

“Sacred Space in an Age of Distraction”

It is the third Sunday in May,
And if the past is any indication at some point during the sermon
A whole bunch of motorcycles and sirens will ride by on Rt.16
Distracting us from anything I’m saying.
Some day I will research who they are and what they are roaring past for,
But in the meantime – and if they do come past – we will just pause, ok?

This sermon on the theme of sacred space and distraction
Began for me not with those motorcycles or with those rare
Times when one of your cell phones has gone off during worship,
But instead on a recent Friday night in the cafeteria of Placentino
Elementary School in Holliston.
Was I there to learn about the pedagogy of our daughter’s 2nd grade curriculum?
Was I there to meet her teacher for next year?
Not quite.

I was there in my jeans and my red bandana tied around my neck
And my black suede vest and my flannel shirt tucked in,
My daughter’s hand in mine, she in her jeans and her cowboy boots,
The two of us gathered in a circle of at least 100 other fathers and daughters
For the Annual Dudes and Daughters Girl Scout Square Dance.

Oh yes.
*Howdy partner! Howdy conner! Two steps back, step to your left,
Three steps forward, hold hands and turn to your right.
Now switch and turn to your left.*

Who knew a dance could involve so much geometry?
It was exhausting, and yes, it was wonderful, too,

My daughter's face flushed pink and smiling and carefree.

About a quarter of the way through the evening

(which would last a whole 2 hours!)

The caller said he sensed the dads needed a break.

So he invited all the girls up to the foot of the stage where he was

Leading things – 50 girls in cowboy hats and jean jackets

And denim skirts and boots (me thinking: where am I? Texas?).

And the caller gives them a few instructions, puts the girls

In three rows, and cues the music.

And what followed was truly amazing – twirls, slides to the left,

Hands in the air, hands on the hips, slides to the right, more twirls,

All moving in nearly perfect synchronized cuteness.

Up close and in the fray of daily life it is easy to miss just

How beautiful, how precious, how unique are the people we love,

But sometimes when we see them from a distance,

Even if it's just from across a cafeteria,

We are stunned.

Forget the staged photos of the people in our lives,

Forget those days when we start out in the morning determined

To love our families and partners and children and parents no matter what.

These are the moments – like watching our daughters dancing,

Or watching our partner from the window watering the rose bush,

Or how our friend tilts their head back in laughter from something we have said –

When we remember just how gorgeous life can be, how special, how prized.

Religious types have a word for these kind of unique moments.

We call them sacred.

Back to the cafeteria. I'm not always Mr. Live In the Moment,
Mr. Rev. Dr. Pay Attention, All Life is Sacred, blah, blah, blah...
Far from it, actually.

But that night, just in that one moment watching my daughter,
I felt that cafeteria transform into a sanctuary,
The song and the dance the sermon, the hymns, the prayer all
Wrapped into one holy moment.

Wondering and hoping I was not the only Dude, the only Dad, to notice
I looked up and around me,
And, my friends,
what I did I see but an ocean of dad faces tilted down,
their faces illumined by blue-ish light,
their eyes gazing not at their daughters but at the screens on
their phones.

Over there a guy whips out his ipad from a bag on his back,
Over here a guy taps out a message with his thumbs,
Behind me a phone rings and is un-holstered quick as Jesse James.
And lest you think I am saying I am any better,
I notice in me, for all my presence, an antsy-ness,
My trigger finger on the phone in my pocket.

*Maybe I have time to just check my email, maybe I have time to, you know,
Just 'check-in.' I won't miss much.*

But before I succumb the music ends, the dance stops,
The daughters come running back to us.

"Dad," she says to me. "Did you see me?
Did you watch me? You didn't go on your phone, did you?"

Hear me sigh. Hear you sigh.

But I want to be careful here.

This is not a sermon about technology and me getting ready

To fire and brimstone at you about what Steve Jobs

Has done to us (though, that might be fun).

Instead, on this beautiful May morning what I'm wondering

About are the sacred spaces we have in our lives,

And the distraction we have in our lives,

And how it seems like to me and maybe to you the distractions are winning.

First, the sacred spaces.

Where are they? What are they? Let us count the ways.

Winthrop lake at first light. Farm Pond at dusk.

Wachusett Mountain lookout point.

Rocky Narrows here in Sherborn. The Tree Cathedral in Northampton, England.

Mountock River in Southern Missouri.

The shade from the evergreen tree at noon.

Forest Street in autumn. These are mine. You have yours.

Nature is sacred.

This while building on the hill. Thin cushions on centuries old pews.

Clear windows. The floor of this sanctuary that, if you go down into

The basement, will see is held up by huge tree trunks chopped

Down in 1825, the knot on the woods you can still feel with your fingers,

the bark still rough.

Music Sundays. Sermons. Prayers. Choir, Silence.

Sharing. Laughter. Tears.

This church, this sanctuary is sacred.

This June Phoenix, AZ will be sacred, maybe even as much as it will be hot.

Unitarian Universalists from all over the country will gather there

And set aside our normal denominational business

to act for immigration justice.

Carved out of the rhetoric, carved out from the debate,

Carved out from all the complexity of this issue, a circle will be drawn

And sacred space will be made where we ask:

How will treat our Neighbors?

What does it mean to honor the worth and dignity of each person?

What does it mean to offer sanctuary to the stranger, the foreigner,

To the children following their parents across the border,

To the babies grown into adults who have no papers and no home anywhere?

All those places where our faith put into action is sacred.

Time with people is sacred.

The Friday evening dancing in the cafeteria,

The sideline we stand on watching a child's umpteenth game,

The afternoon spent planting hydrangeas with the spouse,

The hour you spend in the doctor's office with the loved one who is worried

About a test result,

The 20 minute lunch you take to sit with a friend who could use the company,

The late night family movies in living rooms,

The monthly visit to the graveside of a cherished one.

The 10-minutes bedtime story you really, really don't have time or energy for.

Time with the people we love and who love us sacred.

All sounds so nice, so easy, so lovely, yes? Why can't I do all that more?

Maybe it's because of these: the distractions.

To name only a few:

For those not yet retired and even for those who are:

the expectation that every email needs to be answered not tonight,

Not tomorrow, but right now!

The commute that saps every ounce of strength.

The workday that now with the ease of technology means

That the workday never really ends, that we never really 'off.'

For those caring for aging parents or those with aging bodies themselves,

The distracting worry over what will come next.

Will I ever feel healthy again? Will mom ever be able to take care of herself again? Will dad ever get out of that home?

Anxiety over the future. Anxiety that crowds out all other thoughts.

Anxiety that desecrates the sacred space we knew.

For those with children,

Oh, the schedules! The errands, the Sunday morning birthday parties

Because that is the only time left when families aren't doing anything (except church!),

the Saturday morning and Sunday morning lacrosse and soccer and baseball games, the play dates, the tumbling classes, the drum lessons,

The art classes.

Wait! Parents ask. *What about me?*

For all of us, regardless of demographic,

The beautiful, seductive, distracting screens everywhere,
Facebook (put your Face in a Book Instead! Said one billboard I saw),
the overwhelming news cycle that wearies us so much
That we find it hard to know where to even begin to make the world better,
The distraction of having too many choices and too much to;
The distraction, even, of thinking something is wrong with us
If we are not busy like everyone else.

My friends, how do we live in the world with all these things
To distract us from the sacred space we seek?
In other words, how do we worship in places that are sacred to us
Instead of worshiping our distractions?

At a recent gathering of covenant group facilitators in our church,
We asked ourselves this question and in response I shared an
Exercise developed nearly two centuries ago by William Ellery
Channing, founder of American Unitarianism,
Because he believed that meditative self-examination could be
A central practice of our faith.

What does he know about modern life? We might ask.
Nothing, but he did know a thing or two about being religious
In a world that overwhelms us.
With it, we close.

Make yourselves comfortable, he said. Take several deep breaths.
In your minds eye take a detailed inventory of your day so far,
And the day you have ahead of you.
Ask:

How did I greet the day? Upon waking what were my first thoughts and feelings?

Did I begin the day distracted or centered?

What work have I done or will I do this day?

Will it be fulfilling?

If work begins tomorrow, ask: which parts feel aligned with my values?

Which feel contrary to my values?

What will it mean for me to resolve the disparity with integrity?

With whom have I interacted today?

Spouse, partners, children, family, church-friends, strangers.

How have I treated them?

Have my interactions with others been mutual and loving?

Where have I and can I enter sacred space today?

Where can I go that I feel most spiritually alive, and what distractions

Ought I avoid that cut me off the Holy, that make feel 'spiritually dead?'

And as our meditation and sermon conclude, forgive yourself and others

For what needs to be forgiven, give thanks for what you are grateful,

And recommit to beginning tomorrow wiser and better for having reflected

On today.

Amen.