

Unitarian Universalist Views of the Sacred

Paul Razor, Editor

Sacredness is a quality we attribute to a dimension of our lives we perceive as worthy of the highest respect and reverence. The sacred draws us out of ourselves. It is a vehicle through which we may experience ourselves in deeper relation with the divine. To hold something sacred is to name it as holy.

These essays illustrate the diversity of Unitarian Universalist perspectives on the sacred. They also reflect the liberal religious tendency to avoid sharp distinctions between traditional categories such as sacred and secular or transcendent and immanent. Unitarian Universalists may speak of the sacred as manifest in the earth, or nature, or even all of creation. Or they may speak of it as a human impulse toward the transcendent. Whether perceived as an inner orientation or an outward response, the sacred is a dimension of human experience that opens us to the deeper connectedness that is always present.

Paul Razor, editor

Abhi Janamanchi

The sacred is present and available to us wherever we look or are willing to find it.

The sacred and the secular are two aspects of the same reality. God speaks to all of us all the time in that still, small voice. But because that is not the timbre we are expecting, we habitually ignore it. Our self-imposed blindness mars our experience of it.

The sacred is connection—to one's self, one's faith, world, universe, cosmos, and God. We experience this sense of connectedness by leading a life of awareness and extending loving attention to the most minute particulars of our lives and our relationships. Our wholehearted attention to every gesture, every thought, every action sanctifies them.

By being attentive, we not only experience the sacred but are inspired to participate in the healing of our communities, our world, and our planet. We become especially aware of ourselves and of the truth that we are a part of something greater than ourselves, whatever that something greater is called.

If we remain open and expectant—watching out of the corners of our eyes, keeping our ears cocked, putting away all preconceived ideas—our lives will emanate the sacred.

Abhi Janamanchi serves as the minister of the Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater, Florida.

Judith Meyer

“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,” writes Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Self-Reliance.”

With that sentence, Emerson lays the ground work for the way Unitarian Universalists think about the sacred today. Trust in our individual perceptions is foundational to our faith.

At the same time, Unitarian Universalists realize that attitudes about the sacred are not entirely private; there is always a social aspect to them. It is not enough to care only about what I hold to be sacred. To enter the realm of the sacred, even within “the integrity of your own mind,” is to experience a sensibility that humankind has protected and cultivated for thousands of years.

We all possess the instinct to set aside something as sacred, to cherish it, and to protect it with our whole selves. We must make room in our world for others to do the same, even when we do not agree. The sacred is something we share, a bond that is varied in its expression but fundamental to our humanity.

Judith Meyer serves as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Santa Monica, California.

James Ishmael Ford

The world as-it-is is just as it is. We live and breathe, act and rest, all in one world. Everything is intimately wrapped up with everything else in a profound unity. At this moment before moments there is no word, no thought. It just is. Then, at least for us in the human realm, there is a moment of distinction and discrimination, of high and low, of good and evil. As important as this moment is, there is one more step on our path of wisdom. Meister Eckhart writes, “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one

knowing, one love.” Our senses perceive the parts of the world. If this particular knowing is simultaneously informed by a great sense of unity, it opens the possibility of divine knowing, of the sacred. This particular knowing, and acting from this knowing, is our great calling.

James Ishmael Ford serves as the minister of the First Unitarian Society in Newton, Massachusetts. He is also a Zen teacher for the Boundless Way Zen network and the Pacific Zen Institute.

Elizabeth Lerner

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

—John Keats

Beauty, when it is not contrived, indeed seems a quality of truth; and real truths, even harsh ones, have the beauty of their realness. Beauty and truth are sacred because of the meaning and ultimacy that they point to. Rituals are the same—while important, they are not sacred in themselves. The occasions they celebrate are sacred: religious commitments, lifelong covenants, and the impulse of the human soul toward the transcendent divine.

Long before Keats, Plato said that the good and the beautiful were inherently related, almost interchangeable. What is true and beautiful and good? Music. The fragile interrelationship of every living thing. Tying our hearts to one another, though we know death will part us. Poetry. The impulse toward self-sacrifice and the greater good. Commitment to justice. The Unitarian Universalist understanding that revelation is continuous and beyond mere human abilities to define or create. And so much in nature—from dainty miracles of life to such bastions of awe as the illimitable sea.

Elizabeth Lerner serves as the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring, Maryland.

Patrick O’Neill

There is something innate to human nature, something basic to our civilized sensibility that recognizes certain distinctions of worth in reality. And the name we have traditionally given to the highest of these is “the holy” or “the sacred.”

I am suggesting that there is a part of human experience that evokes an attitude of reverence, awe, and ultimate respect, a category of transcendence.

My own concept of the sacred these days is less concerned with divine mysteries and Latin definitions than with a simple recognition of the relatedness of all life and our place within the web of existence. For me, the sacred is that which binds us to all other living things and to the Earth which is our home.

Even if no divinity exists, for me the relationship of all living things, each to the other and to the world which sustains us, is sacred. Whatever violates that relation violates the sacred. Whatever nourishes that relation increases it. Whatever calls us to an appreciation of that relationship, calls us to holiness, invites us to the sacred.

Finally, this may be the truth of the matter: The things that are holy and sacred in this life are neither stored away on mountain tops nor locked away in arcane secrets of the saints. I doubt that any church has a monopoly on them either. What holiness there is in this world resides in the ordinary bonds between us and in whatever bonds we manage to create between ourselves and the divine.

We act as agents of the sacred by our choice to view this world in a religious way. We are co-creators and preservers of God’s beauty in the world, in our art, in our science, in our service to high ideals, and not least in our devotion to the good and the just.

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Victoria Safford

When I was nine or ten, I found a dead deer in the woods. I saw the flies feeding on her open eyes and felt the silky roughness of her coat, forgetting all those warnings to never, ever touch a dead animal, not even with a stick. A child is made for wonder, not for hygiene. I pressed my living hand against the stiff carcass, smelled the black blood, lifted up the heavy hooves. I thought about death and how deer run, how they stand among spring trees, glance up, and disappear. That afternoon I learned as much about the sacred as I did in all my later classes in theology.

When I say sacred, I mean the architecture of this radiant creation, and whatever it reveals to us of beauty, truth, and love. It is the common, holy mystery of life and death.

We are part of the cosmos, fragments of its holiness. In our relation to the whole—expressed as reverence, joy, gratitude, prayer, and among us as compassion—the sacred is made manifest. It is the larger love which transcends all our understanding.

Victoria Safford serves as the minister of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church.

The editor, Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, is the director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom and professor of interdisciplinary studies at Virginia Wesleyan College.

For Further Reading

Some of these resources are available from the UUA Bookstore: 1-800-215-9076; www.uua.org/bookstore.

Brock, Rita Nakashima, and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Eshin Rizzetto, Diane. *Waking Up to What You Do: A Zen Practice for Meeting Every Situation With Intelligence and Compassion*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005.

Holbrook, Kate, et. al., eds. *Global Values 101: A Short Course*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Mendelsohn, Jack. *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I am a Unitarian Universalist*, 2nd Edition. Boston: Skinner House, 2006.

Parker, Rebecca Ann. *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Edited by Robert Hardies. Boston: Skinner House, 2006.

Rasor, Paul. *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*. Boston: Skinner House, 2005.