

A Sacred Place  
UUF

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May 6, 2018

In the book of Exodus, a story is told about God speaking to Moses. Moses was keeping his father-in-law's sheep. He had led the sheep to Horeb, the mountain of God. The bible says "there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet was not consumed". When Moses took a closer look to see why the bush wasn't burning up, he heard his name being called. He said "Here I am". Then he heard, "come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Sometimes, we need to be told when we are standing on holy, or sacred ground...because that which is sacred is not always obvious. Sometimes we need to be taught what is sacred, or holy, because that which is highly important, highly valuable, is often defined contextually. What is holy or sacred to one faith community may not be to another.

Sometimes, that which is sacred may not even be obviously religious. And often therefore, it needs to be taught and learned. Pat Lamanna's song, "A Sacred Place", that we sang this morning, tells us

this place is sacred because of the “kindness shown and the love we bring; the fellowship we share and a listening ear to show how much we care”.

Because the sacred is defined contextually, the words of her song exist within a larger context. That context is not the local gym, or the teacher’s room at school. That larger context is this specific congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie. Our fellowship is a UU congregation that shares a set of principles with all other UU congregations.

This congregation, the UUFP, has a particular covenant, developed by us and adopted almost unanimously. It’s our UU principles combined with our specific covenant that allow the words of Pat’s song to accurately define this place as sacred.

I remember being in Barcelona. To this day I carry an image in my head of a particular event that captured my attention. While walking down a street, I noticed a building that was set back further than one would expect. As I passed by I noticed a bunch of shoes. There must have been a hundred pairs of shoes, all neatly lined up in rows, each further from the door and closer to the street.

I had never seen such a thing before. It was immediately obvious that on the other side of that door was a sacred place. I assumed Muslims had gathered for midday prayers. The vision was a powerful indicator of a boundary crossing. The owners had left their shoes behind in order to cross the boundary from the mundane, the secular, into a sacred place.

I suspect, each and every one of us has a place, or a thing that is particularly important to us; something that evokes in us an emotional response. Maybe it's a place by the river, in the mountains or in the woods; maybe it's a hand-me-down from mom, dad or a loved one. Maybe it's a ring or piece of clothing.

My guess is that most of us would not refer to such a place or thing as sacred...even if we treat it as such. While we might well insist that others treat it with respect, we're not likely to demand they experience it as we do.

So while something may be particularly important to us as individuals, we don't necessarily impose those beliefs on others. At the same time, there are some things that we do impose on others, even if they don't rise to the stature of the sacred.

There are some homes I go into where I've been asked to remove my shoes at the door. Even while being fully welcomed, there is a behavior that's required in order to cross a certain boundary. And if one is to demonstrate proper manners, one should not need to be asked again.

Societal manners dictate that we adhere to certain expectations or requirements...if we are to be accepted into certain places. (wearing a shirt and shoes into an eatery) Sometimes the expectations are made clear from the very beginning. Sometimes, expectations are discovered when we abridging the norms.

In the article we heard from this morning, "Holy Manners: The Spiritual Politeness of Healthy Congregations", the author tells us we can be driven by adherence to laws, which are externally dictated and enforced. Or, we can be driven by our own free choice, taking no-one or nothing other into consideration. Or we can choose a third way, where we operate from the domain of obedience to the unenforceable.

We were told that while obedience to the unenforceable may include moral duty, social responsibility, and proper behavior, it goes

further than that to include all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.

That sounds like such a tall order, given we are talking about the actions and behavior of people. We're talking about humans, who have egos that serve to delineate self from other. We're talking about people who live in an American culture that places a high value on individuality.

And we, here, are dealing with a non-traditional faith community, that values an independent search for truth and meaning. We're a faith community that exists within a cultural time and place where there seems no space between the domain of law and the domain of free choice. Each seems to be in a fierce battle to win...often it appears, at whatever cost.

There seems no mid-ground to occupy; no encouragement to do what is right for the sake of doing what is right. Yet, we are a faith community that is designed to stand apart from ardent beliefs. Our faith is designed to honor the inherent worth of others and to view ourselves as a part of an interconnected web of existence.

And we, as a faith community, are largely populated by people who insist on making their own decisions, determining what to believe

on their own. Interestingly, at the same time, we are populated by people who have freely chosen to enter into a covenantal relationship with others, promising mutual trust and respect.

Lets take the time now, to remind ourselves of the covenant we've created and the commitment we've made to fully live UU principles and values in our daily lives. Pull out your order of service and lets together read our covenant.

Our UU principles and our covenant stand in stark contrast to the normative behavior we are likely to encounter outside our doors. There is a fierceness, an ugliness that is endemic in society today. Our UU principles and values stand fully separate from those behaviors.

Perhaps we should...dare I say the word...require... people to remove their shoes before they enter this sacred place. Perhaps by the act of removing their shoes they will be reminded that they are entering a sacred space.

Short of that requirement, perhaps all we're left with, as a faith community, is to encourage and support obedience to the domain of the unenforceable. Perhaps we as a faith community should commit to

reminding each other of our covenantal agreement, our UU principles and values.

Perhaps we should all commit to standing side by side and support one another in the practice of “holy manners”; where we practice obedience to the unenforceable. Lets remind one another that the practice of obedience to the unenforceable is the work of a faith community; it is a spiritual practice that benefits the self and who we are as a people.

May the force be with you!

Amen and Ashe.