wish it was.

Oh God, forgive me.

Look at my filthy Utopian desires:

Lift me off to the kingdom of heaven.

Emancipate me from my body.

Let me inhabit the magical space of Other,
 the female void.

I am guilty of obscene sexist binaries that position me nowhere but outside my fantasy,
 waiting to jump,
 wishing I knew how to enter.

Guide me to always look to the present,
 to the faith,
 to the mystic

that already exists and to multiply that.

Remind me not to hope for epiphany,
not to hope.

Help me to understand that life eternal is already in progress,
in process,
because if it is not, I will always remain outside of it,
waiting and
wanting.

Lord, give me the strength to find the gate which is straight and
the way which is narrow,
that leads me into life.

Amen.

We must live this hymn within each iteration.

We must (re)write this hymn within each iteration.

FATHER: AN OSTRACIZATION

From: wade tillett <wade@XXXX.org>
To: "XXXXXX, XXXXX" <XXXX@uic.edu>
Subject: Step 1 of my project
Date: Tue, 24 Oct 2006 01:17:06 -0500
X-Mailer: Sylpheed-Claws 2.5.5 (GTK+ 2.8.20; i486-pc-linux-gnu)
Organization: XXXX.org

... My twist is that I would not be researching "them," but rather my reaction - how do I put up resistances to belief, how do I preserve "objectivity", where are the walls/borders of my self, my belief, my "rational" self? I am currently looking into auto-ethnography, performance studies/ethnography for some sort of basis of method (Denzin, 2003; Foltz & Griffin, 1996).

Why am I interested in this anyway? On the one hand, I view it as ...out there beyond the borders of what I think I can accept. So placing myself into such a context will expose the borders of my own belief. My brother tells me [of one pentecostal revivalist church, the Toronto Blessing, that believes] that somehow a golden sword can be manifested out of nothingness into someone's hand. A tactile real sword out of nothing! Surely that exposes the degree to which reality and belief are tied together. That is the level of belief I want to explore. That is the level of belief education must explore. We learn belief, but its borders are often invisible to us. How do we change belief systems (James, 1929)? To change the underlying structures will cause, must cause, radical upheavals in the manifestations of those structures. Reality itself is altered in unforeseeable ways. An understanding/acceptance of the blindness inherent in creation can only be termed faith.

The polished brass cross hovers over the pastor's head. We are supposed to pretend like we don't see the wires.

After a while, we don't.

"Do you have an earlier service, at 11? I saw the sign outside."

(Obviously embarrassed.) "No. There is another church."

"Oh yes." (Now I'm embarrassed.) "I'm quite familiar with church sharing in Chicago. I just..."

"If we could we would prefer to have it at 11, have our own..."

"2:40 is fine for me."

What should I wear? I can't remember the last time I shaved on Sunday. I think I'll wear a collar shirt and tie. Not sure about a suit, might be over the top. I'll ask Anne. Should I wear my contacts or glasses? Contacts seem more ambiguous....

"And I would like to welcome Wade Tillett to our congregation today."

Shoulder-cast glances. I raise my hand. Why did I give my real name?

And address.

"Someone here is fooled by the thief. Someone here thinks they're better than someone else."

For certain there are numerous factors why I think I 'm better than someone else. My refusal to join, to enter, to raise my hands or voice in praise. My location towards the back of the church. My wool winter jacket or maybe my cuffed pants and black leather shoes. Maybe it's my haircut. I can never figure out what exactly are those minute socio-economic indicators, but they are there. I know. I can tell that the congregation was largely lower middle class. What was it anyway, the two-toned small-checkered brown suit? The polyester pants?

13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. 15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. (Matthew 7:13-15)

I'm not sure if that guy in the front row is blind or not. His jacket has some club name on it, "Blind" I don't know, if he was, surely the pastor wouldn't have mentioned that the blind leading the blind end up in the ditch.

Or maybe he would have. He did mention how before the gospel was preached there, the people of New Guinea "ate each other out of their huts over there." It was only after the introduction of the gospel that they stopped cannibalism and realized each other were humans created in the form of gods.ⁱ

It seems awkward within a congregation where 7 of the 22 adults are African-Americans. The construction of the other seems crude. But maybe that's just me. And maybe it's just me that thinks the bit about the thief, his rendition of the thief into a pick-pocket, also seems oddly awkward towards African-Americans. Maybe I am reading too much into it. Or projecting the cultural stereotypes I know. I don't think so though. There is something there.

Maybe part of my reasoning is also that that the African-Americans are sitting pretty much together on the right side of the church, and have been almost as stunningly silent as me throughout the service, despite boisterous calls from mainly the left side of the aisle.

Again and again, I re/create my self, my other. I step back, dissociate. I cling to my values blindly. I want to remain critical AND I want to believe. I turn away from the fact that this means I already believe. I already believe in being critical, self-conscious. My values are simply beliefs trumping other beliefs (Feyerabend, 1975).

To truly believe, must I be blind to belief's limits? Do I really dare to question and explore the borders of rationality, or is it just some pedantic exercise, a false dissociation?

Oh Lord, Let me avoid the false dichotomy of criticism and belief.

Help me to realize that one cannot exist without the other.

That both belief and criticism are necessary to look beyond the realm of the self-determined.

Let me see how "Criticism becomes possible through belief (Kuschel, 1989, p. 188).

I drop my \$10 plus some other dollar bills into the plate guarded and offered by Brother Minkah at the altar. I am careful to slip it under some envelopes. The man before me, the blue trousered one, gave about \$2 it looks like. I had looked for envelopes. None to be found. Why is this the only thing I participate in? No singing, no hand-raising, no praying. But I'll give \$. Sure as hell, I'll give \$.

So, yes, the entire congregation, all 25 or so, standing down by the altar, hands raised and swaying. One or two yelling or jumping up and down compulsively. The pastor is laying his hands on people's heads. The pastor's wife continues her electric organ and vocal solo in the background, standing facing a monitor behind the low railing.

"Praise the Lord."

"Praise the Lord."

"Praise the Lord."

The bandaged one echoes it back like his skull is empty. An empty tomb. There I am judging again. But really, what level of consciousness is he in right now?

Driving home, I was to pray to Anne, "I don't think raising my arms and running down the aisle would really have made any difference to my belief.... Do you think I'll ever be able to believe in something? Is there any way I can enter?"

Eloi, Eloi. Why have you forsaken me?

Finally, there is a turning away.

No.

Continually, there is a turning away.

Belief itself is blind.

We step in darkness, hands outstretched (see Kierkegaard, 1985).

We step in faith, forsaking self.

To forsake the self is death.

To be reborn, the self must be forsaken (see Derrida, 1995).

I never realized Jesus was re/living the psalm, the hymn. How was that left out of my Christian education? Psalm 22:1 repeats, Matthew 27:46.

Repetition is the fulfillment of prophecy, to live the iteration.

Even in death, especially within death, we live within its iteration.

SON: AN ACCUSATION

10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

"If you haven't entered into that spiritual realm, you will. Jesus promised we can live more abundantly. Not have abundant life, but live more abundantly. We can enter a different dimension of living. We only need the baptism of the Holy Ghost."

Here I stand. Like a distant planet. The empty pews lined up row after row, counting off the depths of my hell, the distance of my self from belief, the self-imposed ostracization from an inhabited spirituality.

"What are you seeking for?"

I had written that I was not going to let their conservatism get in the way of my spirituality. And here I stand, a prude, slowly shifting my weight from one foot to the other. Both hands grasped around the curled back of the empty wooden pew before me, the weight of the vacant space overhead crushing down on me. I wish I could run down to them, across the top of the pews armed outstretched, screaming in joy. I wish I could rush the aisle. The suspense is palpable. The pastor, among a sea of raised hands and self-selected choruses, is calling out to me. To me! We are the two forces in the church. His is gravity pulling. Mine is friction.

"What are you seeking for?"

Interesting that the very division that I had posited, the very borders of the self that I was sure were there, that I was hoping to uproot, have manifested themselves in such a real physical spatial configuration. I, two rows in from the back on the right, am standing with my head down, sneaking a glance now and then at that other realm I don't know how to enter.

"What are you seeking for?"

On the way home, on the phone, I confessed. "I just stood there at the back. I wasn't comfortable going down front. I didn't know what was going to go on down there. I knew I'd be roped in if I went down there. I should have gone down there and just stood towards the back. I upset the whole service. There was only me standing in back and the pastor with everyone's support not so subtly calling for me to come down for the whole last part of the sermon."

Brother Minkah knows. I can feel him looking at me. I decided not to write except during the sermon, and then not too much, for fear of drawing attention to myself. So only during the sermon I write on the paper I had hastily tri-folded and tucked into my breast-pocket. I was running late. I use a Bible on my lap as a table, and write only a few words to jog my memory.

After the service, the bandaged hand is outstretched. I reach for it.

The bandages are lying on the seat, nicely folded. As if...

A 20-something White fuzzy-headed young man approaches me as I am shaking hands with a few other congregation members. As he shakes my hand

he looks into my eyes. He says nothing. His eyes are looking right through me. Is it hatred? Compassion? Lust? Whatever it is, it is severe. It takes me a moment to recover, to speak up, to manage some polite words of greeting that I can no longer recall as I was barely aware of them when I said them.

I am thinking I am nothing more than a spiritual tourist, a predator, a thief.

A thief!

The stare.

The eyes.

They are those of my accuser!

I am the thief.

Why wasn't it clear to me before?

“Are you from around here?”

The awkward silence.

That hangs in the present like an affair. We are both sure it happened. But to mention it would make it real.

“I enjoyed the service. I really did. I hope to come back sometime.”

I wonder if I will.

Adonai. My prayers are a collection of scars.

Each day I run my finger along them, tracing them in wonderment and disbelief.

Re-searching.

How is it that we are born again?

Re-constructed?

Again risen?

Another iteration.

CODA

The tree used to hold the tire swing. Brother|brother Luke and I hover under it while swinging my kids beneath the playhouse. Squeak. Up and down the slide. A whirlwind around us. Luke is breaking sticks and throwing them. Me, I am taking the broken pieces he throws, turning them upright with my shoe, and stepping on them, forcing them into the soft, wet ground. One after another.

Off to the side we can see those endless fields, the crops are harvested already. Father is wandering the backyard with a shovel, in search of dog poop, pretending not to be listening in.

Luke: "How was the church you went to...?"

No. It wasn't that their actions were too crazy. If I was to be a Christian, that's how I would want it to be. You know, alive. A living god. I mean, if I'm going to choose my own belief construction, I want to inhabit one that is active. Mystic. It was the god-above thing that bothered me, that made me feel more distant. Politically, I can't accept the transcendentalism.

"...I think the Holy Spirit is moving us back to a truly Pentecostal Acts II church, but I think there is massive resistance, massive resistance at the top for some people who want to maintain control and massive resistance on the bottom where people like to be an audience but don't really want to be responsible for their faith... (Brennan quoted in Abbott, 2005)

I want to know how to be a "conscious believer." Is it possible to see the limits of my own belief and still inhabit it?

The Godhead.

That was a word that was in the lyrics projected in green text on blue onto the church walls (with PowerPoint, which amused me). I'd had to look it up after I got home. It means something like the merging of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The meta-consciousness, the embodied experience, the mystic landscape.

Amen.

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i New Guinea is not in Africa. I am simply remarking on what I believe to be the pastor's construction of other.