

A person stands in silhouette on a rocky outcrop, looking up at a night sky filled with stars and the aurora borealis. The scene is framed by a white border.

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SACRAMENT

A principled and passionate Unitarian Universalist and a deeply faithful Catholic, that was me and my neighbor, Emma, who was my best friend throughout upper elementary and middle school before her family moved away and we drifted apart in our high school years. Her mother was the religious matriarch of the family, leading them and praying the rosary at dinnertime. Her mother also ran the thrift store and the bookshop at the nearby Catholic hospital. I spent a lot of time with Emma's family, and I remember going to Catholic mass with her, sometimes in very odd places, at the hospital chapel, but also in a giant, unadorned and unremarkable space at a nearby shopping mall.

When it came time for the Eucharist, the sacrament of bread and wine communion, I was curious. What do those wafers taste like? Spoiler alert, they taste like cardboard. But I also felt confused and uncomfortable. Was I supposed to go up and receive communion along with my friend? Was I welcome at the table? Would I be turned away by the priest or would he extend a blessing to this out-of-place Unitarian Universalist kid? Now, I had been baptized as a baby since my mom was still part of the Catholic Church at the time, but I didn't grow up in the Catholic Church, didn't accept its doctrines and creeds, nor did I participate in any of the other sacraments, unless you count those spaghetti dinners at the neighborhood church and school. A few people have been to those.

I didn't have a way to make sense of it all at the time. But as I reflect on these experiences and consider the role that sacraments play in my life as a Unitarian Universalist, I wonder, what if sacraments are not something available only to select individuals who have received a blessing or accepted certain truths, but to anyone? What if sacraments are part of the circle of enabling love that embraces all the living that we just sang about? But let's take a step back. What is a sacrament? One way to talk about a sacrament is that it is where we meet the holy. Norbert Capek, the Unitarian minister who served in Prague and was imprisoned and killed for treason by the Nazis, wrote the

words that I shared earlier about that place in the depths of his soul where with lightning reigning and horrible darkness frightening the world outside, he found refuge. It is the place where the divine and human meet.

Within the confines of a Nazi prison, there probably were not many opportunities to participate in visible sacraments. So he returned to his own soul and found there his source of strength. Capek had been born into a Catholic family, but left the Catholic Church as a disillusioned teenager and became a Baptist minister. It was during his time in the United States that he and his wife, Maya, discovered Unitarianism and decided that they wanted to bring it back to their homeland. There, he founded the Unitarian Church in Prague, which because of his disillusionment with the highly liturgical church of his youth, this was a church without elaborate rituals, without even hymns, without formal or prescribed prayers. But he did create a ritual called the flower celebration, in which each member would bring a flower to the church, place it in a large vase, representing the communion of unique souls they gathered. And at the end of the service, each person took home a flower that was different from the one that they brought.

While some today call this ritual a flower communion, Capek would have bristled at the word communion, yet it was and is a sacrament. Sacraments are also sometimes referred to as outward signs of inward grace, visible symbols of the reality of God, tangible embodiments of the sacred, something that we can see and taste and touch through which we connect with the Holy. A sacrament is how we make that divine human meeting place within us outwardly visible. From the depth of your own soul will rise again God's flower.

Now, Catholics have seven sacraments, baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. Protestants have two, the Eucharist and baptism. Unitarian Universalists, we have an infinite number of sacraments. Your ministers were talking this week about the simplest way to explain a sacrament to young ones and elders, to people who come from traditions that embrace sacraments and those for whom it's a foreign concept. When Reverend TJ said, "Sacraments are good things we repeat." In other words, a sacrament isn't only a felt sense of a divine human connection, but it's an embodied ritual that is repeated, bread and wine shared, flowers gathered and dispersed, truths sought and spoken, sick bodies blessed, vows exchanged, through which we make a channel for the sacred to move through our lives. In some traditions, the channel makers are the clergy, the ordained ones who are authorized to conduct the sacraments, but in our tradition, we believe in the priesthood and prophethood of all.

So I do not stand in the way of you accessing the holy or that inward grace or the reality of God. A couple weeks ago, I was at a regional minister's gathering at a Catholic retreat center and noticed that there was a path through a grassy area that had been worn down by countless feet treading on it. Rather than following the nicely paved and landscaped and lit paths, retreat goers had made their way, their own way to connect the lodge to the chapel. And this is what sacraments do. They connect us with the holy through well-worn channels shaped by good things we repeat. There are so many sacred possibilities in life itself, so many paths to connect to the holy, so many ways to get to the chapel. We need not diminish these possibilities by limiting the sacramental to two or even to seven.

Every Sunday, we say in worship the words of our affirmation, which includes the line, "The quest of truth is its sacrament, it being the church." Unitarian Universalist musician and artist Glenn Thomas Rideout says, "I believe the fundamental sacrament of Unitarian Universalism is the question. I believe it is our communion," he says, "and our closest and most direct path to anything divine." Accepting a truth given to us is not our Unitarian Universalist way or our sacrament, but questioning and questing for truth is the path or the channel that we create to connect with the Holy. It's the quest itself that is the sacrament.

200 years ago, Unitarian Minister William Ellery Channing said that, "Humanity's likeness to God is in our ability to reason and discern, to seek and learn new truths. The likeness to God," he preached, "belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. In proportion as these lie dormant, it is obscured. In proportion as they are perverted and overpowered by the appetites and passions, it is blotted out. In truth, moral evil, if unresisted and habitual, may so blight and lay waste these capacities that the image of God and man may seem to be holy destroyed."

Now, Channing was a man of his time and place, and for him, the spiritual nature and likeness to God was evident in us from the neck up. This is the realm of God. I would argue as a Unitarian Universalist 200 years later that our spiritual nature is part of our whole being and that our lives, not only our brain, can be an embodiment of the holy, that is a sacrament. The ancient Greeks had a practice they called *paideia*, from which we get our modern word pedagogy, meaning the process of growing and developing our full humanity. The foundation of *paideia* was that academic learning is not the only way of shaping a person. A spiritual education in which we cultivate the capacity to ask and answer questions well is just as important in our development. It's faith development. The quest of truth in which we repeatedly ask good questions about the mysterious and sacred things in life is a sacrament that connects us with the holy capacities within and the truth and meaning present throughout creation.

Just the other morning, my daughter modeled this at breakfast. I couldn't have come up with a better sermon illustration myself. She said to me out of the blue, "Mama, where do coffee grounds come from?" I said, "Coffee beans? Where do coffee beans come from?" "Plants." "Where do plants come from?" "The soil." "Where does the soil come from?" "The earth. Where does the earth come from, mama?" "The big bang." At this point, I was just like, "Let's just go eat breakfast." "Where does the big bang come from?" "Well, it came from this tiny bubble that expanded." "Where did that bubble come from?" "Well, scientists don't actually know everything about it. It's a bit of a mystery. Some people would say God." So coffee grounds, making the invisible God visible and real. I knew there was some truth to the joke that Unitarian Universalists' only sacrament is coffee hour. Have you heard that one before?

I don't know about you, but this time in which we live has me questioning whether the vision of beloved community, the end of all souls growing in harmony with the divine is in the words of the poet, Wendell Berry, a paradisaical dream, or if in fact its hardship is its possibility. In Berry's poem of vision,

we heard him describe a vision of what it would take to resacralize the earth and all of creation, making it a source of infinite sacraments. As a farmer and naturalist, Berry laments that so much of creation has been exploited and destroyed, leaving it a ruined place. There are so many ruined places in our world today, bombed and pillaged by greed and ignorance. This poem paints a picture of the memory of old forests made visible, growing into legend, legend into song, song into sacrament.

To me, what he is touching on is the holy possibility present in all of creation and the holy capacities in each person questing for the wisdom to survive hardship. It is not an inaccessible dream. It is real and good and it is hard. The resilience of humanity and of creation is a visible symbol of the reality of God, a sacrament. This season of lent that we are in is actually the perfect time to be talking about this sacrament because the 40 days of lent mirror the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted and tested, preparing him for his ministry ahead. The Lenten season asks us to seek truth about who we are as finite human beings, about our shortcomings and imperfections, and about what we need from each other. It doesn't offer all the answers, but it invites us to see, to acknowledge, and to live deep truths.

Jesus' time in the wilderness prepared him to minister and to preach the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand, not elsewhere in a future time and place, but near, perhaps as near as our own heart or the ground on which we stand. Jesus lived a sacramental life, teaching and living the truth that within us and around us are opportunities to grow in harmony with the divine. So what does that look like for us? Unitarian Universalists in Dallas, Texas, and the United States and the world in the year 2026 to embrace a sacramental way of living. We seek the goodness and abundance that's present, although sometimes hidden. We keep asking good questions, a practice that will help us grow and develop our full humanity. We welcome all to the table to partake in the gifts of this church and of something much larger than this church.

We join together in rituals that make our faith tangible, the lighting of the chalice, the burning of paper at the beginning of the new year, the sharing of communion and remembrance on occasions such as Maundy Thursday and Christmas Eve, the dedication of babies. We covenant, we ask questions and we learn together. Again and again and again, in so many ways, we make channels through repetition of these practices that make visible the immortal invisible. So may the sacraments that you take part in here bring you deeper into the love that is our doctrine, the service that is our prayer, and the harmony that we seek with the divine. May it ever be so and amen.

