

Sanctuary Everywhere

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Lately I've been taken by the idea of sanctuary. It seems that security and safety is hard to find these days. Last week we thought about All faiths as a sanctuary, a place where we could step out of what ails the world and step into a place that is life giving, welcoming, and safe to be ourselves. Our staff and Board of Directors look at the policies we have in place that serve to make this a safe place for people of all ages. But safety goes beyond the policy. First and foremost, it is a feeling, one that liberates people from fear and anxiety. And when people feel safe, extraordinary opportunities are available. Listen when people light candles on Sundays. There are tender things spoken. People risk. We are trusted with these vulnerabilities. And then there are silent candles some of which may represent things too tender to even be discussed. A community like this is intentionally gathered to welcome people in every stage of life. In obvious ways this includes old and young, wealthy and financially challenged, healthy and people with physical concerns.

But in less obvious ways it includes people who are struggling with mental and emotional challenges, people who are overwhelmed by grief or who carry the weight of the struggles of those near and dear to them. This is a safe place for us when we are broken and looking for healing. And that pretty much describes each of us some of the time. "Lean on me, when you're not strong and I'll be your friend," are the words of one of our hymns. We sing that because we want it to mean something. "May all who seek here find a kindly word, May all who speak here feel they have been heard," are the lyrics of another.

That's what we strive for in the creation of our Sanctuary. It's not just a room, not just a gathering place. We have and must continue to work hard to make this room a safe place where people can tell their stories, or speak their truths knowing they will be heard and kept safe from attack or denigration. If this is truly to be a Sanctuary, it must be the place of radical hospitality. And that means opening our hearts to the things people say. It means silencing our judgemental sides, even if it's only for the time we have here.

Our pulpit or our chalice do not make this room into a sanctuary. Neither does your minister, frankly. Only you can make this place a Sanctuary, for you are the sacred objects here, with your Unitarian values and your good hearted and compassionate character. What does it mean to be a people of sanctuary? Just saying the word "sanctuary" brings one a sense of peace and safety. It can bring back conflicted memories for some, but for most of us the idea of sanctuary conjures up feelings of being protected. Like its close cousin refuge, it speaks to the universal longing for a space to retreat from the dangers and depletions of the world. One thinks of the family ties and friendships that protect, restore and heal us. The sanctuary movement and its refuge for immigrants is another powerful example of offering lifegiving safe space. As the well-loved Irish proverb puts it, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." So, certainly, the hunger for protection and the call to protect each other is central. A sanctuary, in its original meaning is a sacred place, such as a shrine. It comes from the Latin word Sanctarium, a

container for holy things...or perhaps a gathering place for cherished people. It might seem odd to have a room in a Unitarian congregation called a Sanctuary. We really aren't, by most common definitions, a terribly holy people. There are even a good many people who are amazed when we use the word 'church'. Yes, for some who are very religious and some who are anything but religious, the words, 'Unitarian' and 'Church' are oxymorons.

But as we dig deeper, we are reminded that the sanctuaries in our lives do more than simply protect us. They also send us. They don't just help us heal from our journeys; they also strengthen us for the new journeys ahead. In their fullest, they are not escape houses as much as fueling stations. They don't just whisper, "Come and rest," but also, "Be filled and go!" The archetypal image of a toddler leaving and returning to their parent's leg comes to mind. That "home base" is not a tether but the very thing that allows us to venture out. Having been blessed with shelter, we are strengthened to offer that same gift of shelter to others. In other words, sanctuary always comes with a calling. And so the question for all of us this month is not just "Where do you find shelter?" but "Having been empowered by shelter, how can you share that same gift with others?" Along the way, we also discover that our sanctuaries need sheltering and protection themselves. It's a paradox: Our sanctuaries can't protect and repair us unless we also protect and repair them. The green sanctuary movement is a great example of this. The solace of nature and the lifegiving interdependent web need us as much as we need them. The same is true for the sanctuaries in our personal lives. Friendship, silence, stillness: These are all things that wither if we don't tend to and make space for them. So, in the end, maybe the most important question this month is "How are we caring for our sanctuaries so they can take care of us?"

We need "Sanctuary Everywhere" which is the simple idea that everyday people can work to keep each other safe—wherever we are. Sanctuary can mean taking someone into a congregation to protect them, but even broader than that, sanctuary is about the community coming together to protect those who need it. That means standing up to discrimination, harassment, and violence in our schools, congregations, public spaces, cities, streets, and everywhere it happens. Whether we are welcoming refugees or working to stop deportations, protecting religious groups who have been targeted and attacked, working to ensure that Black Lives Matter by interrupting anti-Black violence, or protecting the rights of LGBTQ people, we are all in this together. We hope to interrupt hateful acts and government actions that put our communities at risk, and to encourage concrete policies and practices that create greater safety and a welcoming environment for all.

Sanctuary Everywhere draws on the many traditions of peoples' movements protecting targeted communities, like the Underground Railroad during slavery, Kindertransport during the Holocaust, the protection of conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War, the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s and in more recent years, #NotOneMore, which has sheltered numerous undocumented immigrants from deportation. In today's political context, sanctuary is about ensuring safe havens at many different levels for specific targeted communities. Here are some ways that supporters can get involved at any level, in any space.

Ideally, we would live in a world in which such safe havens were not necessary. Sadly, that will not likely ever be true. The idea of sanctuary as a sacred place of refuge is returning to our hectic, noisy world. In medieval times a sanctuary was a place for a fugitive on the run to seek safety and be immune from arrest. The word itself is derived from the old French 'sanctuaire', implying safety, and the Latin 'sanctus' meaning holy. Now, in the 21st century, we are re-establishing this idea of sanctuary in relation to nature and wildlife reserves, spiritual retreats and

even with the successful City of Sanctuary movement that is building a culture of hospitality for refugees.

We can extend this idea of sanctuary into our own homes by setting aside a space where we can contemplate and be still. With the increased pressures that technology is placing on society through smartphones, email and social media, isn't it desirable that in the future each home might include a safe haven or a dedicated corner into which we could withdraw, however briefly, from the constant electronic intrusion? Here, we're not talking about a retreat from the world or a disengagement from the issues of our time – there is sometimes a criticism of spiritual seekers implying they are impractical or remote. What we're talking about is an engaged spirituality, based on a recognition that slow, quiet time spent in deep silence will help to heal the world from its obsessive materialist nature.

In the past this practice was often undertaken in withdrawal, but now we're seeing the spread of spiritual practices in everyday lives. This is where the importance of sanctuary comes in as we try to hold an inner calm in the face of a world in crisis. Creating a physical space into which we can withdraw is helpful for this. In that space – maybe a small corner of a room decorated with flowers, or perhaps a space outside – we can withdraw from the world of sense impressions and the world of doing, allowing ourselves instead to just be. Entering our sanctuary of silence can allow us to drop our identification with the physical body and its egocentric thought processes, linking us to something deeper. But both doing and being are mutually interdependent, and so this experience can be transformative and inspiring, producing some surprising results.

We need sanctuaries to know the world and its wonder, to know and care for each other as different peoples and faiths, and to know ourselves. From such sanctuaries, blessing always flows. It may not change the course of events in the way we would most wish; it cannot prevent us from being vulnerable and mortal. But it always has the power to transform us through loving-kindness, and guide us with wisdom.

May it be so.

