The Seven Words of Kahlil Gibran

HED: Seven Words
DEK: Khalil Gibran's Poetic Invitation to Faithfulness
SEO Snippet: The uncommon life and legacy of Kahlil Gibran challenges us to honor and use language as a bridge to connect with the "other" and
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"Suppose you were compelled to forget all the words you know except seven – what are the seven words that you would keep?" the poet-philosopher Kahlil Gibran once asked a close friend. She turned the question on him.

His answer: You. I. God. Give. Love. Beauty. Earth.

In a time of massacres and dying empires, his words were weapons in the war for Syrian national identity. They cut at corruption, revived Arab culture, and united Christians, Muslims, and Druze around the voracious soul in every religion - but these seven were the words his soul most needed to say.

I: Exile and Loss

> "My people died of starvation and I came here alive, lamenting them in my loneliness…
>
> My people died on a cross. My people died with their arms stretched toward both East and West and their eyes seeking in the darkness of the skies."
>
> *-Dead Are My People*

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) was born in a small village in Lebanon. Within the budding conception of "Greater Syria," Lebanon was a sanctuary for minority religions like Christianity, whose various sects accounted for 80% of Lebanon's population, and the

Druze, an ethno-religion combining elements of Christianity and Islam which accounted for another 12%.

The Gibran home was poor, but it welcomed visitors from every faith. The Gibrans were Maronite, Eastern-Rite Catholics who speak a dialect of Aramaic called Syriac. Young Kahlil grew up speaking Jesus' native tongue and drawing from the ancient wells of Semitic Christian poetry. His mother, Kamila, thought a monastery would be the place for her creative, spiritual son, but in 1895 Kamila took her children to Boston in search of a better life.

Kahlil grew up between Boston, Beirut, and Paris. In 1902, his sister died of tuberculosis. Kamila and his half-brother would die within a year and a half. At the same time in Greater Syria, ethnic cleansings became commonplace. Clergy were often tax collectors and mouthpieces for the Empire, coaxing their flocks into passivity or pogroms. Young and bereaved, Gibran was angry, but a trip to Paris would transform him from restless artist to the leading poet of a renaissance in exile.

Beauty: Reviving Arabic

> Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul.
>
> If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas. For reason, ruling alone, is a force confining; and passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction.
>
> Therefore let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion, that it may sing;
>
> And let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection, and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes.
>
> *-The Prophet*

By the 1800's, Arabic literature was trapped in stale imitations of classical styles from the golden ages of Islam. For the inhabitants of the Levant, to lapse in beauty is to lapse in divine inspiration, making the decay of Arab culture a spiritual crisis.

The *Nahda,* or "Awakening," was a movement to revive Arabic art and culture, one disproportionately led by Christians. In Paris, Gibran found a mentor in fellow Maronite Ameen Rihani, one of the leading intellectuals of the Lebanese-Syrian liberation movement. Gibran was transformed under Rihani's tutelage.

Moving to New York City in 1911, he collaborated with three Syrian Greek Orthodox writers to revive an Arabic literary society called “The Pen League.” Through this group, Gibran would become the most powerful force in the *Nahda* movement.

Together, they defied convention by writing in modern Arabic, the kind of Arabic average people found comprehensible and compelling. They wrote often-incendiary poetry and essays, mocking the hypocrisy of the elite and exalting the common person. Gibran earned the distinction of having his books burned in Beirut - yet his ideas were catching on.

In 1923, Gibran wrote *The Prophet*, his seminal work. After its publication, he was asked to return to Lebanon to lead a political movement. He had a tremendous capacity to inspire and his works held clear political charges, but he was not interested in statecraft so much as the formation of a culture that forms great states. He declined.

God: Christ by Every Name

> Is not religion all deeds and all reflection,
>
> And that which is neither deed nor reflection, but a wonder and a surprise ever springing in the soul, even while the hands hew the stone or tend the loom?
>
> …All your hours are wings that beat through space from self to self. He who wears his morality but as his best garment were better naked…
>
> And if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles.
>
> Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.
>
> *-The Prophet*

Gibran was as fierce a lover of God as he was a critic of religious corruption. He applied Christ’s teaching to diverse faiths through fictional surrogates in *The Madman* and *The Prophet*, then explicitly in *Jesus, Son of Man*. Like most great poets, Gibran was no stickler for theological orthodoxy - but he gives us a portrait of Christ as an epic hero who turned history upside down, whose example and teaching continue to do so.

Gibran’s transition from political agitator to prophetic voice was reflected in this literary Jesus, a prophetic wrecking-ball confronting spirit with its own forgotten origin, the liberating key to the image of God imprisoned by weakness and hypocrisy. This Jesus was equal parts myth and ubermensch, containing hyperbolic truths and fine

consciousness. Gibran's Jesus walked a line, never denouncing tradition writ large, but mocking faith that lacked mind or heart.

All religions, in Gibran's eyes, were united through wonder before God. Christ was God's revelation of human destiny, the visible surface of Mystery's common depth: the Messiah for the Jew, the Logos for the Greek, the Kaaba's secret for the Muslim, the blurred lines between the soul, the soul's experience of God, and God himself. Christ was simultaneously spiritual and worldly, a spirit who conquers civilizations with a higher way of being.

Love: Good Samaritans and other Kind Heretics

> "I love you, my brother, whoever you are - whether you worship in a church, kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque. You and I are children of one faith, for the diverse paths of religion are fingers of the loving hand of the one supreme being, a hand extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all, eager to receive all."
>
> -*The Voice of the Poet*

When Jesus said to love one's neighbor, the response was logical: Who is my neighbor?

Jesus responds with one of his most challenging parables: A kind heretic belonging to a hostile people was a doer of God's word while the hearers of God's word were not. Godlike love transcended the bounds of revelation, history, and nation.

Gibran's creativity lingered within this difficult teaching. Culture wars turn all goodness into a team sport in which at best we compulsively qualify our admirations, and at worst haggle over credit. Ideological rivalries appropriate God's worship for petty human competition. They teach us that it's worse to love people across the aisles and risk endorsing their beliefs than it is to simply not love at all.

What is truly risked by believing without qualifier that the Muslim is made in God's image and authentically seeks God as they know how?

Gibran would tell us that we qualify our affections to score points in a fruitless game. He would usher us into freely loving other faiths, assuring us that there is something divine in even the most man-made religions, because there is something divine in mankind.

This was not an accommodating abstention from moral or theological positions - far from it, Gibran was a scathing critic of hypocrisy.

Yet, he recognized that religion is not limited to ideas that can be compartmentalized and dissected - religion is the search for God with the tools one has been given. Instead of arguing over the inherited tools, Gibran pushes readers into a quest that unites humanity in humility and hunger.

This was the blueprint Greater Syria needed, full as it was of Jews and Samaritans under varying names. Gibran sought imitations of Christ wherever they may be found, ignoring the works-cited. In a time when every demographic in the Levant felt insecurity about their own primacy, Gibran's voice was bold, effusive, and sincere in its love for the "other." That voice would become a rallying cry.

You: Breaking the *Millets*

> Love one another, but make not a bond of love.
>
> Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
>
> Fill each other's cup, but drink not from one cup…
>
> Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,
>
> Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.
>
> *-Love One Another*

Tribalism became formalized in the legal code of the Ottoman *millet* system. The *millets* ("nations" or "religions") were meant to protect religious and ethnic minorities, and did so successfully at the height of the Empire. Each *millet* had its own courts, tax code, and place in society, but eventually the connection of religion to political power turned bitter. By the 1890's, Sultan Abdul Hamid II was actively arming the *millets* against each other in a gambit to divide-and-rule. Christians and Druze, Kurds and Assyrians, groups that historically cooperated, slaughtered one another. Over one million Christians were massacred in the Armenian Genocide and Assyrian "Sayfo." The "segmented pluralism" of the *millets* no longer protected; it divided.

The arbitrary unity of tribalism had to be destroyed for actual peace to flourish.

Gibran considered "you" and "I" the basis of all other words. A world of "you and I" would build more bridges than a world of "us and them," but it was not enough to merely

paste Western individualism on the communal cultures of the Middle East - individualism is alienating compared to the connectedness of the tribe.

Gibran's writings offered new archetypal heroes who braved "aloneness," blending the alienation of individualism with monasticism, shedding their unthinking tribe identities to become titans of conscience.

> "Jesus was often alone… He was upon the earth, yet He was of the sky. And only in our aloneness may we visit the land of his aloneness." (Jesus, Son of Man)

People of all faiths could recognize the best of their mystical traditions in Gibran's fictional prophets. As Syria grappled with a new national identity, Gibran contended that it belonged to one *millet*: a civilization of mystics.

Give: Building the Nation

> There are today, in the Middle East, two men: one of the past and one of the future. Which one are you?
>
> …Are you a politician asking what your country can do for you, or a zealous one asking what you can do for your country.
>
> If you are the first, then you are a parasite; if the second, then you are an oasis in a desert.
>
> *-The New Frontier*

France took control of Greater Syria in 1920, crushing many of the same Arab fighters who helped the French and British overthrow the Ottomans. They ranked religions politically, placing Maronites on top. The worst effects of the *millet* system were still in place. It was not enough to be supreme over an abomination - Gibran railed against the French.

The rallying cry against most empires at the time was nationalism, the political philosophy that people with shared culture, language, religion, or ethnicity (nations) should rule themselves. But what criteria define the nation? Who is in and who is out? Nationalism is a tool to fight enemies - and in the absence of real enemies, it invents them. Nationalism had not yet crescendoed with Hitler's Nationalist-Socialist Party, but it was already evident that ethnicity was an easy spot for "nation." Lebanon risked replacing one tribalism with another in its battle over identity.

Nationalism concerns itself with who truly belongs to the nation. Gibran was concerned with what we owe to others. To his mind, a culture of self-sacrifice was religion's best gift to statehood. If he saw wonder in the god of every religion, he saw self-sacrifice in the dictates of every religion. "Benevolent strongmen" used benefaction to assume power, but a radically generous people could be its own antidote.

Earth: The Foil to Eternity

> To raise man from secret darkness,
> Yet keep his roots clinging to the earth;
> To give him thirst for life, and make death his cup-bearer…
> And then to lay him low,
> When the earth in her hunger cries for food"
>
> -The Second God, *The Earth Gods*

There's something Solomonic in *The Earth Gods*, one of Gibran's final works, and in Gibran's use of "earth" in general. It is at once the place where divinity contends and where our pretensions are humbled - the foil to eternal, lasting destiny.

Kahlil Gibran was laid in the earth in 1931. His words took flight in both East and West, in the mouths of John F. Kennedy and Beirut's protestors. They gave new beauty to Arab identity, and made Gibran the third best-selling poet of all time. His words lacerated religious pundits and vivified diffuse religions, ethnicities, and generations with an eternal Word:

> "The scribes and the Pharisees say the earth is thirsty for my blood. I would quench the thirst of the earth with my blood. But the drops shall rise oak trees and maple, and the east wind shall carry the acorns to other lands."
>
> And then [Jesus] said, "Judea would have a king, and she would march against the legions of Rome.
>
> "I shall not be her king. The diadems of Zion were fashioned for lesser brows. And the ring of Solomon is small for this finger.
>
> "Behold my hand. See you not that it is overstrong to hold a sceptre, and over-sinewed to wield a common sword?

> "Nay, I shall not command Syrian flesh against Roman. But you with my words shall wake that city, and my spirit shall speak to her second dawn.
>
> "My words shall be an invisible army with horses and chariots, and without axe or spear I shall conquer the priests of Jerusalem, and the Cæsars.
>
> "I shall not sit upon a throne where slaves have sat and ruled other slaves. Nor will I rebel against the sons of Italy.
>
> "But I shall be a tempest in their sky, and a song in their soul."
>
> -Jesus, Son of Man

Nearly a century later, our algorithmic echo chambers might as well be the ethnic quarters of Beirut or Damascus. We remain broken into ideological millets. Our vocabularies are cluttered with cheap new epithets, banal buzzwords mass produced by pundits and bloggers who profit from outrage. That's why Gibran's puzzle is more important than ever.

If we only had seven words to say, "Republican" or "Democrat" would not be among them. We would find ourselves stripped of fleeting definitions as our words became more different and more honest, less like lectures and more like the Song that conquered Rome's soul.