

Encountering the Sacred

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When I was in Divinity School, I went to a talk by an activist Roman Catholic nun. This woman had done exemplary work in the Boston community: she had established a halfway house for women inmates, just coming out of the prison system, and another for women with AIDS. Her activities were firmly rooted in her faith, and she described how she got up every morning and spent a half-hour in prayer before she hit the streets. After her talk, there was a question and answer session, and one of my classmates asked her if she believed in God, and if so, what was God for her.

The nun replied, "it's very interesting that you ask that. Yes I do believe in God. All the work that I'm doing would not make any sense to me if I didn't. But as to who or what God is, it varies from day to day, and with what I have been reading or meditating in. I read medieval mystics and think of God as a bright light. Recently I read a book on the religion of the Australian aborigines, and for some time after that I saw God in every tree, bush, hill and river."

That talk was twenty years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. What impressed me was that this woman had taken religious vows, had joined a holy order, in order to center her life around this thing called God, and yet she couldn't articulate any one thing that God was always. It was from this exchange that I developed my elevator speech about Unitarian Universalism: that we have a religion which is based on the proposition that some questions are too important to have only one right answer.

I know that a lot of us don't have much use for the word God. Many have been burned by it in the religions we came from. What I want to explore this morning is whether there is a more universal experience than God which is still religious, which we might call the sacred or the holy.

Theologian Paul Tillich defined God broadly as that which was of ultimate concern. This is grounded in traditional religious conceptions of God but it is broader. The theophany from Isaiah 6 which I read just now obviously pictures God as a kind of being, and God is located in a temple being attended by various angels. The space in the Jewish temple which God occupied was called the Holy of Holies, and the only ones admitted to enter were priests who had performed elaborate purification rituals. So the poor prophet, the narrator, moans that he is doomed for he has entered the presence and looked upon the face of God without being a priest of undergoing such purification. In the early days in the Exodus, two sons of the first high priest Aaron, brother of Moses, were struck dead because they entered the divine presence without being properly purified. You could not look upon the face of God and live.

But in the Isaiah passage, the prophet is purified by having hot coals pressed on his lips, giving him the sacred word, and then he volunteers to take the word of God out to the people.

So at the start of a Jewish New Year, we might remind ourselves of the traditional images of the sacred, and at the same time embrace Tillich's broader definition of God not as a being on a throne, but as whatever is our ultimate concern. Not everyone believes in God, but everyone has an ultimate concern.

A theme running throughout the Hebrew Bible, is the struggle over who is the true God and who are false Gods. Under Tillich's definition, you can undergo a similar question as to whether what you value most, what that to which you devote your time, is truly ultimate.

My point this morning is that atheists, agnostics, humanists, religious naturalists all can have encounters with the sacred. No natural laws need be violated.

You may encounter the sacred only a few times in your life, or you may encounter it every day. You may say with Peter Meyer that everything is holy now.

At their most intense, sacred space and sacred time are liminal; they are thresholds from a former state of being to a different state of being. The word threshold means a place for thrashing, a place where the kernel of grain is separated from the chaff. It is a place and time for separating from what needs to be separated.

We may actually cross such a threshold rarely, but we may often have rituals and visit places which remind us that there are thresholds, beyond which life is different.

These reflections arose in me a few weeks ago when I was helping my wife Jacqueline and her siblings keep a death watch for their father. The call had come as we were preparing dinner at our home in Brewster: Charles had suffered a stroke, and we dropped everything and drove to the hospital in Burlington where they had taken him. By the time we arrived, the diagnosis had become clearer; the stroke was massive and it was unlikely he would ever regain the use of his left arm or leg. The family entered into a time out of time as they gathered to make decisions and to say good-bye. Charles was two weeks past his ninety-fifth birthday.

We had a week with him before he went over to the other side. Early in the week, he could talk with difficulty, but as I went over what he had said in my mind, I realized with awe that Charles knew what was happening to him and he knew who he wanted to see while there was still time. Once he had checked in with his loved ones, he could check out. And he did.

I never used the word "God" during that experience. Charles, so far as I know, was an atheist. But it struck me as a sacred time. The whole experience was sacred, because it was the ending of a life. The life was ending however we felt about what was going to come after, and we in the family were all glad that we had put aside our other agendas and attended to Charles in his time of dying. Jacqueline posted a beautiful picture on social media showing Charles' hand entwined with the hands of Jacqueline and her sister Carol.

I often say at a memorial service that a human life is sacred, sacred in its being born, sacred in its living, sacred in its dying. But what makes it sacred?

There is a voluntary element of the word sacred. Something is sacred if we choose to treat it as sacred. Someone else could have treated Charles' death as matter-of-fact; the nurses and hospice workers we dealt with were sympathetic and respectful, but I think the death of this one person wasn't sacred to them, for they see death every day. It was sacred to us because we chose to hold it sacred. Anytime any of us walks on an intensive care unit, we will pass the rooms of people who are actively dying, but that does not make those rooms sacred space to us. We treat the family members coming and going with respect for it is sacred space to them.

In this respect, the sacred is different from God. God as traditionally conceived exists whether you believe in him or not. The fairy Tinker belle in Disney's Peter Pan requires the audience to clap to show we believe in her so she can gather strength to recover, but God is not conceived like this. IN a twelve-step recovery program, God is the higher power who stand

outside the suffering addict and helps the addict have the willpower to resist her cravings.

But for many people, God is not a being or a person. There may be something other than matter in the universe, there may be more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in our poor philosophy, but most of us would see this as some sort of force or energy, not as a person. As we read ancient texts, we can see how ancient people came up with a personified God. We understand that humans have evolved to relate to people in a special way, and particularly to our own parents and our own tribe, and it is in some sense natural that people would project the love and power of a father or mother onto the world in general. We may have had, may still have, a deep psychological need for a heavenly father or mother who cares about us individually and knows all things and is all-powerful. But that deep psychological need does not amount, for many of us, to proof that such a being actually exists in the world.

This is why the sacred or the holy is a broader concept that may be acceptable to UUs who can't stomach the idea of a personal God.

What does the sacred look like, and in what circumstances is it encountered? First, I don't think it has to be a peak experience and doesn't have to be a happy one. Charles' departure was an immensely sad time and yet it brought us together as a family, and it brought me more tightly into the family fold as an in-law. As William Blake wrote, "joy and woe are woven fine:" under the immense sadness there was also a quiet joy that we were loving him on his way.

My life took a pivotal turn in 1996 when my first marriage came apart. I remember a phone conversation with Lee in the fall of that year in which it became clear that the marriage was going to end, and I said, "this is a holy moment." What I think I meant was that we were both crossing a threshold. We had been sweethearts since high school, and I would often say I didn't know where her personality began and mine left off. I was soon to learn. Up to that moment, I had expected that the trajectories of our lives would always move in parallel, and what I think I meant by calling it holy was that I was going to have to do a lot of adjustment to my expectations and reimagine my future without her.

Emerson and Thoreau would hold that the sacred is encountered in nature. Nature existed, for them, as a gateway to the sacred. Here is one of Emerson's most-quoted passages from his essay "Nature:"

"In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, — no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

I had this kind of Emersonian encounter last Sunday afternoon; I had gone to a musical event at First Parish Brewster, and afterwards, I went down to Breakwater beach a half-mile behind the church. It was late afternoon, with low-hanging clouds and a pleasant temperature without much wind. The tide was out – way, way out. I walked away from the shore at a good pace towards the open water and after twenty minutes of walking I was no more than halfway to the tiny dark figures of strollers I could see at the water's edge. I was struck by the immensity of the space I was in. It felt like I could walk to Provincetown.

In a way, finding the sacred in a solitary encounter with nature has almost become a

spiritual stereotype. For my money, the word sacred easily covers a variety of human situations which are not dressed up or signed as sacred.

Let me tell you about one. I knew a woman in the Charleston UU congregation whom I and the rest of that congregation knew suffered from mental illness; she spent her life in and out of mental institutions. I closed down my law practice and left that congregation in 1995 to pursue my ministry studies at Harvard. When these were finished, I returned in 1999 to be ordained there. On the morning of my ordination ceremony, I was attending the Sunday morning when Helen, I will call her that here, stood up at Joys and Concerns and said loudly that the congregation must not ordain me because I needed to come back and practice law so I could take a case for her. This was apparently the case I had rejected six years before, on the grounds that it could not be proven in court.

Notwithstanding Helen's request, the ordination proceeded, but in the months afterwards, she became more vocal and started calling and sending letters to the church office making the same demand. Someone in the church got in touch with me, and I agreed to go visit Helen in the state mental hospital the next time I was in South Carolina.

I kept that appointment, though it was difficult for me to do it. Decades earlier, my family had had to commit my father to the state hospital, and I remembered visiting him there, one of the more surreal episodes of my life.

With Helen, though, I concentrated on trying to make some sense of the sentences that came out of her and looped and whirled through topic after topic until, ten minutes later, she would pause for breath. In the pause, I would try to get in the three or four sentences I had prepared as to what my status was and why I had rejected the case all those many years ago and why I could not represent her now. And then another ten-minute sentence would start on its swooping way. We continued like this for an hour, but about half way through it, I remember looking at her face and saying, "this could be the face of God." And I relaxed. I had come to see her, in person. I hope that at some level, she understood that I was concerned about her. I hoped that the physical fact of my being there might accomplish some comfort which words were not bringing.

Maybe it is just the romantic in me that wants to see a sacred dimension in such a difficult encounter. Maybe the point of thinking that Helen's face was the face of God was to remind myself of her inherent worth and dignity.

To me these are sacred encounters. They are times when I can get a glimpse of an ultimate concern which I lose in the everydayness of my life. But I'm not going to defend this label. I can call that a sacred encounter, and if you don't see it, that's fine. Sacred means that I am setting it aside as something of worth. Worth and worship and worthy call come from the same root. I don't have to tell a story about how the water becomes wine or the wafer becomes the body of Jesus. Sacraments can be defined by scripture or liturgy, but as UUs we each have the right to say what we consider sacred, and it doesn't have to involve supernatural elements at all.

Everyone will worship something, and everyone has their sacred things, though not everyone will have an altar in their home for them. Ken Burns' film is stirring memories of the Vietnam Era, when the war's protesters burned American flags and the war's supporters rallied around them. The flag is sacred to many people, and the act of disrespecting it is called

desecration, literally, de-sacred-izing.

What we make sacred is what we hold dearest to our hearts. It is the hill on which we are prepared to die.

Another word for sacred is, of course, holy, which itself comes from the same root as whole, heal, hale, health. We seek wholeness in our lives. We seek a deeper or a higher ground on which the opposites that bedevil us – rich and poor, black and white, male and female, right and left, theist and atheist – will be transcended or reconciled, usually by being revealed as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a larger unity.

I opened the service with some verses from a song claiming that everything is holy now, by UU singer-songwriter Peter Mayer in St. Paul, MN. I wouldn't say that's quite true for me, and I'm not sure whether if everything was holy, that would mean that nothing was holy. Yet his song is appealing and it points the way to a beautiful spiritual practice. I will leave you with its concluding verses.

Read a questioning child's face
And say it's not a testament
That'd be very hard to say
See another new morning come
And say it's not a sacrament
I tell you that it can't be done

This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse
It made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
How things have changed since then
Everything is holy now
It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
Cause everything is holy now.
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now.
Amen.

Readings

Holy Now by Peter Mayer

When I was a boy, each week
On Sunday, we would go to church

And pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
Everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now

When I was in Sunday school
We would learn about the time
Moses split the sea in two
Jesus made the water wine
And I remember feeling sad
That miracles don't happen still
But now I can't keep track
Cause everything's a miracle
Everything, Everything
Everything's a miracle

Wine from water is not so small
But an even better magic trick
Is that anything is here at all
So the challenging thing becomes
Not to look for miracles
But finding where there isn't one

When holy water was rare at best
It barely wet my fingertips
But now I have to hold my breath
Like I'm swimming in a sea of it
It used to be a world half there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
Cause everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now