

“What’s in a Space?”
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October 5, 2014

I’m a vegetarian, as some of you might know, but I love McDonald’s – for one reason. They’re great places to stop on trips, because you can always walk in the side door and head straight for the rest rooms. Oh, you thought it was about the food, huh? Nope! I never buy food there. Although I made an exception recently.

Gene and I were traveling out in LA, and we stopped at a McDonald’s. I was about to head in the usual side door when a guy with a weather-beaten face and a dirty green jacket caught my eye and asked me if I could buy him a hamburger. I asked how much it was. He said a dollar. I said OK.

We went inside, we got the hamburger, and he thanked me several times. I made my way around to the side hallway (and I felt completely legitimate in my use of their facilities!) On my way out, I saw the same guy sitting on the curb, eating his hamburger. Gene was still inside, so I sat down next to him and asked him about his story. He talked, and I listened. I suddenly felt as if the barriers between us...just dissolved. It was a jarring sensation. In that moment, though, we became simply two human beings –different only in our circumstances. It reminded me of what theologian Martin Buber described as the sacred space which is created when “one person truly turns to another person.”

I’ve had this kind of experience before, in my work as a hospital chaplain. The same feeling of wonder and awe I’ve felt gazing at an incredible sunset. A feeling of reverence.

I believe that the spirit of life and love is embodied in everything, and therefore that everything is sacred. So, I’m as likely to experience a conscious sense of it as I’m talking to a homeless man as I am oohing and aahing over the colors of the western sky.

“Sacred” is derived from a Latin word meaning “to set aside” or “to dedicate” (to a god or gods). For the Romans and the Greeks, there were particular places and things that were reserved for worship of their gods.

For the ancient Israelites, our religious forebears, this idea of sacred spaces and objects was also true. Sometimes we UU's have a tendency to think we just sprang up out of nowhere. But I think it's important to be aware that our roots go all the way back to the Judeo-Christian traditions. In Exodus, in the story of Moses on Mount Sinai, God explains to Moses very specifically how the people are to construct the Ark of the Covenant, which will hold the two stone tablets on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments, AND exactly how to create the tabernacle AND all its accoutrements, down to the colors of the thread! If you've ever read that part of Exodus, it just goes on and on. The level of precision and detail in those instructions shows how important it was to the Israelites to have spaces set aside for worshiping their god.

The room called the “Holy of Holies” was the innermost and most sacred area of the tabernacle and, later, the temple in Jerusalem. It contained only the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of Israel's special relationship with God. No one but the high priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies. And it was only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that he was permitted to enter the small enclosure to burn incense and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the Ark. These acts enabled the priest to atone for his own sins and the sins of all the people.

A heavy drape, called the veil, divided the Holy of Holies from the rest of the worship space. The veil symbolized the separation of humanity from God. The veil and the priest's rituals were reminders that people could not carelessly or irreverently enter God's presence.

Jesus the Reformer undertook the mission of helping people to see that God was with the people, not in an isolated place inside a temple. That God did not need to be revealed by the high priests and their rituals, but instead was present in people's commitment and actions.

A worshipping assembly brings sacred space into being, not a building or its art. Early Christians, also our religious forebears, understood this, and worshiped in homes or anywhere else they could gather in relative safety.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, Christianity suddenly became a publicly supported religion and its practice was more open. Now the Church was an establishment of the Empire. Constantine required his subjects to attend church, so he needed to provide large buildings for worship. Constantine chose to use the Greco-Roman basilica as the model for the layout of Christian worship halls. Liturgical artist William Wolfram notes that, with its single longitudinal room with parallel colonnades and aisles, the new worship centers were imperial in concept, ample in plan and dominant among surrounding buildings.

The small ecclesia, the early Christian congregations, with their egalitarian form of worship, were gone.

The chancel of the basilica became a special area for the clergy, and it was raised above the laity. Instead of the simple wooden altars Christians had been using, the Emperor instead built permanent structures decorated sumptuously with gold and jewels.

Eventually, elaborate baldacchinos, which are wooden or stone canopies, were built to stand behind the altar. In many churches, veils were placed around the baldacchino when it was not in use –a strong visual symbol that emphasized the similarity to the Holy of Holies, saying that here was a special dwelling place for the divine.

We've heard churches and temples called "houses of God?" This idea that God is only present, or especially present, inside the walls of a building is still with us today. It's good to look back upon our Judeo-Christian heritage from time to time to evaluate where we are now. Do we need to be in a particular space in order to sense the presence of something larger than ourselves? This congregation has worshiped at a university, in a gym, in a strip mall, and it will soon be in a former boardinghouse-turned-Knights of Columbus hall. So, I think the answer would be no.

Yet are there not some spaces which seem to invite the contemplation of divine mystery? Santa Barbara writer Genevieve offers a perspective on sacred space which I think captures its larger meaning. She suggests that cathedrals and other houses of worship “stand as monuments to the universal search for meaning; they are physical embodiments of this search, and, simultaneously, they reveal much about the spirituality of those who first built and used them. Buddhist temples, Islamic mosques, Hindu ashrams, Native American sweat lodges, African dance circles –all represent a similar longing to gain insights into life’s deepest questions: Who are we? Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going?”

A sacred space is one that encourages an attitude of spiritual openness. It’s not necessarily where answers are grasped or understood. Rather it is where questions are asked, conversations occur, rituals are perpetuated, dances are performed, songs are sung, and silence is heard.

An intentionally-created sacred space reflects the core values and beliefs of the congregation –or, at least, it should. The creation of that space begins in the hearts of the congregation’s people. Liturgical artist Wolfram comments that often we can be remarkably careful with our verbal statements of belief but not as conscious about our visual statements.

In our mission statement, we say that we are a welcoming congregation. For those among us who haven’t been here that long, Becoming a Welcoming Congregation is a specific program from the UUA for congregations that want to take intentional steps to become more welcoming and inclusive of people with marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities. What might that look like in our new building? How will we convey the message that we are a welcoming congregation?

Will we also actively extend that welcome to people of color? How?

What about to people with limited mobility?

Are there other biases we hold that we may have been expressing unconsciously? Whose artwork are we displaying? Whose artwork is missing? Whose images do

we see? Whose images do we not see? What about the style of décor? What does it say about us? What do we want the style in our new building to say?

Our mission statement also says that we are “diverse in religious and spiritual expression.” What might that look like in our new space?

OK, how about “uniting in fellowship to enrich our lives and inspire the community?”

The last part of our mission statement talks about promoting our “Unitarian Universalist principles.”

Thoughts about how we might convey those principles visually?

Let us pause for a moment in this space which we have created.

May we keep before us the true meaning and purpose of our space, which is to help us grow in spirit so that we become ever more able to live out our mission in the larger world. May it be so.