

Lori Whittemore
This is no ordinary time
2.13.2022

Cue to Paul

Many of you know, if Paul's music didn't clue you in further, that today is Superbowl Sunday. Thank you to Paul for learning that ditty. Sounds much better on an organ than on my tv. Today marks the Holy of holies, for some. It glorifies and celebrates the talent, prowess, strategy of the teams. It is a Sacred day to many, infused with communion of the nachos. Pageantry of the halftime, a celebration of cultural icons. Players running out from the locker room, the symbolic womb of creation, bursting forth, birthing forth into a world where skill, luck, hard work, privilege, dedication, gender, race, who you know, what you stand for, or kneel for will determine your place in the tribe, or you are welcome to a tribe, at all. But I am way ahead of myself right now

I was thinking about the Superbowl and why it is sacred to some people. And what makes it sacred and whether it should be sacred at all. Then I got to thinking what does sacred even mean and I went right down the rabbit hole. And I'm taking with me today, in hopes that it will lead to some further introspection and perhaps some community discernment about what makes this place sacred.

Today I want to spend time considering what is sacred and what is profane. In the broad sense of these terms, and how they speak to our culture and reality. And explore them in the context of this community. What is sacred? How is life ordered here? Here in our country and culture and here in the UUA in general and here being UUCSB. This Sunday is about inspiring introspection about your life together as a community. And why, if you stand back and look, it is not ordinary at all.

Sacred

So first I want to talk a bit about the concept of sacred. Mircea Eliade made a great study of this back in the 50s. In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, he explores how and why humanity needs to create sacredness. It is a way of making order of the life. A way of explaining the big whats and whys and humanities relation and relating to it all. It is a way of understanding one's place and orientation to life.

Sacredness starts with a place. A place that represents the opening up of time and space. A place where creator breaks into creation to reveal itself to the created. The sacred place connects the cosmic creator through the created who then orders the chaos according to creator. This sacred place creates and identity for different cultures and traditions. As an example, Mecca is a sacred place for Muslims. It is the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed who received Allah's direct revelation in the form of the Quran. It is said to be a place where cave or revelation is located. It is the center of a Muslim's world. Prayers in the direction of Mecca are one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith along with at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during a Muslim's lifetime, if possible. Mecca is as sacred place. It marks a breakthrough of the creator through creation to the created. Allah (God and creator) broke through creation in a

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cave just outside Mecca to reveal Godself to Mohammed. That is a sacred place. Muslims order their world around it. As the travel, migrate or move to all parts of the globe, they mimic the holy place by building a mosque that has the holy text, that will be read by an Imam and people will come to pray there...all facing Mecca. They have a have a sacred time Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection and community. A holy site that centers them, sacred texts that tell their history, laws and purpose. Ways of replicating their community away from their sacred site. Rituals and celebrations that order their lives. Sacred, Holy.

Rituals and myths and practices become sacred as they provide insight into the origin of a people or culture and offer a way of ordering and orienting the people back to their origins. Rituals that re-enact or re-actualize origin stories and revelation stories become sacred. Heros of the stories are glorified and worshiped in ways that make sense to the culture and context of the people they represent.

Islam, Catholicism, Hinduism have very pronounced sites, clergy and sacraments requiring distinct rituals. Other traditions including native traditions may have a specific sacred sites, seasons or rituals that are not a distinct or concrete. People create a sacred place that connects them to what is holy and important.

“Deep in the religious instinct is the desire to order time. The liturgical calendar, in the Catholic tradition, regulates time according to holy days and seasons to help believing hearts peer into mystery. For those requiring more finely tuned calibrations, the Roman church has broken the day into canonical hours, which are to be understood as the natural rhythms in which one might live consciously and responsibly throughout the stages of the day. The belief is that as we become more deeply sensitive to the nuances of time, we become more available to the present moment.” That’s a quote from Renita Weems, in her book Listening for God.

It is not just a religious thing. When there is not a common religion or culture, there is still a need to order life according to a higher overarching law. In countries that are not founded or organized around a specific tradition, there was and is a need to create an ordering of society that all can relate to. The sacred site(s) becomes the seat of the law makers and law keepers and the repository of the laws themselves. The rituals become the lawmaking in the form of election and inaugurations. Celebrations honor the heroic founders and symbolic dates of their work. Origin stories about the founding of land or the independence from an overlord, or the making of a country through laws and elections become the stakes of tents. When our hallmark is the freedom and justice that our sacred institutions create and measure our society by, and those institutions fail in one way or another, how do we adjust.

Our sacred civic origin story starts with discovery of our land that is not ours. That we take by inauspicious means and then glorify the taking and the subjugation of those who we took it from. We are working on that. We are being disabused of the glorification of Columbus for instance in recognition of what really took place, and we are adding in ordering of sacred time a

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hero for freedom and equality in instituting MLK, jr day. So while the country may get it wrong sometimes, it also gets it has the capacity for correction. For now. But when the country holds up the tenets of freedom and justice for all and then lives out a life of freedom and justice for the privileged and chosen, it leaves me wondering if we should be leaning into the rituals, myths, and heroes anymore. Do they deserve the sacred status? Even while the monuments and institutions stand, should we be ordering ourselves around a society that's foundation doesn't match what it says about itself? We hang our hats on the fact that we can change our collective minds about our true heroes and let some go and add some newer and truer heroes to honor. because our society orders itself around freedom and justice and truth. At least that is what it should be about. Until we restrict people from voting. Sacred Society.

Sacred other. And then our society and culture adds a whole other layer of sacred. A whole other way to order time. Sports. We make arenas sacred sites, games sacred rituals, coaches into Gods and players into saviors. The pageantry feeds us. Our ordinary time consists of seasons where weekly services in the forms of games take place. There are lead ups to advent seasons in the form of playoffs, culminating in the most Holy and largest church service in our country. The ordering of sports time culminates in the Superbowl. Which you will experience tonight if you are so inclined.

The sacred ordering of time; through religion, through civics and through culture.

I suspect by now you are thinking...where are you going with this?

Let's talk about Sacred as it relates to Unitarian Universalism. When I was reading and researching for today's sermon, I looked in the online UU library to determine if there was an ordering system for sacred time. This is what I found on Patheos.com

Unitarian Universalists generally consider all moments as suffused with the sacred. In terms of ritual, congregations typically meet on Sunday mornings, and they celebrate versions of Protestant Christian, American, and other holidays as part of a liturgical year. All time is sacred.

Furthermore

As with sacred time, Unitarian Universalists hold all space as sacred. Most congregations meet in church buildings that exhibit a variety of architectural styles. Many Unitarian Universalists also find that nature and the environment offer a special sense of the divine. All space is sacred.

Sunday services often feature the lighting of a ceremonial chalice, and the sharing of congregational "joys and concerns" to the lighting of additional candles. Unitarian Universalists mark the life cycle with infant dedication ceremonies, weddings, and memorial services. All lives are sacred.

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Contemporary Unitarian Universalists draw their practices from a variety of traditions, often turning to various forms of prayer, meditation, or yoga. Not all Unitarian Universalists engage in daily practices, and many seek unique ways to imbue the everyday with sacred significance. All beliefs are sacred Patheos.com

Low Church is what that is called. Don't take it personally, it just means light on sacrament, ritual, pageantry, smells and bells, if you will. The building doesn't overwhelm or inspire awe. The people and the community do. True heroes to UUs are the harbingers of freedom. Celebrations and significant dates come from triumphs of democracy. UU is a religion of the ordinary. It is a religion that makes the ordinary come alive. The fullness and authentic rhythms of life are revered. The sacred for UU as I've discovered, is the community itself. And so UUs know how to do community. How to live with people they disagree with or don't understand. They don't worship something outside of themselves but nurture the sacred in themselves and the others around them.

The plague disrupted this ordering of time. The plague disrupted ordinary time. In a church that holds community as a core value and justice where the spirit comes alive, this plague impacted the very fabric of your identity. You have banded together, made the best of it, supported one another. Impatient to be fully together, you are taking steps to make the service accessible in one way or another.

This shift in your ordinary time is an opportunity to take stock of your community. To do a community assessment if you will. Last week we looked at assessing ourselves individually, determining what holy means to us, what serves and doesn't serve. Because we are in the stage of assessing for our journey, looking at what tools do we have to prepare us as a community for what comes next.

Ordinary time can have a way of dissolving your resolve. But this is not ordinary time. Our ways of being in community have been disrupted. The principles we hold as our beacons are being challenged politically and culturally. In this stage of our pilgrimage, this is the perfect opportunity to do some collective soul searching.

You already have your principles in order. Ask yourself, how are you living up to them. How are you making them come to life for yourselves, for each other, and as a beacon in the world? How do your principles equip you to look at other people and cultures and see the inherent worth and dignity of every person? How are the systems of the church, this church, promoting justice, equity and compassion in human relations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and respect for the interdependent web of existence that we are all a part of? How are the systems promoting a democratic process in the congregation and society? How are these principles informing how you live and lead your life together? And how do you carry them outside of your community and in your ordinary life?

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If I am reading the books, and websites and all of you correctly, it is how you as a community live into the ordinary time that makes this community truly extraordinary. How do you find wonder and marvel of ordinary life together? How do you show each other how to cry at loss and support one another when it is your turn to cry? What happens in this community when the pipes freeze, or the roof leaks, or the parlor needs painting is what determines how you live out your principles. And it must always be counterbalanced by looking at the so-called normal outside of the community to call BS when the world is bowing in reverence to those events, those people, those institutions that are not only unworthy of their status but purposefully oppress people to maintain it.

This time which is not ordinary has revealed a lot to me about the world. About the lack of access to healthcare. About the systemized racism we experience right in our own back yard. About what poverty, addiction, homelessness really looks like in Maine. It has revealed to me how many sacred institutions (so called) fail to address these issues or worse. Some of these "sacred" institutions exploit and contribute to these evils. All important things to recognize and work on. I appreciate that your community takes these on by setting aside plate offerings for organizations doing good work. A collective commitment to the work of the world. At this pause in ordinary time, in preparation for a pilgrimage, I invite you to think about what a deeper dive into the how your principles inform your ordinary time.. How are you poised to live into the new ordinary and new normal that will happen after COVID? How will you feed your own flock, make your space sacred, raise people's consciousness, seek peace and justice for all? In service to making the ordinary come alive for your children and your children's children?

For UUs and UUCSB the ordinary is the sacred. All stories count. The rhythms are the cycles of seasons and cycles of life. When society doesn't live up to this, what is the role of this church in caring for the suffering?

That is where your collective soul searching needs to kick in. You are uniquely placed as a community to speak to the broken systems and speak up for those who suffer. Because you don't live or order yourselves around extraordinary pomp and circumstance or authoritarianism of clergy, or leadership of one sort or another.

There is a call brewing here, a call stirring in these pews inside these four walls that will become is becoming manifest. You can heal the suffering of others because you heal your own suffering. You can make space for people in spite of their different beliefs, or genders or gender expressions because you do that every day in your ordinary lives.

And this is no ordinary time. COVID has dealt the world many blows. The death toll and the suffering have been extraordinary. The isolation alone has killed people. The ills of society have been laid bare for all to look at. Poverty, access to health care or lack thereof. And of no consequence are the political realities of this moment. Voter suppression, the threat to women's right to choose the inequities in health care, housing, education; institutionalized

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racism. Knocking on our door. Religions trying to limit us and free us at the same time. Trying to dictate what is taught or talked about or what is not taught or talked about.

You have the stuff in this sacred community, in your principles, in your practices to heal beyond these four walls. You have demonstrated that you have exactly what it takes to be a light in the world. What are you going to do about it? I invite you back into your liminal space to think about this? I invite you to have coffee or tea virtually or in person with each other, however you feel comfortable, and explore this idea with each other. You are a wonderful community with a caring way of being with one another. You respect each other's differences and opinions as far as I can tell. When you are living into your best selves, you have something that this world needs desperately. They need your example, your values and your warm and caring hearts. The world needs you to bring the ordinary alive in a world that seems to only value the extraordinary.

Sermon resources

The Parent's Tao Te Ching, A new Interpretations

The Sacred and the Profane, Mircea Eliade

Listening for God, Renita J. Weems

Sacred Reading, Michael Casey

The Seven Principles in Word and Worship, Ellen Brandenburg, Editor

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