

“Sacred Space Everywhere”

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Like many, I have fond memories of my early childhood. Until I was seven years old, my parents and I lived close to the New Hampshire seacoast.

By some measures, this chapter of family life was difficult. We lived in the oldest mobile home in a small trailer park. My father worked at the local VA hospital while my mother cared for me and, when she could barter childcare at another time, took substitute teaching jobs.

Yet, we had a wonderful community of friends. Our neighbor gave my father permission to plant a vegetable garden in his field. The road we lived on included a pond with a small beach. The walk to the pond along Steppingstone Road included pockets of woods and streams. I remember looking carefully into the water as we passed, searching for the small frogs that lived there. Life was simple and we were content.

Every now and then, my parents would find someone to watch me in the evening so they could hear live music at a local venue, The Stone Church. Even though The Stone Church was a place for grown-ups, a place I never visited, as a child I understood that going there was a special occasion.

I now look back and see my parents from an adult’s perspective. I can see how important it was for them to set aside the responsibilities of raising a child and scraping by in difficult jobs for an evening of friendship, rounds of beers and the counter-cultural folk music of the time.

A few years ago, I decided to see if The Stone Church was still in business...and it was! I learned that not only did it continue to feature live music but it was known as a place that helped some great performers get their start, giving The Stone Church even more mystique beyond what my parents enjoyed in its earliest days.

But that’s not all. The Stone Church’s website shares the history of the building. Built in 1832, The Stone Church was first a Universalist meetinghouse, a Sunday sanctuary for the millworkers in town. Twenty years later the church was then inhabited by a Unitarian congregation. Then in 1865, the building was purchased by the Catholics. When that parish moved downtown, the building then became a French school, then a roller-skating rink, a playhouse, a VFW hall and then a shoe factory. A significant fire almost destroyed the building before students from the University of New Hampshire converted it to what I knew as The Stone Church in the early 1970’s.¹

When I learned this history, I was pleased there were even more personal connections, considering the Universalist and Unitarian communities that once gathered between its

¹ <https://stonechurchrocks.com/history/>

cherished cut-glass windows. Yet, I began to wonder about those congregations. Did their communities close or move to another location? How did each new faith community – first the Unitarians and then the Catholics – experience the sanctuary as their sacred space? Some say the faithful worship the same God but with different names. Was that God recognized in the roller rink? Was this God present in the shoe factory? The history of The Stone Church raises many questions about sacred space.

“There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places,” writes Wendell Berry. I recall my colleague posting this quote a few years ago, in response to the news that his alma mater, Episcopal Divinity School was holding a ceremony to desacralize their chapel. Despite a large endowment, the school was closing. As part of yielding their physical space to whatever came next, they paused to ceremonially name their chapel as something other than sacred space.

The history of The Stone Church, the desacralization of the EDS chapel and Victoria Safford’s reflection about the view from Highway 36 speak to how I have come to understand sacred space. And, like many spiritual understandings, they contradict one another.

I have come to understand that sacred space is defined by attention and intention, whether through the offering of shells or blessings or ceremonies. This intention has meaning and it invites more meaning still, drawing us together to honor our rites-of-passage and to join one another in regular devotion.

Yet sacred space is not contained or ultimately defined by this intention. All space has the possibility to be sacred. We are reminded that just as The Stone Church toggled between different confessions of faith, any space can toggle between serving as a sanctuary and serving as what we might call “ordinary space.”

As you can imagine, I began thinking about the meaning of sanctuaries and the sacred possibilities within ordinary space when we began leading worship services from our homes. The week we made the shift from broadcasting from our beautiful sanctuary to home worship, I drove to the building to pick up things that symbolized the chancel. You see these things behind me – the chalice, our Partner Church bell, the brass vase, images of the stained glass.

This errand inspired a number of emotions. For one, I felt like a thief, taking property that did not belong to me. These elements of our worship belong to all of us. Some might say they belong to none of us but instead belong to God or the Holy or our sacred shared ministry and mission. In my mind, I knew that I was taking them into my home so I could regularly share them with you but it didn’t feel right.

I also felt, in a way I hadn’t before, a deep sense of grief at what brought us to this moment. Grief for the ill, the vulnerable and the dead and grief for something else that was, at least for the foreseeable future, gone– the freedom to commune with the sanctuary. Our sanctuary, the site of so many child blessings and memorials and weddings and services and musical

performances, was now inaccessible to all of us.

A memory of Deane Stryker's memorial came to mind, with rows of chairs reaching to the back of the Symmes Room, all full of mourners in deep grief. I remembered, too, the visitor who came about a week later, a distant friend of the family, who just wanted to sit in the empty sanctuary, perhaps resting in the glow of all the love expressed for Deane and her all-too short life.

Each of these attendees came to connect with something greater than themselves. Now no one could come to this sacred space. For the foreseeable future, those of us who know the sanctuary intimately, need to rely on memory and the sense of the sacred around us, wherever we may dwell.

My grief began to lift a bit when I invited my colleagues on a listserv to share their thoughts about sacred space. We ministers find comfort in connecting with ministers too.

I particularly appreciated the input from my colleague, Jake Morrill, who wrote,

I understand the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem...as the precipitating event for both modern Judaism and Christianity, as it was no longer possible to uphold a place-based religion, so it was important to create a more portable one, based in stories and rituals. "When God doesn't have a mailing address, what do faithful people do?"

Jake's comment reminded me of the many things I appreciate about Judaism. In that moment, what came to mind were all the home-based celebrations – Hanukkah and Passover. This whole "worship at home" experience has been practiced beautifully and faithfully for hundreds of years. And our "temple" has not been destroyed, just temporarily put out of commission. My grief shifted towards curiosity and gratitude.

I was also grateful to my colleague Barbara Gadon who encouraged me to read a book by Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, "An Altar in the World." Throughout Brown Taylor's book, she defies assumptions one might make about a parish priest as she advocates finding the holy not only within our sanctuaries but also far beyond.

One of my favorite chapters was titled "The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence," in which she remembers first experiencing reverence when her father taught her how to clean a gun. She recalls:

First my father showed me how to check the shell chamber to make sure it was empty, how to set the safety, how to hold the gun so the muzzle always pointed away from us. Then, with the fingers of a surgeon, he attached one solvent-soaked patch to the end of the rod, sending it through the gun barrel with a sound that made my teeth hurt...Then he let me run more cloth patches through until they came out clean. He used graphite last -to lubricate the barrel, he explained...Then he let me put the gleaming gun

back...This ritual...introduced me to practices that nourish reference in human life: paying attention, taking care, respecting things that can kill you, making the passage from fear to awe.

I also appreciated Brown Taylor's candor and humility when she, as a priest, acknowledges that she is "bad at prayer." She describes an informal altar she created in her home, a sometimes-center, sometimes symbol of her devotional life. Brown Taylor writes:

Since I am a failure at prayer, I keep an altar in my room. It is an old vanity, made of rosewood. I keep some icons on it and a lot of candles. When people ask me to pray for them, I write their names on small pieces of paper and put them in a small brass box that sits in front of two paintings, one of Jesus and one of his mother. Most nights the altar just sits there, holding all those pictures, wicks, and names.

Brown Taylor's description of her altar reminded me of my altar. To be honest, I engage in no spiritual practice at this altar. And, yet, in every place I have lived as an adult, I have constructed and reconstructed a collection of objects with meaning that, to me, is nothing less than sacred.

My altar is just one place where I have applied attention and intention to the physical space around me. I now invite you to join me on a short tour of parts of my home to see some of these places:

[video of tour]

Victoria Safford asks us, "What makes a place a holy place?" You have seen signs of attention and intention in my home. As I review the elements of my altar, I also answer Safford's question in another way.

I believe that life's meaning is not given to us but found in the meaning we find and create ourselves. It is an important and sacred thing to remember the people from whom we come, the places and experiences we have shaped and that have shaped us, the loved ones that have gone before but, through the sacrament of memory, dwell with us still. Like Victoria Safford, I am humbled when I consider the people that once traveled the land upon which I travel. I also find comfort in naming my individual thread in the tapestry of everyday human history.

We have been asked many times how we want to use these days in quarantine. Today, I simply invite you to bring attention and intention to where you dwell. Even if you do not miss gathering in our sanctuary, I invite you to live into the potential of sacred space everywhere and create sanctuary wherever you are.

Perhaps you will create sanctuary by taking Marie Kondo's advice. Each time you leave home and return, thank your home for providing you and your things shelter. You may do this out loud or silently. Consider not just your body but your apartment or house or bedroom a temple.

Perhaps you will create sanctuary by practicing a simple ritual at home. Pause and thank the good green Earth for your food. Enjoy a moment of silence together before you begin eating.

Perhaps you will create sanctuary by pausing to consider the lives that unfolded before you in the space you call home. What were their individual threads in the tapestry of everyday human history?

Along with looking up The Stone Church, a few years ago I visited my old neighborhood. To the extent that any of us find meaning in knowing where we come from, this trip was nothing short of a pilgrimage.

It was so good, seeing the ribbon of grass I once stood on, waiting for the school bus the first time. I smiled when I saw the sun glittering on the surface of Wheelwright Pond.

And, yet. So many temples of my early childhood have been destroyed – the convenience store on the corner was torn down for a bank, the field where my father grew his garden is now a subdivision. The forest that once lined Steppingstone Road has given way to new houses. The beach is gone, with access denied through a fence. I saw no frogs in the stream.

One more gift I received from Barbara Brown Taylor was her reading of Jewish and Christian scripture. She reminds us that building a temple was a human idea and grounded in human need; God was content to emerge in a burning bush, through a dream, upon a rock, in a simple tabernacle.

The physical sites of my childhood may be gone but the story of those places still lives within me. I come back to that story with the artifacts I assemble time and again on my altar and through my recollection. Memory, too, can be sacred space.

The holy dwells in our dedicated sanctuaries and in the simplest of places. In this time of staying at home, a chapter of difficulty and uncertainty, may all find a true sense of the holy wherever we call home.