

## Sacred Space

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Some two thousand, two hundred years ago, the most holy of sites to the Jewish people, the Temple in Jerusalem, was reclaimed from Syrians, who, allied with Greece, sought to banish all non-Greek religions in the Mediterranean basin, including Judaism.

In their years of occupation, the Syrians had conducted ritual sacrifices to Greek Gods and Goddesses in the Temple, destroying its purity as a site for the holiest of Jewish rituals.

This was a big deal. Before the year 70 CE, the Temple in Jerusalem was the only site at which important Jewish rituals could be performed, and access to the innermost rooms of the Temple was restricted to the priests who performed those rituals.

It was not until after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 that Judaism began to allow rituals to be performed elsewhere, and developed a form of worship that depended only upon enough people gathering in one place—a *minyan*—and not on the presence of priests in a specially-sanctified room. (Robinson, 15)

And the miracle that inspired the holiday we now know as Hanukkah happened because the priests who found the temple desecrated decided that the re-sanctification of this space could not wait until a new batch of ritual oil could be pressed, purified and blessed for this purpose.

Those priests decided that the Jewish people had gone long enough without access to their most sacred ritual space, and began the eight-day cleansing ceremony with one day's worth of oil in their lamp.

The altar in the Temple was a sacred space—not just to those priests but to all of the Jewish people. Having rituals performed at that altar was the ultimate act of defiance to an empire that sought to eradicate Judaism.

And so, as our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world prepare to kindle the lights of Hanukkah over the next eight evenings, I thought it appropriate to think about sacred spaces in our own lives.

Surely none of them rise to the level of the Temple in Jerusalem, the non-existence of which still sparks conflict in Israel (the Temple Mount is the site of a mosque, co-incidentally one of Islam's holiest sites). I don't mean to make a comparison at all.

It's just that in the lives of modern Jewish people, the Hanukkah candles are lit to celebrate a miracle from two thousand years ago. Where every menorah is lit today, a prayer will be said, marking that place and time as holy, as sacred.

We, too, have sacred places in our lives. We, too, have acts by which we infuse certain places with meaning and story. What are they for you?

I will give you an example.

Before I ever was a minister, I was asked to participate in the wedding of my good friends RJ and Alyssa. RJ was the friend who introduced me to Unitarian Universalism, and the wedding was to take place in the sanctuary of our UU congregation.

My friends' theology leaned in the direction of earth-centered pagan religions, and the ceremony was being performed by a mutual friend of ours, Catharine, who was a Wiccan priestess.

But Alyssa's family were conservative Catholics from Texas, and most any pagan ritual—even the lighting of candles and the calling of the four directions—would have sent them right for the door. To many gathered there that day, it was bad enough this wedding was taking place in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

I was singing the prelude. I sang a John Lennon song entitled *Grow Old With Me*. Just before the ceremony, Catharine pulled me aside and explained that my job in singing that song was to cast a sacred circle in which the wedding would take place.

To those whose theology is pagan, creating a sacred circle is an essential element of any ritual. Normally, that is done by invoking the spirits of the directions. That day, it had to be done with the intention I put into the song.

What did it mean that my singing had to sanctify that space? What kind of sacred space needed to be created? How could I do that—little old me?

And yet I did it. Without anyone there being the wiser except Catharine, Alyssa, RJ and myself. And that was all that was needed.

All of us have places in our lives—no matter where or how we live—that are special, in which special things happen, places that invoke in us a feeling of oneness with the world, of being surrounded by love, of closeness to God, or of peace and calm.

It is easiest for me to experience sacred space outside—amid the wonders of nature. This is the kind of sacred space best left to poets and writers to describe.

Nineteenth century British poet John Ruskin once wrote:

*"There is religion in everything around us. A calm and holy religion in the unbreathing things in Nature.... It is written on the arched sky; it looks out from every star; it is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind; it is among the hills and valleys of the earth, where the shrub less mountain top pierces the thin atmosphere of eternal winter, or where the mighty forest fluctuates before the strong wind, with its dark waves of green foliage; it is spread out like a legible language upon the broad face of an unsleeping ocean; it is the poetry of Nature, it is that which uplifts the spirit within us... And which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty and holiness."  
(Ruskin)*

Poet Mary Oliver writes often of the sacredness of nature. Her poem "Poppies," ends with these words:

*But I also say this: that light  
is an invitation  
to happiness,  
and that happiness,*

*when it's done right,  
is a kind of holiness,  
palpable and redemptive.  
Inside the bright fields,*

*touched by their rough and spongy gold,  
I am washed and washed  
in the river  
of earthly delight—*

*and what are you going to do—  
what can you do  
about it—  
deep, blue night? (Oliver)*

And I have experienced a sacred communion with nature more times than I can count. Special places and times are etched into my soul forever. Years ago, I wrote a piece for a local independent newspaper in which I reflected on one such place, Pea Creek. Here's part of what I wrote:

*As I flipped my calendar to June and turned on the car's AC to ward off the sweltering heat, I was reminded that it's just about Pea Creek time.*

*I look forward to that time in the summer when the air is hazy and still and the long evening hours are bathed in a warm twilight glow. It's at that time of year that I'll get calls from friends in the middle of the afternoon asking if I'd like to go swimming that night...*

*We gather at the swimming hole in silence and slip into the cool, flowing waters. We splash and we laugh. We swing from the rope through the air and crash through the glassy surface of the pool. We sit on the banks and chat. We toss balls to the dogs, watching them leap into the water to retrieve them for us. Floating down the slowly moving river, we revert to days of our youth, spent swimming in streams from upstate New York to west Texas to the Oregon coast.  
(Tino)*

In my worldview, I exist surrounded by that which is greater than me. This sacredness, that which I feel comfortable calling “God,” is everywhere and in everything. The magical and holy feeling I get from being in our natural world—be it walking on the Outer Banks under the light of a full moon, playing on the rocks in Central Park or sitting on a rock high in the Blue Ridge mountains—the feeling I get from these places is sacred, and makes me believe in the immanence of God—the ever-presence of the holy in every space around us.

And this sacredness is not just in nature, but in the special spaces around us each and every day.

We create sacred spaces indoors as well. The casting of a circle, the building of an altar, that favorite chair in which you read the Sunday paper.

Edward Searl, in his book *A Place of Your Own*, talks about creating special spaces in our homes as places to remind us of our connection to nature and to others. To him, an altar is a place where someone “invokes and has a relationship with the transcendent.” (Searl)

Whatever your theology, such a space in your life can help you connect with that which is beyond you. To center you in your spiritual practice, to remind you of treasured relationships, to spur you to action. Searl uses humanist language to illustrate how each of us needs some place to connect us with the greater body of human experience.

To him, his altar is encouragement to change, to reflect on our needs, and to spark creativity in his life. He seeks, as late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister William Channing Gannett spoke about, “the domestication of the infinite.”

Do you have such a space in your home? Somewhere set aside for specific contemplation? Somewhere decorated with objects of myth and memory, things that spark in you feelings of connection to the infinite?

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a conference on Star Island, a UU conference center on a rocky island off the coast of New Hampshire. If you’ve been there, you might understand why many claim it as their “spirit’s home.”

One particularly sacred space on the island is the chapel. Perched on the island’s highest point, the tiny stone chapel is the site of evening worship services. Each night, conferees walk in silence up to the chapel carrying candle lanterns, which, when hung from pegs in the walls, provide the chapel’s only light. Lit by dozens of candles, the chapel glows with spirit.

The physical atmosphere of this place certainly contributes to its sacred nature, but the reverence with which it is treated makes it sacred space. The uphill walk in silence...the long line of lanterns making their way around rocks and crags to the chapel...the slow, deliberate peal of the chapel’s bell...the ritual hanging of the lanterns. It is this that creates sacred space.

Similarly here and in our everyday lives, whatever space we're in becomes sacred by what we do in it. My friends' wedding was conducted in a sacred space because those of us assembled to witness it made it one.

Over two thousand years ago, priests arrived at their most holy place after years of exile to find it defiled, unusable for the rituals and ceremonies they had been unable to perform in their banishment from Jerusalem.

To those priests, the creation of sacred space was of primary importance. It required them to act with faith in God's miracles and in the face of reason, which told them that they had not enough oil to complete the ceremony.

We are told that the oil lasted eight days. We are told that the purification ritual was complete, that the light of the lamp burned bright throughout the night. And yet, only the priests were allowed in that inner-most room of the Temple. Only they witnessed the miracle.

I mean no offense in my clear implication that perhaps one day's oil lasted one day and the priests continued the ceremony anyway. I hope no offense has been taken.

What I think is important to recognize, though, is that those priests made the decision that the holiest rituals of their faith—rituals that could only be performed at the sacred altar of the Temple—had waited long enough. They decided that waiting for more oil brought their faith that much closer to being eradicated by the Syrians and the Greeks. And so they blessed their space, using whatever oil they could find, with only the holiest of intentions.

Sometimes a sacred circle needs to be cast with a love song instead of candles and invocations to spirits and elements.

It is up to us to create sacred space. We can all create places in our lives that serve as continual blessings to us and those around us. If we choose to praise each day, to sanctify each space, we will live in concert with the transcendent and we will truly be blessed.

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