

The Sanctity of Life  
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One of the most remarkable experiences of nature that I have ever witnessed happened in the desert mountains of Western Nevada. From the road leading up the western shore of Pyramid Lake, I decided to hike up into an essentially random stretch of the mountains paralleling the road – up a sloping valley between two rounded vertical extensions protruding forward from the ridge. This was dry desert country in the rain-shadow of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There was no trail, nor was one needed, as I could walk almost anywhere on the desiccated sandy/pebbly soil between the clumps of desert sage and sporadic patches of brownish grass. The country was defined by lack of water. The walking was uphill, but easy, and I was in no hurry, stopping to listen to the hum of cicadas punctuated by absolute silence, and turning around to observe the ever-widening view of the valley as my elevation increased.

At one point, the valley divided with the wider section continuing westward more steeply upward towards the visible ridge, and the other branch angling northward, rising more gradually, but narrowing and looking most likely to dead-end somewhere within the folds of the undulating curtains of rock. Since I had no destination, and was not looking for a way through or a pass over this range, I chose to continue into the more narrow section, deciding to see how far I could proceed before having to turn back around. As the canyon narrowed, I soon lost any view except for that directly behind me. After another 20 minutes, it was clear that this was indeed a dead-end canyon ending in two branches: one straight ahead towards the rock wall of the mountains, and the other reaching to the left around a buttress of vertical rock and obviously extending but a short distance towards the backbone of the ridge.

When I rounded that last buttress of rock, what I encountered was totally unexpected – there was a pool of water about half the size of this sanctuary. And not just a pool, but also vibrant yellow-green bushes growing along one side, with half a dozen birds in their branches, with large red and black wasps hovering around; and in one spot in the water, deep green blades of thick grass; and all of this explosion of colour and movement contained like a stage-set by the vertical rock walls. It was so unexpected, and unimaginable, that it really did take my breath away, and all that I could do was to sit down on the spot, in awe, at the entrance to this sacred space, this natural sanctuary. It was overwhelming.

After a while, I rose and walked up to the edge of the water. It was crystal clear, and I probably should have drunk from these “life giving” waters, but as I had also read stories of thirsty souls, lured by the promise of refreshment, meeting untimely ends on the banks of poisoned springs, I chose simply to immerse my hands, and even that was cool and refreshing amid the surrounding aridity.

My talk today is about the sanctity of life. That oasis was a sacred place – it sparked in me emotions about unexpected truths, about meanings larger and deeper than myself, about the wonder of life, the sanctity of life. The desert, itself, is a good metaphor for this topic, for it highlights the extremes of life, and in so doing, creates cracks in our complacency about life and forces us to consider survival. Life in the desert is both strong and fragile. Fragile for our species who cannot survive there without bringing water with us – yet strong and filled with life in sage and serpent, insect and cactus; strong in hundred-mile vistas of overpowering permanence – and yet fragile, still visibly etched by the tracks of wagons from 150 years ago. Strong and fragile just as we know life to be. And like the desert, life is both marked by our individual journeys and, at the same time, obviously much bigger than the tracks we leave upon it.

Birth is a universal human experience – we have all been there, even though we don't consciously remember much about the day. Most of us have also had the joy of seeing a child born, and in that interplay between fragility and strength – the fragility of a baby's dependency and the strength of the life force moving it forward – in that interplay between fragility and strength, we recognize again the sacred, through emotions generated within which connect us to meanings and values which are larger than the self, more powerful than the everyday and more meaningful than the mundane. For today, I am calling this “the sanctity of life”, well aware that there are other terms which we may choose to use.

The term “sanctity of life” has been politicized today – it is not the bumper sticker that most Unitarian Universalists would put on their cars. Rather, “sanctity of life” is the rallying cry of those who wish to ban abortion and euthanasia, and also of those who wish to limit access to any form of birth control. The argument is that life is sacred, from God, and that it is immoral for humans to meddle by making such decisions. Or in other words, people who do choose to make reproductive decisions or end-of-life decisions, do not respect the sanctity of life.

There are a variety of religious perspectives in the world today, and there always have been throughout history. Try as they might, through either brutality or kindness, no one religion, no one perspective, has been accepted by all. But in my mind, all religions are essentially talking about the same two subjects, trying to come to terms with the same two essential issues. The first is the sanctity of life, or more broadly the meaning of life. Who are we in the wider perspective? We live; we die; but there is obviously more than this – life goes on before us and after us. What is that broader life, that universe, that existence? What is the source of our feelings of wonder, of awe, of respect in the face of life wider or deeper than ourselves? This is the issue of the sanctity of life.

The other essential topic of all religions is morality, morality in two parts. First, how do we act thoughtfully in this special or sacred place? What is our relationship with whatever our gods may be, or with however we define this larger world? And secondly, how do we act ethically with one another? How do we treat each other – our families, our neighbours, and our strangers?

Within the religious spectrum, modern Unitarian Universalism tends to ruminate more within the moral and ethical pastures of religion and rather less within the areas of sanctity and holiness. We are an ethically based faith, and have always been so inclined. This is what originally separated both Unitarianism and Universalism from mainstream Christianity, and also what eventually led to the merger of the two denominations. We are sometimes criticized by mainstream Christianity as being more of an ethical society than a religion, but what is actually true is that we simply focus more on the ethical side than most others do.

As a short digression, let me give a quick, very simplified, history here. The term, Unitarianism, was coined as a rejection of Trinitarianism. Unitarianism said that God was the complete wholeness of existence and could not be divided into three parts. Divisions were worldly descriptions; God was whole. And this indivisible God did not divide Himself, taking an active part in the daily affairs of the world, but was instead higher than this level of existence. Over time, the logical outcome of this philosophy was that prayer and supplication were of less importance since God was above listening and acting; and so what was of more importance was how we expressed the godliness within us, or in other words, how we treated each other, the moral and ethical side of religion.

The Universalists ended up in pretty much the same place, but by a different route. The term Universalism was coined to refer to the belief that all souls were going to heaven, i.e. universal

salvation. At the time, Protestant Christianity was arguing about who was going to heaven and who was going to hell. Some said that this was decided according to our good or bad deeds, but that implied that God didn't know ahead of time, which was impossible because He was all-knowing. So others said that God pre-determined who was going to heaven (the Select Few), and we could pretty much tell who they were because they were the ones doing the good deeds, or at least attending the correct church. The Universalists solved this argument by claiming that there was no Hell. Hey, they said, remember? -- Good is All Good, and if he is ALL good, then he could not have created a bad place like Hell. God is Goodness, and what is most important for Christians is to incorporate God's goodness into our lives, to live that goodness in the world. And the logical outcome of this was to emphasize the ethical and moral aspects of religion.

Universalists were emphasizing God's goodness, and Unitarians were emphasizing the god within, and the 19th Century joke was that God was too good to send Universalists to Hell, and that Unitarians were too good to go there. The two groups eventually merged so that we could all live in this paradise together.

My point, even before the historical digression, is that Unitarian Universalism is an ethically focussed religion. We tend to talk more about how we should be living our lives than to talk about a Higher Reality, or about sacred spaces. But this is the particular balance that we choose, and the two realms are not mutually exclusive, and as I commented before, both discussions are a part of any religious belief.

While we have no creed that we are all required to believe personally, we do have a denominational statement which has been accepted by all of our Canadian congregations. We call this statement "The Principles and Sources of Our Religious Faith". As could be predicted, most of the content deals with ethical issues, such as respect for each other and justice for all, but there are a couple of ideas expressed in these principles and sources that relate also to my topic today, to the sanctity of life, such as this principle

*We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

This statement is an acknowledgement that we are a part of something valuable that is larger than ourselves and larger than humanity, an "interdependent web of all existence". Some of us describe this web in scientific terms, others in spiritual terms, and others in both, but the uniting factor is that we are a part of something larger – the environment, Gaia, God, love – your choice and our discussion with each other. This is where I place the idea of the sanctity of life, that there is in living things, and in the life force itself, something worthy of respect, powerful enough to take my breath away before a desert oasis, to make me think beyond my little box, and to feel connected to something bigger.

When we get, in our same statement of unity, to the sources of inspiration for Unitarian Universalists, there is an acknowledgement of our diversity and of our appreciation for religious pluralism. We do not all draw from the same sources, but the first one that is listed is quite appropriate here, we draw inspiration from the

*direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life*

I, personally, go to this well for inspiration – direct experience. In the desert, in the city, in our daily lives many of us see, experience and then act in ways we hope will uphold life, whether it be the life of one we love, the lives of others in our society, or life in nature. It is interesting to note some of the words used in this statement, such as “affirmed in all cultures”. I, for one, enjoy reading religious writings from various cultures. Some cultures would identify this “transcending mystery and wonder” as God, others would make that plural, the gods; and yet, as an atheist, I am quite comfortable with this language as well. For me, there is a mysterious and wonderful aspect to life, and when I consider it I am transcended, that is, moved beyond myself, moved “to a renewal of the spirit”, or in other words, I am energized and more hopeful when I make such connections, and more eager to contribute to solutions, and more open “to the forces which create and uphold life” -- that is, feeling more connected to the rest of the world. I am convinced that these feelings ring true for many of us here and that this is why it is included in our statement. It is also why I am speaking today about the Sanctity of Life.

Recognizing the sanctity of life does not remove it from the context of human living and does not release us from the responsibility of making decisions about it. The sanctity of life does not mean that it is God's hands and not ours. Such a concept comes from the belief that humans are inherently sinful, and that we sully God's masterpiece with our dirty hands and sinful thoughts. On the contrary, I believe that it is the very sanctity of life that calls us to respond – to respond as much as possible with hand and heart and mind – a response that is also a responsibility. This is not meddling; this is not playing God. This is being human.

In the course of our human lifetimes, all of us have had, and will have, decisions to make around human life issues, and we will also be exposed to others' decisions on these same issues – decisions about parenthood, birth, abortion, end-of-life; decisions about the degree of medical intervention or when to stop treatment; decisions based upon what our loved ones want and upon what we want, and upon how best we can support each other. Some of these decisions are purely personal, some involve family, and some may even have broader implications in society.

These decisions are contextual, made in the present reality of the situations we are facing, and influenced by both present circumstances and our more general beliefs and values. Values that we have thought about ahead of time, and perhaps talked about with our loved ones and even our friends, values such as these, the sanctity of life for one example, will help to inform our decisions, but even so, the decisions themselves are made in the here and now, taking the immediate factors into consideration as well as pre-considered ones. I believe that this is where morality really happens – in the moment of decision in the present, more so than in the general rules we have developed to help us make those decisions. I do not believe that following the rules is morality, but that morality is really in deciding whether or not to follow the rules, deciding each and every time within the context of what we are facing. Sometimes this is easy, things are as expected and the moral decision is clear; but at other times it can be more difficult and morally challenging.

For some, this sounds like moral anarchy – everyone deciding for themselves what is right and wrong – but in the end, I rather think that this is what happens anyway, as no matter how absolute the morality is expressed, people still eventually choose whether or not to abide by it. The value in identifying the contextual nature of morality, and naming it as such, is that it highlights the fact that we are responsible for our actions. In having to decide each time anew, we become more responsible rather than less, because we are responding again and again rather than once for all time. Morality is not static – things change, life changes, we are faced with new challenges – and knowing what is right is a learning process. Acknowledging relativity is not the slippery slope towards immorality but rather the opportunity for thoughtful, considered decision-making, and the opportunity to engage with others in

determining what is right and wrong.

In making beginning-of-life and end-of-life decisions, I suggest that some sense of the sanctity of life will play into most of our discussions, and in my mind that sense of sanctity will involve our feelings about the quality of life as well as its span and its essence. All of these factors will be added together to make as informed and as ethical a decision as we can. And of course, a sense of the sanctity of life may also guide us in broader social and political positions that we may wish to take. Perhaps sanctity of life will help guide us in our thoughts regarding environmental policy, or in our lifestyle decisions. It might influence what we have to say about supporting a war, or the bombing outside of a war; about our levels of foreign aid, or our refugee policy; or about our relations with the Native Peoples of this country, or even whether there should be an inquiry into the murder of Aboriginal women. Perhaps all of these, are in part, sanctity of life issues? You decide.

When I walked back from my oasis in the desert, I turned upwards and reached the ridge, upon which I continued walking in a wide arc back roughly in the direction towards where I had first begun, and where I would eventually find a place to drop safely down into the valley below. On one narrow section of the ridge, a skeleton of a deer was lying across the trail, a full skeleton from antler to tail, missing only one hind leg which I could see down below in the ravine. The deer had been there a long time, as it was completely eaten clean and bleached white without one speck of flesh or sinew, or even hide – just clean, white bone, startlingly vibrant in the sunlight, as vibrant as red and black wasps and deep green grasses. Just as water, death here had nourished life and left a testament to be read by any thirsty traveller, that life and death must both be honoured, and that the deeper meaning is in the two combined.

Morality is not static. Things change. We change. Life changes. Life changes -- and an appreciation for the sanctity of life embraces those changes, from the very first life form to the last, from birth to death. And for many of us, it helps to guide us in how we wish to live and die.