**Some Thoughts on “Sacred” for Not Church - FINAL**

Lance Ozier June 13, 2021

Thank you . . .

I’m honored to have the opportunity to contribute to today’s meeting. I’m a relative newcomer to Not Church, and most of you probably have no idea who I am or why I’m here. So let me take a moment to introduce myself.

I live in Corrales, New Mexico, a small, semi-agricultural village of about 8,000 people along the Rio Grande near Albuquerque. But for over 40 years I lived and worked on the East Coast in public broadcasting, including an 11-year stint at PBS headquarters in Washington, DC, capped off with 22 years at WGBH in Boston. In retirement, I am a passionate amateur photographer, a calling that came after age 50.

But I think the most meaningful credential I can offer this group is the fact that I have known Anna Zimmerman for nearly 65 years. And it’s because of her that I am here today. So, Anna, wherever you are today, thank you for inviting me.

Our theme for today is “Finding the Sacred in Everything.” Maria suggested this topic, and Anna – completely out of the blue – asked me if I would share some of my thoughts on the subject. For her it was a leap of faith that I would even HAVE some thoughts on the subject – I mean, how many people spend much time thinking about “sacredness”? . . . but knowing Anna as I do, I know she’s good at leaps of faith, and as it happens I DO have some thoughts, which I’m happy to share with you this morning.

Before coming to the theme of “Finding the Sacred in Everything,” there’s a prior question that needs to be explored. If we’re trying to find the sacred in something, what are we looking for? Just what do we mean when we say something, or some place, or some idea is “sacred”?

The term “sacred” is most commonly associated with religion, and as a result it comes with a lot of baggage that can obscure an understanding of what the term actually means.

But the term “sacred” is often applied to things or places apart from the religious realm.

For example, in the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection attempt at the Capitol building in Washington, many people – news commentators, even members of Congress – referred to the event as an attack on the “sacred space” of democracy.

On the other hand, what one person or group might consider sacred may not be considered sacred at all by some other person or group. For example, in India, cows are considered to be a sacred symbol of life, and as such should be protected and revered. In the United States, cows are slaughtered by the millions every day . . . sacred, perhaps, only for their monetary value or for their use as the primary ingredient in hamburgers.

And interestingly, things that have been deemed “sacred” can lose their sacred status. For example, in the village I live, there’s a 150-year-old adobe church building that no longer serves a religious congregation. At some point 40 or 50 years ago, the size of the congregation exceeded the capacity of the building, so the parishoners built a larger building down the street. And when they left the old church, they performed a ritual of de-consecration – removing the designation of “sacred” from the building to allow non-religious activities to occur in it.

So we’ve seen that the term “sacred” can apply to things or places outside the religious realm. And different groups can hold different things or places to be sacred. And things or places that are sacred can lose their sacred-ness for some reason.

All of this suggests that we need to understand the term “sacred” in a more universal way.

If we can intellectually strip away the religious or other specific associations (like “democracy”) from the term “sacred,” we may be able to get a clearer view of what it means for some thing – or some place – to be “sacred.” And if we have a better understanding of the term, then we might get a better sense of how to go about finding the sacred in everything.

To me, a sacred thing or place embodies, illustrates, or symbolizes a value, or a standard, or a way of behaving that is agreed upon or accepted by a group as being of fundamental importance to the group.

In addition, a thing’s sacredness is usually ascribed or attributed to a source with power or scale (or both) far beyond that of the group that has declared the thing or place to be sacred.

In other words, a thing or a place becomes sacred when we recognize its relationship to a larger, perhaps transcendent, whole that is perceived or understood as something fundamentally important. And that recognition is frequently not just the result of an intellectual engagement. Typically there’s also an emotional element – a revelation, an epiphany – that comes with feelings of awe, respect, and humility.

When that happens . . . when we recognize a place or a thing’s connection/relationship to a larger, “good” or important whole, we recontextualize that place or thing as being aligned with the goodness or importance of the larger whole, and the thing or place becomes “sacred.”

If we understand the term “sacred” in this way, we can then productively turn to our theme for today: finding the sacred in everything.

Finding the sacred in everything isn’t about waiting around to be gobsmacked. It requires purposeful attention, asking, “What aspect of this thing, or person, or idea, or place can I recognize as emblematic of, or symbolic of, or an embodiment of something that is bigger than the thing itself, and is of fundamental importance or value to me?”

Sometimes we are able to do this successfully on our own. But sometimes it’s difficult, and sometimes we need help in finding the sacred in something. So where can we get help?

I imagine that for many of us here at Not Church, organized religion may not be the first place we turn to for help in finding the sacred.

Fortunately, there are many other places to turn for help. In my experience, those who help us find the sacred in things are artists, composers, musicians, painters, dancers, singers, philosophers, historians, novelists, and, of course, as we are about to experience this morning, poets.

So with that, it’s an appropriate time to turn the program over to Maria to introduce our guest speaker . . .