



Counting On Our Ultimate Concern, by Sharon Salzberg

The offering of one's heart happens in stages, with shadings of hesitation and bursts of freedom. Faith evolves from the first intoxicating blush of bright faith to a faith that is verified through our doubting, questioning, and sincere effort to see the truth for ourselves. Bright faith steeps us in a sense of possibility; verified faith confirms our ability to make that possibility real. Then, as we come to deeply know the underlying truths of who we are and what our lives are about, abiding faith, or unwavering faith as it is traditionally called, arises.

Abiding faith does not depend on borrowed concepts. Rather, it is the magnetic force of a bone-deep, lived understanding, one that draws us to realize our ideals, walk our talk, and act in accord with what we know to be true. Theologian Paul Tillich defines faith as alignment with our "ultimate concern," those values that we are most devoted to, that form the core of what we care passionately about. An ultimate concern is not an interest that is merely a fashion or a whim, but one that is a centering point for our lives.

When we wake up in the morning and picture the dealings of our day as consequential, we tell ourselves a story that is based on our ultimate concern. We remind ourselves of loving our neighbor or remembering God. When at the end of our day we recall its events and arrange them in a pattern that reveals something significant, our ultimate concern is what we reference in the arranging. Because of abiding faith in an ultimate concern, the day wasn't just a series of flashing moments, lost to us now and amounting to nothing. We count on our ultimate concern not just for ballast when things get rocky, or for a sense of easy comfort on a bad day; we go there for light.

Our ultimate concern is the touchstone we turn to over and over again, the thread that we reach for to convey a sense of meaning in our lives. It is the glue that connects the disparate pieces, the frame that gives shape to the picture of our experiences. We turn to our ultimate concern when afraid, or bewildered, or when we don't quite know who we are anymore.

--Sharon Salzberg, from "Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience"