

“Eat, Drink, and Be Wise”
 Proper 15B (August 19, 2018)
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

Students and professors in our town are about to begin a new semester, which made me think this week of my days as a young theology student at Harvard. One day I visited the office of a professor to discuss a paper I’d written for his course on the history of Judaism. Crossing the threshold into Shaye Cohen’s office was like stepping into Dumbledore’s office in the *Harry Potter* series, what J.K. Rowling describes as “by far the most interesting” office at Hogwarts school. Over time, memory can exaggerate details, but inside Professor Cohen’s office I remember seeing trinkets collected from years of travel on one table, a huge oriental rug covering the floor, plush chairs, an ornate desk with a banker’s lamp in the background, and three of the walls covered - floor to ceiling - in books. Bookshelves stuffed to bursting. Each bookcase had its own ladder reaching the top that must have stood at least ten feet. It was a marvelous. What was even more remarkable, I later learned - though this may be more Harvard legend than verifiable truth - was that Professor Cohen actually had duplicates of every one of those books in his home office, so he wouldn’t have to schlep books from one office to the other. As a young 20-something, still dipping my toes in the scholarly world, I remember asking him - in a moment of awestruck awkwardness - “have you read all of these?” “Oh no,” he said. “That would take two lifetimes. I’ve read *in* them all.”

Novelist Walter Mosley likened a bookcase to a person’s biography: a “bookcase,” he said, “will tell you everything you’ll ever need to know about” a person. I don’t know if Mosley is right about that, but a well-stocked bookcase is certainly a testament to years of work. Years of reading and collecting, assembling and shifting around: poetry alongside history, biographies beside novels; books about travel, geography, architecture and design next to books on religion and philosophy; and perhaps there’s a shelf or two devoted to stacks of yellowing newspapers or old editions of *National Geographic* or *Vanity Fair*.

The word “book,” according to the editors of *Word Mysteries & Histories*, “goes back to the Indo-European root *bhago-*, meaning ‘beech tree,’” and to a “Germanic word that meant ... ‘a beech staff for carving runes on.’”¹ This implies that writing books, like collecting books, takes work: writing is a bit like carving letters into wood; sculpting, chiseling, hammering. It’s handiwork. Or maybe, “craftsmanship.” Novelist Colum McCann has said that “writers have to have the stamina of world-class athletes. The exhaustion of sitting in one place,” he says. “The errors. The retrieval. The mental taxation. The dropping of the bucket down into the near-empty well over and over again. Moving a word around a page. Moving it back again Figuring the best way to leave it alone. Hanging in there as the clock ticks on.”² It’s been said writer John McPhee used to tie himself to his office chair until he finished a piece of writing, because the temptation was to wander off and lounge in the pub instead of plunking keys on his computer.

¹ The American Heritage Dictionaries, eds., *Word Mysteries & Histories: From Quiche to Humble Pie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 23-24.

² Colum McCann, *Letters to a Young Writer: Some Practical and Philosophical Advice* (New York: Random House, 2017), 15.

Maybe it's a good thing that striking words upon a page takes work; that collecting books and filling shelves takes years; that knowledge gleaned from reading needs to accumulate over time, like sand in an hourglass. Because words are gems and daggers. Words, says one writer, are vehicles that carry truth. "Language," says another writer, can be "a great weapon."³ "Words are," to refer again to Dumbledore, "our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it." Being careful with words is the mark of the wise person in scripture, while the fool, scripture goes on, rambles in word salads, and pours forth folly.

Our Christian tradition - like many traditions - is a religion built by words. Jesus is called the "word" made flesh. The Bible is a bookcase stuffed to the gills with ancient wisdom and timeless advice forged in the fires of life and hammered into words. Scripture's words can soar, as if on eagle's wings, to borrow an expression from the prophet Isaiah, and lift the soul. But "the Bible," said one preacher, "is not all sweetness and light." Its words can also irritate and bite, like spurs that jolt stagnated faith into action. Preacher Paul Scott Wilson speaks of scripture's stinging beauty when he writes that: "To the person afraid of life," God's words in scripture are, "Do not be afraid . . . I have called you by name . . ." "To the person . . . [in] pain," God's words in scripture are, "I will always be with you." "To the one who mourns," God's words in scripture are, "I will wipe every tear from your eye" "To the guilty," God's words in scripture are, "Repent, and receive the good news of forgiveness." "To those needing justice," God's words in scripture are, "it will roll down like waters . . . , like an ever-flowing stream." "To those facing [conflict]," God's words in scripture are, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." "To the dying one," Christ's words in scripture are, "In my father's house are many dwelling places . . . I [will] go to prepare a place for you."⁴ The words of scripture can both comfort and sting; bring the guilty to their knees while lifting up with grace those who feel ashamed.

Wise words in scripture lift up the downtrodden; unsettle the proud; reassure the repentant; poke the complacent; and shower everyone with a divine love that accepts the fact that we are all human: broken but beautiful.

Each of today's scripture readings offer words of wisdom - ancient advice; or, to use a modern phrase, "self-help." The writer of Proverbs invites readers to feast on wisdom as one would a sumptuous banquet; Jesus in today's gospel reading puts himself on the menu, so to speak, as wisdom in flesh and blood, inviting his followers to ingest his teaching and immerse themselves in his way of love. But it's our other two readings that drew my attention this week. The Ephesians text exhorts readers to "take great care" to live wisely. The writer uses a mathematical term in Greek to describe this care. It's a kind of exacting self-examination. A self-awareness that, like writing, takes work: hammering away, chiseling away at oneself - cleansing the soul, purifying the inside so a better person can emerge on the outside. In the reading from First Kings, Solomon asks God to help him with this process of self-care. In that story, Solomon, a newly minted king, fell into a restless sleep one night (perhaps an example of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, which says, "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.") While sleeping, *uneasily*, Solomon dreamed that he was visited by God, who offered to give him anything he wished to help him be a better king. Instead of asking for riches or victory over his enemies, Solomon asked God for wisdom, literally in

³ Again, McCann, *Letters to a Young Writer*, 31.

⁴ Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 99-100.

Hebrew, Solomon asked God for a “listening heart,” which English translates as a “discerning spirit,” or a “spirit of wisdom.” God was delighted with Solomon’s request, and granted it; and Solomon went on to gain fame as Israel’s wisest king with an entire bookcase of ancient self-help books written in his honor; books that treat wisdom as a kind of self-love - a “care of the self,” as philosopher Michel Foucault once put it. Books attributed to the wise Solomon - like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes or the Wisdom of Solomon - tell readers that wise living means learning self-control: controlling the tongue, controlling anger, controlling desire. “The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,” says the writer of Proverbs, “but the mouths of fools pour out folly.” “A wise person,” the writer continues, “is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool throws off restraint and is careless.” Ancient self-help writers - often writing in Solomon’s name - exhort readers to be gentle and humble and honest, and to strive to live lives marked by love.

Living in this way, living wisely, takes work - work, like writing and collecting books. Which is why, I think, the writer of Ephesians says it’s exacting and arduous - like math. And why King Solomon prays to God for help to live wisely. And why, perhaps, entire shelves in modern bookstores, are stuffed with self-help books: books on optimism and positive self-talk and the 8 Powerful Steps to Self-Love, according to *Psychology Today* - advice designed to help us be better on the inside so we can live better on the outside; or, to borrow words from scripture: to love ourselves, so we can love our neighbors.

This week in *The New York Times*, over 250 readers submitted letters detailing how that modern philosopher of the soul - that modern day teacher of wisdom - the late Aretha Franklin, helped them over the years learn self-love and self-respect.⁵ One letter was from a Vietnam veteran, who said he first heard Aretha Franklin in April of 1967, on the day he arrived in Vietnam. “A black soldier was lying on some sandbags outside a bunker listening to ‘Respect’ on a cassette player,” he wrote. “I heard ... that soaring voice [that stopped me in my tracks].” “I’ve loved [her] ever since. Aretha [singing to me of respecting and loving myself] is on a permanent rotation on my inward soundtrack.” Another letter to the *Times* came from a reader who said she had suffered abuse as a child. “I believed [Aretha Franklin’s] message that I deserved respect,” said the letter. “Thank you, Ms. Franklin, for inspiring [and empowering] me ...” Another letter from a reader in Massachusetts said, “I was 17 [years old] when Aretha’s version of ‘Respect’ came out. It was the voice I needed to hear as a young college woman trying to head for a male-dominated career path. Aretha was the voice urging me to take my full place in the world and never let anyone disrespect me.” The letter continues, “When I was a first-year law student with an infant, and two male classmates pushed me against the wall and told me I should leave and give my place in the class to a man who needed a career, I went home and listened to Aretha sing ‘Respect’ to help me refocus my determination. I graduated first in my class of 286 three years later, and again, I listened to Aretha sing ‘Respect’ at my graduation party. So thanks Aretha, for all the music, the inspiration and the courage.” Other letters to *The Times* came from readers who confess to coming down with laryngitis from singing Aretha Franklin songs; they thank her for giving voice to all women who struggle be heard; they describe Aretha as being part of the soundtrack of their lives, empowering them to live their best lives, to love and respect themselves, to help them to get up in the morning when life has beaten them up. One reader said Aretha “literally saved my life.”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/16/reader-center/what-did-aretha-franklin-mean-to-you.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=timesinsider®ion=c-column-bottom-span-region>

These tributes to Aretha Franklin, the bookcases of ancient wisdom from scripture, the wisdom of the way of love taught by Jesus, the exhortation from Ephesians to love thyself, the prayer of Solomon asking God for self-help, the stacks of modern self-help books - all of it, I think, is pointing to a single truth - a truth repeated many times in the Bible, in Judaism, in Christianity, in all great philosophies of life: that respecting, loving, being kind to and caring for our neighbors flows from loving ourselves - from respecting ourselves, from being kind to ourselves, from caring for the self, to quote Michel Foucault, again.

So, let me close today with a question: what do you need to do this week, this coming semester, to take better care of yourself? Maybe self-love starts with something as simple as looking into a mirror - as our children did in today's children's sermon - and saying to ourselves, "you are a beautiful person. And you are loved by God." Amen.