

Sacred Places

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

23 June 2019

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“This is the day the Lord has made...” is not the usual way to begin a service in a Unitarian church. So I won’t do it. But at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, they begin their explicitly atheist services with a modified form of that traditional line. The preacher steps up to the podium and says “This is a day not of our own making.” It’s a way of acknowledging that, whatever our individual philosophies, theologies, and sources of meaning, we all woke up this morning into a world that operates on a scale much larger than our personal perspective or understanding. To acknowledge this is to begin to touch the sacred.

Wendell Berry says “There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” I think of the word “desecrate” as mostly a synonym for destroy. But it means something more basic – it’s a place where the innate sacredness of life is ignored or overlooked. So according to Berry, we can’t make something unsacred, we can only treat it that way. By the same token, we can’t make anything sacred. The world is made sacred of its own accord. What we can do to a place is to *consecrate* it: to lift up and celebrate its inherent sacredness, to bring it into our focused attention. We can do this in any place and at any time, though I would say it’s often most powerful when done in ritual as part of a group.

Thinking about the sacred and what it means to consecrate a place takes me back to a quirky feature of my time as a university student in religious studies in Montreal. There’s a chapel in the Birks Religious Studies building at McGill University which is called the Birks Heritage Chapel. It’s called the *heritage* chapel because it’s officially not a chapel anymore. It looks like a chapel, it feels like a chapel – architecturally speaking, it’s decidedly more church-y and chapel-y than many religious buildings I’ve been in, but it’s emphatically not a chapel. It’s a heritage chapel, which means that it was officially “de-consecrated,” so although it’s still used for weddings, memorials and the like, those events can’t officially be considered church services in some traditions. As far as I understand it, this “deconsecration” happened as part of the secularization of the university at some point in the second half of the 20th century, though the exact details are not easy to find. Though the religious studies department was once called the “faculty of divinity,” at some point it was decided that a secular, public university couldn’t have a church on campus. It’s always struck me as a strange phenomenon, this “deconsecration,” but it’s not necessarily absurd if you’re willing to inhabit that mindset. If everywhere is sacred, it is up to us to decide whether or not to behave that way or not in a given place and time, and in a

way it's just formalizing our intuitive habits of behaving differently in a place or worship, or in an old growth forest than we would behave at a movie theatre or the grocery store. We talk differently, we move differently. There's something different about the place, one way or another.

"There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." These few lines of Berry's poem have often been quoted by people, including myself, without knowing the text as a whole. Until recently, when I read the entire poem, I had always assumed they came from one of Berry's essays about farming or ecology. But instead, they're from a poem. And it's not a poem about religion, it's not a poem about open-pit mining, garbage dumps, or 16-lane highways, which are the kinds of things that come to my mind when I think of desecrated places. It's a poem *about poetry*, of all things. Why does he make a statement like that in a poem called "how to be a poet.?" And what does it have to say to those of us who are not poets? "Breathe with unconditional breath the unconditioned air. Shun electric wire. Communicate slowly. *Live a three-dimensional life. Stay away from screens. Stay away from anything that obscures the place it is in.*"

The poem was first published in 2005, so when he says "shun electric wire," I don't think he means to use more wireless devices instead. "Stay away from screens. Stay away from anything that obscures the place that it's in." Like many of us, I suspect, I have a decidedly mixed relationship with devices like the one I am preaching from right now. Much has been said about the proliferation of screens in our lives - their uses and their harms - and I won't repeat any of that. I'll just share a story and the feelings it provokes in me.

Over the past year, as our son Darragh started laughing, crawling, walking and all the amazing things babies do, we have tried to capture bits of it in photo and video to remember some of the incredible moments. And then there are the pictures with grandparents and siblings and more. And the shots for the sake of family living in far-off places who want to get updates and be a part of things. It adds up. One father I met on the GO train strongly urged me to take more videos, because that's what he wishes he had more of now that his kids are older. And we do take them. Though quite often, when we reach for our screens in a moment of laughter and play, we end up feeling like we muddle up the moment by trying to *capture* it, just like the beauty of a wild songbird takes on a somber melancholy feeling the moment we try to *capture* it and put it in a cage. Sometimes words reveal a lot.

And sometimes I have this image that arises of Darragh looking at me when he's a lot older, maybe a teenager, scrolling through the piles of pictures and videos and saying, "Did you really spend all that time looking at me through a screen when I was right there in front of you?" Maybe he'll never think or say anything of the sort, but it's an image that troubles me and makes me slow down a lot of the time when I have the impulse to document a moment with him instead of just being a part of it.

Mark Morrison-Reed says ““I came as a cloud shading those I loved, dew that glistened and evaporated, tears coursing down, waters of joy and gratitude. Life’s precipitation can’t be captured or contained. Only kissed.” In fact, I would say that it’s a defining feature of the sacred that it’s impossible to capture. A sacred place is a place where we can kiss the waters of life.

But there’s more to say about screens, and not the digital kind. Like many people in this city, and maybe in this room too, I recently got a crash course in basketball. My early interest in basketball was curbed after I got the message that I did not have the ideal build for the sport, though I can’t imagine why anyone would think that. But I learned that in basketball, the common offensive play called a pick and roll involves “picking,” or “screening” a defender, so that they can’t see the player carrying the ball and what they are about to do with it. This is similar in hockey, where players will “screen” the goalie so that they can’t see where a shot is headed, making it much harder to stop.

So in its digital sense, a screen is *something that we look at*, but its deeper meaning – or at least its deeper meaning in sports – is something that *prevents us from seeing*, prevents us from perceiving what it is that we need to pay attention to. “Stay away from screens. Stay away from anything that obscures the place that it’s in.” So in that sense, a digital device might be a screen, depending on the spirit in which we are using it. But there are many more screens out there. Relentless advertising is a screen. Being in a hurry is a screen. Stereotypes about people we barely know are a screen. Which is why breaking down stereotypes of all kinds, and encouraging people to meet and really encounter one another across lines of politics, identity, race, gender, religion, language and more is one of the most sacred things we can do. The pride festivities happening in Toronto right now are an example of that. Over several momentous and tumultuous decades, the evolving pride movement has taken the humanity of LGBTQI+ people from something hidden behind screens of prejudice, hate and misunderstanding into increasingly fuller view. Perhaps the next several decades will see us drop many more of the screens that cause us to see one another and the world around us as anything less than fully sacred. As the song we sometimes sing goes, “How could anyone ever tell you, you are anything else but beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you are less than whole?” Pray that the wholeness of each of us shines with undeniable brightness always.

“Stay away from anything that obscures the place that it’s in.” To say the same thing in opposite form: when you truly inhabit the place where you are, you are in sacred space. Be in the place you’re in and that place shall be sacred.

Be in the place you’re in, and that place shall be sacred. Be with the people you are with, and you shall know them to be sacred. There are no unsacred places. There are no unsacred times. There are no unsacred people. Amen, and blessed be.