

## **Finding the Sacred in the Profane .**

### **Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey**

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There are no inherently sacred objects, spaces or events. They are made sacred by the power and belief people invest in them. Some might disagree. For example some people would say the Bible is a divinely inspired book and therefore sacred, apart from the meaning humans give it. Others don't agree.

We surely don't all agree upon sacred objects, spaces, and events. Various cultures and religions each have unique sacred objects, spaces, and events: Sacred Cows in India, Sacred Mountains and rivers of First Nations People, the covenant of the ark for Jews, Easter for Christians, and Mecca for Muslims.; spiritually energizing places like Iona the island off Scotland; the fairy rings in the green glens of Ireland and even our Unitarian Flaming Chalice. What makes these diverse places, events and objects sacred? Isn't it the power that humans invest in them?

As Unitarians we probably don't spend much time thinking about what is sacred, or what sacred means, or the need for it in our lives.

Yet, is there one among us who does not yearn for symbols, metaphors and rituals that enrich our lives, and give it meaning? Why do we go to art museums and music concerts. I say we go because it our souls out of the ordinary and into the realm of the sacred. The sacred occurs when we are moved, stirred, energized and enlightened. But perhaps we don't name the experience "sacred" and why not?

Well first, many us think of the sacred and profane as two distinct categories. Organized religion has created this dichotomy for us. So the common notion is that the sacred belongs only to the realm of the "religious", as suggested by the definitions of profane and sacred. Profane is defined in Oxford Dictionary as: "outside the temple; " not concerned with religion"; " Not holy because it ' s unconsecrated". When we think of something "made holy or consecrated, we think of it as being blessed by a religious official. For example, we often think of communion bread and wine blessed by a priest ( male only). In the Christian tradition, for several centuries, only priests were allowed to drink of the communion cup- until Jan Huus, a Czech priest and forerunner of the Reformation was burned at the stake for proposing that the communion chalice be shared with the laity.

Some say our chalice symbol is reminiscent of Huus making available the cup for the non-ordained. The flame of our chalice bespeaks of an eternal flame. Light by the way, is an almost universal symbol of the sacred.

For many of us the ritual of lighting the flame of our chalice at the beginning of our Sunday services, reminds us of the need for religious freedom and it also binds us together because we know that all over the world in Unitarian congregations are doing the same thing. A sacred ritual brings a community of people together in just such a way. In the last 10 years a majority of Unitarian congregations have instituted the practice of lighting candles of joy and concern also as a way of bringing us together as a community of faith.

These rituals bespeak of us even liberal religious folk's need in affirming the sacred ( whether we name it thus or not) in our lives. In fact in some ways after the humanist movement of the 1940- 1970s we've come back to more ritual. I recall reading the early history of Mt.Vernon congregation- now 25 years old. One of the big debates was about having flowers which seemed to "churchy" to many, probably those wounded by organized religion. Those flowers were a symbol- but not a positive one. So some of us so wounded by institutional religion we want nothing to do with anything that remotely reminds us of boring, meaningless institutional "religious ritual".

If not rejected outright, we tend to relegate the sacred to religious institutions, to relinquish our power to find and create the sacred in the ordinary. Too often the sacred is contained in a box called "religion" and trotted out only on Sunday and then snapped shut for the rest of the week.

Unlike our ancestors, today we experience a deep schism between the sacred and the profane. And I believe we do so at great peril to our souls. Just look around you at modern society- does it look to you like most people feel connected to life and one another. Does it look to you like most people find their lives meaningful? Consider that anxiety is ubiquitous and that in the U.S. last year doctors wrote 213 million prescriptions for anti-depressants? I don't see a lot of *joie de vivre*- "joy of life" around me- and far less of it on the nightly news.

Yet, we still have the same need as did our ancient ancestors, sun worshippers, or myth makers, who saw and heard experienced spirits all around them. The same need to incorporate the sacred into our everyday lives, whether that means sharing a sacred meal together or talking to the birds. I think there are lots of ways we might take back the sacred into our everyday lives. We might redefine "religion" so that it's no so distant from our everyday experience.

The root word for religion, “Religo” comes from the Latin word meaning to bind back together. I like to think of religion as a container like a basket, a place where we can reweave the tattered and frayed edges of our lives, to meet soul to soul and encounter the holy. I like what Linda Sexson says in her marvelously inventive book entitled *Ordinarily Sacred*: “Religion is not a discrete category within human experience. It is rather a quality that pervades all of experience. Religion—whether we choose to name the experience thus or not—is to be lured by the transitory that reveals the transcendent, to be captured by the aesthetic .. and makes meaningful divisions between the sacred and the profane. “ ( p. 7)

What of the transitory lures you to the transcendent? What experiences of the sacred have you known in your life? It might be music, art, nature, perhaps something aesthetically pleasing to you- something of beauty, something that encourages your imagination, energizes your spirit and calls you to a higher spiritual place.

I think that’s what our Unitarian forebears, the Transcendentalists had in mind. When Ralph Waldo Emerson, an oft quoted Unitarian Transcendentalist speaks of the over soul- I think he means an over arching spirit ( a Divine Spark with a capital D of which there is a piece in each of us. This material mundane, transitory world is but a shadow of and less real than the spiritual, sacred world of the eternal transcended one. And we are beginning to find that Quantum physics concurs.

As Sexson says, and I imagine the transcendentalist would agree, its not through church officials or organized religion that the transcendent is to be found but rather in the every day events, objects and spaces of our lives—in the transitory- in that which passes away but which we empower and consecrate to help us look beyond the mundane to the holy. I think as Unitarians we have always been concerned about finding the sacred in our everyday lives, and in particularly looking for symbols and metaphors in nature- what some might call natural religion. And I think most would agree that religion is not discrete category within human experience, but rather a quality that pervades all of experience, if we would but open our hearts and minds to that possibility.

What is required of us so that we might find the sacred in the profane? First, I think we need to open to the possibility of the sacred that surrounds us and then willing to engage our hearts and minds to look beyond what passes away to what endures. In order to find the sacred in the secular, we need have the eyes to see and ears to hear- The sacred will not appear to those who are not open to the experience of something beyond the mundane. I like to say my job as a minister is to move folks from the question of “ Would you like fries with that?” To “How is it with your soul? “ Where

are you on this continuum of reality? Some live mostly in the “would you like fries with that” world and others more in the world of “how is it with our soul?” The latter will see and hear and experience the sacred far more often than the former.

Well what do we actually mean by “the sacred” We might define sacred as the mysterious dimension of human experience. a non-rational experience where powerful emotions are stirred. 3. an energy, a fire in the soul.

I like what Mircea Eliade, the French Religious historian whose classic work, “The Sacred and Profane” published in 1959, has to say. He says the sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world. Eliade speaks about indigenous cultures having many sacred places and times, such as food and sex. Eliade says that these activities always have the potential for becoming a sacrament, that is a communion with sacred. Few of us, today, although we enjoy physiological activities such as eating and sex, rarely regard them as sacred or holy. Why not?

We might consider making eating a communal sacred experience. I like to say a short prayer before my evening meal- “Thank you for the food we eat but do not grow.” It reminds me that I am but a small part of something far larger- I didn’t create the seeds, the soil, air or water required to grow what I need to sustain my life.

When I think of the sacred is often expressed in symbols and metaphors. For example, take the metaphor: “God is like a father” or “God is like a mother”. The problem with this metaphor and others, is that over time we forgot that the metaphor and simply said God the father, taking the metaphor literally. The problem comes when we take a sacred symbol or metaphor to be the reality. A symbol or metaphor points to an ineffable transcendent beyond. A metaphor or a symbol is like a door or a window, something to look through to a larger landscape, to a numinousness. Numinosity means something that ’s infused with a higher power ; a sense of the mysterious, a sense of the divine. As a 7 year old, I had no idea of numinousness, the word or the notion.

However when my mother was in the hospital undergoing a risky surgery, I was lying on the lawn of Brattleboro Memorial Hospital in Vermont, waiting for the outcome, and fearing, as a 7 year old might , her death. An idea popped into my head that if I found a 4 leaf clover in the grass my Mother would live. Not only did I find one- but a whole patch of them- and yes she did live though the surgery. I invested that clover with a power beyond the ordinary, giving it a numinous, or divine energy. The 4 leaf clover itself wasn’t sacred, but I had a need to make it so.

Lynda Sexson makes this point when she speaks about the universal human need to make meaning beyond the mundane moments of our lives. She notes the similarity between children and adults in their collection of sacred objects. She asks “ What is the distance between beads of dogwood berries a little girl has strung and hid in a box under her bed, telling her own great-grandchild about them seventy years later, and the beads of the rosary developed as a memory guide for a series of prayers that have been used by generations since at least the fifteenth century? The distance between the dogwood berries and the rosary –between the improvised and the articulated is indeed vast, but they are strung like beads along the same continuum of experience”

She goes on to say, “Inventories from children’s hiding places and from religious holy places bear a remarkable similarity: bones, bright stones, beads, fur , feathers, bits of writing, nuts, a picture. The borrowed power of the totemic animal, the regenerative grain, the sacred text, the icon. the stuff, the ‘Junk’ that is precious to children—and to adults\_ is precisely the stuff of the sacred. Religion does not reside in these literal things, but resides in them metaphorically.”

If we don’t include the sacred in our everyday lives, our souls are and will perish. Too many are wandering aimlessly in a spiritual wasteland. Our culture has been so inundated by the mundane that we hardly notice the sacred. It’s hard to find the sacred at Bellingham’s Bellis Fair Mall with it’s lights on 24- 7. No sun, no moon, no stars, only plastic plants and neon lights.

How might we put the sacred back in our lives? One thing we can do to create the sacred in our everyday lives is to create a sacred space in our home, or even a box for objects that are sacred to us. Or frequent places that seem particular spiritual.

Besides objects and places and events, our relationship with people can hold a special sacredness. Martin Buber in his famous book *I and Thou* believed the sacred is to be found in the relationship with others. Buber says we relate to one another in one of two ways: I-it and I-thou In I-It relationships we treat another like an objects, separate from ourselves, which is all right and even a necessary part of like, those causal encounters and business transactions such as checking out at the grocery store.

However, we want to become conscious of and encourage more I-thou relationships. Those relationships where we engage in a mutuality and experience a deep connection. Throughout our lives we yearn for these deep connections and these connections are where we encounter the sacred. In his

poetic way, Buber summed up his belief in the omnipresence of the sacred by saying:

“In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us we gaze toward the train of the Eternal Thou. In each we perceive a breathe of it; in every Thou we address the Eternal Thou. ’ ’

#### CONCLUSION:

There are no inherently sacred objects, spaces or events. They are made sacred by the power and belief we invest in them. We can reclaim the sacred in our ordinary every day lives if we pay attention, if we open our hearts to those deeper dimensions of reality, if we invite the sacred to appear in our everyday lives- if we let our lives become “ordinarily sacred”.

Let us pray :

May we profoundly experience the sacred in the ordinary tasks and pleasures of living.

May we become conscious and intentional in recognizing the sacred.

May we engage in more I-thou interactions.

May we continue to deepen the sacred encounters with others.

May we open our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds to the holy in our midst.

May we may find mystery in the mundane.

May we be lured by the transitory to glimpse the transcendent.

Amen; Blessed Be