

Encountering the Sacred

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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As some of you may have noticed, the last issue of the *Unitarian Universalist World*, our national magazine, carried an article taken from an address I had delivered some time ago to the Annual Meeting of the Central Midwest District of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I was, of course, flattered that the editors had decided to reprint my musings on the state of our movement, but I was totally unprepared for the response the article generated. I have received cards, letters and phone calls from all over the continent, an invitation to lead a seminar religion in the twenty-first century for faculty members at the University of New Hampshire, an invitation to address the annual meeting of the Retired Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, and an invitation to be an honorary co-chair of the conference on "JUST AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY" scheduled to be held at Drew University June first and second. As I have attempted to respond to all these various contacts and invitations, I am amazed to discover just how time-consuming fifteen minutes of fame can be.

What surprised me the most, however, was a conversation with a colleague who indicated to me that he had been monitoring the Unitarian Universalist exchanges on the internet. Apparently there are people in our movement who engage each other in electronic conversation concerning various issues and developments within our movement. According to my friend, for a brief while, I was the subject of some of chatter on the electronic bulletin-board. At the conclusion of my article, I had said:

We are not Christian, or Jewish, or Humanist, or Pagan or Buddhist or Taoist or Moslem, though we do include and embrace people for whom these are important identifiers. We are something else, something the Universalists called emergent Universalism, something Kenneth Patton called "a religion for one world," something rooted in a reverent, mystical sense of being a part of a sacred reality, the interdependent web of being. We are called, then, to define the *religious* and *spiritual* dimensions of the ecological crisis confronting the world and to preach the gospel of a world where each is part of all, where everyone is sacred, and every place is holy ground, where all are children of the same great love, all embarked on the same journey, all destined for the same end.

Apparently, my use of terms like "holy" and "sacred" had confused some of my readers. Since I had explicitly rejected the labels of most of the religious alternatives with which they were familiar, why had I chosen to cling to those anachronistic terms? Was I a crypto-theist, was I a humanist in cleric's clothing, or was I just confused about my religious identity?

I don't know how this discussion finally resolved itself. I long ago decided that if there is anything more seductive than television, it is probably the virtual community of the internet, and so, I have avoided engaging in conversation with nameless, faceless, placeless people via computer screens. However, the knowledge that the conversation was underway has led me to reflect on what I mean when I, who stumble over the word "god," allow terms like "holy" and "sacred" to fall so easily from my lips. Is it possible for an agnostic or even an atheist to have an experience of the holy, to recognize some part of existence as sacred? This morning I would like to think aloud with you about the reality of the sacred in a post-traditional world and a materialistic culture.

To begin with, let me affirm at the outset that while I may have doubts about the existence of any entity which deserves the name God, I have no doubt that there is a quality of existence which is holy and sacred, and that experience of this reality is available to us all of the time, in the midst of our quotidian joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, dreams and despairs.

When I seek to define the sacred and the holy I discover that despite my facility with words and my love affair with the English language, there are no words quite adequate to define the reality to which I wish to point. The quality of an experience which makes it sacred, which partakes of the holy, has something to do with a sudden awareness that the other, that which I observe or otherwise experience has an interiority, an integrity, a meaningfulness of its own, that does not need any explanation or any justification. The quality of an experience which makes it sacred, which defines it as holy, has to do with a sudden shift in perspective in which the other, that which is outside and apart from me, ceases to be an it and becomes a thou, assumes a personality, acquires an internal reality. The quality of an experience which makes it sacred, which speaks of the holy, has to do with a moment when I cease to be the observer and become defined by the context in which I am situated, in which there is a sense of the profound and unbreakable unity which underlies all the differentiated realities through which we move most of the time.

I suspect by now that you have only the vaguest sense of what I am talking about. The truth is, the more I attempt to define the sacred, the less certain I am that I know what I am talking about. Perhaps the best way to understand the sacred in our lives is to avoid defining it and try, instead, to describe those moments when the encounter with the sacred is real, when some indescribable something invades our every day existence and forces us to recognize that we are standing on holy ground, that our existence is more than appears on the surface of things. Let me share a few of those moments out of my own life, in the deep conviction that you have known such moments in your own life and in the hope that together we may learn the lessons such moments hold.

Every morning, after I have showered and as I am dressing, my little black dog, Bart, stands patiently in the hall outside my bedroom, waiting for me to finish. Eventually I emerge and we go down stairs, where he jumps into a chair and extends his neck, eager for me to attach his leash and head out for our daily walk.

I should tell you that in wet weather, he refuses to leave the yard--he doesn't like getting his feet wet. But most mornings we walk together up the street to the Watchung Reservation. Many mornings, this is just a routine, just a habit, a thing we do to get my day and his off to the right start. But every now and then, something happens and my view of the world shifts and the ordinary and the obvious and the unremarkable become extraordinary and arcane and amazing. Sometimes the shift is occasioned by so simple a thing as the sprouting of grass seed where my neighbor had stripped his lawn and graded it. Sometimes it is the sight of golden-brown slugs busily cleaning organic matter from the surface of the road. Sometimes is the wild beauty of a deer appearing unexpectedly in a clearing.

This past week, as we tramped up the road, it was a small gray bird pacing back and forth at the foot of a tree. It was a mourning dove on some kind of extended watch. Back and forth he paced, keeping a wary eye on us as we approached. At last, we came too near and he flew up onto a low branch and waited until we had passed. When I looked back, he had returned to his pacing back and forth beneath the tree. And abruptly the world shifted and I knew without any doubt what was going on in his small mind. He was keeping watch as his mate, some where nearby, was sitting the nest, incubating their future. Suddenly, for a moment, I entered his world, saw it from his perspective, saw it as a shared adventure, understood the imperatives of his existence and that they were not very different from my own. I found myself wrenched out of my ordinary reality and set down in a world in which everything is alive, in which unspoken purpose and meaning run through the entire community of living things, in which the ordinary world becomes numinous and sacred and precious beyond words. It was a small moment, but it stays with me, changing the way I see the world, making every part of that world personal and vividly alive and real and accessible.

Years ago, when our four children were young, we lived in Northern Virginia, in an apartment on the second and third floors of an old mansion, the first floor of which served as meeting space for a Unitarian Church. So that we would have a private entrance to our living quarters, the church custodian constructed a set of stairs to a balcony which opened off our living room. It functioned quite well, except for one problem. In the wall of the building, near the door to our apartment, there was an ancient, well-established hive of bees. The flight-path of the bees took them right across the new stairs at about the level of the heads of our children as they passed in and out. Inevitably, trajectories collided and the bees ended up buzzing our kids every time they made use of the stairs.

After several of these encounters, I asked the custodian if we could move the hive. He allowed that such a solution would involve tearing up and rebuilding a section of the building, an expense the church was not eager to assume. I asked if there was any solution short of exterminating the bees. He smiled at me and pointed out that after all this time there must be many pounds, perhaps hundreds of pounds of honey in the hive. If the bees died, if they were no longer there to keep it cool by fanning it with their wings in the hot Virginia summers, the honey would melt and ooze through the walls--something the church would not be happy with.

Seeing the consternation on my face, he smiled again and said, "You know, the bees have been here a lot longer than you. They are just as inconvenienced by the turn of events as you are. Maybe you should look for a way to live with them." He turned and walked away, leaving me standing on the new stairway, watching the bees flying back and forth in front of me on their endless journey from hive to flower to hive. How in the world do I make an accommodation with a hive of bees, I wondered. And at that moment, something happened. I do not know how to describe it or explain it, but suddenly I stopped seeing the bee-hive as a thing out there, separate from me, a problem, an obstacle, and saw, instead that the bees were a vital part of the all-encompassing community of life and that we shared a community of interests. The bees and I had more in common than we had differences. And suddenly, without thinking about it, I found myself addressing the bees. I said to them, "Friends, I don't know how, but we need to find a way to share this space. We wish you no harm; we do not intend to disrupt your patterns, but we do need to use this stairway. I hope we can share this world and not harm each other."

Having made my little impromptu speech, my world snapped back into its usual configuration and I immediately felt very foolish. The sense of being part of a larger community which included me and the bees having evaporated, I looked quickly around to make certain that no one had overheard me conversing with the bees. Seeing that I was alone, that my foolishness had gone unobserved, I ducked into the apartment. Later that afternoon, when my daughter came home from school, I saw her coming up the new stairs. Something was different. The bees were no longer buzzing her. After I greeted her at the door, I stood and watched for some time. Clearly, the bees had altered their flight-path. They no longer flew low over the stairs; they flew straight out from the hive and then made a course correction to head out to the flowers in the meadow.

Now, do I believe that the bees understood my words? No, I do not *think* I believe that. Is it possible that creatures so finely attuned to their environment were able to sense in some wordless way the essence of the message I had shaped into words? Perhaps. It is more likely that bees have an innate intelligence which led them to shift their flights away from a new and unexpected obstacle. Indeed, it is likely that the wise old custodian knew from the start that this is what would happen. But the important thing, for me, is that unexpected shift of perspective which had occurred when I ceased seeing the hive of bees as a thing, a problem to be handled and began to see the bees, instead, as a part of the larger community of life, as part of my community and, in some sense, part of my life. Suddenly we were all included within a larger reality; they had an interior meaning which I was called to validate, they had an existence I was called to affirm; we, the bees and I, were equally expressions of something infinitely larger. As I stood on those steps, my world, for a brief moment, became a special sacred reality, everywhere alive and pulsing with meaning and purpose a reality in which it was not strange or peculiar to converse with bees. The bees ceased to be my adversaries. They became, instead, an expression of the same holy force which flows through all living things. And in that moment we gained enough time for the bees and the Bumbaugh's to learn to live together.

Several weeks ago, I found myself at the bedside as my mother-in-law lay dying. Most of her children and one of her grandchildren had gathered from across the continent to keep vigil throughout the long day and into the soft, quiet evening. First one and then another would hold her hand, speak softly to her, express their love for her. There was never any detectable response--only the shallow, labored breathing.

Occasionally through the day people from the staff of the nursing home would step into the room to pat her hand, stroke her arm and say their farewells. Then, as the evening wore on the family was alone with her as her breathing changed, became more shallow and quicker and then stopped.

For a moment there was only silence in that room--a silence almost palpable, as if we were waiting for the breath to begin again. Then, one by one, we approached the bed and took our leave. There was nothing ugly or painful about it. Life had simply used her up and death had released her from limitations which had grown too great to bear. When it was my turn, I stood looking at her. In her still features I could see the woman who had been so vital a part of my life--I could see her on picnics with the family, at holiday dinners, on vacation trips, when her youngest son headed for Vietnam, when the grandchild died, when her husband died, when she came to live with us.

I looked around at the familiar faces gathered in the room, and suddenly time collapsed. I could see them as they had been when I first met them decades ago. I could see them as they are now. I could see them as they will be when age and death closes in upon them. I could see myself as a child, as an adolescent, as a young man, as an old man. I could see each of us in the fullness of time gathered back to the earth. Standing there, at that death bed I knew at the core of my being what it means to be part of the cycle of life, how each of us is the incarnation of all those who have lived before us, how each of us is resurrected in the lives of those who live after us. As the only person in the room not part of that biological family, I knew at the core of my being that we belong to each other, inherit from each other and endow each other in ways not limited to genetics. Standing there, in the presence of death, I rediscovered the sanctity of life and the reality of the sacred community in which our existence is rooted. And in that sacred, timeless moment, all of it--the joy and the pain, the living and the dying--all of it was sacred and holy and as it should be.

I don't know how to define the sacred, but I know it is present in those moments when the world becomes for me a living reality and all creatures, including those so very different from me become my kin, an expression of the same force which flows through my veins and inspires my being. I don't know how to define the sacred, but I know it is present in those moments when a sense of the unity of all things wraps around my being and affirms the rightness of the world.

Am I a theist, an agnostic, an atheist, a humanist, a believer, a doubter? I am all those things, and I guess I have come to the conclusions that anyone who takes life seriously, who is open to the glories and wonders of this world, will be all those things as well.

Religion, you see, is not about believing or not believing. Religion is prior to any affirmations about gods or not-gods. Religion is deeper than knowing or not knowing. Religion consists in a stance toward life, a mystical vision of life. And because this is so, religion has absolutely nothing to teach us. Rather, it simply recalls us to the wisdom already deep in our beings, the wisdom upon which all knowing and believing rests, the wisdom too fundamental for words, the great truth that beneath the appearance of things all is one, and all the differentiated forms existence assumes are but expressions of that sacred, holy reality out of which the world is bodied forth and by which we and the world are sustained.