

Performing Scripture

Unfortunately, most adults have memories of some horrible moment in their childhood when they were expected to recite something by memory in class or in church—and they “froze.” The mind goes blank and the muscles tighten and the eyes dilate. We do not want to recall such moments, and we do not ever want to be in that position again in our life. Memories of such experiences on the part of teachers and students alike have tended unfortunately to eclipse the development of a pedagogy of performance.

It is tragic in a way, because people are blocked from opportunities that could change their lives. What an opportunity it would be if students were challenged to learn and perform the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King or Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address or Kennedy’s inaugural address or a speech by Harriet Tubman or a speech of the ancient orator Demosthenes or traditional Native American stories or Hamlet’s soliloquy or poems that make the tongue sing. There are so many wonderful opportunities to do this in courses of so many different disciplines in the educational system—from speeches in political science to passages in drama to gripping paragraphs from books in science to philosophical arguments from the greats to pieces of world literature. Just consider the possibilities. But oral performance is a lost art, and one that teachers seldom consider resurrecting.

The shame is that it is not that hard to do. Consider the number of songs or hymns most people can sing all the way through practically in their sleep. My thirteen year old granddaughter performs popular songs with friends with dramatic flourish. She and her friends sing camp songs by heart for weeks after the camp is over. My eight year old granddaughter can sing along with the words to almost any rap or R & B song that comes onto the car radio. How many kids know the multiplication tables by heart? How many people have a repertoire of jokes? To do some memorizing and performing of poems and speeches and passages of scripture is not far removed from all this. And the natural ingredients needed to do it are not far away: interest, incentive, some determination, a model of how to do it, a process for doing it, a safe place to practice, and the assurance that forgetting and recovering (always with a script nearby!) is as natural as falling and getting up when learning to roller skate.

And what we and they miss when we never teach students to do this! Students could learn to do this all the way through the educational system. We could begin with proverbs and very brief stories in childhood in order to build confidence. Then we would not have to do educational therapy with adult learners when we asked them to do it in class later in life. Learning something so that it becomes part of you is a unique experience. Learning something by putting yourself in the place of the speaker rather than just objectively reading it or hearing it—out there separate from you—is a whole different way to learn. These are things you might never forget. Even if you may not recall the whole thing, there are lines and emotions and angles of vision that will stick to you like burrs for a lifetime.

I was very fortunate to have had a positive experience with memorizing and performing when I was a child. My father was a pastor. When he preached, he seldom looked at his script. He memorized the sermon or knew it so well that he could look at us and talk to us. He would often recite poetry in his sermons, some of which I learned. I can recite one such poem to this day (one I never saw written). He also knew longer pieces that were not for preaching. For example, he could recite lengthy Robert Service poems about the Yukon gold rush, including *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* and *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. They had a wonderful lilting sound to them that resonated so well. I also took part in a program at the local Brethren Church to receive prizes for memorizing a certain number of scripture verses. I had a chance to preach

when I was in high school, and I gave the commencement address. In both cases, I learned the talks by heart.

Then I also had occasion to learn a lot of poetry. While in college, I worked one summer for a limestone company building roads. It was a great job with interesting co-workers—digging, sweeping dust, and flagging cars. However, after the first two weeks I was so bored that I would go home at night and memorize a poem, then spend all my free mental time the next day repeating it. I learned several hours worth of poetry from *One Hundred and One Famous Poems* and other collections (of Western civilization literature), such as Grey's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* and Poe's *The Raven*, along with *Invictus*, *Crossing the Bar*, and countless others. I could still to this day recount from memory about an hour's worth of poems I learned that summer.

I had pretty much forgotten about memorizing until the late seventies when I was preparing a fresh translation of the Gospel of Mark for a book I was writing on *Mark as Story*. I read in TIME magazine about a British actor, Alex McGowan, who was performing the King James Version of Mark on stage to audiences in the major theaters in England and in cities across the United States. From the rave reviews, it was clear that the audiences were captivated and delighted by it. The reports expressed surprise that a biblical narrative would lend itself so well to theater and be so engaging and entertaining. Some people thought he must have made up some of the stories! To those of us in biblical studies, however, this was not such a stretch. The Gospel of Mark originated in an oral culture of storytellers in which the stories and letters were either composed orally in performance and eventually written down or they were composed in writing in order to be performed. So why should Mark not lend itself well to oral performance? Nevertheless, until that time I had not entertained the possibility for myself.

In response to reports about McGowan's performance (I finally saw it on tape two decades later in the late nineties), I thought, "I could do that!" And I had the advantage of making my own translation from the Greek. That same year I severely wrenched my back playing golf and was in bed for a month. It was then that I set myself to memorizing Mark. It was a lot to keep in mind. It takes two and a half hours with a brief break for me to recite/perform Mark. I learned it and practiced it one line at a time, over and over and over. It took the whole month of doing little else to get it initially in mind. Then it seemed like only a week would go by and it would be gone! After my recovery, I looked for opportunities to perform it in class and for churches. At first, I would work fifteen to twenty hours before each occasion just to do the memory work. As I gained control of the material, I began to get guidance on how to tell the stories so as to bring out the dynamics of the narrative and to have more of an impact on the audience.

I chose to memorize and perform because I thought it would help my students experience Mark (and other writings of the Bible) in a fresh way—as hearers rather than readers. And it worked. Students heard things they never noticed when reading. They said that it brought emotion back into the Bible and humanity they could relate to. They said it felt like they were encountering the Gospel of Mark for the first time. I was very encouraged by the results and wanted to keep going. Since then I have performed Mark over three hundred times for classes and in churches around the country. I learned other pieces from the New Testament. I have memorized and performed for my students (and others) the "Sermon on the Mount" (from the *Gospel of Matthew*), sayings on wealth and poverty (from the *Gospel of Luke*), scenes from the *Gospel of John*, Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* and the *Letter to Philemon*, the *Letter of James*, *I Peter*, and the *Book of Revelation*. I have spent countless hours learning and re-learning these by

heart. I do not have a gift for recall. I have to memorize. If there is any gift, it is stubborn determination!

These experiences have changed my life. My own life has been enriched by such “immersions” into the biblical materials. Performing these for students has made an extraordinary difference in my teaching of the Bible and the dynamics of my classes. And my practice of translating, memorizing, and performing has become the primary research tool for my own scholarship. If I want to study a particular book, the way I do it is to become the voice of the text, live inside the worldview of that text, know every detail, bring it to life “on stage,” and seek to convey the implicit rhetorical impact of the work to bear on the engagement and transformation of an audience. For me, there is no better way to understand a biblical writing than this. Throughout this time, I came to use this approach more and more fully as a pedagogical tool for students—not only for students to *hear* but also to learn and *perform* biblical passages for themselves.

And how appropriate a pedagogical process it was, especially in relation to the biblical writings. In the oral cultures of the first centuries, less than 5% of the people could read or write. Everyone was steeped in the orality of the culture. As such, the New Testament writings were not originally experienced in writing by most early Christians. They were oral—told by early Christian storytellers and heard by audiences hungry to experience the stories and letters being told. The writings now in the New Testament were not originally written or received as scripture. They were treated as story-epics, letters, and a prophetic apocalypse—probably performed from memory. They were hand-written on scrolls between 50 and 100 C. E. Many of them were composed orally in performance and then transcribed into writing, while others were composed orally for written dictation with the goal that they would be performed orally. Written scrolls had little value in their own right. With no punctuation or spaces between words or capital letters, hand-written scrolls were not designed to be read with facility before a group. The scrolls served the orality of the culture, as a means to signal sound, like the score of a musical composition. Vastly different from books, hand-written scrolls functioned as aids to memory retrieval for a performer preparing for a performance. They were performed, mostly from memory. Even if one was attempting to read a scroll publically, one needed to know the composition by memory.

These New Testament writings are trace records that have all the marks of orality. They were composed “be ear” in memorable ways to please the hearing and to train the mind to remember—with alliteration, chiasmic patterns, chain linkages, antithetical and synonymous parallelism, contrasts, proverbs, maxims, parables, stories and much more. Just as we have people with photographic recall in a print age, so in oral cultures there emerge people with audio-phonic recall—the capacity to hear and reproduce something with astounding faithfulness (as some musicians can do today). Indeed, everyone was accustomed to hearing and remembering, because that was the way people learned anything. In a sense, the experiences generated in my class were meant to recover something of the original ethos of the early Christians—experiences of oral performance that have been fundamentally lost for about 2000 years now.

As such, the New Testament writings are examples of “performance literature”—every bit as much as music or drama. They were meant to be performed. Imagine a musicologist studying scores of music without ever having heard a performance! Imagine a Shakespearean scholar studying the plays without ever experiencing a performance of them! Imagine that we biblical scholars have studied the texts of the New Testament without ever hearing a performance of them! When was the last time in the history of the church when the wisdom of

James or the epistle of I Peter, for example, were performed in their entirety for an audience, as they were in the first century? How can we get back to these oral/aural experiences? How can such experiences help us interpret the writings in fresh ways? How can we overcome our approach to the New Testament writings out of a print culture mentality so as to treat them as performance literature? And how can we learn to perform them?

Originally, then, the “real” New Testament compositions were performances in the first century, and the writings we now read are like fossil remains of what were once flesh and blood performances. The idea now, based on clues from the text itself, is to put flesh and blood back onto the fossils and make them live as performances! This is not simply a matter of giving sound to the text, as if performance literature was a matter of creating a talking head. A performance involves the performer, the audience, and the context. Putting flesh and blood onto the manuscript includes inflection, pauses, pace, volume, pitch, gestures, posture, facial expressions, and movement. And the text provides clues to what a performance might have been like when it tells us that someone “screamed” or “pleaded” or “laid on hands” or “wept” and so on. The text as “script” implies a certain embodiment when the composition expresses irony or outrage or sarcasm or concern. There is no way we can reproduce a performance the way it was done in the first century. Nevertheless, learning and performing scripture by heart is designed to offer students the chance to give life to the text and to recover something of the oral/aural experience of them. And the performance itself *is* their interpretation of the text, every bit as much as a commentary or an essay about the passage is an interpretation of a text.

When I first engaged students in this enterprise, I mainly did my own performances for the classes and worked with their responses. For example, I would perform Mark or Revelation all at once in the school auditorium on a given evening. Shorter pieces I would do within the class time. And it changed the whole way of interacting with the text in the class. The event created a common, communal experience we could all discuss together. The next step was that I asked the students themselves to perform. I invited each student in my Gospels class to learn and present one story to the rest of the class, such as “the parable of the unjust steward” or “the healing of a blind man” or a “conflict over the Sabbath laws.” It was amazing what happened. Each student presented one story, and all students heard twenty or twenty-five stories—by different people from different social locations with different styles and approaches. The encouragement for students was considerable. It was one thing to hear the teacher perform. After all, they sort of expected it from me. But to hear their peers tell the stories was jaw-dropping for them. And each one came away knowing that *they could do it!* I incorporated this unit of memorization-and-performance into many different classes at the MDiv and PhD levels.

Then I took it a step further by having several students do a whole letter. For the last few years I have regularly taught a course in the shorter letters of Paul, covering Philemon, Galatians, I Thessalonians, and Philippians in that order. In that class, I perform Philemon twice (once in a kind way and another in a stern way!). And I perform Galatians. Both performances help us immensely to dig into the meaning and rhetoric of each of these letters. Philemon takes about five minutes to perform; and Galatians takes about thirty minutes. The familiarity with the letters created for students by hearing is significant. And the common experience enhances our conversations about letter-structure, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, social-science analysis, and rhetoric.

Then I have asked students to volunteer to learn and perform one of the chapters from I Thessalonians and Philippians. So five or more students present the whole of I Thessalonians to the class, and four or more students present the whole of Philippians. I have never failed to have

enough students to cover both letters. Sometimes, two students will do the same chapter; and the class gets to hear it twice. I also encourage students to perform in their native language or in a second language of their choice. We will have a student perform the chapter in English followed by the same chapter in a different language. We have heard Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, German, Thai, Swedish, and Swahili, among others. What a thrill it is to have these different voices of men and women, black and white and Latino and Asian American and Native American, old and young, people from diverse countries and social backgrounds giving their rendition of a chapter from one of Paul's letters.

The pedagogical power of this experience lies in the shift in medium. To experience the Bible in a different medium is transformative. For students who have read the Bible over and over in print and now "to hear it" and "to tell it" fosters a fresh encounter with the Bible. And it is clear to everyone that just reading the text aloud does not do it. It is not the same as performance at all. With reading, there is less immediacy, less liveliness, and less interactive relationship with the audience. Reading aloud simply replicates in public the act of reading in private. There is not real shift in medium. But with performance, everything becomes oral. Going from written text to oral performance is a fundamental paradigm shift for scholarship as well. To study the Bible with assumptions from print culture is very different from assumptions drawn from oral cultures in which scrolls served primary orality. And there are significant implications for the church and its ministry.

So too for the classroom. There are four strong implications in the classroom that characterize this shift from print to orality, all focusing around interpretation. All these implications relate to a key ingredient of interpretation, namely the exercise of the imagination.

The first implication for interpretation is the experience of being an audience for a performance of the text. The sound itself affects the experience of the composition. It envelopes a person and is a vehicle not only for meaning but also for emotion. The experience is also thoroughly temporal. When we read, we can go back and forth looking spatially at the pages of text. But a performance does not stop. It just keeps going, and the hearer has to keep up. Furthermore, a performance involves seeing as well as hearing. The presenter is acting out the text and also thereby generating visual images. It is quite a holistic experience for an audience. Furthermore, the experience of a performance is communal. The group reacts to the performance as it goes along—the changes of mood, the laughter, the rapt silence, and sometimes the tears. It becomes clear that performer and audience *together* generate the experience and therefore the meaning and impact of the composition. And the capacity to talk together afterward about the experience, including the sharing of diverse interpretations by members of the class/ audience, confirms this insight.

The second implication for interpretation is this. The student assumes the role of the speaker—the voice of the text—and of the many different voices within the text. With a story, the performer embodies the narrator and also takes the role of the characters in the story. In a letter, the performer takes the role of the sender, much as the original performer did, by standing in, for example, as Paul speaking to the community being addressed. If hearing a performance changes the relationship with the text, the shift to becoming the performer goes much further. The experience enables you to know the text so well and to communicate with an audience. One student reported: "I must admit I am forced to change my image of Paul from an angry person who rails at people to one who loves those to whom he is writing." Another said, "I got in touch with the Paul who is concerned about these people."

The third implication for interpretation is that students find this experience to be an amazing avenue into the meaning of the text. Performing makes you aware of the fullness of the text, including the cues to performing it—when to move, how to speak, what gestures to make, what tone the narrator or a character is taking, what emotions to express, and much more. By memorizing, one knows all the details of the text. You cannot screen out details that you do not understand or disagree with or find objectionable. You have to make sense of them. And you are seeing the texts from the inside. And in that experience, these stories and letters come to have new meaning and life. Most students end up writing their interpretation paper on the passage they learned; and it always improves their grasp of that text. In relation to their performance and their paper, I recall students saying something like, “I never knew this was in Paul, and it changes everything” and “I have said these lines all my life, and for the first time, I think I know what they mean.”

The fourth implication for interpretation is that students get in touch with the rhetorical impact of the text. This may be the most important pedagogical payoff of all. As much as anything, this happens because the experience of performing makes the performer acutely aware of the text as an act of communication. But more than communicating, the performance is an act of persuasion and of transformation. When we read the text as print, we put our focus on what the text *means*. But when you perform it, you put focus as much on what the text *does*. Does the text seek to get the audience to share possessions, free a slave, overcome fear, know the power of love, be brothers and sisters to each other, and so on? Furthermore, the impact is not just on individual behavior; rather, the performance is seeking to generate a certain kind of community—characterized by freedom or acceptance or holiness or wisdom or mutual relationships. The performance can be seeking to change the way people think about the world—affirming or challenging their most fundamental assumptions. The performance *offers a world* and draws the audience into it. This potential rhetorical impact is a dimension of the text often ignored by interpreters operating with a print mentality. But when communicated orally, the performer must ask: What is the impact that this text was meant to have? How does the text work so as to generate that impact? And how can I perform it so as to be faithful to that impulse of the text?

The theological implications of this paradigm shift in media are significant. One implication is the *incarnation* of the word that takes place. The performer now becomes the medium of scripture. A number of years ago, I was team-teaching a preaching class in which we incorporated the memorization of a text into the dynamics of the class. As preparation for their performances, I had shared about my own experiences and performed some selections for them. One morning, my colleague entered the room announcing, “I hope all of you brought your Bibles.” There was awkward shuffling as some people realized they had not brought a Bible. Then someone noticed me doing the same thing and said, “Hey, Dr. Rhoads didn’t bring a Bible.” At which point, another student chimed in with, “What do you mean ‘bring a Bible’, he *is* a Bible!” After the laughter died down, we realized that the student had made a profound observation, namely, that an oral Bible is in the hearts and minds and bodies of those who know these stories. As a class doing performances, *we were the Bible*. Together with others, the Bible is the community of those who bear the memory and the stories.

Another theological implication is that the *word of God becomes an event*. It is off the page and into the world. This oral dynamics of the word can dislodge an approach to scripture based on a print mentality that says each word, each line, each verse, as printed, equals the words of God. One can see in the performance how different each presentation can be, how some things

are emphasized more than others, how much the audience participates in creating meaning, how powerful the word can be liberated from its fixed form in the book, how much the spoken word challenges us to change. Performance makes the word alive and powerful as never before. This experience of word as event can change the way students understand the church, how they go about their ministry of worship and education, and the possibilities they see for transformation of the world.

I became so convinced of the pedagogical efficacy of this approach to interpretation that I am now regularly teaching a class wholly devoted to learning and performing biblical selections, called "Scripture by Heart." In the next reflection, I will describe fully the dynamics of that class. As a conclusion to this essay, I share a recent e-mail from a student who had the experience in class being described above. She is a second career student who spent many years teaching high school English literature before studying for the ministry. She describes an event that occurred as part of her first call process.

Hi David:

Just thought that you might enjoy hearing how our time together in "The Shorter Letters of Paul" and "Scripture by Heart" continue to impact ministry. Today I interviewed for a call at a redevelopment church in Racine. The people are aware of the need to change, but can be hesitant about sharing their feelings about this. The congregation asked me to preach during my interview and the Synod did not want me to do this. The committee asked me if there was not something else that I could do.

I started toying with the idea of performing Paul's letter to Philemon. My Synod contact person thought it was a good idea because it would demonstrate my "preaching" (quotation marks are the contact's and not mine) and leading capacities. The more I prayed and thought about it, the more I could see a correlation between Philemon and the situation the congregation faces. Philemon faced change too. What would happen if he did not do what had always been done regarding Onesimus' misconduct?

One of the people on the call committee was not a member of the church although he assists the church a great deal. He said that he wished that church was more interactive. It was the perfect time to perform Philemon. I assigned each member of the committee a role as listener in terms of the original letter and asked them also to listen for how the letter might connect to the current situation experienced by the congregation.

When I finished they were in tears. The Holy Spirit had touched their hearts through the Word and I got to watch it unfold as they made connections. They saw themselves as leaders on the spot as was Philemon, saw themselves as other slaves who would ask why Onesimus should receive special treatment and how they might respond that way when today's youth did not do things as they had. Most significantly, they asked if Paul "could have commanded Philemon like that ('though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty . . .')." This led to an interesting discussion about the changes that Paul had experienced himself, how as a follower of Christ he had to learn a new way of relating to others; that they might need to learn new ways of relating to others in order to grow. I couldn't have planned it if I tried. Isn't God amazing?

If I am called to this congregation, I could imagine performing Paul's letter to Philemon for the entire congregation as an introduction to our visioning and mission statement work.

Thanks so much for learning experiences that lend themselves to such ministry.

*Peace and Joy,
Crystal Steinberg*