



**Religious Concepts:
The Sacred, The Holy, The Divine**

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I attended a personal growth workshop some years ago in which the presenter suddenly asked us, seemingly out of context, “What altars do you have in your homes?” We responded in ragged unison, “Huh?” She explained further, “Where do you praise what is most sacred to you?” I imaged gaudy pictures of bleeding hearts over my bed, or little statues dressed like Mary standing in my front lawn, and I shook my head. She kept asking these *religious* kinds of questions, “Where is the sacred center of your home? What is most holy?”

Finally one of the women raised her hand tentatively and said, “I have pictures of all my family clustered together on my mantle?” “That’s an altar,” the facilitator said with more excitement than I thought appropriate to her words. Another person raised his hand and told about a carving he had from his grandfather and how he kept it on the night stand so it would be the first thing he saw each morning. “That’s an altar,” came the enthusiastic reply. One by one the hands went up and objects were named, places were described. “That’s an altar. That’s an altar.”

We began to get as excited as she was. I gave it a try: “There’s a bench in my garden with a pot of geraniums next to it. It’s my favorite place. Sometimes I go there to read; sometimes just to sit and admire the flowers.” “That’s an altar.” I felt approved. Finally there was only one man left who hadn’t found an altar in his home. “My wife has lots of altars,” he admitted. “Her cooking pots hang from the ceiling in the kitchen, shined with love; her sewing machine is never put away because she makes gifts there; her doll collection takes up most of the study and she rearranges it weekly. I can see they’re her altars. But I don’t have any altars. I just come home after work to eat there and sleep there.” “What about at work?” the leader suggested. “I hate my job,” he said. “There are no altars there either.” Suddenly we knew more about this man than we wanted to know. “Where is the first place you go when you get home?” our leader asked him gently. He thought for a while. “I go directly to the table in the hall. That’s where I keep my briefcase when I’m home,” he said. “That’s an altar,” she told him softly, but she wasn’t as excited as before.

She explained what was behind this exercise. We need to know what we’re connected to in order to know ourselves. We need to know what about ourselves we show to others, where are relationships are deepest and what is at the center of our values. We create these altars unconsciously, she said, to express ourselves—to reveal ourselves and to communicate from our centers. She also suggested that we could become clearer about ourselves if we created altars consciously; if we kept the things that represent our most cherished thoughts and values visible to ourselves, where we could

praise them. By praising she meant, not worshipping them, but the simple acts of admiring, of reviewing, of rearranging, of dusting or of caring for them. That way we don't forget who we are and who we are becoming, she said. That way it's clear to ourselves and to others what it is we hold sacred.

This is one in a series of services about the religious concepts and phrases that we use or confuse as Unitarian Universalists. Not all of us have concerns about these ideas and words; not all of us think about them one way or another. But the truth is, most of us have no common language in which we can communicate our faith to one another; no language with which we praise, or declare, or witness. We could choose to create a new language; but that is a long and tortuous process. It is an intellectual process and we need words that have emotion in them. Our only choice is to reclaim the language and concepts that carry our baggage from another life, or simply have never made it into our religious lexicon. Today I want to talk about the idea of sacredness and holiness, along with a cluster of ideas that cling to them—ideas like reverence, divinity and worship.

The story I have just related seems a far cry from the religious concept that defines sacred as that which pertains to the aspects of God. It would seem far-reaching in many churches, where the sacred is delicately separated from, and safely set apart from, the secular, or the profane, those ordinary elements of daily life that are the antithesis of the holy. The idea that kitchen pots or garden benches might be considered altars of the sacred would be blasphemous in some churches, while in many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations the same idea is met with apathy, indifference or angry rejection.

It seems a far distance between the precipices of the mundane and what some would consider the miraculous; miles across the gulf between secular and sacred. Our eyes catch that distance and we feel dizzy. We back off from the abyss, safe on the side of the ordinary. Safe with only poetic references to waking up and going to sleep and singing in the bathtub.

[But maybe we've listened to the wrong preacher; perhaps we should pay attention to the choir. Behold, the light shineth in *all* things. The light, we assume, refers to the holy, the sacred. The light is in all things. Even the ordinary.]

Linda Sexson, a professor of religion at the University of Montana, wrote a book called *Ordinarily Sacred*. In it she describes how ordinary objects can take on religious meaning. A peculiar moments in ordinary lives, saturated by metaphor or personal symbol-making, are the stuff of religion. Perhaps we are not as safe from religious feelings as we thought with those poetic references. Those mundane metaphors.

"Religion," Sexson wrote, "is not a discrete category within human experience; it is rather a quality that pervades all of experience." Even the idea of dividing the world up into the sacred and the profane, she suggests, is a religious idea. "If religion or the sacred is to be discovered or reaffirmed in this culture," she concludes, "it will have to be found under the bed, in a box on the shelf, or in the miracles of life we knew how to discover when we were small children. We have to look in places we have recently missed," she advises. We have to start at home among the ordinary things that we hold dear.

Anne Sexton, whose poetry often contained religious themes, suggests a similar search for sacred things among the mundane. Her poem *Welcome Morning* defines what is sacred to her, along with her reactions and relationships to it:

*There is joy in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry, "bello there, Anne" each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.*

*All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning,
and I mean, though often forget, to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.
So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.
The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young.*

But, now that I've said it—said God and read joy with a capital 'J'—don't I have to look at the other question more closely? Doesn't the religious concept of holy and sacred point to a concept of deity? If I don't have that, if I've rejected that, can I accept a concept of sacredness? And doesn't holiness imply a hierarchy that points to Heaven, away from mud and toward the stars; away from humanity and toward something else, something better? Good questions, if you have rejected sacredness; good questions if there seems no fitting definition.

Holy, holy, holy; lord God almighty. I sang that song as a child and did, I admit, connect the words *holy* and *god* as if they had one single meaning. It was hard later to separate them. That which was sacred belonged to that which was holy to God. And I threw God away when I quit singing *Holy, holy, holy*. But all I really understood, then, all I had been taught, was about a transcendent god out there, other, unreachable, unconnected to me, to humanity, except by that umbilical cord of creation. I rejected that god. Such a god meant nothing to me, as I could see I, apparently, meant nothing to it. I was a Universalist without knowing there was such a thing.

What made me more comfortable with the concept of god, if not with the god of my childhood, was the understanding of an immanent god—Ba light that shineth in all things and of all things, the Tao. It is that universality I accept; that totalness, that connection of me to you and to the cosmos, that binds me in empathy with Linda Sexson and Anne Sexton; that encourages me to set altars in ordinary places and find the sacred on mountain tops and amid dung heaps.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have pretty much eliminated hierarchy in our sense of religious accommodations. The up-down, above-below relationship of heaven to earth, of immortal to mortal doesn't suit our religious geography. Sacredness, holiness, with their connotations of being more than ordinary, better than mundane, gets discarded, too, in this kind of religious housekeeping. But can we not collapse the hierarchy of sacredness, conflate it into a smoother playing field that does not compete with daily existence? If we do so, we have a better view of the Ajoy of morning things. Without the looking up and feeling down, we have a better chance of seeing the light shining through such acts as lying on the grass, getting up and going to bed, following our feet or singing in the bathtub.

To really get the picture, though, we have to ask the other side of the question. What if we have *no* concept of the sacred? What if everything is not just smooth and level? What if everything is unrelievedly ordinary, without the promise of transformation, without the hope of metaphor? What then? What if we don't ever set up altars—bin our homes or in our minds—to that which is important to us? What if we never ask, as Sexson asks, "Why do children collect feathers, hide gold paper, delicately perch a marble in the arms of an unresisting house plant, or stick shells under their beds or stones into their mattresses?" The 'junk' that is precious to children, she responds to her own question, "and to adults is precisely the stuff of the sacred. What if we don't come to that conclusion? What if we don't *faint down by the kitchen table in a prayer of thanksgiving*? I think we lose something in our lives. *I think the Joy that isn't shared dies young.* Because what would we have left?

Why would we worry, for example, about justice and equality if we could not hold it up as more important than, better than, (dare I say it?) more holy, than its opposites? How could we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person if we found no sacredness in life itself? How do we seek truth, respect the earth, encourage spiritual growth, acknowledge evil do all those things we claim to do—if we do not have hidden somewhere in our rhetoric the skills to discover the sacred among us? Are we not, then, very like the man whose only altar is the table where he lays his briefcase, on a journey from a job he hates to a house where he merely eats and sleeps? Are we not empty of metaphors that relate things to one another and relate ourselves to that which is beyond thing-ness?

Sacredness, to me, is about such relationships my relationship to myself; to each of you; to all of creation; to mother earth; to the cosmos. The Joy that suggests gratitude is that which lets me know I have once again stumbled upon and connected with the holy. The experiences I have that are beyond categories and description are to me signs of divinity. I do create altars wherever I am. I create altars of the holy to encourage Joy and to strengthen relationships.

I have in my office many altars. Upon my walls I have hung quilts of my own creation, because creativity to me is sacred, a holy gift. On a table, where it lays until I get around to hanging it is a painting of bulls. The bull is my totem, the animal to which I most relate, though I am scared to death of real ones. They connect me to the world beyond people. There is a statue of Kwan Yin in the bookcase, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and another of Buddha, relaxed and laughing. None of these items is sacred in itself. I do not venerate them. Days go by and I don't even notice them. But when I do, they become holy, for I am reminded once again of who I am and what is sacred to me.

The porcelain figure of Kwan Yin is a graven image of a Buddhist reverent. Her followers pay homage to her. I do not. I am fascinated by the possibility of her and of the compassion she has perfected not in her historic life, but in the concept of loving kindness she has come to represent. She is the ideal I long to be kind and filled with loving compassion but who I too seldom am. It is this ideal that is sacred. I smile with the joy of knowing her. I remember who I am and who I am not yet.

The wall hangings I made in a different time for a different space. I no longer own that space; the reasons I made those particular quilts no longer exist except in me. But when I look at them, the past returns in blessed memory and I remember where I am and where I am not, and do not need to be.

The painting of the bulls is one of more than a hundred icons I have featuring that animal. I did not plan to collect them all. It started as a joke when co-workers began to bring me the little plastic bulls that hung around the neck of a wine bottle popular at the time called *Sangre Del Toro*—blood of the bull. I was, after all, the only Taurus in the crowd. I left the bulls in my office and when people wanted to give me something, they would bring me a picture, a statue, an icon of a bull. Pretty soon I was giving them to myself because they came to me. I began relating to the strong and awkward images they presented to me. I told this once to my massage therapist and she said, "You certainly have the neck of the bull; it's where you store all your tensions," and she gave the offending part a little pounding, a little shaking. Once when I was meditating, a white bull appeared to me and I heard it say, "You don't have to use all your strength all the time." And when I look at these images, I know what I do and why I do it and I know what is not required of me.

These ordinary objects have no magic properties that make them sacred in themselves. They are crafted, hand-made, iconic representations, but as parts of an altar, they represent to me that which I hold worthy of sacred contemplation. They connect me with myself; they represent relationships, dreams, intentions and hopes. They remind me that in the ordinary there is always more, if we have but eyes to see it and lips to praise.

They remind me to say thank you to life and to share the joy I find in it, as well as the equally sacred sorrow.