



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Jack Kerouac and the Transformation of a Generation

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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This has been a particularly interesting week on the poetry front. It has required me to learn about Jack Kerouac - who up until now for me was an iconic name - associated with the era of my growing up but whom I never engaged. I was probably just a little young when the Beat Generation and the Beatniks emerged on the scene. I remember Maynard G. Krebs - the Beatnik character on the old black and white TV show - *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* back in the early 60s. But he was a cartoon for a movement that was way more important than we probably realized. Jack Kerouac was, "the voice of the new generation." This new generation emerged in the 50s, after the back to back bloody global death frenzies were over and the world was settling into complacency. Between the two world wars, the violence machine had gobbled up 64 million lives. 64 million stories never finished. 64 million promises unfulfilled.

The collective human spirit was ready for something else but had no idea what that might be. To use the words of the Letter to the Romans, humanity was ready to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Transformation is not instantaneous, it is a process and it starts with discontent. It starts with someone, or a group of people who know that the old way no longer serves.

Kerouac, Alan Ginsburg and Williams Burroughs together were the literary midwives of the Beat Generation. They took seriously their rejection of culture as it had been known and pursued the new through all things forbidden - murky sexuality, drugs, and a rejection of prevailing social norms. But they weren't anti-social - they were a new consciousness emerging, one deeply interested in religion and spirituality. As a fascinating article in the *New Yorker* magazine by Louis Menand says, "The Beats were not rebels, they were misfits." They saw what the world had become and refused to take part. The term the "Beat Generation" was coined by Kerouac. At first the word "beat" was used to describe the human condition - down and out, poor and exhausted. In the African American community "beat to his socks" was the ultimate expression of poverty. Kerouac transformed the idea of beat into the pulse of a new generation - a generation intent on being different. Which, of course, caused all kinds of alarm. Young people were drawn to it, it had music and the movies, James Dean and Brando and of course the Rat Pack made up of Humphrey Bogart, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr., and a few others.

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Kerouac's most famous book, *On the Road* was a buddy story written in a new literary style - a breathless, stream of consciousness that had a dangerous feel to it because you never quite knew where the sentence would end or if it ever would. There was also in this buddy story a new kind of masculinity. Prior to the Beat Generation, the only acknowledged bonding experience that men had been allowed was war or its surrogate; sports. This was something new, a new kind of friendship. "The Beats were men who wrote about their feelings." It was raw and vulnerable and uncomfortable for the John Wayne myth type.

Some 50 years later, the new consciousness of the Beat generation has morphed through the summer of Woodstock and the Hippies and peaceniks, and has now come alive again and finding its expression in the Occupy movement and Arab Spring and global discontent with the way things are.

Jack Kerouac was a complex person, fairly messed up by most standards. A devout Catholic and student of Eastern thought and Buddhism he wrote poetry as a kind of spiritual discipline, for himself. His poetry was not published or probably even known until after his death. It was found in his journals and reveals a soul yearning for transformation, an appeal to God for help to become something more.

And what do I owe You, God for my gifts:  
I owe you perspiration and suffering and  
all the dark night of my life:  
God I owe you godliness and diligence,  
God I owe you this blackest loneliness,  
and terrified dreams --  
but humbleness, God, I have none and  
I owe it You: for I would have You  
reach down a hand to me to help me  
*up* to You -- Oh I am not humble.  
Give me this last gift, God, and I *will*  
be humble, I will owe You humbleness,  
but only give me the gift.  
Spit in my soul, God for asking and  
always asking, and for not giving and  
owing what I have given, and give,  
and shall give: God make me *give*...  
God, oh make me a giver.

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This week surprised me - I was hardly prepared to think about Jack Kerouac and Jesus in the same space but I have found intriguing similarities, mostly in the call of a misfit to be made new, to be transformed. Transformation is never simple. It's never immediate - it requires a journey away from the old ways that no longer serve and toward something a little bit scary, perhaps even dangerous. There's personal transformation - each of us is called to this within ourselves which begins when we feel that dawning discontent. And then there is the transformation the mind of the world. For that to happen, some group has to stop fitting in with complacency and the way things are and then they have to go on the road to discover their destination and to discover themselves along the way.

Christians and the beat generation; who knew?

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