

The 2010 Raven Award for Excellence in Arts and Entertainment

Deceit, Desire and a Divine Adaptation by founder, Suzanne Ross

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My job tonight is to answer the question you all have been too polite to ask: why is an educational foundation concerned with issues of religion, violence and peace giving an award to Heidi Stillman? You might well wonder what her adaptation of a 900 page 19th century Russian novel has to do with our work, no matter how deserving of recognition it may be, or how much Keith and I enjoyed it! Oddly, it has everything to do with it.

René Girard's mimetic theory is indebted to Dostoevsky and most especially to his final work, *The Brothers Karamazov*. This story of a family gripped by rivalry and envy provided Girard with a fully developed exploration of the connection between human desire and conflict. Conventional wisdom tells us that our desires are our own spontaneous creations but Dostoevsky and Girard beg to differ. They both teach that our desires are not our own creation at all but are borrowed or imitated from others, and when we deny that simple human reality, our relationships become infected with envy, rivalry and hate. All the drama in *The Brothers Karamazov*, all the conflict, tumultuous love affairs, divine visions, demonic hallucinations, deceit, envy, pride and murder have their origins in the mimetic nature of desire.

Dostoevsky's characters dramatize that we learn what to desire from others who model that desire for us. Even our desire for ourselves, that is, our ability to love ourselves, is dependent on modeling. Children learn to love themselves by imitating the loving glances of their parents. Yet no parent child relationship is ideal. We see just how bad things can get when Papa Karamazov and his eldest son, Dmitri, imitate and escalate one another's desire for the same woman. Through it all they claim that their desire is the more authentic and the other is merely an obstinate obstacle to be removed by murder if necessary.

This theme permeates the novel. Nothing happens independently, every idea is a response to someone else's thoughts and every desire is aroused by the presence of someone else's desire. Even the monologues resist the illusion of autonomy and are presented as internal dialogues. Dialogue and not descriptive prose dominates the novel because Dostoevsky developed his novelistic form to artistically depict what he observed about human existence – that we exist in dialogue, that is, we are interconnected beings. As Father Zosima explains: "Everything we do, small and large, affects our fellow beings and our mother earth... for all is like an ocean flowing and blending; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world."

I'd like to illustrate this with a personal father-daughter story. When I was a teenager my father told me repeatedly that he and I were very much alike in that neither one of us cared what anyone else thought of us. I think he was trying to protect me from falling under the influence of bad role models, and I did puff up with a sense of my own independence. Yet as time wore on I realized that the opposite was true. Far from being independent, I cared deeply what people thought of me and suffered paroxysms of self-doubt and humiliation from a steady stream of perceived slights. Ashamed of my failure at autonomy, I kept all this to myself until Dostoevsky's novel *Notes from the Underground* appeared as part of my junior year curriculum. I read it with a surge of relief to discover that I was not the only one who was living and suffering underground.

The problems presented by the belief in autonomous desire are pushed to the breaking point in the novel in the section known as *The Grand Inquisitor*. It's a flight of imagination offered to us by the middle Karamazov brother, Ivan about what might have happened if Christ had returned to earth during the Spanish Inquisition. The Lookingglass performers will present this scene tonight so you can get a small taste of Heidi's creative staging of Dostoevsky's lengthy discursive passages. In this scene, the Grand Inquisitor, a Cardinal of the church, has imprisoned Christ and condemned him to be burned as a heretic. He proceeds to make the compelling albeit very long case that human beings cannot live with free will as God intended. He insists that we are too weak to be left to our own devices and that only a benevolent dictator can save humanity from itself. In Ivan's imagination, the Grand Inquisitor is scandalized that Christ resisted the temptations by Satan in the wilderness to become that dictator, refusing to imitate Satan's desires for power or even to be worshipped as a god. Interestingly enough for a novel packed to the breaking point with dialogue, when the Grand Inquisitor is done presenting his argument, Christ's response is expressed in silence: he gently kisses on the lips the man who has condemned him to death, a gesture of love and forgiveness that causes the Inquisitor to shudder. Though this story is his invention, Ivan will not say if the Grand Inquisitor is changed by this encounter. Yet Dostoevsky's plot pivots on this point: our fate, like the Grand Inquisitor's, depends on our response to the love and forgiveness modeled by Christ.

Heidi, to her credit, chose to include the Grand Inquisitor in her adaptation when the easier road would have been to leave it out. What dramatic value is there in Ivan's long discourse, a digression to be sure from the unfolding plot? And why drag the question of religion onto the highly intelligent and sophisticated Lookingglass stage? If Heidi had succumbed to the zeitgeist of our modern age, she would have been too scandalized by the way Dostoevsky takes the question of religion seriously. Mainstream commentary today has marginalized, demonized, debunked and pronounced religion dead and God along with it, yet it won't die. Indeed, religion

has emerged as a driving force not only in the politics of our own nation, but in the global conflicts so unique to our time that spill outside the old boundaries of national identities and political states. Oddly enough, rational thinkers do everything with religion but take it seriously.

The Brothers Karamazov is an enduring classic because it focuses our attention on the questions that matter most. Classics don't answer questions, they ask them. Dostoevsky stood as if on a hilltop overlooking the transition to modernity and he realized that with the death of God, Western culture was losing sight of the truth that we are created beings; that we are brought into being in relationship with others who shape our desires. This is neither good nor bad, and is a human reality whether God lives or dies. What Dostoevsky saw so clearly is that it is the height of deceit to believe we are free from the influence of others. Being free does not mean free from influence but involves our freedom to choose our models, those we imitate and endow with the power to give us our desires, our essence, our being.

When we say at the Raven Foundation that we seek to make religion reasonable, we are looking to recover a truth that religion knows so well, that human beings cannot exist without models. Modernity may have destroyed God as a transcendent model, but it has not destroyed the human reality that we are created in another's image. In our undeniable need for models, we have become as Dostoevsky feared, gods for one another and infected with envy, rivalry and conflict both personally and globally. Strangely, Dostoevsky also points to our reliance on one another as a source of hope for as Alyosha says at the end of Heidi's adaptation, "There is a web of interconnectedness and responsibility that we have for each other and it starts at the beginning of life. We each hold the power to change life for each other, for the good or the bad."

The question that Dostoevsky asks, that Heidi so powerfully presents to us and which concerns the Raven Foundation is: who will our models of desire be? It is a question well worth asking if you are seeking the good in non-rivalrous relationships and authentically peaceful communities. Heidi Stillman is the recipient of the first Raven Award for Excellence in Arts and Entertainment because her adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* helps new audiences discover the prophetic message of a novel whose time may have only just arrived.

I hope you can see now why the Raven Foundation is so enamored of Heidi's project not only for her inspired choice of material but for how well she honored the themes and questions raised by the novel. Tonight is our way of showing our gratitude and admiration for her accomplishment.