

# Words and World of Langston Hughes

by Rev. Grace H. Simons

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton on February 22, 2004

---

February is Black History Month. The purpose, of course, is to lift up people and events that are often neglected in standard history courses, and that don't make the documentaries and docu-dramas very often. For most white folks, including me, 'observing' Black History Month means discovering parts of history that have been unknown to us, or maybe known only through a few phrases or references. Whether that's true for you or not, the subtitle of my sermons on Black History (I offer one every year at this time) might be 'Stuff We Ought to Know.' And once we're past Martin Luther King, Jr, Thurgood Marshall, Marian Anderson, Sojourner Truth, George Washington Carver and a variety of sports standouts, we're pretty much into stuff we *don't* know about. When we don't know, we tend to just go right ahead – sort of assuming that if we don't know about it, it either wasn't important or just wasn't. We box ourselves in with what we know and forget that new vistas await if we open the door. Vistas that are quite important in this multicultural land.

So let me begin with a little background. Langston Hughes was born in 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. He became one of the most prominent and prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, that period from the late 19-teens into the mid 1930's which saw a great flowering of Negro arts and creativity. He continued writing into the 1960's and died of cancer in 1967. Since we're specifically looking at his work this morning, I'll use his words in building the context.

After the Reconstruction period in the South, American Negroes began a gradual migration to a variety of destinations in the North and West. Only a trickle at first, this movement gained strength as word came back that conditions were different outside the South.

## ***One Way Ticket***

*I pick up my life  
And take it with me  
And I put it down in  
Chicago, Detroit  
Buffalo, Scranton  
Any place that is North and East – And not Dixie.*

*I pick up my life  
And take it on the train  
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,  
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,  
Any place that is  
North and West –  
And not South.*

*I am fed up  
With Jim Crow laws,  
People who are cruel  
And afraid,  
Who lynch and run,  
Who are scared of me  
And me of them.*

*I pick up my life  
And take it away  
On a one-way ticket –  
Gone up North,  
Gone out West,  
Gone!*

Negro communities swelled in many cities, but New York, and specifically Harlem became a center for the Northern Negro. Negro literature began a steady development with the publishing of works that gained national attention in the late 1890s. W.E.B DuBois became a spokesperson for racial justice, publishing *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. DuBois spoke of what he called 'two-ness', a divided awareness of one's identity. 'One ever feels his two-ness,' he wrote, 'an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.' With World War I came increased job opportunities, and the migration of Negroes from the South swelled. By the 1920's Marcus Garvey was inspiring racial pride among the working class with his Back to Africa movement.

Harlem was both the political and the cultural center of black America. 'Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual,' Hughes wrote, 'pulling him from everywhere.' Art and music flourished. Brightly colored, exotic and sensual images with links to Africa covered canvas. The sounds of jazz arose from the creative cauldron that was Harlem. And a whole group of Negro writers gave voice to the pains and pleasures of being a black person in America. This poem, Harlem, by Frank Horne names the prominent:

*Harlem...Harlem  
Black, black Harlem  
Souls of Black Folk  
Ask Du Bois  
Little grey restless feet  
Ask Claude McKay  
City of Refuge  
Ask Rudolph Fisher  
Don't damn your body's itch  
Ask Countee Cullen  
Does the Jazz band sob?  
Ask Langston Hughes  
Nigger Heaven  
Ask Carl Van Vechten  
Hey! ...Hey!*

'... Say it brother  
Say it'

Harlem was a state of mind, and the young writers, artists, musicians and dancers saw themselves as a force different from the Negro literati of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 'We younger Negro artists who create now,' Hughes wrote, 'intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.'

But even without Jim Crow laws and even with creative juices flowing, the life of a Northern Negro was hardly problem free. Prejudice was alive and well in the North, enshrined in custom and in hearts if not in law. Hughes himself had gone to an elementary school that kept the races separate through fourth grade, and then, in the fifth seated the colored children behind the white children. That pattern held regardless of one's age. As an adult, Hughes wrote a poem called

### **Puzzled**

*Here on the edge of hell  
Stands Harlem –  
Remembering the old lies,  
The old kicks in the back,  
The old, Be patient,  
They told us before.*

*Sure, we remember.  
Now, when the man at the corner store  
Says sugar's gone up another two cents,  
And bread one,  
And there's a new tax on cigarettes –  
We remember the job we never had,  
Never could get,  
And can't have now  
Because we're colored.*

*So we stand here  
On the edge of hell  
In Harlem  
And look out on the world  
And wonder  
What we're gonna do  
In the face of  
What we remember.*

Langston Hughes began writing poetry in the eighth grade. His first published poem **The Negro Speaks of Rivers** is one of several that are printed in our hymnal, although the title is changed. (The editors used the first line as the title, 'I've Known Rivers.' And this

gives me an excuse to mention one of the dilemmas of this sermon: language. Many of the writers use 'Negro' and 'colored' which are, shall we say, out of style these days. In their writings they also occasionally use 'nigger,' a word I would never normally say. Occasionally they use 'black', but I have not seen 'African American.' I have tried to stay with the authors' usage as much as I can, though it sometimes sounds harsh or antiquated.) But back to the poem. It gives voice to Hughes' consciousness of his African heritage.

**I've known rivers:**

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young*

*I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans and*

*I've see its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers:*

*Ancient dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

Reading Langston Hughes has a very contemporary feel. His work contains so many issues that are live today: racism and injustice, tensions between haves and have-nots – both within and across racial lines; tensions between light skinned 'high yeller' Negroes and those of darker hue; the woes of joblessness and scrambling for money, the age-old loves and tensions between men and women, the hopes of parents for their children's future. Some marvel at nature, at the throb of life; some speak of death; many are proud and some tender. And in so many of the poems, the line between music and words blurs, and the jazz and blues Hughes loved sing in his phrases.

I can offer you only a sampling, but listen to these few:

**Moonlight Night: Carmel**

*Tonight the waves march*

*In long ranks*

*Cutting the darkness*

*With their silver shanks,*

*Cutting the darkness*

*And kissing the moon*

*And beating the land's*

*Edge into a swoon.*

### **Dream Variations**

*To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.*

*Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
Dark like me –  
That is my dream!*

*To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun,  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening ...  
A tall, slim tree ...  
Night coming tenderly  
Black like me.*

### **Troubled Woman**

*She stands  
In the quiet darkness,  
This troubled woman  
Bowed by  
Weariness and pain  
Like an  
Autumn flower  
In the frozen rain,  
Like a  
Wind-blown autumn flower  
That never lifts its head  
Again.*

### **When Sue Wears Red**

*When Susanna Jones wears red  
Her face is like an ancient cameo  
Turned brown by the ages.  
Come with a blast of trumpets,  
Jesus!*

*When Susanna Jones wears red*

*A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night  
Walks once again.*

*Blow trumpets, Jesus!*

*And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red  
Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp like pain.*

*Sweet silver trumpets,  
Jesus!*

**Miss Blues'es Child**

*If the blues would let me,  
Lord knows I would smile.  
If the blues would let me,  
I would smile, smile, smile.  
Instead of that I'm cryin' –  
I must be Miss Blues'es child.*

*You were my moon up in the sky,  
At night my wishing star.  
I love you, oh, I love you so –  
But you have gone so far!*

*Now my days are lonely,  
And night-time drives me wild  
In my heart I'm crying  
I'm just Miss Blues'es child!*

**I, Too**

*I, too, sing America.*

*I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes, But I laugh,  
And eat well  
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
'Eat in the kitchen,'  
Then.*

*Besides  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed –*

*I, too, am America*

### **Tell Me**

*Why should it be my loneliness,  
Why should it be song,  
Why should it be my dream  
deferred  
overlong?*

### **My People**

*The night is beautiful,  
So the faces of my people.*

*The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people.*

*Beautiful, also, is the sun.  
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.*

Although many of Hughes pieces deal with injustice and pain, he also has a large body of humorous writing. His first novel, reported to be highly autobiographical, is entitled, **Not Without Laughter**. He details the trials of growing up poor and black in the early 1900s, and also the humor and compassion summoned to bear those trials. Many of his poems have an impish or self-deprecating tone, like this one, titled,

### **Wake**

*Tell all my mourners  
To mourn in red –  
Cause there ain't no sense  
In my being dead.*

Or **Evil**

*Looks like what drives me crazy  
Don't have no effect on you –  
But I'm gonna keep on at it  
Till it drives you crazy, too.*

And **Motto**

*I play it cool  
And dig all jive.  
That's the reason  
I stay alive.*

*My motto,  
As I live and learn  
Dig And Be Dug  
In Return.*

For years Hughes wrote a column which featured dialogues on many issues with a character called Jess B. Simple. The columns were said to be inspired by a conversation Hughes had in a bar, and they mixed serious themes with comedy. Let me read part of one. (*Riddles* p 60 – 62, *The Return of Simple*)

It's time to end. And I am neither literary critic nor black studies scholar. Most of this work is new to me, so I dare not offer analysis. But I can say that I'm glad to know more about Langston Hughes and about the Harlem Renaissance. Glad to discover the delightful humor, the earthy interchanges, the cries of pain and outrage at injustice. For while it was briefly fashionable for white Americans to visit the Apollo and other Harlem night spots, trendy to boogie and listen to jazz, fashion is fickle and too little of the richness found there remained well known in the white community.

I am glad to know that, earlier than I had imagined, Hughes and his contemporaries verbalized their pride in the beauty of black bodies and the strength and resilience of black souls. I wonder how long it will take for us to learn their songs. I understand more clearly the frustration of African Americans today who often face the same barriers described in these poems of 50 years ago, and more. I'm a little embarrassed to be a relative newcomer in this territory and I'm thankful for the nudge of Black History Month. Perhaps that's true for you, as well.

---

This page is copyright © 2004, The Rev Grace H. Simons; Commercial Duplication Prohibited. Non-commercial reproduction with attribution is permitted; prior notice would be appreciated - contact Rev. Simons with particulars.