

Response to Gould Lecture, 5/1/92
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As those of you who attended last years SLUUD Annual Meeting when it was held at the First Universalist Society of Syracuse may remember, I was also one of the respondents to the Gould Lecture. So, I am unsure whether it is an honor or a punishment to have been asked to do it again this time. We can only hope that I do a good enough job this year so I don't have to do it again next year! Here goes...

In my response this evening, I would like to endorse the notion of sermons as "skinny, wiggly little things" that have the capacity to activate the individual memories of many to create the sort of inspiration that has the capacity to restore a sense of wholeness to the listener. It does border on the mystical when either by accident or divine purpose, we the preacher learn that we have somehow generated those powers of memory in our listeners that lets them understand something about themselves or life that had previously lurked beneath the surface of their awareness. Though I spend a great deal of time trying, I'm not sure how much the actual words of the preacher matter, for it isn't so much what we say, as what is heard, that transforms the listener. So even though I am normally not the one listening on Sunday morning's that is the perspective I'd like to take in the next couple of minutes to add a couple other metaphorical dimensions of a sermon to Jack's delightfully accurate vision of sermons as "skinny, wiggly, little things".

The first metaphor comes from my preaching class at Harvard Divinity School. At the time I was there, the only preaching classes available were taught by the Rev. Peter Gomes, minister of Memorial Church of Harvard University. He is an African-American, an American Baptist, and something of a task master. Each week, several members of the class would give 10 minute sermons on an assigned scriptural text, and in between each homiletic exercise, he would pace up and down the center of the chapel firing off questions, offering instant analysis, delivering witty remarks, and at times brutal criticism. One day after a particularly dull sermon had been delivered, the preacher slinked back to his pew, and Prof. Gomes stood and paced with his cane in hand (he had the gout) and started his line of questioning. "Mr. Wilson", he called us all by our formal names, "what did you have for breakfast this morning?" We all looked at each other wondering what was going on. The preacher-to-be- stammered, "Well, um, I had an English muffin." "I see. And what kind of an English muffin did you have, Mr. Wilson?" Things were getting stranger. "Well, it was a Thomas' English muffin." "And why was it that you selected Thomas' English muffins when you were perusing the bread aisle at your neighborhood grocers?" "I guess....well, I guess it was because of the nooks and crannies!" To which the Rev. Gomes replied, "And that is precisely why I didn't buy your sermon! There were no nooks and crannies." He went on to make the point that no matter how much the speaker may have a thesis, a parcel of information, a persuasive argument, that he or she feels compelled to communicate, the listener requires the times and spaces where they might linger long enough to listen not only to the words spilling and spewing out over the pulpit, but to be able to hear and to feel the resonance of those words with their own lives. It is in these spaces,

these "nooks and crannies" of our own minds as listeners, that the educational process of preaching has the immense power to heal us, and to strengthen us, and to inspire us.

We preachers have a great responsibility to our listeners. When I was ordained into the ministry in 1986, I sent an invitation to some of my Professors, Prof. Gomes among them. He replied in this fashion: "Not all of my students in the preaching seminars care to remind themselves or me of the rather exacting time we spent together, and so I am even more grateful for your invitation. I recall you and your efforts very well indeed. Your gifts more than outweigh your liabilities and thus it seemed wise to concentrate on what needed doing. People will be inclined to listen to you, they will want to hear what you have to say: you owe them the best investment you can give." No Sunday goes by that that challenge doesn't sit on the edge of the pulpit in the line of sight between me and those who sit ready to listen.

And secondly, and more concisely, there are times that the sermon must not be a "skinny, wiggly, little thing." I was reminded of that yesterday at a rally on the steps of the Courthouse in Syracuse where several hundred people had gathered out of frustration, rage, and pain over the verdicts in Los Angeles and the resulting violence. There were a couple of sermons I heard there from my colleagues from the black church and there was nothing "skinny" or "wiggly" or "little" about them. Those sermons were "stout and hardy, insistent and raucous, sturdy and strong, firm and forceful, noisy and at times obnoxious" so that those of us who sometimes miss the subtleties of true inspiration wouldn't stand a chance of missing the point. The listeners there in the cold rain arrived there sharing a common set of images and memories in their minds and hearts. We were a group ready to be inspired. And we were, or I should say, I was. I came to realize the ways that inspiration can sneak up on you like a "skinny, wiggly thing", and the times that it must hit us like a ton of bricks because there just isn't the luxury of time for a gradual awakening to the urgent truths that live at the heart of inspiration. This week seems just such a time.

Jo Gould was my Religious Education Director when I was a child. I never heard her give a sermon, I don't know if she was ever given the opportunity or whether she thought it a worthy use of time. But I do know this. Her educational philosophy was dedicated to the ends that children would come to know and experience the wonder of living in this world. I think she would approve of all the efforts that parish ministers and religious educators might make to expose and reveal that wonder at the world and our opportunities in it: whether that wonder struggles to emerge from a bean seed in a blotter on a windowsill or whether it is somehow set free by a "skinny, wiggly, little thing" that some minister, somewhere, is thinking about writing, for you, even now.