

essay

Toward a Mormon Renaissance

by James Goldberg

James Goldberg is one of the founders of New Play Project. See page 27 for an interview with him.

In 1920, while riding on a train, Langston Hughes wrote a poem on the back of a napkin. Maybe you've heard it. It was called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and it goes like this:

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 seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

I've known rivers:

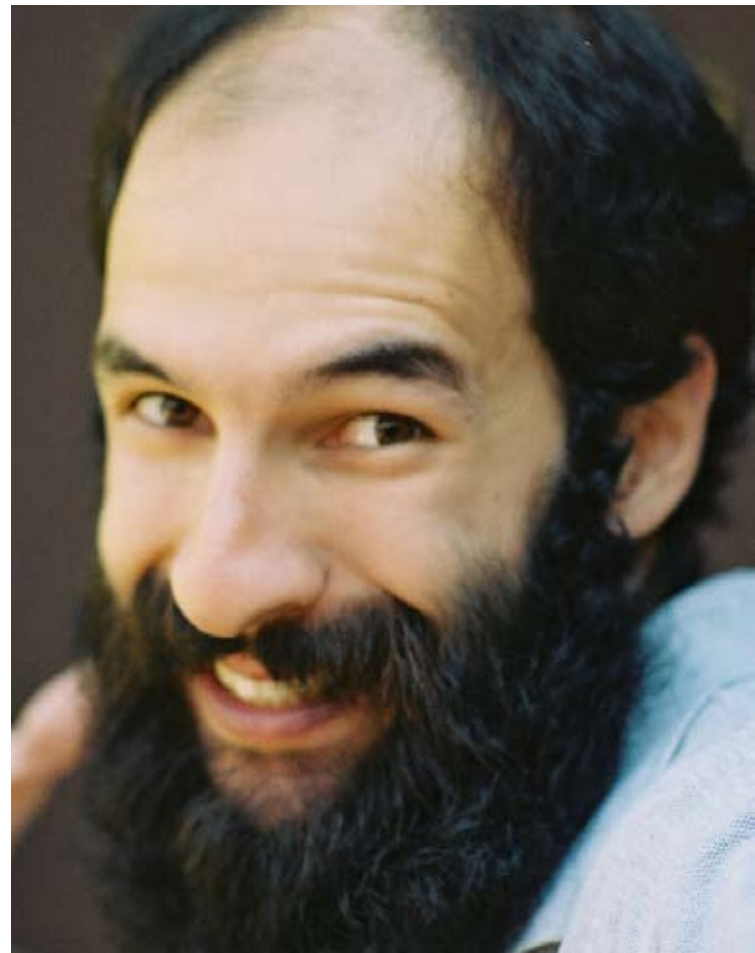
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

It's a beautiful poem, I've always thought. And a wise poem. There's something about the way that poem reaches so far back into the past and so deep down into the soul that communicates a grounded, mature kind of confidence. You know what I'm talking about? That's a poem that can give depth and strength instead of just describing them.

It's incredible that it does that, when you think about it, because that poem was written in 1920. You know what most people thought of black history and culture back in 1920? The vast majority of white Americans and all too many African-Americans thought of

black as different, backward, inferior: the blacker physically or culturally, the worse. There was nothing to be confident about, as far as most people were concerned. But Langston Hughes wrote *my black soul is deep like the rivers* and 86 years later we remember him for it. Not because he was the greatest individual writing talent of his day, but because he had something to say. Something that went beyond himself. He wrote about the culture and heritage of his people with pride and artistry. He and other like-minded writers, not ashamed to call themselves Negro poets, gave this nation a literature of



black dignity. All those individual writers, works, and goals clumped together are remembered as the Harlem Renaissance. And I hope that long after hundreds of movements from the last century have been forgotten, the Harlem Renaissance will be remembered; because America desperately needed the gift it offered to take another step toward being whole.

So. Here we are, eighty-eight years later, in the Mormon community. Mormonism is technically a religion, but it's also a tradition and a people. (Being a Goldberg, I understand how these things work. A religion can form a people. It's been done before.) We're a people with a rich heritage that goes back far beyond the founding of the church in 1830. We've got unique institutions that have helped us keep a sense of community in an age when many communities are falling apart. And we have wisdom, a surprisingly rare gift in an age so saturated with information and opinion—we know something about how to treat each other, about our relationship to God, about the spiritual power that runs all through this world. We have an overarching gospel framework to organize and prioritize our insights within. And of course, we've also got online resources with wisdom on food storage and stuff. Profound or practical, inherited wisdom is part of who we are.



And who are we? Unlike most tribes and peoples, none of this heritage is restricted to any ethnic group or country. Anyone can choose to adopt this heritage as part of their own identity. The whole world is getting

less national and more global and Mormonism is one of the world's first great post-national cultures.

All this means that Mormon writers, like the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance, have a lot to say... if—let me emphasize that—if we have the courage to undertake the same kind of project they did. I mean, black history and black culture in 1920 were already incredibly rich. The black community already had an incredible strength, but hardly anyone had ever managed to write about it in a meaningful, resonant, artistic way. There was a black tradition and a black heritage but no body of black literature. The Harlem Renaissance changed that, and that changed the world.

What I'm trying to say is that maybe it's time for us to help change the world again. Look, I know it sounds arrogant to say that. Who am I to change the world through art? There is no shortage of better writers out there, and a lot of them don't worry about how to stay on insurance as much as many of us do. They're more experienced, going to down better marked and tested paths of expression, in a larger and more connected community of artists. Who am I compared to that? Who is Aaron Martin? Who is J. Kirk Richards?

Who are we? Well, we're Latter-day Saints. We're people who have wrestled with some of life's big and little issues and have been lucky enough to have help. We're people who think and act a little differently than most of the country does and value that uniqueness. We're people who know a little about God and a little about life. We're people who believe that's enough to say something big ... and who are trying to connect with others who share that belief and desire.

Are we going to make a difference? I hope so. And I take hope in history.

See, when Langston Hughes was sitting on that train in the evening, watching the sun set, when he wrote, with the voice of his people, "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins," he was 18 years old.

The scripture says that through small and simple means great works will come to pass. And maybe with our shared work and prayers, building from the base of the heritage that binds us, they will. And maybe, if an amateur publication can help connect and inspire us, this will be a part of a process that people can look back on some day and call a Mormon Renaissance.

So, thanks for reading. And for being a part of whatever good unfolds. ■