

## Holy Moments in Ordinary Life

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Unitarian Universalist Society  
Sacramento June 11, 2017

Reading: “[Welcome Morning](#)” by Anne Sexton.

Hymns: #1064, Blue Boat Home;  
#123, Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor;  
#298, Wake Now My Senses.

### Blessing for Recent High School Graduates

#### Sermon:

So much has been going on here at UUSS during the past several months of my sabbatical absence. It is wonderful to be back. I missed you. I look forward to reconnecting as well as to getting to know the adults and children who have become part of UUSS while I was gone. During the time away I worked on my Doctor of Ministry dissertation, and finished it. I did some traveling, reading, resting and reflecting. So the sabbatical is over.

After all of my time away, I am hoping that you are not expecting any evidence of spiritual growth. I didn't feel particularly spiritual, especially while slogging through the dissertation. I did keep up a meditation practice and kept you in my prayers—you and the rest of the country, and the world. Yet I had many occasions to feel like a spiritual klutz, just as I did before the sabbatical. At the end of my first day, I began a sabbatical journal. I created a document on my computer with a box to fill in for each day, so I could note what I did, what article I read or show I saw, and where I went. I did this at the end of every day, for three days. Then I didn't. I never caught up with the lost days, and that spiritual practice disappeared.



Near the end of my time away I was in South Korea for a two-week visit. A couple of nights before leaving Korea, I entered a Buddhist temple, right in the crowded city neighborhood of my hotel in the city of Seoul. In the early evening's darkness, hanging rows of colored paper lanterns glowed in the outside air near the buildings—orange, red, blue, green--so many bright colors. Inside the main hall of ornately carved red, green and blue woodwork, three golden Buddha statues towered one story high to the ceiling. As I peered in, I decided I could be a bit less of an onlooking tourist and join the handful of people sitting on thick rectangular gray meditation cushions.

I took off my shoes and stepped in. I walked around a person sitting with a Buddhist holy book, and steered clear of another person who was doing a series of prostrations, standing, bowing, bending, kneeling and then touching the ground with the forehead. A few people were fingering strings of beads. I looked around and saw two of the meditation cushions stacked near a carved square pillar. I lifted one up to use. Underneath it was a string of beads. Right

then a man came toward me and spoke to me. He must have said something like: “Hey, that’s my spot.” I didn’t know where people were getting their cushions and saw none available, so I just stood by a pillar observing the people and the big statues. I thought: “Well if I’m here, I can do a standing meditation the same as a sitting one. I’ll just stand here for 20 minutes, till the clock on the wall says 8:30. Sometimes I closed my eyes, and watched my in-breath and my out-breath. Sometimes I looked around. As stood there, I realized how distracted I was--far from mindful! I checked the clock. My mind explored... where to have dinner. I wondered: “Will somebody take my shoes from outside while I’m standing here? Probably not, they’re old and pretty worn.” Boy was I restless. I came back to my breathing for a while. Until I realized what a great picture I could get of the Buddha statues from that angle, so I sneaked out my cell phone.

It was a very long twenty minutes. But by the end of it I noticed which people were still sitting, which ones had left, and which ones had arrived since I started. I observed people returning their cushions in the area behind the statues—that must be where I could have found one for myself. I decided I could leave now. I walked a few blocks for dinner. Although my mind had been racing and rushing when I began what seemed like a sorry excuse for a standing meditation, by now I was much more aware of my walking, less rushed. Those moments had not felt holy or spiritual, but challenging. But the time I took seems now to have been a worthy sacrifice, a holy time. We don’t often realize that an experience was holy, spiritual or otherwise special until we recount the story of that experience well after it has taken place. A holy moment does not come on demand, not by submitting an order or clicking on a smartphone application.

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<sup>1</sup> “Awesomeness Is Everything,” by Matthew Hutson. *The Atlantic* (January/February 2017). Accessed June 9, 2017.



I recall a few special moments during my time away from here. What I’ve learned over the years is that it’s better not to expect or plan for an experience that feels like a holy moment. Perhaps it’s best if we do not go looking for it, but invite it, make space for it. Moments when we have a sudden insight, feel grace, or experience emotional power are not everyday experiences for most of us. Yet they can happen in the midst of ordinary life.

When you ask many people about holy moments in life, they think of a moment of awe or wonder. Things that give you goosebumps. In fact, a feeling awe is the “second most common cause of goosebumps.” If awe is #2, you might ask, what’s the #1 cause? Being cold.<sup>1</sup> Reviewer Louis Carlozo recalled that he had felt goosebumps at seeing a black and white film from 1961, of Ray Charles and his eight-piece band performing in Paris.<sup>2</sup> Lots of people talk about feeling awe and wonder out of doors, in the mountains or at the ocean, for example. In Korea I had a conversation with a man who had visited the United States, and he recalled the moment he laid eyes on the Grand Canyon. Riding in a car in the national park, he saw a sign for the canyon and got out. He walked, and came upon the canyon right away, sooner than he had expected. He felt stunned. He’d known it would be vast; he’d known it would be beautiful. But he saw it before he expected to,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/awesomeness-is-everything/508775/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2012-01/ray-charles-live-france-1961-dvd>

and the scene overtook him...with a feeling of awe. That for him was a holy moment. He hadn't engineered or expected any particular experience. He had merely put himself in a place where he would be *open* to an experience, and WOW, there it was.

I don't place myself in a National Park very often. However, in April I started making up for it. I saw Great Basin, Canyon Lands and Arches National Parks, though it was a short visit, only four days. Our main focus was Canyon Lands. My friend Peter, a devoted camper and hiker, was taking some of the cremated remains of our mutual friend John to the park. John had loved Canyon Lands, and both of his parents' ashes had been placed there decades earlier. (I don't believe such a practice is allowed anymore, and I hope that small transgressions like ours don't harm the park.) Peter asked me to go along. We set up and took down the tent camper near all three parks, but not in them. Dispersed camping, primitive camping—whatever you call it, it was challenging to me, and invigorating, especially in the cold night air. We hiked in the day, cooked and had wine in the evening. Among other topics of conversation, we recalled our experiences with John, stories he had told us about his life. We noted his professional accomplishments, his expertise at hiking and biking, his love of the outdoors, and his generosity, humor, and good cheer. The big day of our journey was an 11-mile hike. It was big for me, anyway. It was a sunny day and not very hot, but I sweat a lot while we hiked. My legs felt the strain of climbing. I feared losing my balance going down some big slabs of rock. An hour before the end of our daylong trek, my body wanted to say: DONE. But midway through the hike, we did rest for a meal. Then we found a remote place under the shadow of a high stone wall, near a bush. Peter dug a hole, poured in a cup or two of sandy gray ashes, and covered it over. We spoke our farewells to John; I said a silent prayer; Peter read a poem.

We looked out over the view. He said: "John would appreciate having this view for eternity." Indeed the park is amazing—a surreal, moonlike landscape—more like Mars than the moon, with clay-red slabs and pillars of rock, dotted with green brush. Though it seemed like a fitting thing to do, the burial did not seem like a powerful moment for me. Because the hiking took so much out of me, I didn't have enough breath for the lovely scenes to take my breath away. Yet in looking back now, I appreciate all of it. And mostly, I appreciate the random conversations we had over the days together, the bonding over our shared appreciation and shared loss of a friend.



Sometimes we don't recognize a holy moment *in the moment*. Only on reflection. It is better if we don't predict or expect those moments, but only invite them. If we actually have the time available to ponder, it is a privilege. And if we take the time, we receive a great gift. As restless as we may feel amid the distractions of our day, if we can pause a bit and reflect as we sit still, or take a stroll around the block, or do the laundry or wash the dishes, we might recognize what our holy moments have been.

Many people have experienced the holy moment of being in the presence of someone who is passing away peacefully. When a person is privileged to die of natural causes, and not by violent means, and lucky enough to die in a safe setting, with pain absent or moderated, the loved ones who witness their passing might experience an awesome yet quiet gift. A sad moment, but a special one. Dying is as ordinary as living for human beings and other animals,

yet if we are present for another person's death, the moment will be impressed on our memories for years afterward.

At the other end of the life cycle--that is, near the early part of it, many of us can mark holy moments from watching children, or conversing with them, or just caring for their needs. In Religious Education here at UUSS, our volunteers and staff can run out of memory to hold all the stories of the special moments with our youth and children. The ritual we did earlier today, marking the passage of our youth from high school age into adulthood, represents in one moment all those holy moments experienced by their parents and families, and by us here as the religious community. I asked one of my friends who has four children, two out of high school and two younger ones, to describe the most notable kind of holy moments. Well, each kid has been a different experience. However, this parent said: "The moments in the past have all been about having a genuine conversation. They asked questions, I gave them some info from my experience, and we pondered, together."



On the second day of my sabbatical, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, a friend took me to a concert at the Mondavi center, to hear the Los Angeles Philharmonic! Gustavo Dudamel, their joyful, energetic young music director, was conducting. When I saw the ticket price for our main section seats, I was glad I was being treated. I did not feel totally worthy to be there, but I did my best to appreciate the music. The only work on the program was Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony. I read in the program notes that the work was all over the place, musically speaking.

"Passionate...brooding...and acerbic" are some of the words reviewers have used, as well as "heavenly, vigorous, ferocious, and violent," and finally "quiet...peaceful." And I came to hear all those words do describe that 90-minute work of music. It was Mahler's last completed symphony, it was not conducted in public until 1912, in the year after the composer's death from a heart condition.

I'd not heard Mahler's Ninth before, so I was just trying to keep up with it. Typically, I don't love a work of music when I first hear it, whether it's a symphony or a song. But if I hear something a few times and it becomes familiar, and I like it, then I grow to *love* it. The memories of my repeated hearings of a piece of music *crowd in* together, making the familiar music special... spiritual, nourishing, and sometimes holy. But that on this night, Mahler's Ninth is new for me. I don't really think it's affecting me very much as I hear most of it. Then, after the music of that symphony goes all over the map for 90 minutes, the work ends not triumphantly, but quietly... gently. "Dying away," as Mahler noted on the score [in German]. And as we could barely hear the music end, the conductor kept his hands up in the air, one hand holding his baton. He did not lower it. The musicians did not lower their instruments. Neither he nor the orchestra moved at all; nor did we in the audience. Quiet. Held as we were by Gustavo Dudamel's motionless gesture, we had to let the effect of all that music sink into us. We could not leap up automatically to show our appreciation as good arts patrons. He did not move his arms for a long time. Two minutes, maybe more. He was conducting *us...* to silence. Finally, he and his orchestra, very slightly, began relaxing, and we did begin a very long ovation. The applause probably lasted longer than the silence, but the silence is what has stuck with me, the moment that stayed in my mind. I had not expected it, and it was a gift. It was a holy moment, a memorable one.

Wait... reflect. Don't react, but merely rest on the sense of this gift of art, or whatever experience we might be having. We could apply such a reflective approach to eating a meal, doing chores at home, watching children, sitting with a sick person, walking to the store, shopping at the farmers' market or the supermarket. Reflect, instead of reacting. Wait...receive the moment... reflect.

Often we don't realize that an experience was holy, spiritual or otherwise special until we recount the story of the experience well after it has taken place. All this calls for/ is for someone to receive and listen to our thoughts, recollections, and impressions of the moments of our lives.

Yet the first and most important person to listen to and receive our impressions and holy moments we have... is we, ourselves. If we can take the time/ if we can pause till we settle down, we might be able to recall, appreciate and reflect on the richness of the special moments of ordinary life. Whether we write an idea or an image in a journal, roll an experience over in our mind, or tell it to a friend, it is nourishing to look at the moments of ordinary life in some time of intentional reflection. May we and everyone have the blessing for such a time of reflection on the holy moments of life. May we and everyone have the freedom and the safety to know such experiences in the first place. May we and everyone have the chance to appreciate those glimpses of grace, to appreciate those feelings of awe and insight which make life more than ordinary. May we notice, and give our thanks. Amen.

Now please join me for a minute of pausing together here, in silence. Perhaps you can remember a moment when you felt wonder, awe, or a sense of grace. Whether or not you can call one to mind this morning, by our sitting for a time, perhaps we can invite those moments we can call holy in the days to come. Create space for special moments. Not to rush, not to expect, merely to invite and receive. Join with me now for a few moments.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

