

THE EVERYDAY SACRED
By Michael A. Schuler, Senior Minister
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For almost thirty years now I have witnessed people from across the globe venturing into the Landmark Meeting House, eager to see firsthand what **Frank Lloyd Wright** hath wrought. I notice their expressions as they enter the sanctuary, and try to discern what they're feeling: admiration? Awe? Surprise? Fascination? Bewilderment?

So what, I ask myself, provokes such reactions? Is it the cult of personality surrounding the architect himself, such that his creations, like those of a Picasso or a Mozart, are automatically elevated to a higher plane? I suppose the fruit of recognized genius always captures our full attention.

The notoriety of its designer aside, as religious edifices go, our Meeting House is really rather modest. Few, if any, of the elements delineating sacred space are present: no iconography, no stained glass, no altar rail or polished brass. **Wright** used to say that the prow itself was meant to convey the impression of praying hands, but if he hadn't suggested it, I doubt that many casual observers would make that connection.

Originally, of course, occupants of the Auditorium would have enjoyed an unobstructed view of what were then agricultural fields and the shimmering waters of Lake Mendota beyond. When combined with the exposed, natural elements of the interior space, this certainly created a sensation of unity with the surrounding environment. With apologies to **Adrienne Rich**, we might call the structure a "transcendental etude" composed of living stone.

In any event, all of this got me to thinking once again about the nature of the sacred. What gives something that quality? Does it reside in the object or act itself, as part of its essential nature? Or, is it rather a sensibility or attitude we ourselves bring to that which we

contemplate? Or, to put it another way, can something be objectively sacred or is sacredness primarily a perceptual matter. Does it, like beauty, lie in the eye of the beholder?

The word itself derives from the Latin "sacer," which literally means "holy" or "cursed." In its original sense, to be "cursed" didn't mean something was evil or undesirable. A "cursed" object or person was deemed taboo or at least to be approached very carefully because of its association with powerful and potentially dangerous metaphysical forces. As **Mircea Eliade** wrote in his classic study,

...the sacred is the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, nor in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world.

Eliade's definition of the sacred can be usefully applied to the Kaaba in Mecca – Islam's holy of holies; to the subterranean kivas in Pueblo culture; Buddhist stupas, Christian reliquaries and to Judaism's Torah scrolls. For the faithful in these traditions, the only appropriate attitude to assume when in their presence is reverence and self-negating admiration.

We may question the validity of this notion – the idea that something, anything, can be intrinsically sacred – in light of modernity's increasingly relativistic and commercialized outlook. Objects regarded as spiritually potent to one people are routinely expropriated and put up for sale by others who don't share that understanding. As

Wendell Berry glumly observes, "...far from assigning an absolute value to these things, the financial system puts a price, though a highly variable price, on everything...."

We see the collision of these two standards of evaluation in almost every episode of PBS's "Antique Roadshow" as people bring their possessions in for expert appraisal. For some, the monetary value assigned to the artifact is paramount, and their delight or disappointment in the dollar figure they're quoted is clearly evident. Others – and there aren't nearly as many – seem more interested in the provenance of the piece. Whatever its commercial worth it's not something they're prepared to part with. Their purpose in being there is to increase their knowledge of and deepen their appreciation for something they already hold dear, if not sacred.

Similarly, certain civic observances have long been invested with the same quality. When the President of the United States takes the oath of office, he is thought to be assuming a sacred obligation to uphold the Constitution and, by implication, to prioritize the interests of the republic and its citizens. The fact that most U.S. Presidents have placed their hand on a Bible while reciting the oath reminds them to treat it with the utmost seriousness. Frankly, I don't think **Mr. Trump**, who spent his whole life wheeling and dealing, really gets that.

For ordinary citizens, the National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance are accorded a similar status. In repeating them, we profess fealty to and a willingness to sacrifice for the sovereign state. Because they see loyal citizenship as a sacred trust, many Americans are deeply offended when someone, whether out of pique or personal principle, refuses to participate in these civic rituals. Even if repeated mindlessly and while clutching a beer in one hand, respect must be paid to the Anthem.

It strikes me, however, that when someone like former NFL quarterback **Colin Kaepernick**, breaks that rule, he may be taking the National Anthem more seriously than his critics. He, at least, has thought long and hard about the words and their underlying significance. He knows that the promise contained in those words remains, for many,

unfulfilled. By kneeling during the playing of the anthem he gives visible expression to his belief that something sacred has been defiled.

The foregoing is indicative of a larger trend – the unrelenting de-sacrilization of the world. It's not a trivial matter because by depriving us of experiences that generate feelings of respect and concern, this trend threatens much that we ought to care deeply about. In his book *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*, **Thomas Moore** has this to say:

In modern life we are not prepared to honor the hidden and the invisible. We know how to deal with what is plainly in front of us, but we have forgotten technologies of reverence that were once commonplace.... With its emphasis on efficiency and practicality, modern life works against a sustained appreciation of the numinous.

This statement hearkens back to that definition of the sacred I shared earlier. **Moore** invokes the term "numinous" which, when it is present, leaves the impression of something mysterious and vaguely magical. Confronted with the numinous we are reminded that, "there is more to heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in our philosophies." The numinous is akin to the sacred because there is something about both that can be intuited but not fully grasped by the intellect.

In any case, the numinous, like the sacred, possesses absolute and not just instrumental value. It is not its usefulness or the market price that counts, but the claim it places on us to approach life – our lives and the lives of others – more graciously, gratefully and caringly. As one commentator put it, the sacred is perceived as "richer in being" or "more saturated with being" than ordinary reality, and thus our experience of it becomes richer and fuller as well.

But becoming cognizant of that sacredness can be difficult for instrumentalists who aren't

used to thinking in such terms. That's why it's important, as **Thomas Moore** said, to rediscover the "technologies of reverence" by which hearts and minds are opened to what would otherwise remain inaccessible.

For **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, prayer was such a technology and he defined it thus: "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul." Earlier in our service **Claire Box** stressed the importance of "Bringing our whole self to any given experience." This is a type of prayer as well - a "prayer of opening" which can serve as a gateway to reverence.

Daniel Dennett is a philosopher-scientist whose book *Breaking the Spell* laid bare the humbuggery of traditional religion. He's often counted among those thoroughgoing modern materialists who have helped advance the cause of the "new atheism." One might not expect **Dennett** to have much use for a category called "the sacred," but in fact he does. **Dennett** says that as he contemplates the infinitely rich Tree of Life that has spread, root and branch, over the entire planet, it leaves him humbled and amazed. "Is this **Tree of Life** a god one could worship or pray to," he asks? Answering his own question, he says,

I certainly cannot. But I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. To me the world is sacred.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Deep Ecologists and those who have been swept up by what **Duane Elgin** calls "Cosmophilia" – a profound love for and belonging to the totality of nature. It's the kind of feeling I've had while gazing across Lake Jackson toward the majestic Teton Range, or while hiking through an ecologically rich tall grass prairie, alive with flitting butterflies and colorful finches.

In contrast to such expansive and breathtaking perceptions of the sacred, others are much more intimate. When the Jewish

theologian **Martin Buber** sat watching his cat one day he suddenly became aware of its "Thou-ness" as a sentient being; it was no longer a mere animal, an "it" but a being imbued with significance. Sometimes this shift of perception will occur when we least expect it and in a way that completely defies our expectations. In her last collection of essays, **Ursula K. Le Guin** describes such an encounter from years earlier that was burned into her memory.

Le Guin had just left her house in Napa Valley to sit in the yard. She was about to ease into a chaise lounge when she heard a hiss and the telltale rattle. As she turned she saw the startled rattlesnake slithering toward the high grass. But then the snake stopped, turned its head and looked at her. Both parties froze, but **Le Guin** held its gaze and, she writes, "We were like people newly in love who can't take their eyes off each other."

But, of course, the two of them were by no means in love. Under ordinary circumstances snake and woman would have had nothing to do with each other, their mutual impulse being either to run away or, if necessary, lash out. But neither one moved nor looked away, and this went on for six, seven or even ten minutes. "We were alone together," **Le Guin** writes, "alone in all the world...bound together by common fear...entranced."

Ursula Le Guin describes this out-of-the-ordinary, timeless encounter as, in its own way, sacred. "Over the years I have thought of again and again," she says,

...always with the vividness of the moment and always with a sense of its importance, or import: of there being a great deal to learn from it.

So, there it is again, that sense of the numinous embodied in an inexplicable, transient communion between human and reptile. It was, in its own way, a miracle – the kind of miracle that, as **Willa Cather** puts it in her novel *Death*

Comes for the Archbishop, “results from our perceptions made finer so that for a moment our eyes can see...what is there about us always.”

This, no less than the **Grand Tetons**, is convincing evidence of the Tree of Life’s magnificence, and of the privilege we have to be a fleeting part of it all. In the words of a **Pawnee Indian Prayer**:

Remember, remember the circle of the sky, the stars and brown eagle, the supernatural winds breathing night and day from the four directions.

Remember, remember the sacredness of things, running streams and dwellings, the young within the nest, a hearth for sacred fire. Remember!