

[Home](#) [Editorial Policy](#) [About Us](#) [Article Submission](#) [Archives](#) [Subscribe Now](#) [Contact Us](#) [FAQs](#)

Search

Search Tips

Current Issue

October 18, 2017

Volume 14 No. 10

Articles

Into the Depths of the Soul: A Case Consultation with Dostoevsky Scott Janssen

In the Aftermath of Disasters: Resources for Spiritual Care PlainViews Staff

Cultivating Inclusion: The Importance of Pastoral Care Week Eric J. Hall

The Importance of Charting: How a New App Aids Team Communications at the Hospital for Special Surgery PlainViews Staff

The Issue, the Exception, and the Challenge: Use of Chaplaincy Volunteers Sue Wintz

HealthCare Chaplaincy Network Forms Partnership with New York State Chaplains Task Force PlainViews Staff

Open Access

Special Topic Issues

Into the Depths of the Soul: A Case Consultation with Dostoevsky

[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

"If you mess with me I'll cut your throat with a razor." The look on Isaiah's face is predatory – a stark contrast to his frail-looking body crumpled in the wheelchair in the corner of his nursing home room. I harden my eyes, silently conveying that I'm not prey, just his hospice social worker. His voice is like a hammer pounding nails, "I am the master of the streets!"

I point out that we weren't on 'the streets' and ask what he is trying to tell me?

"I don't need you coming around. Get out."

"It's your room. You want me to leave?"

"I don't care what you do."

I tell him he's sending double messages. "Do you want me to leave or is it okay if I stay?"

Before he can answer he erupts into a paroxysm of coughing, his frame shaking so hard it looks like it might break. He looks frantically around the room, searching for something to spit into.

I hand him a cup. After spitting out a mouthful of phlegm he composes himself and snarls, "I hate it when people stand over me like that."

"Okay if I sit?"

He looks at a chair, glares at me and nods.

Creatures of Contradiction

As I sit, I have the passing thought that Isaiah seems like a character in a novel by the 19th century Russian author *Fyodor Dostoevsky*. Maybe it's the intimation of churning inner torment or the way belligerence bristles from a body so battered by illness it looks like he'd have a hard time *lifting* a razor much less cutting my throat with it. I suspect that if Isaiah were to find himself dropped into the middle of Dostoevsky's dark novel, *The Devils*, he would fit right in with Stavrogin and Shatov as they plotted and simmered.

He's 52, dying from damage to his kidneys after a lifetime of cheap liquor and drugs. Dostoevsky, who was fond of giving characters illnesses which eroded their bodies then recording how they responded as they slowly withered away, would have paid close attention to a man like Isaiah.

Novelists with his sensitivity to the workings of the human psyche offer avenues into the human condition not available if we rely solely on clinical theory, case studies and research data. By drawing us in and allowing us to see the world from the perspective of a well-drawn character, they heighten our empathy and hone our ability to see beneath the surface of things and to better understand clients like Isaiah.

Dostoevsky, a deeply spiritual writer, would have appreciated Isaiah's contradictions. The way he demanded that I leave then gave me permission to stay. The way he asserted that he needed nothing then turned with a look that screamed *help*. The way defiance gave way quickly in the face of something as mundane as a coughing jag, revealing anxiety then quickly transforming back into defiance.

Contradiction, paradox and intra-psychic conflict were themes with which Dostoevsky constantly wrestled not just in his writing but in his life. In a letter to his brother Mikhail, for example, he acknowledged that, "even when my heart is warm with love, people often can't get so much as one friendly word out of me." (Yarmolinsky, p 44)¹

In *Notes from Underground*, the narrator is so haunted by conflicting thoughts, feelings and behaviors that his consciousness almost seems to divide as a second voice emerges to argue with the first. Sometimes these inner tensions are so great that Dostoevsky's characters seem composed of multiple, contradictory selves. Myshkin, in *The Idiot*, for example, appears as a saintly innocent one moment, a confused simpleton the next; confident and self-possessed in one scene, absurd and childlike in another.

He would have been sensitive to the contradictions in Isaiah's behavior and would have approached not with an eye toward quick diagnosis but with empathy and curiosity intent on following them to their source and discovering their meaning from the inside out.

Eye of the Beholder

Time and again Dostoevsky shows that however contradictory or irrational a person's behavior may appear, it makes perfect sense to them. And contradictions that are apparent to others are often hidden from or minimized by the self.

Perhaps the best known illustration comes from *Crime and Punishment* in which Raskolnikov coldly murders a pawn broker and her sister. Though this brutal act is transparently immoral, he convinces himself – the reader witnesses him doing so – that he is committing a deed that will benefit all of humanity. In Dostoevsky's hands we see how this strange belief takes hold of the center of Raskolnikov's being. He literally believes he is doing something good because of the story he has told himself about the meaning of his actions, blind to the fact that his behavior is at odds with his professed values.

By guiding us into the interior space of such enigmatic characters we come to understand how seemingly contradictory behaviors and patterns of thought actually make sense to the person expressing them, disarming our judgments and presuppositions. As we learn their story, we discover the secret blueprints such characters, and by extension, clients like Isaiah, are using to make sense of the world.

On the surface, Isaiah's story was a rough one, offering plentiful insight into how his aggressive and inflated behavior made sense to him. His mother had died when he was a child and his father had abandoned him and his sisters. Left to fend for himself, he'd lived a life of trauma, violence and conflict, dealing and using drugs.

Whenever Isaiah talked about his life he affected a style in which he was always the hero. Rather than focusing on his struggle with heroin or the negative impact of his behavior on others, he focused on the fast money and lavish spending. Rather than thinking about the deaths of friends to murder, overdose or prison, he focused on the power and status that went with being 'connected.'

Throughout his life he'd always projected strength and power. Vulnerability meant weakness and weakness made you a target. Intimidation, control, and a willingness to retaliate to insults were essential for survival. The fact that such projections made him stand out like a sore thumb in a nursing home made no difference. Impressions still had to be made.

Despite attempts to shade his narrative in a heroic direction he often appeared depressed and anxious. Despite assertions that he needed no one, he seemed lonely. The man who liked to boast that he was king of the streets spent most of his days without a single visitor and needed help getting to the bathroom. Though he told stories about his past criminality and toughness as though these were badges of honor, he appeared frightened and overwhelmed.

What Lies Beneath

If Isaiah was aware of the contradiction between the image he wanted to project and the sadness and anxiety percolating below the surface he didn't acknowledge it. If he was aware that his attempts to intimidate often appeared desperate and absurd, he kept it to himself.

Dostoevsky understood on a personal level the psychic toll it can take to conceal from one's self or others such contradictions. Like Isaiah, there were things he tried to project – moral courage, sensitivity, intelligence. Inwardly, though, he could be painfully insecure, apt to take offense at the slightest provocation, real or imagined. He could be emotionally and socially erratic, mercurial to the point of cruelty, and, amidst attempts to connect with others, he often wound up isolated.

Unlike Isaiah, he knew that beneath these contradictions lay self-doubt and emotional or spiritual pain. In the letter cited earlier, Dostoevsky offered a hint of what was driving the contradictions he saw in himself, explaining that beneath the surface "a nameless grief possesses me." Though he is not specific about the nature of this grief – the possible sources in his difficult life are many – he implied that it often overpowered his best hopes and intentions, amplifying his insecurities and leaving him "moody and edgy." (Yarmolinsky, p. 44)

When patients become aware of such hidden inner states, whether the nameless grief of Dostoevsky or the fear Isaiah was attempting to mask, this awareness has the potential to transform cognitive, emotional and relational patterns and resolve painful contradictions. It can also send one back into familiar defenses, recoiling from the pain such awareness can bring.

In *Notes from Underground*, when the narrator is visited by the prostitute, Lisa, there is such a moment. By then he has been ranting throughout the book, trying at times to connect with others then sabotaging these attempts, retreating into solitary diatribes, alternating between self-castigation and self-justification. During their talk, the Underground Man drops his guard and allows himself to feel and express to Lisa the unhappiness which he has so long covered over with anger and word games, and which drives his desperately contradictory behavior.

Here is a moment of choice, and choice is another of Dostoevsky's recurring themes. Having uncovered this deeper realm and taken the risk of sharing his pain, the Underground Man can open his heart and connect with someone who is offering love or he can run from this moment of vulnerability back into the familiarity – and unhappiness – of old patterns.

As Isaiah declined, tension built between how he wanted to be seen and the pain and vulnerability of internal experience. One night, I was on-call when a page came in. There had been a death at the nursing home and Isaiah had become agitated when the body was removed. Now he was "melting down."

When I arrived he was curled up in his bed crying. I sat beside him silently. After several minutes his sobs subsided and he started talking, staring ahead as if in a trance.

He recounted how, as a child, he'd tried to placate his father and been beaten. He talked about his grief when his mother died, how he'd blamed himself, a mere boy, for letting his sisters disappear into the foster care system.

He'd struggled to survive, working for drug dealers then becoming one, telling the story without denying the anxiety and fear which had long been hidden beneath his posturing and bravado. When he told me about a young man who had died shooting heroin that Isaiah had sold him, a convulsion of sobs crashed over him.

"Am I going to hell?" he whispered.

I took a breath. "What answer do you give yourself when you ask that question, Isaiah?"

Resting his head on his knees he said softly, "I'm a bad man. I've done bad things."

"I know you've done some bad things in the past. What about now?"

Emotions poured out, sadness, shame, grief. He'd buried them beneath his 'king-of-the-streets' facade. Previously unspoken and inwardly painful beliefs emerged: I'm a bad man; I should be punished; I should have protected my sisters.

Isaiah was at one of those moments of choice that Dostoevsky loved. He could go deeper, search for insight, healing, transformation, or he could double-down on old defensive patterns. Would he do what the Underground Man had done – run back into his psychic armor – or would he follow the path Raskolnikov ultimately took, looking at the truth beneath the surface and living into a new kind of life?

I suggested to Isaiah that true strength had nothing to do with the power to intimidate or the respect one had on 'the streets.' Maybe he was working with ideas about what it meant to be a man

and how the world worked which no longer served him. Maybe it was time, even as he was dying, to find another, truer kind of strength.

Making the Pivo✚

If we look to Dostoevsky for answers about where this deeper self may be found we must think in spiritual terms. He would have understood this self as Isaiah's soul. Modern readers not comfortable with the religious connotations might think in terms of the deep or core self, though for Dostoevsky such formulations would have been nonsensical.

One of Dostoevsky's most immediate and palpable experiences in this regard occurred after he was arrested by Czarist troops and sent to a prison in Siberia (an event chronicled in his chilling autobiographical work, *Notes from the House of the Dead*). He found his prison mates to be savage and depraved, viewing them with fear and contempt until one day when he had a transformative experience in which he was able to see beneath the hard surface of their lives and into their souls. Years later in his serialized, *Diary of a Writer*, he recalled the incident that opened his heart.

Feeling despondent and alienated, he was flooded by a vivid childhood memory in which he was a frightened boy lost in the woods, terrified there were wolves nearby preparing to tear him apart. Amidst his fear, he came across one of his father's serfs, a man known as Marey, who comforted him. It was a simple memory of compassion from a rough-hewn serf stopping his work to help a frightened boy. Its impact, though, was life-altering. Dostoevsky realized in a sudden, almost mystical flash that within each of his rough prison mates was hidden the same compassion.

There are many novels in which Dostoevsky explores this essence, subtly through inference and hints, and dramatically, such as Alyosha Karamazov's direct experience of his spiritual essence in the wake of the death of his surrogate father. Is this not, in some ways, the heart of modern psychotherapy and spiritual care? To see beneath the troubled surface of another's life into a deeper essence which, despite depression, trauma and layered defenses, is capable of compassion, connection, healing, growth and love; an essence with the courage to make new choices.

Here is the deepest substrate of Dostoevsky's work. For the author who was at home depicting acts of despicable evil, charting the inner lives of characters who are self-destructive, insane and violent, who pulled no punches when depicting the lives of the insulted and the injured, underneath it all was the possibility of love, forgiveness, redemption, transcendence and connection with God.

The identity Isaiah had forged on the streets may have helped him survive but it had also covered over this deeper self. Now his surface identity was breaking down. He was suffering and confused, standing at a crossroad.

"Isaiah," I said softly, "tell me about the part of you that realizes you've hurt others."

He grimaced. It was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Hang with me on this one, Isaiah. Just sense the part, however small, that cares about others and realizes that you've gotten off track."

"That part's not real," his voice was sad.

"It is real, and it has real power."

"It's dead," tears welled in his eyes. "Gone."

"If it were dead we wouldn't be talking about it. You wouldn't be asking these questions."

He whispered, "I don't feel it."

"Have you ever cared about anyone Isaiah?"

He nodded.

"Who?"

"Mama," his voice cracked and sounded strangely young.

"Can you feel that love? Is it still there?"

He nodded then he gave me a hard look. *Be careful.*

I nodded. *Message received. "Just feel that love."*

After a minute or so I pushed gently, "As you remember your mother and feel your connection with her, what's the first thing that pops into your head? Just tell me whatever thought, image or memory comes to mind."

What came to mind was a memory of being seven years old trying to cheer his mother up while she was in the hospital near death. We explored his feelings of, and impulses to express, love as he'd sat at her bedside.

We tracked this impulse, this inner voice, in the aftermath her death when he'd tried to protect his sisters, first from their father's rage, later from the system that would ultimately separate them. We worked our way forward through his life, looking at things not from the perspective of the 'king of the streets' but from the vantage of his heart, his soul.

As we did, it became clear that this inner part had not died. It had been there all along. It was the part that was now feeling guilt and regret. Isaiah again spoke of going to hell. What was the point of locating the working of this inmost voice if he was soon to be condemned to eternal suffering?

I knew from previous talks that Isaiah was of a split mind when it came to his Christian religious beliefs. He had typically spoken of God with a sense of dread and foreboding, as a figure of judgment and damnation. Jesus, on the other hand, seemed a more forgiving type, apt to understand the insidious traps of human form. Using his language, I asked him what Jesus would want him to know if he could join our conversation.

Isaiah thought for a moment then said, "I think he'd tell me to keep trying."

"What would he mean by that?"

"I've done bad things. Maybe I have to hurt now because of what I've done. Maybe it's part of the deal."

"What happens next?" I asked.

He was tired and needed sleep. "I'll have to think about that," he said. "Even with all the bad things I've done, my heart never shut down one-hundred percent, did it?"

I affirmed that his heart was still alive, and that it was opening.

Embracing Ambiguity

Writers like Dostoevsky have ways of reminding us that although we may believe we are nothing like Isaiah or the Underground Man, we differ only by degree. By entering their stories with compassion and sensitivity we come to know ourselves better. He would have liked Isaiah from the first twinkling of surface contradictions down into the desperate energy with which he clung to the story about his power and invincibility.

The talk we had that night turned out to be our last. The next week Isaiah's kidneys started shutting down. He drifted into a light coma. Even so, there was a chance he could still hear. Sitting at his bedside, I told him the story of Ivan Ilyich.

Written by Dostoevsky's contemporary and fellow Russian, Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, is the story of a man who spends most of his time living on the surface, pursuing status and pleasure. When he becomes terminally ill his world crumbles, things no longer make sense. As his body weakens he becomes irritable, isolated and profoundly unhappy. As his illness advances so too does his suffering. He looks back on his life and finds very little of substance. Then, in the very last moments of life, unbeknownst to those around him, Ivan finds peace. Everything has fallen away save for the deep voice within. It's the only thing that was ever real.

I have no idea what was in Isaiah's awareness when he died in the early hours of a cold night. I hope he found his way toward some kind of peace. I hope he was connected with his deep self, but I don't know.

Dostoevsky would have embraced the ambiguity as well as the tantalizing hope that our last conversation may have brought comfort. But he would have looked with the hard eyes of one who knew firsthand the many ways in which hope so often yields to the fierce challenges of being human.

After Isaiah's death, I found myself near the neighborhood where he used to sell drugs. A hard, sleety rain was pouring down. I pulled into a parking lot to think about our last talk. Rain pounded the cracked asphalt, washing away fast food wrappers, cigarette butts and labels from bottles of cheap beer and rotgut.

As I thought about Isaiah's life it crossed my mind that this was the place in the story where many lesser novelists would have broken the storm momentarily to have a thin ray of sunlight penetrate the grey sky, a symbol of hope for those looking for happy endings. Instead, the rain came down harder. It seemed to scour away every pocket of dirt and grime; washing away every shard of glass, every discarded syringe. Thunder shook the angry sky. I smiled. *That's how Dostoevsky would have written it.*

Notes

1. Yarmolinsky, A (ed.) (1961). *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*. New York: Horizon Press.



Scott Janssen, MA, MSW, LCSW has been a hospice social worker for 25 years and has published widely on issues related to end-of-life care and clinical social work practice. His book, *Standing at Lemhi Pass: Archetypal Stores for the End of Life and Other Challenging Times*, explores the power of storytelling with hospice patients and families. He works for Hospice and Palliative Care Center of Alamance-Caswell and can be reached at scott@hospiceac.org. His website is at <http://fjscottjanssen.com>

PlainViews® is a publication of HealthCare Chaplaincy Network™. Credit when sharing an article should include this information as well as citing volume and issue numbers.