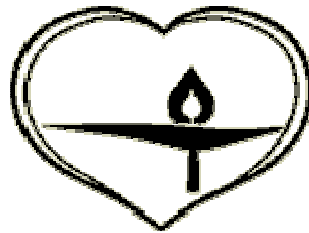


# **When Your Heart is in a Holy Place**



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**  
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In the fifteenth century when the theologian and scientist, mystic and Cardinal in the Roman Catholic church, Nicholas of Cusa, considered the future, he said: “humanity will find that it is not (so much) a diversity of creeds, but the very same creed which is everywhere proposed.... Even though they will have designated ... different religions, (they will find) in all this diversity one religion which (they) call wisdom.”

In our own time, in a much published interview, the Dalai Lama has said much the same: “I believe deeply that we must find, all of us together, a new spirituality.” When the interview asked “Which wouldn’t be religious?” the Dalai Lama answered “Certainly not. This new concept ought to be elaborated alongside the religions, in such a way that all people of good will could adhere to it.” To which the interviewer responded “Even if they have no religion, or are against religion?” “Absolutely”, answered the Dalai Lama, “we need a new concept, a lay spirituality. We ought to promote this concept with the help of scientists.”

Let me remind you that religion is what happens inside churches, temples, mosques and organized traditions. Religion, often involves agreeing to a creed – though not always, as Unitarian Universalism affirms.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is about a private or group relationship to something beyond the individual human being. Spirituality is the quest to

understand or engage any person, any event, any object in its wholeness. It is to be in healthy relationship to the earth and its people. Remember that the word health belongs to a family of words, all dealing with what it means to be complete; these words include heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy and wholly. Spirituality is the struggle to see or treat persons, events, objects as separate or apart from oneself, but as a part of the great web of all life and all humanity.

Spirituality happens when the heart is in a holy place. Or as theologian Parker Palmer says:

"By spiritual I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and much more trust-worthy than our egos, with our own selves, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, and with the mystery of being alive."

Ah, to get beyond the human ego, to enter a realm where the all-desiring "I" is quieted, made aware of its own profound belonging in the greater family of life, a life that though it can never be fully known, fully understood – not even science can do this – can be fully felt, fully experienced. For it does in the end boil down to that which we know by experience; our guest speaker last week Peter Hale pointed out that this is

especially so for Unitarian Universalists, where no creed binds us, but rather we are bound by the covenant we make with one another, and by our principles and our sources.

In particular our first source binds us, in which we proclaim our own grounded-ness in “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life”;

What do we mean by this – by direct experience? I know what I mean – I have told you some of my own stories, many taking place in nature, among the people of life, and amid the fertile goodness of Unitarian Universalism. You will hear, in a few weeks, the stories of some of your fellow members, who completed the Building Your Own Theology class with me and have agreed to share their credos, what they have experienced and come to understand as true. Some weeks back, I told you the story of George de Benneville, whose mystical experiences caused him to devote his entire life to spreading the good news of Universalism in America. The writings of Unitarians Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau that tell of their spiritual experiences in 19<sup>th</sup> century America continue to inspire new generations of readers even today.

In an interview by Bill Moyers with religious scholar Houston Smith, author of the well known, *The World's Religions*, Smith talks about the challenges of understanding spirituality – or the core of any world religions. He says “The Sufi’s have the saying that there are three ways to understand fire. The first way is that you can hear about it. Someone tells you, ‘hey there is this thing like fire; it leaps around’. The second way is to see fire. And the third way is to be burned by fire.” We have all heard of conversion experiences, events that in their suddenness and their seemingly miraculous nature, burn change into us, often in a way that lasts forever. We think of Moses and the burning bush. We remember Saul who would go on to become St Paul; or the famous story of St. Francis’ conversion... how he was born a wealthy merchant’s heir and became a penniless, preaching wanderer.

Yet we also know that a conversion experience is not necessarily a one time bolt of lightning, although it may feel that way at the time; but is a “process” that we work, struggle and sometimes weep our way through. The Franciscans, inheritors of the legacy of St. Francis, have a Rule in their monasteries, Article #7, that extols, “Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily.”

Outside of Christianity we think of Mohammed.

The transformative experience is recounted in all the world's religions. For Buddhists, it is what occurred to the historical Buddha and to all those who experience kensho-satori, or the dropping away of 'self', the disappearance of ego. The Tibetans call this "the Great Death" to distinguish it from the physical death of the body.

But not all of us experience this kind of change. And to leave the ego behind, even for an enduring moment, requires a great deal on our part. As Dostoyevsky has said: "A new philosophy, a way of life, is not given for nothing. It has to be paid dearly for and only acquired with much patience and great effort."

Dostoevsky had a literal understanding, a true experience, behind his words. He was burned by the fire. Growing up in Russia, in the 1800's, he was drawn to writing at a young age. Daring to express his own opinions at a time and place when this went against the prevailing rulers, his first book was published to high acclaim when he was only 25. He then joined a discussion group, one which rallied about new and progressive ideas, for which he and a group of his fellows were arrested by the Russian government on charges of criminal conspiracy. On December 22, 1849, at 8 a.m. Dostoevsky and the others were taken before a firing squad and told

that they were to be executed three at a time. At the last moment, the sentence was commuted.

Instead of death, the Russian government sentenced Dostoevsky to four years of imprisonment in a maximum security prison. Dostoevsky spent these years with ten-pound iron chains around his ankles and wrists in a lice-infested, filth-ridden “cemetery-of-the-living” which he later described in *The House of the Dead*, surviving on a diet of only cabbage soup. After his release he was sentenced to six years of enforced military service near the border of China.

While in prison Dostoevsky and several others were taken to a mock execution, (though they did not, at the time, know of this deception) which the Tsar staged in response to the crime of the expression of free thought within the Russian state. This performance was so convincing that just the experience of witnessing it made one Dostoevsky’s fellow prisoners go insane, which the great writer would later describe in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

After that experience, Dostoevsky would say these words in a letter to his brother: "Life is in ourselves and not in the external," He went on: "To be a human being among human beings, and remain one forever, no matter

what misfortunes befall, not to become depressed, and not to falter--this is what life is, herein lies its task."

Out of the exceptional difficulties of his life, out of the experience of knowing fire by being burned, Dostoevsky would go on to become one of the most celebrated writers of all time. He died in 1881, shortly after completing the epilogue to *The Brothers Karamazov*, and was buried in the first ever funeral honoring a great writer of the state. Some forty thousand people came to his funeral, as Russia mourned the death of its literary hero.

"The tragedy of life", said Norman Cousins, 'is not death, but what we let die inside us while we are alive.'" Dostoevsky did not let the life inside him die, despite the horrors he witnessed and experienced, despite, on a symbolic level, the burns he suffered by learning about fire firsthand.

Though it was dark, and sometimes frighteningly real, he translated his life into literature that continues to influence readers and writers to this day. He wrote of the human condition in stories that transcended the place, the time and the particulars. He took the experiences of his life, and rather than let these drain him of life, he used them to create new life and to offer a legacy to the world.

We are not all born to be great Russian authors, of course. But I believe we are all born to make something of our lives that transcends our

individual selves and that will outlive us. For some this is the work we do, through vocations paid or volunteer. For others it is in the gentle and caring forging of new generations of children and grandchildren, and always, and across all the wisdom traditions, it is in the relationships we build and nurture, by how we take our place in the great continuum of the human community. For still others it is in the act of creation – of art, or music, or story or dance or drama or song – that capture the human condition in some new way that can be shared, and felt, and in some way understood by others.

This giving back, this act born out of experience, is what happens when we take what we know of life's mystery and return it to the source, to the whole. This is how we, in religious terms, grow the spirit, how we heal and are born anew. We take the places in our hearts and minds, our lives and times, where we have been burned, wounded, or transformed, and first, we accept them, then we reshape them, recreate them, and finally offer them back to the world. Listen to one of the last poems Dostoevsky would ever write. Hear the mystic in it, the voice of the spirit that no one religion can claim, but which all seek to embody:

Love all Creation.  
The whole and every grain of sand in it.  
Love every leaf,  
and every ray of light.  
Love the plants. Love the animals.  
If you love everything  
you will perceive the Divine Mystery  
in all things.  
Once you perceive it  
you will comprehend it better every day.  
And you will come, at last,  
to love the whole world  
with an all embracing love.

We are known, in our brief lives, by this: by how we live out our days, by the work we do, by the art we create; by the relationships we build, by the love we make. We are known, in the end, by what we fashion not only out of our struggles and our joys, but out of our place in time and space ; thus, we are known as we have always been known: by how we treat the stranger, the poor among us, the suffering, the ill and the outcast. We are known by our ability to see our own faces in a Russian face from long ago, to hear our own hope in a distant and different despair, and to feel our own future in the hands of the children of the generations not yet born. We are known by how we enter the fire, and, once we have been inside, by what we choose to bring back to this beautiful and broken world.