

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Holy” and “Sacred”

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Let’s start today with some quotes and observations from religions around the world:

- According to Exodus 24, verses 15-16, Moses went up the mountain and a cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it for six days.
- From Lao Tze, probable author of the *Tao Te Ching* and founder of Taoism: “The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.”
- From Jesus via Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who founded Transcendental Meditation: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like electricity. You don’t see it. It is within you.”
- One particularly famous Zen Buddhist koan or teaching meditation asks, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

My friends, we have a problem here, and the problem is this: we’re trying to talk about something that is, to put it mildly, really freaking hard to talk about. When we talk about religion or worship or even sin, we have referents in our own behaviors. However much we do or don’t like what we think religion and worship and sin mean, we know what we’re talking about. But the words “holy” and “sacred” are not earthbound words. We reach for them and they draw away from us, kind of like the glory of the Lord hidden under clouds on Mount Sinai.

Here’s how Wikipedia defines “sacred”: Sacred means revered due to association with holiness. Holiness, or sanctity, is in general the state of being holy (perceived by religious individuals as associated with divinity) or sacred (considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion; or inspiring awe or reverence among believers).

I didn’t find that terribly helpful so I looked up “holy” instead. Wikipedia redirected me back to “sacred.” I didn’t find that terribly helpful either.

So, what can we do if we want to unpack these terms? We will have to talk around them to some extent and hope to draw close to what is meaningful and, more important, potentially useful about them. First, I will suggest some broad ways of understanding the terms “sacred” and “holy.” Then I will review today’s service for the many ways we already use the language of the sacred and the holy, or language like it, with relative comfort. Finally, we’ll consider a song that many of us have warm feelings for, a song which is all about sacredness, Peter Mayer’s “Holy Now”, and see what wisdom it might have for us.

When we struggle with terms such as sin, it’s often for emotional reasons, not least because the terms have been used in ways that do spiritual and emotional harm. I sometimes think that the challenge that comes with the terms “holy” and “sacred” is more intellectual, or at least it’s about ideas, creeds, even commandments. If we don’t believe in a personal God, how can we affirm that there is a reality that deserves the description “sacred” or “holy”? Aren’t those terms just shorthand for God, after all?

But it gets worse. If we’ve grown up in either Judaism or Christianity, we probably are well aware that the God of the Hebrew Bible seems to define holiness as separation and especially as

separation from the profane. And if God is holy and the holy is the opposite of the profane, the mundane, the everyday, then holiness is not to be found in the richness of our actual lives, the beautiful things of normalcy. So, what must we do to find the sacred? Leave our day-to-day lives behind? Steer clear of people who don't formally worship God? Not acceptable. We must find ways of pursuing the sacred and the holy right here, right now, among us, not up Mount Sinai but in our very own flesh and our very own doings. And that's my aim for today: to point us toward the sacred and the holy in our own lives and help us to orient our eyes toward them.

But first, some better definitions than Wikipedia's are in order. Here's how I understand the words "holy" and "sacred": The holy, or the sacred, is whatever evokes wonder and awe in us. It's anything before which we feel humble. It is whatever is most worthy of cherishing, of holding dear. It is whatever is ultimately important. It is the mystery that we may never understand, but that we know is bigger than our individual egos.

Does this all sound terribly vague? If so, remember this language is only meant to get us closer to these ideas. To use a flight analogy, this is approach language, not landing language. Touching down on the holy is kind of difficult. We read in Exodus that the burning bush went so far as to make Moses take off his shoes. I sure don't have any landing instructions for us today.

But at least we have some language to use now. And this can serve as a point of meditation and discernment for each of us alone, and for all of us together. Let's say you find the idea of the holy as whatever evokes wonder and awe in you to be interesting, maybe even moving. So, what evokes wonder and awe in you? Do you ever have experiences where you stand before nature, or listen to music, or feel a sense of love, and you are just struck silent by it? When that happens to me, I first get a sense of joyful solemnity and then a deep, sometimes wild sense of gratitude. Oceans do that to me, music even more so. Do I think that means oceans and music are themselves sacred? I have no idea. But I do believe that in my encounter with oceans and certain kinds of music the holy is made manifest. I don't know what it is. I just know that it's there. And I know it's there in the tenderness with which a lover holds her beloved or a father holds his child or a pet parent cuddles their animal companion. And perhaps I don't need to know more than this. I accept that if there is a reality that is meaningfully known as holy or sacred, it's a mystery, at least in part. We all are graced to have encounters with those moments however we understand them. Why not understand them as visits of the sacred?

We can do this alone, but we can also do this together. Some of the most holy conversations we can have with each other involve sharing our individual encounters with the sacred and our responses to it. Listening to each other, being witnesses for each other, we can communally bear the power and beauty and even the sense of being so very small that may come to us when we face whatever is truly greater than us.

Unitarian Universalists already have language with which we acknowledge that the holy need not be a personal God with an anti-profane agenda. For example, when we sing Spirit of Life and invite the Spirit of Life to come to us, we are asking for the presence of the mystery in our lives. We can call it sacred or holy or just call it the Spirit of Life. Maybe it's all of these and more. We don't need a clear definition. We just need to invite it to come to us. We believe it will bless us in some way and that seems to suffice.

Then we have today's words of welcome, adapted from a piece of writing by Unitarian religious education pioneer Sophia Lyon Fahs. Listen to that reading again:

“We gather in reverence before the wonder of life, the wonder of this moment; the wonder of being together... We gather in reverence before all intangible things that eyes see not, nor ears can detect, that hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.”

What could Fahs be talking about except the holy? She implicitly defines the sacred here as “all intangible things that eyes see not, nor ears can detect, that hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.” That's the mystery. That's the holy. And our natural response to it, according to Fahs? Reverence. Faced with those intangible things that we cannot measure or control, Fahs says we will fall to our knees, metaphorically if not literally. We will bow our heads, maybe in reality, maybe just in our hearts. We don't need to force this response. If it's really the sacred, whatever it is, the response will be automatic. Which means we can riffle through our lives looking for moments when we found ourselves responding to our lives this way and search for the presence of the holy in those moments.

Our chalice lighting, from UU minister Marjorie Montgomery, is a regular reading for us, but to me it never gets old. There's never a bad time to remember that life is a gift with glories and mysteries, and that gratitude is a proper response to just being alive.

I selected as today's reading an excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson's “the Oversoul.” Again, sit back and listen to the reading with the ideas from the sermon in mind:

“Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought: that the Highest dwells within us. There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us. Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable. It comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur. Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.”

Emerson here uses the language of “the Highest” rather than the holy or the sacred, but it sounds like the same thing to me. The Highest, according to Emerson is a deep power that comes to us in a variety of ways. And it is always within us, even before we look for it. It may be made manifest as genius, virtue, or love. Again, this need not be the biblical God of the 613 commandments. This is a power, a beautiful, soul-moving, life-changing power. And coming to understand its presence within, around, and among us is, to Emerson, the revelation of all nature and thought. It is the final thing we must learn to live sacred and holy lives ourselves. In finding and cultivating the little light of holiness that shines within us we become holiness for the world. Not by rejecting the mundane and the everyday but by setting the mundane and the everyday alight with our own internal sacredness.

And when that light within us is cultivated, what then? What is that experience like? Perhaps there are no words for it. Or perhaps we sing about having peace like a river in our souls, or joy

like a fountain, or love like an ocean. We rely on the simile, on the word “like” because there may be no other way to articulate the experience, no other analogy but the flow of a river in the morning or the rest of an ocean at sunset. Or another analogy that we cannot even imagine as we sit here now. When we try to speak of our experiences with the sacred there won’t be language that provides closure, that ties the holy up neatly like a birthday gift. But there will be plenty of language that helps with the gratitude part.

With these thoughts in mind, let’s turn to Peter Mayer’s song “Holy Now.” You’ll find the words on the back of your order of service. The song documents the great contrast between Mayer’s childhood, when he was taught to find holiness only in the formal places and activities of religion, and his awakened life as an adult when he finds the sacred everywhere. Everything, he says, everything is holy now. Everything is a miracle.

Has reality changed between Mayer’s childhood and his adulthood, that he should have come to find holiness without boundaries and in the most mundane of things? No, I do not think it is reality that has changed so much as Mayer’s ability to find the sacred all around him that has changed. His vision has changed. His interpretation of the world has changed. Of course, turning water into wine is a miracle, he says, but isn’t it even more amazing that the world exists? That we exist? That we can see beauty and feel amazement? That mornings continue to come and go? That’s the real miracle.

So, what Mayer has been able to do here, whether through effort, grace, or both, is to sacralize his very existence. He sees a questioning child’s face as a testament, a new morning as a sacrament, a red-winged bird as a burning bush and the bird’s song as a scripture verse. It’s not in the song but for all we know he sees a forest as a church choir and an actual church choir as cherubim and seraphim. It’s not that he doesn’t see the child’s face proper, or yawn and stretch in the morning. It’s not that he doesn’t see the actual bird. But all of these experiences have taken on a deeper meaning for him, an additional meaning. The mundane is still there, still mundane and yet somehow simultaneously not mundane at all. Is there a personal God in the mix here? I have no idea but Mayer doesn’t mention one. And I suspect he doesn’t need one. There doesn’t need to be a great magician. The magic itself will suffice.

And, reminiscent of Sophia Lyon Fahs’ response to wonder, Mayer’s response to his vision is to walk in the world with a reverent air, even wanting to bow his head when he sees and hears the little red-winged bird. What other response could possibly make sense when surrounded by holiness and when immersed in the sacred? True, this is probably not the response most of us have to our day to day lives. But in theory, this could be our response. We could see the sacred everywhere. We could come to see that everything is holy now. It’s possible. If other people have been able to do it, we can.

As to how to see the sacred in all things, that’s either the work of a lifetime or the most amazing gift of grace, or perhaps a combination. But of this I am sure: if we insist that the sacred is not available to us, that everything is not holy now, because we don’t believe in a personal God, we are unlikely to find ourselves bowing our heads in humility and gratitude very often. If we deny that we ourselves, exactly as we are now and regardless of what we believe, have access to the sacred, guess what? We don’t. And that seems like a loss to me, a turning away from depth and

power and joy towards a world where all a bird can ever be is a bird and all a piece of music can ever be is a piece of music. I would rather be moved enough to walk with a reverent air. As would most of us, I think.

So, my friends, let us not be too worried about the limits of language and our very human tendency to point it in directions that are not always ideal. Let us be ready to see the morning as a sacrament and to give thanks for it. Let us be ready to respond to whatever moves us most deeply with a bowing of the head and a rush of gratitude in the heart. And let us always invite the light of holiness to shine from within us, that others may find the sacred in our very lives. Amen and blessed be.