

Dr. Cornel West speaks, examines important Jewish rabbi of 20th century *By Karen Yokota*

Dr. Cornel West examines Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and his philosophy on piety, poetry and the profane. West is currently in the process of writing a book about Heschel. Here are notes from West's visit to The Well @ Queen Anne United Methodist Church.

Heschel, West's Soul Mate

- Cornel West decided long ago, from "womb to tomb" that he needed soul mates. He is shaped by his literary soul mates, which included Anton Chekhov, Toni Morrison, and John Coltrane. His prophetic soul mates include Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., and of course, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.
- West states that first and foremost, Nihilism is problematic. Heschel said that the major ecumenical movement in the 20th Century was Nihilism. He believed that it didn't matter what religion one believed or lack of religion one had, but "if you don't respond to this major ecumenical movement, then there's not going to be anything worth living for, anyway." Nihilism is power with no compassion.
- West says, "People do what they want to do because they have the big money and power to do it. They don't care. With so much power, one doesn't even feel any longer because they don't have to generate an argument due to the sheer facticity that power allows one get away with no accountability, no responsibility, no culpability, whatsoever.
- With this, a new framework was casted for interfaith work. Heschel works in three ways. He begins with the pietistic, then moves to the poetic and ends with the prophetic.

Piety

- First, Heschel believed that we needed to adopt a new conception of piety. This new meaning of piety is to not to be associated with blind faith or uncritical acceptance of dogma or doctrine. Heschel was concerned of the quality of person that you are before the ritualistic life.
- For Heschel, there are **Three Pillars of Piety**. They are remembrance, reverence and resistance.
- **Remembrance** is ancestor appreciation. Nihilism will never ever be combated without remembrance. Remembrance is refusing to look

forward without first looking back and connect with the best voices and visions and viewpoints that go into the shaping of who you are.

- We are all interconnected and we are dependent on each other. Radical remembrance brings our connectedness to our grandmothers, parents, aunts, cousins, children – nothing is self-made.
- **Reverence** is something that cuts deeper than the surfaces. West asks, “What does it mean to be human? Heschel was a man of “a spiritual royalty.” He was a man who lived in poverty but always carried himself as though he was a part of religious nobility and a spiritual royalty.
- **Resistance** is prayer. “Prayer ought to be subversive,” says West. “It’s contrary than what happens in most Christian churches today, which is praying for a blessing rather than praying to be a blessing.” West says that one responds to an asking and a demand from something bigger than he/she to allow themselves to be a vessel to work through for a love of justice. Keep in mind, it’s not resistance in a narrow political sense; it’s not just a matter of attending a demonstration, it’s not just a matter of reading the right newspaper. It’s a matter of what kind of human being to be.
- West wrestles with the question: How does integrity face oppression? What does honesty do in the face of deception? What does decency do in the face of insult?
- Integrity, honesty, decency, virtue, no ideology of the left has a monopoly of those particular realities when enacted in the right way. It’s at the deep level of humanity in which it is going to be a variety of different traditions.
- Make integrity, honesty, decency, and virtue central. “You can be a Hindu like Gandhi, be a Catholic Sister like Dorothy Day, be a communist like an Angela Davis, or be a Jewish secular figure, like Harry Magdal, or perhaps, a revolutionary Muslim like Malcolm X after he outgrows the person who love him as the honorable Muhammad, but live and be full of honesty, integrity, decency virtue and courage.”
- West says that sometimes the people who love you might have a narrowness, but their love makes all the difference. In fact, in the end, that’s true for all of us. “Cause my hunch is that all of your mamas are not as progressive as you are,” West said, followed by a roaring laughter from the audience. “Mine sure isn’t and I don’t give a damn.”

Poetic

- When you unpack the notion of piety from those three pillars, you've already unpacked a sense of an alternative world. And that's the connection with the **poetic**.
- West quotes Percy Shelley's famous line from "A Defense of Poetry," "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."
- **Poetry** is a weapon along with piety. Poetry is dramatic. Poets are dramatists of ideas. Drama is conflict emotionally felt and critically reflected upon. It's about getting folks to reflect on themselves.
- West challenges the audience to think about all of the possibilities of us learning how to die in order to learn how to live. "We're learning how to die in order to learn how to live," he says. "We are critically examining the assumptions that we have in order to let them die in order for us to learn how to grow, develop and mature. To die is to be reborn and that means that we are awakened. This is to awaken our citizens and us from sleepwalking."
- Within the poetic includes drama, density and vulnerability.
- **On Drama: Drama** is laced with density. It's thick with meaning. When reading Heschel's prose, it's written in a thoroughly prophetic prose. He doesn't write in flat jargon that is written in academic prose. Heschel rejected the profession in an academic sense because he was tied to vocation. He knew that there wasn't a vocation without invocation. Invoking the voices of the past. The poetic is tied to the pietistic and leads us to the prophetic.
- **On vulnerability:** Great artists project a sense of vulnerability and lay their souls on the table. The vulnerability that Heschel expressed in his work is what is necessary today. West says, in today's world where we are bombarded with copies rather than originals, bombarded with imitations and emulations in order to be successful, rather than inventions and creations in order to be great.

Prophetic Witness

- “Racism is a Satanism and a disease of the soul and a callousness of the heart and mind.”
- The prophetic is the hypersensitivity to the suffering of others. The distinction to the modern world is that we have become callous to catastrophe. We’ve become indifferent to criminality. Indifference to evil is more evil than evil itself.
- For Heschel, pietistic, poetic and prophetic is all forms of witness. Our word martyr comes from witness – he was also willing to die.
- Heschel was never afraid. Why are you going to connect us to these folk? It’s not about piety; it’s a matter of poetic imagination. It’s a matter of prophetic witness. Justice is what love looks like in public. Tenderness is what love looks like in private. There’s a militant tenderness that is at work in Heschel; it’s in his prose and it’s how he relates to the world. Non-linguistically and linguistically.
- Heschel had a radical gentleness and a subversive sweetness. There can be no serious struggle for justice without tenderness, sweetness and gentleness. It doesn’t mean you don’t have tenacity and it doesn’t mean you don’t have strong critique.
- If love is not at the center of your calling then it will never take you far enough. Justice is only rescued by something deeper than justice, namely love. Love and justice are inseparable but not identical.
- “One of the problems in today’s society is that we live in an untender time, an ungentle time, says West. “Especially in our young people. They aren’t experiencing much sweetness in their life.” West makes a reference to Destiny’s Child’s, “Say My Name” song. He challenges the audience to examine what kind of music young people are listening to today and asks if anything integrates sweetness and gentleness. He compares it to Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness”. Babyface writes a song for Bobbi Brown about tenderoni. “She’s a tenderoni, a sweet lovely, ‘roni,” West says. “But not reduced to just an object aside oneself.” Sometimes we have leaders that speak so powerfully and insightfully but when it comes to their own personal lives, they are incredibly harsh on themselves.
- How are you relating to folks? Is it I Thou or I it in the language of Martin Buber?

- Heschel keeps us honest: on all fronts. The spiritual and the social. The existential and the economic. The personal and the political. And they all go hand-in-hand. And there will be no new wave of social motion, momentum, or movement in the American empire without being attentive to each one of those dimensions.
- West doesn't suggest that we imitate Rabbi Heschel. West suggests that we act with moral consistency as Heschel did. Regardless of what the establishment has to say. And that's what Heschel in the 60's was willing to do. Over and over again, be highly unpopular. Liberal establishment. White establishment. Jewish establishment. Black establishment. Why? Because pietistic, poetic and the prophetic was for him. He was willing to be highly unpopular.
- Connection to the pietistic to the poetic to the prophetic was for him, all forms of witness.
- Witness: that's where the word martyr comes from – Heschel was also willing to die. When Heschel was with Martin Luther King in Selma, he said his legs were praying. He said when he got up in the morning and read about the war crime and the United states and Vietnam, I couldn't pray, so I had to go to demonstrations with the young folk. Why? Because prayer is subversive. Subversive of what? Callousness. Subversive of what? Indifference. He had to keep the fire flowing. And, that's where we are now. Trying to keep the fire flowing.
- Things get flatted out when it's market driven – when it's all about money. There's no substance. Heschel said, "American culture is becoming nothing but a gold rush, and such a gold rush that the only thing that one can worship is a golden calf." "And that's idolatry shot right across the board – I don't care what color you are," says West.

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