

FAITHFUL WORDS MEDITATION: ON SACRIFICE

Approaching Sacrifice

by Karen Hering

Delivered at Unity Church-Unitarian

St. Paul, MN

October 4, 2009

The climb to the top of the mountain is always long and hard, and a heavy heart will make it longer and harder still. Like other stories of sacrifice I have heard, unimaginable in their trajectories of loss, the story of Abraham and Isaac clenches my heart into a fist of resistance. I will not, cannot go there, I insist with righteousness that roots me at the foot of that steep path.

Other paths of sacrifice keep me rooted more out of cowardice. A woman once recounted to me her own story in another mountain region, a story of soldiers circling her home in the night. She slipped out into the surrounding cornfields with her children, pressing them down with hushed insistence onto the cold, damp soil all night long, hoping they might not be discovered. Later, knowing it would only make her a target of those same soldiers, she rose up in the daylight and joined the other women organizing for peace and for economic survival.

Would I be as bold? If I survived the night in the fields, would I have the courage and the will to rise up by day?

It is tempting – indeed worthy of being named “a temptation” – to distract myself by considering the paths others have taken up the mountain to make their sacrifices, for in so doing I lose sight of the path that begins beneath my own feet. That very spot where I stand, day after day, in a life of comfort and security, is where the true question rises: not **would** I be so bold and willing, but **am** I?

Sacrifice asks each of us to give up something different. To live, as Forrest Church so wisely said, as if our lives are worth dying for. We are not **all** called to be soldiers, martyrs, organizers or prophets. But we **are** each, every one of us, called to make our lives worth dying for by giving up that which stands between us and the Holy.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice means “approach” or “draw near.” Just what is required in order to draw near the Holy? We are asked, in the counterintuitive demands of sacrifice, to lay down our lives in order to gain them, to loosen the tight fist of our

resistance, to open our hands, our hearts, our eyes that we might see and know and love the world enough to save it, enough to save ourselves.

Years ago, while traveling in India, I sat by the window on a train in New Dehli waiting to leave the station. It was early morning and the station itself was filled with homeless people, many still sleeping on the platform around the train.

As I waited, a hand reached in between the bars of my open window. I turned and saw a man who was blind standing not a foot away from me outside the train. He clasped my hand and pulled it through the window toward his face where I gazed into his empty eye sockets while he guided my fingers to touch his features, assuring him in his sightless world that yes, I had truly seen him.

We who live in economic privilege often recoil from the face of poverty, even as I am ashamed to say I recoiled that day, pulling my hand back into the train and then placing some meager offering of rupees into the man's outstretched hand that reached in again between the bars, this time palm up. What would it mean if I could learn *not* to recoil but instead to reach out, to open my eyes and offer my own hands – and the deep awareness, faith and compassion of my heart – to the suffering of this world?

The paradox of sacrifice is that the heavy heart that hears and obeys the call of Love breaks open. And in the breakage, the barriers that separate us from one another and from all that is sacred will come down, reuniting us with the larger oneness of life itself.

What is the path that begins beneath your feet today? What are you asked to do in the obedience of faith, in the service of Love? Are you ready, are you willing to open the fist of resistance and begin walking your path now?

#####

Delivered at Unity Church-Unitarian, St. Paul, MN
October 4, 2009
Karen Hering
Copyright 2009
karen@unityunitarian.org