

Head, Heart and Holy Ground
Rev. Kathy Riegelman
All Souls UU Church 1.21.07

1st Reading:

How can we as people of faith articulate our own faith fully aware of the depth and breadth of the faith of others? How can we affirm our own holy ground even as we sojourn in the holy lands of other faith traditions, even as we find ourselves to be more than sojourners, to be at home there? How is our faith and worldview challenged and changed when we take seriously the fact that we are not alone as religious people, when we recognize as truly religious the traditions and the lives of our neighbors of other faiths?

In the presence of true faith, we should feel not merely respect, but religious reverence. In the presence of true faith, whether Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist, we should take off our shoes, for the ground on which we are standing is holy ground. It is holy not only because it is sacred for the Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist. It is holy ground where we ourselves may be challenged to a deeper faith.

from *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*
by Diana Eck (adapted)

2nd Reading:

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once. The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter.

from *I and Thou* by Martin Buber

Head, Heart and Holy Ground

Diana Eck, in her book, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, tells of her experience of visiting a temple in southern India. In this beautiful and vast temple resides a huge image of Vishnu, reclining on a serpent that represents eternity. Eck spent the day trying to get permission to enter the temple because it has been closed to non-Hindus. Finally, she was allowed to enter, along with a crowd of Hindu pilgrims. She entered the temple and moved through the circular corridors, moving to the center of the temple. It was evening, and time for *arati*, the evening offering of oil lamps. As the drums and bells began, the attendants flung open the doors of the inner sanctum, where the image of the reclining Vishnu resides. Here, as Vishnu was honored by the waving of many small lamps, those in attendance strained to see the image in the semi-darkness and press of the crowd of worshipers. No one could see the whole of Vishnu from one of the many doorways where they stood. At the end of the ritual, the last lamp was brought out and offered as a blessing to the people. Eck, along with several hundred Hindu women, reached out to receive the blessing, touching the lamp, then touching the blessing to her forehead.

Eck recognized that her experience as a Christian had to be different from that of the Hindus. She writes, “But we shared the sense of delight and revelation as the doors were opened, and perhaps some sense of both the majesty and mystery of the Divine. I thought of nothing at the time. It was a moment of total presence, not of reflection.” And yet, her faith as a Christian was deepened as she attempted to take in the whole of the image of Vishnu, never being able to see the whole from any one vantage point. Eck was challenged to deepen her faith as she came to understand that the God she believes in is also too vast to be understood from any one perspective. In being challenged to a deeper understanding of her own faith, Eck was on holy ground.

I recently had an experience that while not quite as exotic or dramatic, I feel Eck would understand as common with hers. My experience began with a routine visit to a patient. Her family had requested a visit from Spiritual Care. I asked the nurse about the patient, and the nurse said, “You’re welcome to visit, just know, she screams every time we talk to her or move her.” Well, that’s a great introduction to a visit. Anyway, I decided to take the risk and visited the patient, and she responded positively to my offer for prayer. We prayed together, she did not scream, and I left a note for her family letting them know I had visited. About a week later I walked by this same patient’s room and noticed she had visitors. I introduced myself and was delighted to see that the patient was more alert and responsive. Her visitors turned out to be her pastor and his wife. The pastor was an African American Pentecostal, and he and I just kind of “clicked.” We had a lively discussion about the state of the world, ministry, and the importance of reaching out to our youth through teaching and example, not by being “preachy.” The patient and the pastor’s wife were both taking in our conversation and talking quietly with each other. The general mood in the room was upbeat and positive. The patient seemed to be enjoying our interaction. She seemed glad this conversation was taking place in her room, in her presence.

As the conversation wound down, I turned to the patient, wanting to give her my full attention before the visit ended. The patient looked me straight in the eye and said something I did not understand—it was like a different language. The pastor repeated the few words the patient had spoken, and then she continued. Still, I couldn’t understand a word, and then I got it—she was speaking in tongues. The patient continued, the words that I did not understand flowing effortlessly from her. When she finished the pastor continued, also speaking in tongues. When he finished, there was no doubt in my mind or heart what had taken place. The patient and her pastor had blessed my ministry and me. I returned their blessing, praying for the patient and her pastor’s ministry. We said our goodbyes and I left the room, feeling very blessed, very full, very peaceful, present, and centered, and very amazed. I had been on holy ground.

The experiences I have related also find grounding in the work of two philosophers, William James and Martin Buber. Both give insight into how we encounter the world, and how our experience and relationships shape meaning. William James was a free-thinking, pluralistic psychologist and philosopher. He is the author of the classic book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James understood that religion in its truest form has personal experience as its starting point. He defines religion in very broad terms: “The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men (sic) in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” He believes that we don’t learn from “second hand” experience. Rather, it is our own experience that informs who we are as religious beings. And so, James and I and most Unitarian Universalists agree—experience has great merit and authority.

Reading James work, I was struck by the unspoken dialogue between head and heart. He documents many religious experiences, and then thinks through them in many ways. James clearly understands the difficulty of conveying the heart or essence of a religious experience. As James continues to expand on the “nuts and bolts” of religious experience, he emphasizes that these experiences are more than rational. Religious experience, according to James, is that which opens us to life. James includes this quote: “Whenever an impulse from the world strikes against the organism and the resultant is not discomfort or pain, but a joyous expansion or aspiration of the whole soul—there is religion.” My experience of being blessed was just this, a joyous expansion, although I cannot easily tell you in words what expanded—it was an experience of being opened. And so, I agree with James, who believes that experience is the starting point and that reason follows. In other words, it takes both head and heart to make meaning of religious experience.

The second philosopher I have relied on is Martin Buber, Hasidic Jew and author of *I and Thou*. Along with James, Buber’s work gives grounding to my experience. *I and Thou* develops Buber’s thesis of “dialogical existence,” or how we engage the world on a relational level.

Buber believes that we can engage the world on two levels, the “It” level and the “Thou” or “You” level. This little book is amazing. Sometimes when I read it I feel like I understand everything, and other times it makes no sense at all. His poetic weaving and stream of consciousness may be just what he is trying to describe—the movement between relationships on the It and You levels. I believe Buber’s work is also an amazing lens for understanding head and heart. He knows that we must have both to have a complete and meaningful existence. Head provides the grounding and heart is the essence of relationship.

Meeting the world on an It level means that we control and objectify whoever or whatever we come in contact with. The “It” level is motivated by our own needs; it is self-serving. I-It does not connect; it separates and makes the other an object. Buber writes, “This is part of the basic truth of the human world: only It can be put in order. Only as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination.” Now don’t get me wrong, Buber believes that the It-world, as he calls it, is a necessary part of existence. Buber describes this world as “somewhat reliable” and predictable. It is a part of our world that we have some control over, control to shape to our needs and desires. We need the It-world because it provides a secure basis for daily life. Buber’s description of the It world relates more to the head, to the rational, analytical part of who we are and how we operate in the world.

Meeting the world on an I-You level is a mutual encounter. In the I-You relationship, there is no anticipation, no expectation, no motivation or gain, no predictability, and no ability to control. The I-You encounter is pure, authentic, unmediated presence. Its about being present with your whole being. Its about trust and non-judgment. I-You is about giving and receiving, inviting and being invited, challenge and risk. There is no way to contrive an I-You encounter. We can neither plan nor avoid them. To return to this morning’s reading, “The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking.” I now know that my encounter with the Pentecostal patient and her pastor was an I-You encounter. Neither of us were trying to be other than who we were. We were simply there; in Eck’s

words, “It was a moment of total presence.” I-You is the heart level. I-You is holy ground.

And so, with James and Buber in mind, I want to return to my experience with the Pentecostal patient. I understand that at the moment the patient and pastor were praying in tongues, I was not using my head. My rational thought process was not trying to make sense of what was happening. If it had been, I would have been making an object out of the patient and pastor. This would have been an I-It encounter. On an I-It level, my head would have said, “Hum, according to the holiness tradition that informs Pentecostal theology, this patient is being filled with the Holy Spirit, which is talking through her in a language I cannot understand. People of this tradition call this ‘speaking in tongues,’ because it is referred to in The Acts of the Apostles, “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” My head might have further informed me to stand politely until the patient and pastor were finished, say good bye and then get out of the room as quickly as possible. I am very thankful that my head did not take over in that moment, or I would have missed the profound experience of being blessed.

Fortunately, my heart prevailed and my head suspended analysis. Without knowing what was coming, I encountered the patient and pastor on an I-You level, allowing me the experience of being invited to step onto another’s holy ground. I was in a place where someone very different from myself invited me to step out of my comfort zone. I mean, let’s face it, I do not look black, and I probably do not look Pentecostal. Patients frequently ask me if I’m a Catholic nun, which makes sense because I work in a Catholic hospital. But I have never been asked if I am Pentecostal. Being on holy ground is a place where the categories all break down. We were able to be there together: black, white, woman, man, old, not-so-old, hospitalized, healthy, Pentecostal, Unitarian Universalist. All categories broke down; I opened and experienced connection and wholeness.

This was holy ground because like Eck, I was challenged to a deeper faith. The most obvious challenge is the distance between our faith

traditions. Even considering our Judeo-Christian roots, Pentecostal Christianity is as far, maybe even farther, from Unitarian Universalism as the Hinduism Eck experienced. As Unitarian Universalists, we rejected a highly emotive style of belief and worship centuries ago, when the Great Awakening swept through New England in the mid-18th century. And this theological chasm between the Pentecostal pastor and me did not matter.

I was on holy ground in a hospital room—maybe not the most likely place one would think of as the setting for a religious experience. I prefer the idea holy ground as a moonlit beach, or high in the mountains, or in the arms of my lover. But, as Buber writes, “No prescription can lead us to . . . the encounter.” In other words, we have no control; we cannot plan or orchestrate a religious experience. It’s the basic “stuff” of everyday existence that’s the fertile soil for holy ground. The whole point is that this “stuff” of our daily lives has the potential for religious experience.

Now, my work as a hospital chaplain reminds me that life is messy. Life is full of uncertainty; it can be cruel and unfair. Ministering in both the joys and tragedies of life has taught me that about where we find holy ground. The I-You encounters may come in happy, carefree times of our life. I also know that we can experience holy ground in some of the most difficult times of our lives. Have any of you seen the movie “Little Miss Sunshine”? Well, for those of you who haven’t, I don’t want to give too much away. But there is one character—Dwayne, a surly, insolent teenage boy. He sulks his way through the movie, until near the end, we find him standing with Frank, his suicidal uncle, looking out over the ocean. Dwayne: I wish I could just sleep until I was eighteen and skip all this crap—high school and everything—just skip it.

Frank: You know Marcel Proust?

Dwayne: He’s the guy you teach.

Frank: Yeah. French writer. Total loser. Never had a real job. Unrequited love affairs. Gay. Spent 20 years writing a book almost no one reads. But he’s also probably the greatest writer since Shakespeare. Anyway, he gets to the end of his life . . . and he looks back and decides that all those years he suffered—those were the best years of his life, ‘cause they made him who he was. All those years he was happy? You know, total waste. Didn’t

learn a thing. So, if you sleep until you're 18 . . . Ah, think of the suffering you're gonna miss. I mean high school? High school—those are your prime suffering years. You don't get better suffering than that.

And so, life, in all of its fullness—the joy and the suffering—all is potential holy ground.

Since we never know where we will find holy ground, it's hard to be ready for a religious experience. I might have missed the Pentecostal pastor's blessing, and so I've thought a lot about how we can prepare ourselves for holy ground, for I-You encounters. In addition to believing there is no "prescription" for an I-You encounter, Buber writes, "[Mutuality] is a form of grace for which one must always be prepared but on which one can never count." That's a tough one. We must always be ready, be on high alert, and never know it'll happen. While I agree with Buber, I believe we can prepare for these unpredictable I-You encounters.

Margaret Fuller, Unitarian feminist and transcendentalist, had a favorite saying. She often said, "I accept the universe." William James writes this about Fuller's saying, "[W]hen someone repeated this phrase to Thomas Carlyle, his sardonic comment is said to have been: 'Gad! she'd better!' At the bottom the whole concern . . . is the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether? Shall our protests against certain things in [the universe] be radical and unforgiving, or shall we think that, even with evil, there are ways of living that must lead to good? If we accept the whole, shall we do so as if stunned in submission—as Carlyle would have us—Gad! we'd better!'—or shall we do so with enthusiastic assent?" James goes on to suggest we can either accept the universe with resignation or openness. I have no doubt that Fuller's acceptance of the universe is the attitude we need to open ourselves to the possibility of religious experience. Acceptance does not mean we deny or diminish life's suffering and hardship. There is no guarantee that we will receive a blessing from our suffering. Rather, I understand acceptance as the opposite of cynicism, of hard-heartedness, of bitterness. Acceptance

means meeting all that life offers with courage, determination, and openness.

I also believe we can practice the qualities that contribute to acceptance. Maybe that's because of my many years of training as a musician. I know that when I was practicing the flute every day, my basic skills became second nature. And so, my experience as a musician informs me. We can "practice" the qualities that might keep us open and available. We can practice being trusting and trustworthy. We can practice both giving and receiving. We can monitor how we judge others and ourselves. We can practice taking risks and being vulnerable with others. We can practice being present with others. And in practicing this openness to life, we can maintain our integrity—our own center of faith. This center or core that forms our beliefs informs how we experience and interpret the world. It is that to which we return again and again for grounding and strength and meaning-making. We can both be ready to accept the challenge to our faith, and be grounded in our faith. Maintaining our center and being open takes practice; it's like breathing in and out.

Breathing in and out . . . Holy ground. I-You. Accepting the universe. Three attempts to describe those awesome experiences of connection where the barriers dissolve, those moments where we are opened, the experience of joyous expansion. In a few minutes I will invite you into a time of silence and centering, a time to remember your own experience of holy ground. First, I want to share with you my own experiences of holy ground, each rooted in the fertile soil of life.

Holy ground?

My father teaching me to skip rocks on a golden fall afternoon,
The after lunch ritual, my grandfather and I searching for dandelions in the
green perfection

of his back yard,

Late summer nights, playing "kick the can" with my cousins,
Standing next to my mother's grave on a gray November day, too empty
to cry,

My fingers growing sure on the flute as I practice the same passage again
and again,

Full moon in July, floating on an Ozark river, closer to heaven than I've ever been,
Sitting in the orchestra playing a Brahms' symphony, becoming the sweep of the music,
The curve of my daughter's head, the soft, sweet smell of my baby,
Scared to death on the first day of seminary, wondering if I can do *whatever* it is I am here to do,
Getting a "thumbs up" from a patient who walked the line with death two months earlier,
Visiting a dying patient, her blue eyes icy and alive, leaning close to hear her whisper, "Each day is what you make it,"
A long night of uncertainty, then joining with the daughters of a Hindu family in the ritual washing of their mother's body,
A Pentecostal pastor praying in tongues, receiving the nourishment of blessing, sharing it with others.

I now invite you into a time of silence. May the silence be a time of meditation to remember your own experiences of holy ground. Let this be a time to recall your memories of I-You, to recall your own experience of joyous expansion. Take a moment to become quiet, to become still. Let us be together in silence. (Silent meditation)

Did you find the memory of holy ground? Did you feel again the connection, the joyous expansion? These experiences give us the sustenance to continue, to meet all that life brings with openness, with acceptance. Be nourished by recalling holy ground. Your experience is too precious to be forgotten. And so, share this experience of holy ground that you have remembered. Don't be stingy with it! Share your experience of holy ground with at least one person sometime in the coming week—over coffee or a phone call or dinner. Share your joyous expansion and in doing so, may you create yet another memory of holy ground.

Holy ground? It is I-You. It is accepting the universe. Holy ground is the paradox of connection and joyous expansion. Holy ground is all of life, beauty and joy, harsh and empty. Each experience of holy ground imprinted on our hearts with laughter and tears and sweat and ecstasy. Each experience of holy ground is a blessing, a blessing of joyous

expansion now woven into the star-sprinkled net of the universe, caught there, held, breathed into eternity, breathed out again. Holy ground? The whole of life is holy ground.