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2021

When Our Best Words Fail

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Recommended Citation

Bailey, J. (2021). When Our Best Words Fail. *Fare Forward* Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1331

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Keywords

James K. A. Smith, love, philosophy, criticism, interpretation

Disciplines

Christianity

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Online access: <https://farefwd.com/index.php/2021/03/31/love-philosophy-three-responses-to-james-k-a-smith/>

When Our Best Words Fail

By Justin Ariel Bailey



The issue is not a choice between argument or art,
but the expectations of self-sufficiency and
possession that attend our understanding of what
it means to be human, to believe, and to bear
witness.

I am about to turn 40. I recently revisited some writing from when I was about to turn 30 and was struck by the optimism and the eagerness of my younger self. At the time, I was happily serving in an immigrant church, living in the parsonage with my wife, and raising two tiny humans. What I did not see coming was a career in academia. I was raised in a tradition that taught me to be suspicious of anyone who had an advanced education—especially in theology. Seminary was a cemetery, the place where people went to lose their faith. When I got over my initial, ingrained suspicion and arrived at seminary myself, I was quite critical of fellow students who entered wanting to become pastors, and left wanting to become professors. They were abandoning the grittiness of local church ministry, I surmised, for an easier life in the ivory tower of ideas.

It turns out I was wrong, even if my heart was in the right place in its loyalty to my local congregation. My perspective was puny in its pragmatism. I thought

that seminary was mostly about accessing and accumulating the best answers for the questions that the people in my church were asking. Academics were suspect because they were hoarding the answers, Scrooge-like, rather than sharing their treasure with the Church.

But the longer I served in ministry, the more I found that something other than eloquent answers was needed. One day, a student told me that listening to me preach was like being placed under a spell. That sounded encouraging, until he continued: “When I walk out of church, the spell is broken.” So I went back to seminary in search of stronger spells.

I wanted better answers, but what I got was better questions, and a more holistic understanding of the human person. I owe much to James K. A. Smith in this regard. Smith’s writing has been a faithful guide for me for the last decade. He taught me not to fear post-modernism. I followed him into the strange new world of Radical Orthodoxy. Most importantly, his book *Desiring the Kingdom* gave me language for the quest I was on in my ministry to emerging adults.

In his bracingly personal essay, Smith tells the story of a shift in his vocational sensibility: from magisterial apologist to ministerial artist, from “conqueror of the intellect” to cultivator of the imagination, from *Comment* magazine to *Image* journal. The essay is part personal testimony, and part iconoclastic exposé. As he tells the story, Smith unmask the idols of the academy: self-sufficiency, possession, control, and mastery. (Willie James Jennings’s book *After Whiteness* addresses these characteristics in greater detail.) Smith writes: “Nothing beats the love of wisdom out of you like a graduate program in philosophy.... Philosophy begins in wonder... but a doctorate in philosophy is where wonder goes to die.” A friend mentioned to me that a similar sentiment obtains for programs in theology —just replace “love of wisdom” with “love of God.” But this was not my experience.

How did my faith weather the idols of the academy? The jury is still out. But part of the answer is that my world started out so small, and that every new stage of my educational journey opened up stunning new vistas. Part of the answer is that a local church kept me connected to reality. And part of the answer is that I studied writers like George MacDonald and Marilynne Robinson, who nourished my imagination.

Nevertheless, what I have found to be most dangerous for my faith is not academic rigor, critical perspectives, or even impostor syndrome. It is instead the intoxicating feeling of *doing things with words*, the feeling that my words have the power to shift someone else’s consciousness, the weaving of the spell

itself. My work has always involved words: first as a pastor, then as a professor, and finally as a writer. I have always loved words, treasuring a secret belief that the *right* words could fix any problem. If prose doesn't work, maybe poetry will do. And if addressing the intellect is not enough, maybe we can aim at the imagination. But idols of mastery and control afflict artists, too. The imagination, it turns out, is no safe harbor from self-importance.

In my best moments, writing feels like praying. But there is a line from C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* that haunts me: "Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from the love of the thing he tells, to the love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him."

The issue is not a choice between argument or art, but the expectations of self-sufficiency and possession that attend our understanding of what it means to be human, to believe, and to bear witness. If poetic knowing holds any promise over pragmatic knowing, it is because of the way that it seeks to set us free from the need to be in control.

By itself, even poetry cannot set us free. It is not enough for us to be told, even in the most elevated language. We have to be shown. As Smith's story shows, we have to come face to face with our limitations in knowing and in loving. This can only occur in concrete relationships in local communities, with others who share our creaturely limitations, our joys, our hopes, our pains. Love's knowledge is the sort found in the places where our best words fail.

It is fitting to close with Smith's recollection of the erudite but obtuse sermons he preached when he was in his twenties: "Here were people quietly burying their elders, terrified for children bent of destroying themselves, facing death and loneliness and loss, never given permission to doubt, carrying any number of secret burdens and sins they longed to confess; and here's a 22-year-old kid who's read a lot of books..." That line is gold—worth printing out and placing above the desk where I write. I am thankful that young preachers, professors, and parents can grow up, as Smith did—and as I did. And I am thankful that I have found the world to be God's school to teach us how to love.