

What is Sacred? – Rev. Louise Green

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The root of the word “sacred” is from the Latin, *sacrare*, to *make* sacred, or to consecrate. There is a deeper root in the Old Latin *saq*, to bind, restrict, enclose and protect. The root of the word “religion” is also “to bind fast” from *religare*. What we say is sacred is fastened to collective tradition and to our individual understanding of the world. The sacred is what we construct and what we perceive, shaped by our living and our search for deeper meaning. I’m going to reflect on the question, “What is sacred?” by using my own story this morning.

I grew up in the Presbyterian church, as child, grandchild and great-grandchild of church elders, ministers and missionaries. Until I was 18, my sense of the sacred was shaped by the repeating rhythm of the Christian year, the concept of a loving Trinitarian God, and a congregation that was both comforting and challenging. In the sanctuary of my home church, I felt connected. Connected to God, the teachings of Jesus, my family history--all rooting me in values I still hold today.

When I left home at 18, I left organized church—mostly in terms of attention, as religion was not of strong relevance in my life. I found friends and loved ones to be the primary source of sustenance, and was inspired by the beauty of nature and the arts. As a student of English and Spanish literature, and a practitioner of dance, I found meaning most in words and movement. The sacred was an ambiguous question mark for me: untethered to a particular tradition.

As I approached the age of 30, a progressive Christian congregation in Chicago grabbed my attention fiercely. I fell in love with worship and community there, evoking a startling and disruptive response—within a year, I was enrolled at Harvard Divinity School, on the way to becoming an ordained minister. I went to Harvard because I was fascinated with the breadth of traditions there, a rich smorgasbord of the theist, pantheist, non-theist and secular. I chose the United Church of Christ for ordination, a liberal Christian denomination connected to my own history, yet more inclusive than the Presbyterian Church. The sacred was again tethered for me, bound to particular practice that was at

the same time familiar and new. I embraced an evolving sense of the sacred, within in a Christian Universalist tradition.

As many of you know, I was an associate minister in two UCC congregations, and a community organizer in three different affiliates in New York City. In organizing, my work expanded to Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Unitarian, and Muslim congregations. What I experienced was the unbinding again of religious sensibility--I could enter many different traditions and feel a connection to the sacred. I appreciated diverse ways that congregations do spiritual practice, saw that people found deep meaning in very different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. The sacred started to be vast and slippery. The categories from my own history began to expand, and entry points for religion, God, Spirit, practice, all started to multiply for me.

Six years ago, I came to All Souls to experience a Unitarian Universalist congregation more deeply, as a minister. Here we draw from many sacred sources, as our UUA statement cites—world religious traditions, Judeo-Christian historical framework, the interdependence of all creation, highest human values, action in the world of prophetic men and women working for justice. We say we are open, and yet, it is very important to see that we are still bound: we are tied to a particular lens which is *itself* a view of the sacred, the liberal view that many sources are valid.

Today, I fully embrace this UU lens, and yet also appreciate the depth and beauty of particular traditions. I strongly affirm the experience of those who plant deeply in one tradition, and do not believe our UU lens is the most evolved way to go about living. I don't think the UU denomination is an invitation to formlessness either, the complete untethering of all categories. I believe we have a compelling and challenging invitation to construct meaning from a broader menu, to bind to multiple points of reference. We find the sacred in many fields.

Two jokes about UUs: What is our favorite color? *Plaid*. What happens when you cross a UU and a Jehovah's Witness? *Someone who knocks on your door on a Saturday for no apparent reason*. These comments from the perceiving public point to a reality, and a danger. It is a fact that most Unitarians' view of the sacred involves many strands, a woven tapestry that *is* plaid. However, if we wander in religious or secular life for no apparent reason, we have become unbound. In my lens, life is most meaningful when we

ask complex questions, examine complicated answers, and then find points of deep connection.

As one with deep Christian roots, and spiritual practices from Buddhism, Hinduism, and earth-based ritual, I am now untethered from the territory of my youth and my ordination. However, I have found ties that bind in this congregation, the UUA religious movement, and the spiritual experience of meditation, yoga, and nature. I am once again bound, even as my categories will continue to shape-shift. I have a strong boat, on an open and fluid sea.

The words of *Abhi Janamanchi*, a Unitarian minister, articulate beautifully where I now reside:

The sacred is present and available to us wherever we look or are willing to find it... By being attentive, we not only experience the sacred but are inspired to participate in the healing of our communities, our world and our planet. We become especially aware of ourselves and of the truth that we are a part of something greater than ourselves, whatever the something greater is called. If we remain open and expectant—watching out of the corners of our eyes, keeping our ears cocked, putting away all preconceived ideas—our lives will emanate the sacred.

May it be so, for each of you, in your journey towards the sacred.

Amen.