

Stand and deliver: Holy words that fly off the page

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

When I was 12 and far more interested in horses than high culture, my father dragged my sisters and me to a student production of *The Pirates of Penzance* in the gymnasium at the University of Alabama. I had seen plenty of movies by then and had watched plays on television, but nothing prepared me for the experience of live theater. For two hours I barely breathed as I watched people in opulent costumes animate a world I did not know existed. As they sang, danced and fought with swords, I twitched in my seat. Every emotion I saw on stage flew into my own body. When it was all over, it had all happened to me. Without opening my mouth, I had just played every part in my first comic opera.

By now I have spent a small fortune on theater tickets, standing happily in long lines before box offices all over the world, but throughout this long love affair I have never wanted to be on stage myself. Recurring nightmares of losing my sermon manuscript at Washington National Cathedral are enough for me. Why augment those with bad dreams about forgetting my lines?

So when I attended recent auditions at Piedmont College for Jane Martin's 11-woman play, *Talking With . . .* I went to support the students. I did notice one monologue for a 65-year-old woman, but my only conscious interest in her was to find out who got the part. For hours I sat in the dark watching bold young actresses become baton twirlers, snake handlers, street people and rodeo riders. Then one of them read for the older woman's part, turning her into such a palsied crone that I thought I might have to file a class-action suit.

When you are 20 with perfect skin, 65 may sound really old to you, but when you are in your 50s, then it is possible to imagine that a woman in her 60s might resemble Kate Hepburn in *The Lion in Winter* more than Granny Clampitt in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Before I fully grasped what I was doing, I was stumbling toward the stage. Acting could not be that much harder than preaching, I thought, at least

until I reached the far side of the footlights and turned to salt. I lost my voice. I ate my lines. I got the part.

Now, halfway through a four-night run, I have a whole new feel for the mystery of the word made flesh. My monologue is only six minutes long—about as long as it takes to read the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel out loud—but within those six minutes I have had hundreds of decisions to make. The most obvious ones concerned how to say my lines. Even a line as simple as, “The older I become, the more I’m drawn to light,” can be said half a dozen ways, each of them revealing a different character. So I also had to decide who this woman was. Was she sad, wry, self-aware or clueless about what was going on inside of her?

All I had were her words on the page, where there was as much going on between the lines as in them. (The rabbis say there is “white fire” between every two words of Torah.) I knew she had lost both her husband and her son, but I did not know why. Were they dead? Had she alienated them? Was she alone by necessity or by choice? With no way to know for sure, I invented answers to those questions, but the words on the page kept exposing my artifice. In one case I delivered several lines looking up—only to realize that all the images in the lines pointed down. Dropping my head, I learned to let the words direct me instead of trying to direct the words. We both had life in us. We both had truth in us. The key was to find the point where the written word and my breathing flesh became one.

By opening night I thought I had made all the crucial decisions. The house lights went down. I stepped on stage, sure who my character was and what my lines meant. Then the audience began to respond to her, and everything was up for grabs again. The souls of the words changed on their ways out of my mouth as I heard them enter the bodies of my listeners. A line that elicited pity the first night drew a howl of laughter on the second, changing the whole way that I conceived my character.

As a preacher, none of this is lost on me. *Holy scripture is a script*. How can I read the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel without imagining who his characters are, how they stand, what the words they say mean to them and how they affect those who hear? How can I interpret that script myself without offering it to those who may change the way I hear the words coming out of my own mouth?

For years I have heard people like Richard Ward and David Rhoads talking about the performance of scripture, but I never knew what they were talking about until now. I thought they were talking about presenting the scripture that “we all know” in a more lively way. Now I believe they are talking about the scripture that none of us knows until we have taken the words inside ourselves, entering into the live risks, mysteries, decisions and relationships that they require of us.

I may never act again, but I will never forget this. Holy words are not meant to stay on pages. They are meant to happen to us, to fly off the page into our own bodies, and through us to animate the world of God’s own imagining.