

## **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

**May 25, 2008**

### **Sacred Space**



Since earliest times, human beings have sought to create sacred space. Our desire to create and experience sacred space continues to this day. We seek places where we can feel close to our deepest self, connect to the wider world, and experience the holy.

While once, there were places that were clearly designated as sacred and others clearly delineated as secular, those lines have become increasingly blurred. The sacred is everywhere. The sacred exists in all times and all places. If the sacred is everywhere, then all places are holy. We can encounter the holy as easily in the woods or at home as we do at church. Any place can be a sacred space.

While we may agree that this bears some truth, in practice we are likely to experience a difference between a visit to the supermarket or the local landfill than to a church or a park. Some places are less likely to evoke a sense of sacredness.

What is it then that makes some places seem holy to us? And why is it we still need them at all?

Some of what makes a space holy has to do with intention. It has to do with our own attitude, the demeanor we bring to a place. A sacred place is a spot where on the whole we behave differently. We are on our best behavior, you might say. We are called upon to be our best self.

The space is thus sacred because we decide it is. We acknowledge it, perceive it, and experience it, as sacred, and therefore we treat it differently. We may even find that we treat each other differently and may even experience a special recognition of the presence of God there.

Usually this means we treat a sacred space with a different level of respect and reverence. When we come to church, for example, we don't sit in the pews and eat a big bag of potato chips and drink soda from a bottle like we might do elsewhere. We mostly don't bring any food or beverages into this sanctuary.

By treating this sanctuary with care, we consecrate it. We make and keep it beautiful. We bless it and set it apart as special and holy, as somehow a bit unlike so much of the rest of what we encounter in our lives – whether at work, school, or on the highway.

Groups of religious people have collectively chosen to set certain places apart and to designate them as sacred. We know that Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals, churches, and Sikh gurdwaras have been designed as places of worship. They carry a shared religious purpose. Religious ceremonies are celebrated there.

People gather to explore the nature of God, to learn about ethics and morality, to understand their responsibilities to each other and the world, and to explore the meaning of life. Places of worship emphasize the human journey. They also seek to help each of us find our place in the world and understand our relationships with ourselves, each other, and God.

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The Reverend Dr. James Wind, president of the Alban Institute, which is a nonprofit interfaith organization, says, “These special places make room for our spiritual selves to emerge, for sacred stories to be told, and life-giving practices to be learned. They make room for us to meet God, rekindle hope, experience self-emptying love, and face the dark side of our humanness with the light of grace” (Congregations magazine, “Space Matters”).

This is true of our church. It is one of the primary places where we come to give worth to life, to explore life’s meaning and purpose, to give thanks, to be held accountable and responsible to something beyond ourselves and our individual personal existence, to celebrate, and to grow spiritually as a person of faith. We bring an intention that makes it sacred.

It is also the case that we sometimes develop a reverential attitude toward a particular place because something of a mystical or spiritual nature has happened in that place. Something fairly distinctive happened there. The presence of God, for example, may have been experienced in some unique way by a religious community. For the three Abrahamic faiths, this has occurred on several occasions in Jerusalem. For Christians, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is sacred ground. This is the traditional site of Jesus' burial and resurrection.

For Muslims, the Dome of the Rock holds special significance. There, the prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. For Jews, the area associated with the second temple, including the Temple Mount, is most holy.

Places such as these where there has been a manifestation of the divine sometimes become destinations for religious pilgrims. Pilgrims travel to the site to participate in a shared experience of God. The faithful gather as part of the much larger body of their faith tradition. They gather to put flowers on a site, to light candles, to place a symbol there, or to pay tribute.

In many of the world’s religions, pilgrimage is a central tenet of faith. The Islamic tradition is perhaps the one best known for the role of pilgrimage. Every able-bodied Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage once in his or her lifetime. The Hajj is to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam. There the pilgrims circle the kabbah, which is the house of worship Muslims believe was built by Adam and later rebuilt by Abraham (“Sacred Space,” Sept 6, 2002, #601, Religion and Ethics Weekly, Bob Abernathy, anchor).

We Unitarian Universalists also have pilgrimage sites. One is in Boston, another in Transylvania. I was fortunate, like some of you, to have attended our denomination’s General Assembly in Boston in 2003 when 10,000 Unitarian Universalists gathered in that city. I also helped lead a trip to Boston for a young adult group some years ago. I looked upon both as pilgrimages in my faith tradition.

Boston, you may know, is the site of our denominational headquarters, the Unitarian Universalist Association, on Beacon Hill. It is where our president, moderator and other staff members are located. It is where our bookstore is housed.

It is not a coincidence that our headquarters is in Boston. That is considered the birthplace of Unitarianism in America. King's Chapel was founded there by Anglicans in 1686. That

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congregation became the first in the United States to embrace Unitarianism in 1784. Boston is also the birthplace of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

A second pilgrimage site is Transylvania where in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian congregations were established for the first time. They continue there to this day in what is now modern day Romania. Every year about a thousand Unitarian Universalists visit Transylvanian Unitarians. They are Unitarians and not Universalists, by the way.

Many of our American and Transylvanian congregations have become what are known as Partner Churches. These partnerships provide for mutual support and education between North American and Transylvanian Unitarian churches. I hope in the years to come that our church might consider a group trip to Boston or Transylvania or both. It is a personal goal of mine to make a pilgrimage to Transylvania at least once in my lifetime.

I have to admit that when I decided to preach about sacred space on Memorial Day weekend, it was not at first obvious to me that there was a distinct connection between the two – between death and sacred space. But of course there is. Sacred space is commonly associated with death.

Death is sacred. Death is one of life's rites of passage. For many, it is seen as the moment of connection with God or with divinity. Cemeteries are hallowed places for Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Hindus burn their dead and pour their ashes into the sacred Ganges River (Religion and Ethics Weekly). As cremation becomes more common in this country with ashes scattered or buried in many places, the connection between death and sacred space may begin to change.

On this Memorial Weekend, I do want to give honor to one special place where members of the military lost their lives and were buried. That is Gettysburg. I have been to Gettysburg a few times. I remember most vividly a trip there over a decade ago. When we got to the Valley of Death, the area between Devil's Den and the Round Tops, I fell silent. I had to catch my breath before I even remembered what had happened there. There the dead of both armies had littered the landscape after battle. It took over a week for the dead to be buried.

At that place where lives were lost and the dead were eventually buried there is the power of so many who gave their lives and all who come to pay tribute and remember. It is sacred space. When Abraham Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address, he said of the whole area, "Nothing I can say will make this place sacred because this place is made sacred by the actions of the heroes who died here."

The places where our heroes have died and been buried are indeed sacred. Not just Gettysburg of course. We make memorials to and for them. We mark the places of their dying and return there to give honor and respect.

So far I have been talking about places that are sacred for groups of people and that have strong religious connections. There are also private sacred spaces that are just as important to us as the ones we share as part of a community.

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Probably each of us has a special place, at least one, that supports our personal spiritual life. Our private sacred spaces may include tree houses and back porches and home altars and ponds and gardens and beaches and sailboats and artists' studios and hammocks and coffee shops and mountain trails.

What makes a private space holy is not so different from what makes it so for a group of people. A private space is holy because of the intention and attitude we bring to it. It is holy because we have had an experience of God there, or an epiphany, or celebration, or even a crisis. It is holy because it provides us sanctuary, safe haven and healing, in a sometimes precarious world. It is a place we trust to hold us and the stirrings of our deepest self.

Just as we need sacred space as a community of faith to remind us of the cosmic journey, we need our own little corner to remind us of our individual life's journey. Such places remind us of the deep questions of life and death. They provide the spaciousness to explore the answers and know what it means to feel fully human. Safe surroundings allow us to be vulnerable to change and growth. Our imaginations can be set free and our lives dreamed into being.

There can never be too many places we experience as sacred. We need to continue to create sacred space wherever we can – to bless the places we inhabit and frequent. Our cities need to be revitalized with beautiful parks, murals, museums, and well-maintained houses of worship. The whole of creation needs our tender care. Earth, where it has been desecrated, needs to be returned to Eden.

Perhaps more than anything, we need, as Patrick Murfin said, “to build temples in our hearts.” These are the temples of our being. Yes, in the end, we need our great cathedrals and our private altars. So too we need the sacred space that has no walls and lives in the heart. May we build temples in the heart. May we fill them with wisdom, healthy skepticism, reason, tolerance, and love. May we build a temple for every heart.

May it be so. Amen.