

The Sacred

It was a chilly April day at Cambridge University in Cambridge England and I was waiting to go inside King's College Chapel, one of the big tourist attractions on the campus. Now, I am fascinated by architecture and was looking around at the Gothic Revival buildings of King's College. The line moved and suddenly I was inside. The organist was practicing and I stood looking up at the exquisite fan vaulting on the ceiling. I couldn't speak and my eyes filled with tears at the beauty. I tried again to speak but all I could get out was: "Oh, my." That moment, my heart opened and the sound and the beauty of the vaulting filled my soul. That moment was sacred to me. I've been back there two more times and it has happened each time. One of the times was Evensong, that is a read and sung service in the Church of England. The choir school did the singing. Their voices filled the chapel and my soul was touched once again. A sacred moment also in a sacred space.

So who decides what is sacred. As UU's we can each decide for ourselves what is sacred, what is holy to us, what touches our soul. I don't know if we have any mountain climbers here, besides Rebecca, but it's hard not to see that Ruth Anne, the writer of today's reading, finds the summit of Mt McKinley sacred. The Alaskan natives call the mountain, Denali, meaning The Great One. It is their sacred mountain. The climb to the top is a sacred journey for Ruth Anne, one which she cannot allow herself to feel until she reaches the summit. There are many other mountains around the world that natives find sacred. Sherpas say a special prayer and hang prayer flags before climbing Everest.

Things that people find sacred may also be objects that are symbols of the sacred. Look at my left hand. It has a ring on it. I'll bet many of you also have a ring on your hand as a symbol of your marriage or relationship. Is that ring sacred or is your relationship sacred, or both. So what does it mean to have a relationship that is considered sacred? In many religions the rings are blessed by a clergy imbuing them with that sacred. My ring was never blessed because I was wearing it long before the Marriage Equality Act was passed in Connecticut. So is it not sacred? I believe that this ring is sacred as a symbol of the promises made to my relationship.

Sacred holds a greater meaning than what is apparent by the naming of an object, journey, or space. It expands our feelings and sometimes our belief in that word...sacred. Archeologists have found digging around the foundations of churches, evidence of earlier religious buildings. Many of the archeologists believe that the peoples of that earlier time felt the sacredness of that ground and later builders, not knowing of the earlier churches felt the same sacredness as they built their church on the same ground.

For each of you that is a question of whether you believe that a piece of ground can be sacred or not. How do we know that a piece of land is sacred? Sometimes a church is acquired, like ours, that was a car dealership and adult education building. Now, I for one, have a hard time finding a car dealership sacred, no judgement if you do. But what we did to make this building sacred is to have our minister bless it. That blessing allows for not only the building to be sacred but all the happenings inside. Does your committee meeting light a candle? Sunday Services does and I know Small Group Ministry does to indicate that we set that time apart as sacred and that the work we do is our ministry to the congregation.

What is different in Unitarian Universalism is that **we** can define our meetings as sacred and **we** decide our lay ministry to the congregation. And like other denominations we have clergy who have been trained and blessed to support us as we do the important work it takes to keep All Souls a vital healthy congregation.

What about secular symbols? Judith's former partner Charlene loved Great Blue Herons and took many pictures of them, did a cross stitch for me of one. She had a great love of nature and photographed many other things, but the heron seemed most connected to Charlene. Charlene had cancer that was diagnosed as fourth stage. A number of us cared for her in her terminal phase. We remember her very clearly because she was such a powerful person and so connected to nature. She has been gone 21 years but each time Judith and I see a Great Blue Heron in flight we say: "Hi Charl" and smile at each other as we remember Charlene. That Great Blue Heron stands for something larger than a bird. When we declare something sacred, such as a bird, it stands for something larger. It is a symbol of our memories of that person. It is a metaphor of connection to someone we loved. In that moment of looking at that bird again I can feel my

heart open and I am connected to Charlene and some power larger than both of us.

But I would ask the question “So why does any of this matter?” Maybe some of you are asking the same question. It matters because we need to imbue our lives with meaning. If nothing in our lives felt sacred or important what would our lives feel like? It is also very important that we get to choose our own “sacred.” We don’t have a creed, we don’t have a long list of what we are expected to believe, so if you ask me I will say “you have to believe something”. Barbara Wells, a UU minister, writes:” One of the wonders of UU church life is that the boundaries between the sacred and the secular need not exist. Spiritual encounters can take place anywhere,”

The journey that we take while searching for what we believe is also sacred. Our hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition” has a reading called “ It Matters What We Believe.” Our Vision Statement says: “All Souls welcomes seekers to our liberal religion”... The journey we all take through our lifetime can be, as our fourth principle states:” a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. Many of us who gather on Sundays come as seekers and searchers. We have vague ideas of what we believe to be important to us. As we search on our journey the sacred is often revealed to us. Perhaps during a service the music touches us and we find ourselves with tears on our cheeks at the beauty of the choir. Count that as a sacred moment and the choir as sacred for having presented it to you. If you have a favorite song that touches you in the same way you can download it or purchase the CD for when you feel the call to find that sacred peace. Tell me why Leonard Cohen’s “Halleluiah” brings tears to so many people. For me it is the soaring chorus. I’m sure for others it is the words, clearly metaphoric, or the harmonies when it is sung either as a chorus or a trio or small group.

As you heard this morning Nick Evento, Reverend Glennys Ulschak, Janet and Vic Marolda, David Gonzales-Rice and others are walking to Newtown to visit playgrounds along the way each of which is dedicated to a child who was killed in Newtown.

They will enact their sacred journey by walking about 200 miles leaving a stone for peace at each of 13 playgrounds. How could we call this journey anything but sacred and the stones that they will carry with them also. It is a way for those

walkers to enact the sacred as they journey to Newtown and back. We must each find a way to enact what we call sacred whether that is walk, a demonstration, a donation, planting a tree or donating a room in someone's name as some in our church have done.

I posted a question on chat and on Facebook. The question was : when you hear the word "sacred" what comes to your mind There were many and varied answers, and thank you to those that participated with your opinion.....now Rebecca and I will read a selection of these words and you will see how many words there are that have meaning for souls. Interestingly I got answers back from some of my Facebook friends who are not UU but have clearly given some thought to the meaning of sacred for them

Great Spirit	nature
Phrase in a book	Earth Mother
Special to my heart and soul	holy
Looking inward	birth, love, and death
Sacred space	connection to the Universe
Professing a Higher Power	Reverence
Precious	revered
God	Sacred Time
Divine	family
Responsibility	buildings

The hearing of other's selections is a way for each of you to courageously share something very important with other souls, and for all of us to connect with one another as this space is filled with many sacred words soaring out into Unity Hall and coming together as we come into community.

Amen and Blessed Be