

JANUARY'S THEME: THE HOLY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
January 4, 2015

OPENING WORDS

~ Rebecca Parker (from a larger poem)

Let there be a season
when holiness is heard and
The splendor of living is revealed.
Stunned to stillness by beauty
we remember who we are and why we are here.
There are inexplicable mysteries.
We are not alone.
In the universe there moves a Wild One
whose gestures alter earth's axis
toward love.
In the immense darkness
everything spins with joy.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

When the Sky is Like Lace ~ Elinor Lander Horwitz

(In this story, the author explains what happens on a 'bimulous' night, and told how we might prepare for nights like that.)

READING

What is Sacred?

~ Patrick O'Neill

In the winter 2007 issue of the UUWorld magazine, an article called "What is the Sacred" quotes Rev. Patrick O'Neill as saying that the sacred, the holy, is found in the relationship of all living things. He writes:

"There is something innate to human nature, something basic to our civilized sensibility that recognizes certain distinctions of worth in reality. And the name we have traditionally given to the highest of these is "the holy" or "the sacred."

I am suggesting that there is a part of human experience that evokes an attitude of reverence, awe, and ultimate respect, a category of transcendence.

My own concept of the sacred these days is less concerned with divine mysteries and Latin definitions than with a simple recognition of the relatedness of all life and our place within the web of existence. For me, the sacred is that which binds us to all other living things and to the Earth which is our home.

Even if no divinity exists, for me the relationship of all living things, each to the other and to the world which sustains us, is sacred. Whatever violates that relation violates the sacred. Whatever nourishes that relation increases it. Whatever calls us to an appreciation of that relation, calls us to holiness, invites us to the sacred.

Finally, this may be the truth of the matter: The things that are holy and sacred in this life are neither stored away on mountaintops nor locked away in arcane secrets of the saints. I doubt that any church has a monopoly on them either. What holiness there is in this world resides in the ordinary bonds between us and in whatever bonds we manage to create between ourselves and the divine.

We act as agents of the sacred by our choice to view this world in a religious way. We are co-creators and preservers of God's beauty in the world, in our art, in our science, in our service to high ideals, and not least in our devotion to the good and the just."

MESSAGE

Shortly after I arrived in Peterborough, someone told me a story about an incident that occurred early in our residence here with Beth Israel. I don't remember the details...a testament to the holey memory I have...but there was a break-in, or maybe simply an unlocked door, and when the president of the synagogue was contacted, he rushed over, and the first thing he did was to check the ark behind me, to be sure the scrolls were okay. That reminded me of a story I'd heard.

There is a priest walking down the street who sees the church is on fire. He runs in, grabs the communion set, and runs out. The church burns down, but he gives thanks that the communion set could be spared.

There is a rabbi walking down the street who sees the synagogue is on fire. He runs in, grabs the Sefer Torah, the scrolls on which are written the five books of Moses. The synagogue burns down but the rabbi gives thanks that the Torah was spared from the fire.

A Unitarian Universalist minister is walking down the street and sees that the UU church is on fire. She runs in and grabs the coffee maker.

Whichever of you told me of that earlier, real-life, incident posed a similar wondering... what it is that we would check on, what would we grab? What is holy to us?

In order to even begin to answer that question, we first have to see if we can define what 'holy' or 'the holy' means. Those of you who have read our January theme packet (and a few B&W copies are available in the brochure rack) probably noticed that I'm sort of stumped by this question. I think I can recognize, or feel, what is holy when I encounter it, but I don't know how to describe it. Even the dictionary definitions dodge the question...expressing how and when the word is used, rather than what it really means.

What is the holy?...if such a thing even exists. Is it even worth pursuing, or noticing? How is something or someone made holy? Should it be a part of our tradition, our gatherings? If identified, what ought to be our response? Today we begin that exploration.

Finding a children's story that somehow relates to the holy was a challenge. I could find no lists of books on the subject...and catalogue word searches only turned up books with a particular religious bent. Thankfully, just yesterday I discovered in Elinor Horwitz's "When the Sky is Like Lace" an attempt to help children to understand and identify a holy experience...an attempt that might also help us, as adults, to grasp some possible understanding of 'the holy.'

I love that Horwitz uses a made up word...bimulous...to describe a holy night, a holy experience. Made up, perhaps, because there simply aren't real words that describe it adequately.

I love that a bimulous night doesn't mean that everything is perfect. There may still be species-ist otters, and sulking snails, and gourami's you should never kiss.

I love that in her story, even though the holy, a bimulous night, doesn't happen very often, there are noticeable reactions. It makes otters sing, and snails sulk, and trees dance, and grass take on the scent of gooseberry jam. It inspires rituals...first eating, then singing, then presents.

I love that Horwitz suggests that encountering the holy involves paying special attention, in order not to miss it. Prepare yourself, she says. Start making spaghetti and don't wear anything orange.

I love that in the story, having a holy experience changes a person. It makes you want to do something unusual...like riding a camel, or gathering cornflowers, or hopping up and down in the mud.

I love all of this.

What I don't particularly like in this story, or at least what I don't want to associate with 'the holy' in my own definition, is that it happens so rarely. I don't believe this to be true. I believe that the holy is happening in every moment, if we choose to see it. What I believe about the holy is that in our act of seeing, we are actually co-creators of the holy moment. In other words, the holy is not found, not experienced, in the FACT of the bimulous night, but rather by our participation in it.

Maybe you don't see it the way I do. (I might call this a 'holy conversation'... which is to say, respectfully exploring a topic across our different ways of perceiving and thinking.) Some might want to make a distinction between what is 'sacred'...that is, made holy by some human act or sacrament...and what is 'holy' by virtue of its own nature...that is, having a particular 'otherness' or a distinctly 'higher' quality without any human intervention. I guess this is similar to the debate about whether God, if there be a god, is something outside of us, or something found within and among us. Is the divine spark given to us, or inherent in us? It would certainly be possible for us to get into a heady discussion, and thereby completely avoid any holy experience.

In Patrick O'Neill's writing about what is sacred (which Paula read earlier,) no distinction is made between what is sacred and what is holy, and like him, I don't want to put too fine a point on this, because I think it simply gets in the way of our understanding of what the holy might be. But, let me come back to this in a few minutes.

Perhaps the Torah scrolls are so important to the Jewish congregation because the stories it contains are holy to them. In fact, a classic story about 'the holy moment' comes from the Torah, from the book of Exodus.

There's this ordinary guy, Moses, out in the field taking care of sheep and goats for his father-in-law. He and the animals are out in nowhere, in the wilderness, and suddenly he sees a flaming bush...but what was particularly unusual is that even though the bush was on fire, it wasn't being burned up! He gets closer, and then to make it even more strange, God calls to him out of the bush. "Moses! Moses!" and tells him not to come any closer. Then God tells him to take off his sandals, because he's standing on holy ground.

Now as the story goes, Moses' first reaction was to cover his face because he was afraid to look at God, or maybe just afraid because of how weird the experience was...a burning bush that talks...and knows his name!

But then God goes on to tell Moses that he has picked him to be the one to lead his people out of slavery and into a good land. Moses is skeptical...of course, I mean who wouldn't be. "Why me?" he says to God. "What makes you think I could lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He continues to offer excuses, but eventually is convinced, and well, you know how the rest of the Exodus story goes.

You have to wonder what made that spot 'holy ground.' Was it the miracle of the burning bush? Was it the fact that God was present, and was speaking? Was it that there was a call to some greater purpose for Moses' life? All of the above?

I don't know. Interpret it however you'd like. But, what I like about this story is that God tells Moses to take off his sandals... take off those shoes, or anything that gets in the way of experiencing this directly. Feel it way down in the soles of your feet. Get raw contact with the warm sand, or the nettles, or the stones, or whatever else you might touch. Take away the barriers. Put your skin to the holy. Do something to mark this as a special time and place. Take off your sandals, this is holy ground.

I've got a burning bush in my yard. You know the kind...the kind where the leaves turn particularly and translucently red in the fall. These bushes seem to glow with fire, and mine is positioned in a place where the autumn sun hits it both morning and afternoon...lighting it up, as it were. I've taken many pictures of this bush, although the photos never do it justice. Perhaps what I need to do, in those moments of noticing, is to simply take off my shoes, sink my toes into the sweet gooseberry grass, and experience it. Simply soak it in. Maybe I could hear what it might be saying to me. "Go and shine, Julie. Go and be bold, Julie. Don't be afraid of colour, Julie." I could stand right there in my backyard and be on holy ground.

But let me get back to this question of what is sacred, what is holy. O'Neill maintains that there is something innate in humanity that allows us to be aware of distinctions and qualities that seem worthy of our attention, of our honour, of our worship. We have the ability to see things in certain ways and to set aside times as special or unusual. Or put another way, we, as humans, have the capacity for awe, for reverence, for respect. And we label the things which evoke these feelings as 'holy' or 'sacred.'

O'Neill then goes on to say that what is holy, for him, is the relationship of all living things, each to the other and to the world which sustains us all. Since that relationship is holy, to violate it is particularly degenerative. And to nourish that relationship increases the sacred in life. In other words, once we notice the holy, and name it, our obligation to honour it increases. To bless and not to curse, to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder.

His is a fine definition of what the holy is...for him. The relationship of all living things is what evokes awe and reverence in him, and it may well evoke similar feelings in you, and in me. Or, it could be something else entirely that you recognize as only. But I think this is particularly important; O'Neill goes on to say: "The things that are holy and sacred in this life are neither stored away on mountaintops nor locked away in arcane secrets of the saints...We act as agents of the sacred by our choice to view this world in a religious way. We are co-

creators and preservers of [the holy] in the world, in our art, in our science, in our service to high ideals, and not least in our devotion to the good and the just.”

The holy is not locked away. We are its co-creators and preservers.

Now, a few of you may have noticed that I haven't said much of anything this morning that relates to what was 'advertised' for today...that is, the connection between 'the holy' and 'health' and 'wholeness'...after all, these words are linked to the same root. It could be that explore this connection next week, yet I don't know of any particular studies. I have to admit that I haven't really looked, because personally, I'd rather try not to describe the holy by way of a scientific study; I'm pretty sure that, whatever it is, it can't be quantified in this way.

I don't know what the holy is. And maybe it's best not to try to define it. So instead, let's imagine what it's like to be in its presence. Let's imagine that there is a place or time...a particular landscape, an inner attitude, a random awareness, a circle etched in the sand...and when you're there, you feel an unusually acute sense of being alive and connected. You feel whole and loved. You sense electricity running through your body and feel powerfully connected to all that is. When you're there, when you can access or create this place or time, you experience incredible inner peace, and the boundaries dissolve between what is and what can be. There, you hear singing voices of support and encouragement...voices that affirm all that is good and just. Whether your eyes are open or closed, whether you are young or old, whether or not you entered this place broken and sad, you know, in your bones, that all shall be well. You feel whole and at the same time you know that there is so much more beyond just who you are and whatever you have done. Just being in this presence, in this place, lifts your chest, and lightens your load, and pulls you onward. You are immersed in awe. Swimming in holy water.

Now imagine that this place, this bimulous circle in the sand, is right here. Right here on this pretty, spinning planet. Mark it. Pay attention. Uncover your face. Take off your shoes and step closer. Bury your toes in this gooseberry scented spot. Sing. Hop up and down in the mud. Look up at the moon and see him winking at you.

You don't want to miss this. This is what matters. This is holy ground.

Amen.

READING #489 (Singing the Living Tradition) ~ *Max Coots*

When love is felt or fear is known,
__When holidays and holy days and such times come,
When anniversaries arrive by calendar or consciousness,
__When seasons come, as seasons do, old and known, but somehow new,
When lives are born or people die,
__When something sacred's sensed in soil or sky,
Mark the time.
__Respond with thought or prayer or smile or grief,
Let nothing living slip between the fingers of the mind,
__For all of these are holy things we will not, cannot, find again.

CLOSING WORDS

~ *Peter Mayer (adapted)*

Our closing words are adapted from the lyrics to “Holy Now” by UU singer/songwriter Peter Mayer:

As children, each week 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.
Because when holy water is rare, it barely wets our fingertips.
But now...just stand outside in the mornings.
See a little red-winged bird...shining like a burning bush... singing like a scripture
verse.
Take a breath, and see that we're swimming in a sea of holy water.
Then bow your head, and walk with a reverent air,
'Cause everything is holy now.
Everything is holy now.

Amen.