

## Approaching Sacrifice

By Karen Hering

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?

## **What Kind of Times Are These**

ADRIENNE RICH

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't be fooled this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here, our country moving closer to its own truth and dread, its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods meeting the unmarked strip of light— ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:

I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these to have you listen at all, it's necessary to talk about trees.

## from "And the Band Played On"

Randy Stilts

On San Francisco Gay Freedom Day in 1985, the loudest ovations came not for politicians or performers, but when the rally's master of ceremonies announced the release of two San Francisco gay men, Jack McCarty and Victor Amburgy who had been among the 29 Americans held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon. The two men, who had been aboard TWA flight 847 on an Athens-to-Rome leg of a world tour, had spent most of their captivity living with the terror that their captors would learn they were gay and kill them...In the long days of captivity, McCarty and Amburgy were kept in dark, rat-infested basements while the terrorists played Russian roulette with the hostages again and again.

When other hostages began to crack, some of the Americans turned to McCarty, who had seemed preternaturally calm. McCarty could not tell them the reason he could handle the prospect of imminent death-that he was a gay man from San Francisco. Instead, he adopted the role of unofficial counselor to the other hostages. It was a role to which McCarty was accustomed; he had been a Shanti Project volunteer serving people living with and dying from AIDS.

When Amburgy and McCarty stepped off the Air Force plane after their release, while a quarter of a million lesbians and gay men celebrated Gay Freedom Day in San Francisco, they walked down the ramp arm-in-arm. They loved each other, and they were proud they loved each other, and they had survived in part because of the strength they had developed as gay men in San Francisco.

## **Readings—When Sacrifice Is Easy**

By Leon Dunkley

October 18, 2009

### **Oughta Be a Woman**

Sweet Honey in the Rock

Washin' the floors to send you to college  
Staying at home so you can feel safe  
What do you think is the soul of her knowledge  
What do you think that makes her feel safe

Biting her lips and lowering her eyes  
To make sure there's food on the table  
What do you think would leave her surprised  
If the world were as willing as she's able

Hugging herself in an old kitchen chair  
She listens to your hurt and your rage  
What do you think she knows of despair  
What is the aching of age

The fathers, the children, the brothers  
Turn to her  
And everybody white  
Turns to her  
What about her turning around alone  
In the everyday light  
There oughta be a woman can break down  
Sit down, break down, sit down  
Let everybody else call it quits on a Monday  
Blues on Tuesday, sleep until Sunday down  
Sit down, break down, sit down  
A way out of no way  
It's flesh out of flesh  
It's courage that cries out at night  
A way out of no way  
It's flesh out of flesh  
It's bravery kept out of sight  
A way out of no way  
It's too much to ask  
It's too much of a task for any one woman

## A Small Quiet War

Ric Masten

over the years my wife and i  
have discovered two things  
a man and a woman  
should avoid doing together  
that is  
if they value their relationship  
laying rugs  
and carrying mattresses

and she's at it again  
my wife  
under the house digging

i can hear her down there  
with my old rusty tools  
picking and shoveling away  
hollowing a place  
for her imagination to run wild in

she's been at it off and on now  
for two years  
running back and forth  
with one shovel full of dirt at a time  
throwing it into the yard  
Doing it the hard way  
And I must admit  
i'm always a bit surprised  
and annoyed  
when i see the size of the pile  
she is making  
but it's her project and she says  
i'm not  
and don't have to be involved

still and all  
it has now become impossible  
for me to lie here comfortably  
listening to the ball game

An excerpt from **Field of Dreams** (Affirming the positive impact of the sacrifice made by Ray Kinsella after he chose to plow under his corn, Terrance Mann said...)

People will come. People will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway, not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children longing for the past. They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it. For it is money they have and peace they lack. Then they'll walk off to the bleachers and sit in their shirtsleeves on a perfect afternoon. They'll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the baselines where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes and they'll watch the game and it will be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game. It's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again. People will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.