

SINGING SACRED SPACES

A Sermon By
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale
January 6, 2008

Last September, Marion E. came up to me in the foyer here and was worried about a Green Sanctuary article in the *Arizona Daily Star* which said our congregation had “banned” meat at all congregation events. (“Faith goes green,” 9 -3-07) Emails were flying on the UUFETA lists (UUs for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), some expressing outrage that our congregation would shut out meat -eaters like that and others communicating delight by people who felt inspired by what they thought was a brave, progressive minister. Marion was concerned that members of our own congregation would see that article and be upset.

I told her it was a slight misquote on the part of the religion reporter, Stephanie Innes, but that overall, we were lucky to have had such good coverage in that article. And I said that if she wanted to send out a correction on the list, that was fine by me.

What I had said to the reporter was that Marion and I had been talking during a vigil a few days earlier about approaching the Board and congregation with the idea of having only vegetarian meals at all-congregation events. It got translated in the article to saying that our congregation “banned” meat at all our events.

So Marion sent a correction, but meanwhile, the flurry of emails went as far as England and the Episcopal Church’s environmental website, and probably lots of other places. In our own congregation, those who did see the article and did wonder about it came up to me and asked me if it was true. I don’t remember very many people even bringing it up.

I think that that September article and the subsequent emails must have found their way to PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I think people found our Green Sanctuary page on our website, which has been set up by Jan A. and Marion E. and others and is really informational as well as beautiful. The activities that our congregation is engaging in and are posted on the web page were quoted in the award which PETA gave me and announced Friday.

So, I have been named “Most Progressive Religious Leader” by PETA, an honor which I will accept on all our behalf, and which, though undeserved in the grand scheme of things, is a great way to get the cause visible and uplift not only our green sanctuary work but also our faith, whose Purposes and Principles explicitly state that we affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.”

When Stephanie called me on Friday to interview me, I hadn’t heard, and in fact, she is the only one who has told me about the award. I did find a package in the office this Sunday morning from PETA containing this framed certificate and a letter, so it seems more real now. But I told Stephanie on Friday that it was her fault that I got this award, and we laughed about the misquote, which I had never told her about. I did tell her about the Christmas Eve Story I’d written called “Dreaming of a Green Christmas,” and she asked me to send it to her, so I did. I had actually sent that story on Christmas Eve to Marion and a colleague to forward to PETA as a gift for everyone who wanted to

read it on Christmas to their kids, but I don't know if it actually got forwarded, and it probably doesn't have anything to do with the award.

Anyway, the article Stephanie wrote for yesterday's paper was so kind and respectful and right-on that I sent her a thank-you. And I want to congratulate all of you because the work for which I'm being recognized is, of course, your own, and as often happens, ministers get the credit when congregations start doing amazing things with their ministry.

What a way to start a sabbatical, no?

So, I go off tomorrow, if not physically, in spirit, and I will use my sabbatical time to focus on an area that really makes my heart sing, that of sacred spaces. This PETA Award fits right in with what I hope to focus on, which is the question of what it is about those spaces we call "sacred" that touches us and connects us to the Oneness of it all. What is it about our interaction with the environment that deepens our relationship with all of life and leads to a greater caring and respect for that life?

I think it was French philosopher Gaston Bachelard who first got me pondering the nature of sacred space. I was given his book in seminary, probably in response to sharing my questions about nature and sacred space, but maybe it was just required reading for something or other. I became fascinated with his book entitled *The Poetics of Space*, in which he talks about the spaces in our lives having to do with home, from the inside corners of our easy chairs where we snuggle and tuck our feet to the far back pockets of our top dresser drawers where keepsakes are hidden and sometimes forgotten. He also explored the meaning of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) as well as the relationship between science and imagination.

I looked him up on the web, and found some quotes along with a Harvard review of his work by Joan Ockman. Bachelard said that "inhabited space transcends geometrical space," meaning that the way we live in a space makes that space something way beyond and far deeper than the four walls which define it. We apply our imaginations to our lived spaces, making them special to us and a reflection of our intimate selves.

I want to take this philosophy out into Arizona, into the spaces which have become sacred to me and to so many others, and explore that specialness and that intimacy with nature: the red rocks of Sedona, the vast spaces of the Grand Canyon, the fern-covered banks near Tonto Natural Bridge, the aspen forests of the White Mountains, the mystical entrance to Portal, the spiritual and artistic legacy of San Xavier, the borderlands where too many people die each year trying to sneak into our country and a better life.

Bachelard writes about poetry and the imagination, both of which I, too, am deeply connected with. He speaks of reverie saying "Reverie is not a mind vacuum. It is rather the gift of an hour which knows the plenitude of the soul." (www.brainyquote.com) I hope to have many hours to engage in reverie, to listen to what these spaces have to tell me and what insights emerge from taking the time to pay attention, make connections and write observations.

In this reengagement with the nature of Arizona, and with the sacred spaces I have come to appreciate, I hope to also work on my theology of mystical naturalism which I've started to articulate more in sermons here. After I learn to create a website and a blog, I'll let you know so you can read as I go along.

We chose to go to New Zealand for three weeks in late February and early March because some of the nature there is so different, and the orientation is opposite, being a place in the southern hemisphere with unfamiliar stars. We will even have to learn to drive on the left. I'm hoping that being in such spaces will trigger new ways of thinking about our planet and our interdependence with life.

My time away is an opportunity for the congregation to engage in new and creative ways of thinking. We have arranged for the Arizona ministers to each preach a Sunday, and other ministerial colleagues and members of the congregation will preach the rest. The challenge before you is to consider what makes your heart sing, and pay some attention to that, and maybe find a way to bring that to the surface of your life and your relationship with this congregation.

Thank you for giving me this time to bring my ministry back into balance with what is most important in life, and to find renewal in reverie, in the wonders of nature, and in the joy of creative writing which has always made my heart sing. I will miss all of you very much, and look forward to our reconnection in May.

