

Engaging the Spirit in Spirituality: A Loosened Tongue

Ken Wilson, 2/9/20

Curiosity essential for **spirituality**. If you're in a religious system **threatened** by curiosity, not a good sign. By same token when we **encounter practices** in any spiritual tradition that seem odd to us, easy to **dismiss** without examination. More rewarding to be curious and ask, "What's the possible good behind this practice?"

Today: what's the good behind practices of speaking in tongues and loud vocalizations?

Ever notice connection between **power we have** and the **freedom we feel** to speak up? The powerful won't shut up (stop tweeting) while countless others struggle to find their voice.

- A woman doing great work finds it hard to ask for a raise
- A gay child struggles to tell religious parents who he is
- A newly married man blows another chance to speak up when his father-in-law makes another racist remark.
- After 5 years together a couple finds they have a handful of things they need to talk about but can't find a way to do it.

Gospel of Luke is our introduction to the work of the Spirit. It opens with an angel appearing a priest in the temple, Zechariah. *Your wife in her old age, Elizabeth will bear a child, John, who will be filled with the Spirit.* Zechariah doesn't believe Gabriel's message; the angel takes offense pushes Z's mute button until John is born. Then the same angel appears to Mary announcing her child to be named Jesus. **So far, angels telling future parents that their offspring will be filled with Spirit.**

Then **plot thickens** and **Luke shows us the Spirit herself** filling a person. That person is Elizabeth in her sixth month while her cousin Mary, newly with child comes for a visit.

Luke 1: 39–45

Pause: Powerful events in Jewish tradition involve pairs. Adam–Eve/Abraham–Sarah/Jacob–Esau/Ruth–Naomi. As images of God, we can mirror the Spirit to each other, catch the Spirit from each other. **Luke introduces Spirit with Elizabeth–Mary pairing.**

Very first time Spirit comes: "And Elizabeth was filled with Holy Spirit and proclaimed with a loud cry"

filled ... water fills a glass, light fills a room, Spirit can fill us

Elizabeth was filled —old woman who has born stigma of infertility (stigma was always on the woman, never the man).. Filled to what end? ***Elizabeth was filled with Spirit and proclaimed with a loud cry***’ ... A loud cry that involves blessing another woman bearing a different stigma--of pregnancy out of wedlock

All of this is happening in a world run by men that controlled women by controlling their bodies and **keeping them quiet.**

Mary, witnessing Elizabeth filled with Spirit also cries out in her own loud voice. It’s like the Spirit jumps from Elizabeth to Mary

And man does she let loose! ***My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant (me!) Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed! For the mighty one has done great things and holy is God’s name!*** (46-49)

Oh she’s not done! (50-55) Mary’s song reminding me of *something*—but what? **Greta Thunberg**, prophet denouncing powerful elders for their abuse of planet, refusal to make it right for future generations. Reminds me of Lenten read, **The Hate You Give** by YA novel by **Angie Thomas**, about Starr, a black 16-year-old girl, who witnesses her childhood friend, shot by police in a traffic stop ... and the courage she is given to speak up on his behalf.

Mary is a woman like these two.

Did you know reports Mary’s song so incendiary banned by dictatorships: India during colonial rule, Guatemala, Argentina.

In Lk 4 Jesus is preaching hometown synagogue where he affirms **the tongue-loosening work of Spirit** first seen in **Elizabeth - Mary:**

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,” says Jesus, quoting Isaiah, “ and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke is telling us that the Spirit comes to loosen the tongues of those who have been silenced, whose speech is constrained.

Adey Wassink, first woman senior pastor in our old denomination. Years of being **shushed** by male colleagues, literally yelled at by a regional leader for making trouble, let alone being condescended to, ignored But in that fiery furnace the Spirit gave Adey her voice: wrote dissertation about the obstacles women face on road to

religious equality. She left that denomination, transitioned the church she founded from scratch to full inclusion ... and now she's writing a take no prisoners book to tell behind-the-scenes story.

The work of the Spirit to loosen tongues that have been constrained, condescended to, shushed, silenced.

When you see religious settings where men pump up their male privilege strutting on stage or twitter, whipping up a crowd, pressuring people to fall over, speak in tongues or whatever—all to boost their own power and popularity.... You are not seeing the real thing. You are witnessing the abuse of spiritual power.

Who was original Spirit-pair when modern Pentecostal movement surprised everyone at start of 20th Century? **Agnes Ozman**, a young single woman, first to speak in tongues. Few years later, a brilliant black leader named Wm Seymour, whose preaching sparked what would become worlds fastest growing

Agnes Ozman – Wm Seymour would not in a million years be invited to WH or attend a Prayer Breakfast with a President wrapping himself in Christian flag while mocking the way of Jesus ... as his compliant Christian enablers sit by.

Lets briefly talk about the gift of tongues, then loud vocalizations

NYT recently reported on a study on speaking in tongues at University of Pennsylvania: Abstract speaking in tongues Study on speaking in tongues in NYT recent:

From Abstract/summary: Andrew Newberg, University of Pennsylvania: Glossolalia (or "speaking in tongues") is an unusual mental state that has great personal and religious meaning. Glossolalia is experienced as a normal and expected behavior in religious prayer groups in which the individual appears to be speaking in an incomprehensible language. This is the first functional neuroimaging study to demonstrate changes in cerebral activity during glossolalia. The frontal lobes, parietal lobes, and left caudate were most affected.

Study showed **decreased activity in the frontal** lobe (concentrated thought area) area, **increased activity in emotional** part of brain.

The authors suggest these findings may indicate a **loosening of control over language** functions in brain, potentially leading to production of apparently unstructured language that the participants experience as outside their control.

This is good: “Contrary to what may be a common perception, studies suggest that people who speak in tongues rarely suffer from mental problems. A recent study of nearly 1,000 Christians in England found that those who engaged in the practice were more emotionally stable than those who did not. Researchers have identified at least two forms of the practice, one ecstatic and frenzied, the other subdued and nearly silent.”

Speaking - thinking closely tied. You know how trying too hard to think or to speak can tie you up, get you caught in a brain freeze? Speaking on tongues is a free-er way of speaking not tied to thinking...like a basketball player in the zone.

I like to use it when I don't know how to pray or when I need to release mental tension that I can't think my way through...

What does it sound like, you may ask? **Sheila Chandra**

Loud Vocalizations. Emily will talk about the Pentecostal gift of praise, but when I say “Loud vocalizations” I mean **raising your voice as a spiritual practice.**

Carla's wife Sharonda gave me a spiritual practice to try: “Read the verses to the African American National Anthem and then sing or shout them out until you can feel them”

Slavery is white history. How we survived it is black history. If you want to get a feel for that reality, it's not enough to read the verses to the African American National Anthem. Need to listen to it sung by a black choir, volume up. And then go into a room, close the door and speak the verse in a loud voice, maybe every day for a week. African American National Anthem, Mary's Song, these things require loud vocalizations. [Bishop Bonnie Perry consecration. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burroughs, Preacher]

“Because the needy are oppressed, and the poor cry out in misery, I will rise up,” says the Lord, “and give them the help they long for.” (Psalm 12)

“During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” (Hebrews 5: 7)

QUIET REFLECTION

Listen to Bobby McFerrin Circle Song 6 which is form of singing common in lots of traditional cultures—

"I think of them as language beyond words. I found that if I sang a line using the consonants, vowels, shadings, and inflection we recognize as human language sounds, people responded as if I were talking to them. There is a human connection even though there are no words. If I sing "you broke my heart, you left me flat," everyone knows exactly what that means — they know the story. But if I sing a line that's plaintive or wailing, people can experience their own set of emotions and their own story. Each of us might give that phrase a different meaning. It's open to interpretation, and one song becomes a thousand songs. I love that".

At any given time, we all have unresolved issues, concerns, dilemmas, that we haven't been able to think our way through.

Imagine those things occupying a space in our heart. Picture light coming into our heart. Pick one of two lines from Sarum Prayer;

God be in my mouth and in my speaking, God be in my heart and in my thinking.