

**“The Holiness of the Heart’s Affections”**  
**Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley**  
**February 17, 2019**

**Prayer** “moon teach me” by adrienne maree brown

how to wear the scars without masking  
how to be all the time darkness and light  
how to follow, to be satisfied with reflection  
how to be careful with the tides  
graceful, but crafting storms  
to be the one who gives, who is held in orbit  
teach me how to love the sun  
please  
please tell me  
teach me how  
to be seams and pockmarks and...beautiful  
to be a portal of longing and connection  
to take a month  
to open and then to close again  
because I am not perfect  
I surrender to the light every time  
if it's a flash, I sit dazzled in the darkness  
I don't even know how to wane  
teach me  
to fill up with ritual  
to be so powerful  
and so very small

## Sermon

In one of the churches I have served I had a running conversation with a member who considered himself an atheist. He was constantly struggling with religious language that didn't mean anything to him. He wasn't being a contrarian and he was never upset about me talking about spirituality. He just didn't get it. Until the day his daughter was born. He came to talk to me about it afterwards. He said, "I never thought I could feel that way. I just felt flooded with light and like there was no 'me' separate from my daughter or my wife. We were of one body. Her body!" He started paying attention then to other things he had never paid attention to before. And, while he didn't have that kind of awe-filled experience again, at least that I know of, he told me he felt forever opened to a different way of seeing the world.

I think relatively few people get to experience that kind of blinding sense of oneness. But at some level I believe most of us crave the chance to do so. Whether it's a conscious thought or not, I think it is part of what brings us to church. Even if you're not saying, "I want to have a mystical experience every day," I think most of us here are seeking a sense of peace, a sense of unity, a sense of meaning, connection with others and something outside ourselves. Wayne Teasdale, in *The Mystic Heart*, says..."fortunately, everyone is a mystic. At some deep level, we know that we are not mutually alienated from each other and that we do have sufficient being.

Unfortunately, most of us have not raised that knowing to our explicit consciousness enough to transform our embodied life.”

What would it be like to let it transform our embodied life?

Many of us, myself included, come to the point of asking that question because of some crisis or grief or challenge to who we always thought ourselves to be. D. H. Lawrence wrote:

“I believe that one is converted when one hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling one's hitherto unconscious self. I believe one is born first unto oneself – for the happy developing of oneself, while the world is a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and the pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering maturity; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitudes of brothers [and sisters].”

How do we nurture these experiences? Can you nurture these experiences? How do we reconcile them with our rational understandings of life?

Talking about mysticism and spirituality is a little like what someone once said when talking about poetry: talking about poetry is like dancing about architecture. *Talking about* and *mysticism* are far apart from one another, because mysticism and mystical experiences defy description by their very nature. The poet Katherine Mosby said: “The way to grace is unique and ineffable; it is more

likely to be intuited than explained. Much of what attracts us to the spiritual is its mystery, its ability to elude language. It is not surprising then to find language more often getting in the way than showing the way. Perhaps that is why some of us more readily make a connection through the senses – a sight or smell, a piece of music or work of art. The oblique approach occasionally finds access the direct one can't. ...”

So if that's the case I've kind of set an impossible task for myself, trying to talk about spirituality in this sermon! But as much as I like to think I have great powers as a preacher, I'm not really here today to *give you* a spiritual experience so much as I would like to encourage you to open yourselves up to one, to many, to a way of living that allows the less than rational, what I like to call the 'trans-rational' in. Again, Katherine Mosby says: “In 1817 Keats wrote, 'I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination.' Cultivation of the soul might be as simple as listening to one's heart and examining the different moments of one's life.”

I agree with Mosby that this is one of the most important ways, listening to one's heart, but I don't believe it is easy or simple. We live in the midst of a culture that demands exactly the opposite from us. That constantly tugs on our attention with the latest this or the latest that, or assaults our spirits with the endless news cycle. Various addictions are readily available to us to help numb our pains, and keep us from doing the deeper work.

Even people who are actively pursuing a spiritual path often do so in a way that takes them in an opposite direction. The great buddhist teacher and psychologist Jack Kornfield says "Since beginning to teach, I've seen how many other students misunderstand spiritual practice, how many have hoped to use it to escape from their lives, how many have used its ideals and language as a way to avoid the pains and difficulties of human existence as I tried to do, how many have entered temples, churches, and monasteries looking for the special effects."

*Looking for the special effects.*

Like Kornfield, I have not found spiritual practice to be simple or painless. I spent 7 years in spiritual direction mid-way through my ministry. Three of those years my director guided me through the spiritual exercises developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Let me tell you, those exercises are not for the faint of heart. They take you into the heart of your deepest griefs and challenge the core of your being. It was hard, hard work, and many of the days as I was driving to see my spiritual director I wondered why in the world I was putting myself through this. But there were many times as I left her home that my heart felt lighter, and the world seemed brighter, even on the gloomiest of days.

I can hear some of you thinking, boy, you make it sound so appealing, Terasa! And indeed, even when we have the mountaintop experiences that I described in the beginning, there's

the inevitable fallings back down to earth. Or, as Jack Kornfield titled his earlier book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. Best. Title. Ever.

But I can tell you that if I had not taken the time and the energy and made the space to do that spiritual work, I would not be the person standing before you today. I would be a brittle, angry, cynical person, the person that I was starting to become before I took those steps.

Not everyone needs to go into such depths or lengths of spiritual practice. Right now my practice is simply to read poetry every day, and reflect on what rises up in me when I do so. Whether it be poetry, the language of the soul, or music, the siren of the spirit, or walking in the woods or writing in a journal — I ask you to consider giving yourself the gift of spiritual practice. David McTaggart and LeeAnn Williams and Wendy Estell have been exploring how we can facilitate your ability to step into a practice. We welcome your ideas.

I ask you to consider it, not just as a path for healing yourself, but indeed a path for healing the world.

I heard a fascinating episode of “The Hidden Brain” the other day, the podcast by Shankar Vedantam. By now you know what a geek I am about brain science so that show is like elixir from the gods for me. But this episode actually made me think differently about science. He was talking about work that a British psychiatrist and researcher, Ian McGilchrist, has done about the divided brain. He’s not just doing a superficial study of why we have a left brain and a right brain like what we would have heard from pseudo scientists

before. In fact those pseudo-scientists ended up poisoning the well of the study of why our brain is divided so much that serious scientists wouldn't touch it. Much to our detriment, as it turns out.

Hang in here with me. I promise I'll get to the spiritual part in a minute. What he has discovered is that there are indeed profound differences between the two hemispheres of the brain. They are different sizes, different shapes, and weights, have different cellular architecture, to name just a few of the differences. It turns out that every living being has a divided brain, because we're trying to solve a basic dilemma in life: that is that we need to do things simultaneously that are completely different from each other. We need to pay narrow and focused attention to things. For example, a bird needs to be able to pick up a particular kind of twig to build its nest, but if that is all that it is paying attention to, something else is going to have that bird for lunch. Because at the same time it needs to pay a completely different kind of attention to the world, a broad, open, sustained vigilance without any preconception about what it might find.

This is where the bicameral mind comes in. The different hemispheres allow us to do both things simultaneously: to pay narrow beam attention which enables us to get and grasp, as well as to keep an open mind to what can be, connections that can be made or explored or related to. In other words it is the left brain's job to narrow things down to a certainty, and the right brain's job to open up to possibility. We are doing this all the time. Each part of the brain

is doing its own thing and then leaving it up to that little section in between to make the choices about which we attend to. Kind of staggers the imagination, doesn't it?

But what McGilchrest also says is that our western culture has been dogmatically giving the left brain the largest say, and denigrating, or at least not attending to, the meaning making work of the right brain. By constantly asking for the facts and the proof of a matter we end up cutting ourselves off from a larger and more meaningful truth. In fact, they have done studies about what happens when you only allow one part of the brain to function. When only the left brain functions, it can't tell right from wrong. There is no morality to a brain that is only interested in manipulating the universe. A scary thought indeed that this is what our culture values the most.

I not only believe spiritual practices are a way of helping us out of this dilemma, because what are spiritual practices if not a big green light to our right hemisphere? I am also looking at what this might tell us about how we can be together: as a congregation, or as a community. There is a whole new way of thinking about the world that draws inspiration from the permaculture movement. This movement notices the systems and patterns that give us life, and asks how we might model our ways of being together on what we observe, rather than what we can *control*. adrienne maree brown, the poet who penned that wonderful meditation I shared with you, has written a book called *Emergent Strategy, Shaping Change*,

*Shaping Worlds*, which does the best job I've seen so far in explaining this amorphous movement.

She says: "Emergence...is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists — the way, the Tao, the force, change, God/dess, life. Birds flocking, cells splitting, fungi whispering underground. Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind. With our human gift of reasoning, we have tried to control or overcome the emergent processes that are own own nature, the processes of the planet we live on, and the universe we call home. The result is crisis at each scale we are aware of, from our deepest inner moral sensibilities so the collective scale of climate and planetary health and beyond..."

It is no accident that this way of thinking has attracted the attention of people of color and other healers and activists who embody the damage our strict and precise systems have created.

I'm only beginning to explore this direction of thought, but I believe it is offering a clarion call to our culture as much as spiritual practice offers a saving grace to our individual souls.

It doesn't have to be heavy, it doesn't have to be serious and intense. It can be as simple as lifting up our arms and faces to the sun. It can be loosing ourselves in the music or burrowing into the warmth of poetry. It can be whatever calls to you, that calls you out of yourself, that helps you to see, to hear, to breathe, to attend to

this great pulsing life that simmers within us all. It asks us to “Do as the Spirit Says Do.” So let us sing!

### **Benediction**

And so we take the ragged fragments / the patches of darkness / that give shape to the light; ... the hopes we carry fractured or whole... the places of welcome that bring healing and life / and so we lay them at the threshold, God; bid you hold them, bless them, mend them, transform them to keep us warm / make us whole / and send us forth.