

## To What Do You Hold Sacred?

Reverend Addae L. Watson

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The word sacred is defined as having been set apart by solemn religious ceremony; not being profane or common; such as, a sacred place; a sacred day; or a sacred service. But more often than not when we hear the word sacred, we immediately associate it with some ancient text, such as the Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita, or the Torah. The result of which was spawned by the ordinary stories resulting from the joys and sorrows of ordinary people that led ordinary lives. There is a great mystery in the vastness of the Universe; God means different things to different people. Which is why some people find solace in nature by walking through the woods, through the Dharma of Buddhism, sitting quietly in meditation, or gazing upon the magnificence of a sunset, viewing great works of art, reading mythic stories, or verses of scriptures. Sufi wisdom holds that one is nearer to God's heart in a garden, than in anyplace else on earth. However, throughout all of the stories, within all of the religious cultures of the world, the common thread that I have found woven throughout is the way in which people lived their lives in relationship to each other and to the Holy. Now many of these stories have been labeled as parables, or folk tales, and legends, yet they continue to captivate and hold our interest. They have become roadmaps, used as guides on our journeys through life. Because, whether you are at home raising a family, or climbing the corporate ladder, or whether you are an artist or dreamer, there is no replacement for the human experience, and you have a story to tell, your own unique, life experience. The emotional impacts of the births of your children, health challenges, deaths of loved ones, beautiful love affairs, or thrilling adventures, each event recalls a choice that leads to the crossroad of victories, and sometimes failure. The story about bondage and liberation and journey is not just about ancient Israel, it is our story. Stories have power, and every life story is a unique once told tale. In his book, *Life of The Beloved*, Henry Nouwen tells us that each of our lives are one of a kind, no one has ever lived your life or my life before, and no one will live them again, he continues saying that our lives are unique stones in the mosaic of human existence, priceless and irreplaceable. Sacred stories, biographies that signify your truth. Now when I think about Unitarian Universalist congregations, I am reminded of the extraordinary amount of diversity that exists in each of them. Many of you may have grown up Unitarian Universalist, with the positive affirmations of this living tradition integrated into your formation. However, many more of us such as me discovered Unitarian Universalism much later in our lives. And if you are one of those that fall in the latter category, you may recall feeling the sense that this was who you had been all along and finally, you had found a place that would celebrate and affirm that inner knowing, affirm you, your uniqueness, like no one else had. Yet as Unitarian Universalist, becoming part of a church community that spreads across such broad theological spectrums can serve to keep us separate. We each live in separate homes, separate families, and sometimes even in separate communities, and after spending a week or more before coming together, being engaged in our various separate occupations, we find our way back together in a sacred place. We arrive from many singular rooms spread across a wide geographical area. Many of our lives are conducted in ways that have no connection with the church, which is why we spend time catching up during coffee hour on Sunday morning. There are many people in my home congregation in San Francisco that have attended services for 15 or 20 years, and have never signed the membership book, they are involved in the multiple volunteer opportunities, but they don't OFFICIALLY become part of the body of the congregation. And when questioned about this, their response is, "Oh I'm not a joiner". Some have told me that they come for the coffee (smile). So what is the story? How and why can so many people comprised of such diversity continue to be drawn into this shared sacred space? I believe that we come together because out of the differences in our past, something revealed itself as a common yearning, a common thread woven into all the various garments of our separate lives. That difference grew strong enough, the yearning voice became loud enough so that we felt called to separate ourselves from our pasts and find ourselves together; Together in a place where that part of ourselves, that holds what Paul Tillich describes as the ground of our being can be recognized and nurtured and honored. It is only in these places that have been set aside to be made sacred, that we

find that unique part of ourselves, in a shared community experience. Is it the words that are said at the opening, or is it the ceremony of the lighting of the Chalice? To what do we hold sacred? Perhaps it is when we light candles of Joys and sorrows that allow us to open a small window into our separate rooms, so that others are allowed a glimpse into our lives, in some small way; to momentarily share a small corner of the fabric woven from our sacred stories. Because, you see when we share our stories, a new pattern is woven, a new pattern with different life stories stretched out on the same loom. And when this happens, the lives of the listeners are impacted by the discovery and the fellowship is strengthened. It is that common thread that we recognize in the warmth of smiles, and the sounds of familiar voices. These sacred places becomes home in a way that home can never be. Because it is only here, that the searching, wandering, traveling, nomadic part of ourselves, has found a place and a peace to settle in. So then this is a sacred and special time, a special time of resting among folks with a common identity. How many times have you sat listening to someone sharing their story, and thought to yourself, that's my story? And you become strengthened, and encouraged with hope renewed. Which is why, I believe small group ministries are so successful, because in sharing our stories we can be moved to a place of wholeness. Listening to other's stories is a gift that we offer them, and a gift that we in turn receive. People who share stories become soul friends. The Kalahari Desert bush people believe that their individual stories contain their soul as a people, only telling their stories to outsiders that they deem trustworthy. The belief is that if enemies come into possession of the stories, they will have the power to destroy them spiritually. I believe that sharing our stories in community with each other can also strengthen us spiritually. Even if we can't agree on who or what God is, or even whether God exists, there is still a belief or truth that guides each of us, that governs the way in which we live our lives in relationship to humankind and in relationship to the holy. Each of us has our own reasons for attending church. We each hold our own hopes and expectations of what we will find. Maybe it is to hear beautiful music and sing familiar hymns. To hear a friendly word, and share greetings with hugs and smiles and yes even tears. We may have hopes of sharpening our consciousness, or of renewed courage. This is an important time of resting among folks with a common identity. Perhaps it is to see our loveliest visions of life, to answer the cry in our hearts, and to be present to the pulse of life. We may need to feel the love of others and express our love for them. To refresh ourselves, and to remind ourselves of our faith and our tradition, a sacred time to experience human nature at its best and to be brought back to our own standards. Maybe we want to be reinforced in community and inspired for our service to others, to be united in the search, and not the end result. Sometimes we need reassurance in our faith, or perhaps to be cleansed of our foul mood and negative thoughts from the week. Maybe we want to sit in silence with others who have come to this sacred space to sit in silence too. Maybe we want to pray for ourselves or others, and maybe we want others to pray for us. What ever our reasons are we come together to share space in a place that has been set apart for a ceremony, that is a living tradition that grows out of the sacred stories as the legacy from a long line of Unitarian Universalists. So I ask you, to what do you hold sacred?

Blessed Be  
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