

Finding a **SPIRITUAL** **v o c a b u l a r y**

By L. Monique Pittman

Eight years ago, as I approached the end of my college years at Andrews University and the beginning of graduate school, I recognized gradually the life-altering, absolutely imperative, undeniable need to mold a language of spirituality, to express the inexpressible. I realized if I were to have any long-term spiritual life, I had to shape a spiritual vocabulary of my own outside the context of the Adventist institution or Christian-speak in general.

The Gospel According to St. John opens with an amazing statement about Christ our Savior that reveals all that is insufficient about our own words:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.”¹

John’s announcement of Christ’s advent posits a prelapsarian world in which language contains no slippage, no gap, no potential for misunderstanding. The medieval writers I teach and study were fascinated by this passage in John and from it derived an understanding of language that has bearing for us today. Whenever we deal with the transcendent world, it’s easiest to begin by talking about what we know of this world. For us, language, our means of communication, includes a signifier and a signified.

For example, we have the signifier or word, “church,” and the signified, the idea of church that is being referred to. What happens in language is that when I say “church,” there is not a one-to-one correlation between the word and an absolute idea of church; the word “church” acts as a cue to the listener, but it does not prompt the same response in every listener and therein lies the slippage of language. When the word “church” is spoken, every person most likely conjures a different image, hears a sound (like an organ), feels an emotion (anxiety, fear, peace, comfort), or remembers some physical sensation (a grimace, a hug).

When I hear the word “church,” I see Pioneer Memorial Church, the church at Andrews University. Thus, my idea of church has numerous resonances that make it unique from any other person’s concept of “church”. All the different responses to this word render that simple, one-syllable term incredibly complex as it is forced to bear the weight of several hundred definitions. This leads us to a fascinating paradox inherent in language—as multiple

meanings pile up (as in the case of our example of "church"), the possibility for an absolute meaning vanishes; thus, the very fertility of potential signifieds produces sterility. The point is that with a limited supply of words, but an infinite range of possible signifieds/meanings, language proves an unbelievably feeble instrument for communication between humans (as our numerous and competing interpretations collide), let alone a tool to commune with the Infinite Higher Being.

The passage from St. John directs us to a perfect world, the world in which no gap exists between signifier and signified—Christ is the Word made flesh. He is the perfect signifier—in him all slippage of meaning is lost for he is both signifier—the Word—and signified, the absolute idea itself—Christ Jesus Savior. But we live in the fallen world; the price of knowledge is ambiguity. Our birthright as children of Adam and Eve is a language so fraught with ambiguity and so barren of meaning that we often find ourselves presented with a meaning for which we have no adequate signifier. Christ stands as the promise that some day, not in this life or on this earth, but in the transcendent world, all gaps in meaning will be eliminated. However, in this world, language, religious language especially, has been drained of significance through repetition and the familiarity that breeds contempt.

St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, recognizes the unified signification of heaven as he addresses God: "I do not wrangle with you for judgement, for you are Truth itself."² In contrast to the ever-present, ever-past, ever-future of God's signification, Augustine acknowledges the lack of human language:

"You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you."³

This passage once again points us to a contradiction we're forced to live with; no matter how limited language is, we are compelled by the power of Christ's infinite grace to find words or experiences to express our belief. I argue that it is the inadequacy of human language that challenges each of us to push beyond words to find through experience a richer vocabulary of the spiritual. Like St. Augustine and many far greater Christians before me, I feel most frustrated about

spirituality when I search for words to explain it; so much of our lives we're taught about religion and given someone else's vocabulary for expressing those concepts. In fact, much of the process of acquiring a religious belief system involves mastering, perhaps mimicking is a better word, the proscribed vocabulary of the Christian religion in general—conversion, salvation, righteousness, sanctification—and Adventism in particular—"if time remains," "Christ's soon coming," "time of trouble." For me, these words are signifiers with no signified.

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Winter for tips on how to survive times of trouble. Laura Wilder may have known about turning hay into fuel, but I added ideas about hoarding veggie links, packing away stripples, and using my *Primary Treasure* to conceal the family valuables. As I grew older, I read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, identifying with the Jews hiding desperately from the Gestapo, convinced that my family and I would someday soon find ourselves the victims of Sunday law discrimination, forced to "run to the hills" for shelter. By then, I lived in central Ohio, and the prospects of finding a welcoming hill were pretty slim—a fearful reality for which I struggled to find a solution.

I cite these examples, not to poke fun at Adventist eschatology, but to suggest that at that early stage of my life, I was parroting the religious vocabulary of my peers and elders. What satisfied the mind of a seven-

or eight-year old, however, rings hollow for an adult. It seems to me that much of my adult experience with religion has been about finding a set of words to describe my belief, a search for words that haven't been drained of meaning through repetition, hackneyed usage, and misapplication. I seek a language where signifier and signified are not separated but united through the flesh of experience—the Word made flesh.



As I mentioned at the outset, what I realized when I graduated from Andrews was that if I planned to remain an Adventist, and more importantly, if I planned to live a Christian life, I had to begin filling my own dictionary with words or experiences that constituted personal spirituality. One of my favorite Christian writers, Frederick Buechner, argues in the introduction to his memoir, *The Sacred Journey*, that God speaks “into our personal lives.”⁴ Buechner writes: “God speaks to us in such a way, presumably, not because he chooses to be obscure but because, unlike a dictionary word whose meaning is fixed, the meaning of an incarnate word is the meaning it has for the one it is spoken to, the meaning that becomes clear and effective in our lives only when we ferret it out for ourselves.”⁵ As I left Andrews, I took up Buechner’s challenge—to “ferret” meaning out—and began looking at my life for the nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections of my spiritual vocabulary. That search for a spiritual language of my own has become the heart of my continuing sacred journey.

When I look for the word made flesh in my own

life, my personal spiritual experience has not been one of dramatic highs and lows, of conversion theatrics; rather, my experience of grace has been far subtler—the turn of a phrase in a literary work I’m studying, a falling ornament in an aria by Mozart, the palpable silence of an auditorium hushed into awe. These remembered moments have come to be the prefixes, suffixes, and root words of my spiritual experience, and it’s those moments that comfort. I would like to share two such moments with you, fully aware my meaning won’t be yours, but in the hope that my search will encourage you to reevaluate the silent speaking of your life.

I remember one experience in particular at Andrews. I was working on my minor in music and taking piano lessons. This particular quarter, the music building was being renovated, rendering unusable all the practice rooms; music students conducted guerilla warfare over the few pianos located in dorms, auditoriums, the church choir and Sabbath school rooms, and the campus center. One night, in sheer desperation, I thought of the church sanctuary itself; it occurred to me that practicing piano in the sanctuary might not be quite appropriate—wasn’t it too close to work? But in good Christian form, I found a ready rationalization: the organ students practiced in the church (because they had to) so what harm could my efforts do?

I half expected the sanctuary to be in use or to find some twenty-four-hour armed guard protecting the sanctity of the church, but to my surprise, the church was dark and still. Walking briskly to the front, I found a light switch and sat down at the Steinway (the instrument a far cry from the pianos in those stuffy, sound tiled practice rooms). I remember warming up with a Bach prelude and fugue before turning to the piece I really had to practice—Beethoven’s piano sonata no. 21, the *Waldstein*. Those who know the *Waldstein* Sonata know there’s really very little about the sonata that could be classified as demure or polite; in fact, in many ways I loved learning that piece simply because there seemed something a bit daring about a 100-pound young woman playing a work so big and powerful and masculine. I had been slogging away at the first movement for several months, and that night, I played that first movement over and over, listening to it echo through that grand sanctuary. That night I felt all that was holy about a sacred place as I left physically and emotionally exhausted. No artist, I can only imagine what it feels like to have the satisfaction of completing an original work of art. I do know that that night in the sanctuary was the closest I’ve ever felt to an artist. Beethoven’s massive chords, runs, rocket speed, and

chromatic scales metamorphosed for me into a mighty prayer of my own shaping, an offering and a challenge to a divine being I struggled to understand.

Thomas Hardy writes wonderful poems about the hollow ache a skeptic feels while sitting in church next to believers. His sense of isolation resonated with my own religious experience during college, an experience plagued with doubts and disappointments. What was so glorious about the night I played in the church sanctuary was that my doubts coalesced with my beliefs. As I played Beethoven that night, I played with bald defiance, but was overwhelmed by the mystery and wonder of belief in the transcendent. I realize in retrospect that what I began to feel that night and what I gradually learn more and more about is that faith is not the rejection of doubts, but rather belief in the context of endless questions. I realized that my constant questions give shape, form, and breath to my faith, that questions are essential to faith because they, in fact, are the context defining faith. Even if my questions may occasionally make me an outsider at church, like Thomas Hardy, they do not make me an outsider in the context of Christ's gift of grace. That night, what could have been a clichéd concept for some finally took on meaning for me as it was reborn in the vocabulary of my life.

When I first moved to California, I used to make myself sick driving back and forth from St. Helena to Angwin each day; perhaps it was the move from the plains of Indiana's arrow-straight state routes to the twists and turns of Deer Park Road, or maybe it was feeling isolated in a foreign land, miles from all my closest friends and family. Whichever it was, I began to practice meditation in order to drown out all the sense of loneliness and frustration I felt as I adjusted to life in California and in an Adventist community once again. Since my mind has a will of its own, I could only silence those feelings by listening over and over to music—to my tapes of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, to be precise. One day, I was listening to the bass solo from the last moments of the *Passion* when I heard as if for the first time (despite the fact I had listened to this piece many, many times), an aria of extraordinary beauty and power. What I heard in the voice of the singer was the most inexpressible longing for peace, fulfillment, for understanding. In arching phrases, half-spoken, half-sung, half-wept words, the soloist sang:

Make thee clean, my heart, from sin.
Unto Jesus give thou welcome.

So within my cleansed breast
Shall He rest,
Dwelling evermore within me,
World depart; let Jesus in!

As I listened, I was suddenly reminded of a moment from one of my favorite poems of the English Renaissance, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. That I should be reminded of Spenser's poem just as I listened to Bach's music seemed a trick of the mind so incredibly accurate that it caught me by surprise. The more I thought about the two artworks historically separate, but united by the random workings of my mind, the more I saw the union of the two as symbolic of the spiritual life and the far more ordered workings of Providence.

Spenser's poem is a brilliant and sincere examination of what it takes to lead a spiritual existence. In book one, Spenser introduces us to a character named Red Cross Knight. Red Cross Knight is a young man on the verge of maturity, but certainly not there yet. He wears the dented armor of another man; the poet points out that Red Cross Knight still must pass the test of numerous adventures before he truly deserves to wear the armor of experience. This borrowed armor also

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bears the mark of Christ's bloody cross, a symbol the young knight still does not comprehend, although he draws his name from that symbol. To return to the terms I used to discuss language, we can see Red Cross Knight as a signifier with no signified. He bears the signifiers of experienced Christianity, but, as yet, he has no signified for those signifiers; he has not internalized the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

In general, Red Cross Knight makes a poor hero as his faults are many: he fails to understand his mission as assigned him by the Faerie Queene; he repudiates the good woman sent to guide him, Una; and, he repeats mistake after mistake as the narrative progresses. For example, every time Red Cross Knight enters a wood or

rests by water, something terrible happens to him. The first time he enters a wood, a half-woman, half-monster named Error attacks him; the next time he enters a wood, a tree starts talking to him, warning him of dangers that Red Cross Knight steadily disregards (who would pay heed to a talking tree anyway); finally, once again Red Cross Knight rests under a tree by a pool of water where he is overcome by an evil giant, Orgoglio, who takes him prisoner. Red Cross encapsulates the Christian who knows the language, but has not internalized the language so that it has meaning and human shape.



By the end of this amazing poem, Red Cross Knight has been reborn, has faced his own doubts and fears about the merit of his identity, has been cleansed at the House of Holiness, and has been made ready to fight the Dragon terrorizing the land of his guide Una. In the final cantos, the symbols of Red Cross Knight's failings have been renewed and transformed by divine power; in his three-day battle with the Dragon, Red Cross Knight is sustained by the Well of Life and the Tree of Life until he finally defeats his enemy. Red Cross Knight has united the sign of Christ's sacrifice, the Red Cross, with the meaning of that sacrifice as the Knight cycles through the three-day battle with the Dragon. Mind you, Red Cross Knight is still not perfect; in the final canto, he is caught telling half-truths, but therein lies the brilliance of his example for us. Rather than con-

struct a perfect, unattainable ideal, Spenser portrays a human being who has found a part of his spiritual vocabulary, but still struggles, just as we, to live up to an ideal we only half-glimpse.

What I heard as I listened that day to *St. Matthew's Passion* was the voice of a human seeking a renewed identity, the voice of a repentant Red Cross Knight asking Christ to enter his heart, rule his human weakness, and unite the symbols of Christianity with personalized meaning. In the link between these two artworks, I heard the absolute affirmation that just as two seemingly random works collided and produced meaning in my mind, so all the experiences of existence, whether joyful or sorrowful, do produce one vast, intertextual artwork shaped by a divine being we cannot see but know exists as evidenced in the mercy and providence of life. That day as I drove to school, the more important message was the recognition that although I wouldn't stop attempting to understand the purpose of my existence, I could rest assured in the providential workings of God's plan. Spenser writes:

Full hard it is...to read aright
The course of heavenly cause, or understand
The secret meaning of th'eternal might,
That rules mens wayes,
and rules the thoughts of living wight.⁶

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* makes a similar statement: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends/rough-hew them how we will."⁷ Once again, a concept that could so easily sound like a hollow platitude took meaning from its manifestation in the seemingly minute experiences of my daily life.

Those who have studied Shakespeare's history play, *Richard III*, will be familiar with this illustration. In the play, Richard is a character who sees himself on the outside of all the fun at his brother's court; the play opens as Richard comments on his rough and deformed appearance—he's a hunchback—and notes his inability now that civil war has ended to turn his mind to wooing as most of the court has done. From the outset of the play, Richard deliberately positions himself in opposition to everyone else. He constructs his identity around not being everything that the members of court are; he's a series of negations of positive concepts: not good-looking, not powerful, not loved. But the problem with this construct is that it means there really isn't any constitutive identity for the individual; there's a void where there should be a presence of identity. By the end of the play, Richard's interior makeup is only a series of ruthless binaries that leave him empty; in a famous soliloquy he can do nothing but contradict himself since

that has been his only method for self-definition over the course of his life. Having eliminated almost all of the competition, he is left to identify himself in opposition to himself.

Many of my friends from Andrews have left the church by now and joined the ranks of the "Badventists." The potential problem with this response to the limitations of organized religion is that so many people still tend to define themselves in opposition to the church; they're so busy being not-Adventist that they forget to think about who they are and what their spiritual needs really are. This approach makes us no better than a character like Shakespeare's Richard III; the danger in this approach is that rather than open up to identity it opens up to nothing. My prayer for all of you and for myself always would be that rather than allow the negative aspects of organized religion to cloud your spiritual life, you would move beyond the impulse to define in negatives. Build a positive spiritual identity in which you make a vocabulary of meaning all your own. That's the greatest triumph over all that seems hypocritical, disappointing, angering, degrading, and discriminatory about church.

These reflections emphasize the solitary experiences that have formed my spiritual language, but there

have also been a precious number of human beings who have aided my search for a vocabulary of spirituality—my parents, my husband, my dear friends and teachers from Andrews, and my colleagues and students in graduate school and here at Pacific Union College. Through those individuals, I have learned that the beauty of a renewed spiritual vocabulary is not only that it provides you with an inner life and positive identity, but that it also compels you to care about this tired, hurting world and to commit yourself to being part of someone else's vocabulary of spirituality. Again, Buechner's words challenge us:

"To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake—even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death—that little by little we start to come alive."⁸

Buechner calls this life's path the only road "worth traveling"⁹ and I agree. It's a difficult road, one threatened by the narrow-minded, but one that offers the greatest glimpse of Christ's grace.

Notes and References

1. John 1:1-8 (KJV).
2. *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 24.
3. *Ibid.*, 23.
4. *The Sacred Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977), book 1, canto 9, verse 6.
7. *Hamlet*, act 5, scene 2, lines 10-11, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, eds. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
8. Buechner, *Sacred Journey*, 107.
9. *Ibid.*

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