

# Meet Billy Amoss

Billy describes how a long-time interest in Russia became a part of his call



*"The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'"*

(Song of Songs 2:8-10)

Call springs from desire, from a deep whole-bodied longing for connection with creation. It is connection with the other – a person, a people, or a specific geography on this planet – that tells me that I belong, that I have a purpose, that life is immensely worth living. In our own Christian tradition, this desire for connection or union can take on cosmic proportions and delineate the path to our collective salvation. A modern-day example to me is Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century French theologian and scientist who described the essence of things as a living heart beating with the fiery energy of love and compassion. And there are voices outside of our tradition that call to me. Brian Swimme, the cosmologist, is a contemporary visionary who is calling humanity to a new understanding of passionate connection with and participation in creation.

My passion for Russia goes back to high school days when I began reading Russian literature. What struck me about this literature was the intensity of the interaction between the characters and a willingness to ask life's big questions. Thus, Anna Karenina is about forbidden desire, obsession,

betrayal, despair, but also about love, commitment, identification with the land, meaningful work, happiness, salvation. Have I left anything out in the broad scope of human experience?

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life, Mary Oliver asks us in her poem "A Summer Day." Another way of asking this question is, what are you passionate about?

My passion for Russia continued to take hold of me through my years in the Yale Russian Chorus and then settled into a kind of quiet but persistent longing as I worked for years in a job that was utterly devoid of life and meaning to me.

When I was in Russia in 1992, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, conditions there were tough for almost everyone. One day I visited a dilapidated children's hospital and met the medical director, a marvelous woman full of energy, goodwill, and passion for her work. After I returned to the U.S. I could not forget this woman and the children in her care. I was seized by a desire to be of some use in this situation. Finally, my passion for Russia was informed by real life experience and called to me to take action for the sake of others. But how? This call to be fully alive was very much centered in my core being and was thrusting me in an entirely unknown direction. At the time I had a wife and two children to support, no savings, and no credentials to work in the area of children's health. It was a terribly inconvenient call, but one that excited me and buoyed me beyond what I could have imagined.

*"Arise, my love, come away,*

*For now the winter is past,*

*The rain is over and gone.*

*The flowers appear on the earth."*

(Song of Songs 2:10-12)

In InterPlay, we ask one another: In your life, who is saying "yes" to you?

In my case the answer has been friends, family, and this community of believers, who responded to my persistent seeking with endless encouragement, money, and a resounding "yes!"

Eventually I was able to do the work I longed for, not only in Russia, but also other countries such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. I love each of these countries through the connection I have with the people I work with there. This connection is informed by a sensuous, almost erotic quality. Our common purpose joins us in a "tribal" communion that I can feel throughout my entire body. We politely refer to this amongst ourselves as being family to one another, but we all know language fails to capture the essence of the connection. This connection, this stream of energy which brings us together, is the divine energy of the Beloved. Its essence is mystery, and its name is wholly unutterable.

The call on my life of which I speak has gone through many phases. As in a good marriage, the passion in call comes in waves. Being in the trough is no fun but usually quite instructive, if we will be patient and pay attention. Now that the founder of the foundation I direct has passed away, I am in a period of redefining the purpose of my work, which was informed so long by my call. The reality on the ground in the countries in which our foundation is working is changing rapidly and dramatically, raising fundamental questions about our mission. Has my work forever lost its relevance, its dynamism, or is the next wave of passionate interplay between human need, desire, and deep joy about to crest and crash down upon my orderly life, rearranging everything so that something new and as yet unnamable can emerge?