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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Defend the sacred.

Rather Religious

My mother enjoyed church-shopping in her later years. She had a mission to find music that fed her soul. As often as not, she rarely had anything good to say about the rest of a service—the sermon, the minister or the message that day. How was church?” we’d ask.

“It was *rather religious*,” she’d complain darkly. Not good! You might understand what she meant—too much God, too much Jesus or just too much holy this or that.

What she called “rather religious” can trigger us, can’t it. “Rather religious” language can get in the way of our diving deep and touching on the transcendent—I’ll bet half the words in that old hymn we just sang triggered some of us here....

Yet these times call for the deepest, holiest stuff we have. Many people are worried, unnerved, surprised, fearful, angry. How to get beyond our theological prickliness and open ourselves up to the sacred...to truths that hold and feed us when the going gets rough?

These times when a president’s first week on the job affronts and shocks the world...these times when the rights of Muslims, immigrants and women—hard fought and hard won in this country—have already come under fire (and this is just the beginning)...These times call us to name and draw on what holds us. What we can count on. What is sacred. *That is “rather religious.” And that’s a good thing.*

What a week. It started at a glorious high point last Saturday when millions of protestors around the globe stood on the “hallowed ground” of the women’s marches. On the one hand, the photo panoramas looked remarkably familiar, from one country to another—a sea of faces, pink hats, creative signs. And an aliveness in the air—an energetic field of exuberance and purpose. At the same time, what created that day were millions of individual personal stories—stories of joy, loss, dreams and disappointments, each one unique. Women, men and children brought those stories together to create a tableau of movement—unstoppable, serious and urgent movement. Sacred movement.

People woke up Sunday feeling elated. Recharged. Lifted up. Hopeful. Something powerful had risen out of those millions and taken shape that day. Hard to put in words. It still reverberates as a high vibration of intention, of worth and dignity, a felt sense of truth. This energy travelled way beyond the marchers to all who beheld it.

Then came the first days of the new administration, starting the next day with the chilling new phrase, “alternative facts.” The worldwide response took off like wild fire and felt to many like emotional whiplash. Shock and outrage threatened to muscle out Saturday’s euphoria. The pushback (which continued all day yesterday and into the night in airports around the world) also included a familiar form of humor common on the web—snarky, sarcastic jokes, irreverent cartoons, tweets and TV skits. Funny. Biting. Pushing the envelope. Sometimes it helps to laugh.

But you could feel the change in mood, from Saturday's elation to a new alertness, dark and serious.

As this fast-moving drama unfolded, the impact of another event last week surprised me. Maybe you too. That same Sunday, a troupe of children, youth and adults put on a variety show here. It was long on charm. Humor, slapstick and outright cleverness in the limerick department had the audience laughing our heads off. Joyously! I must single out the cameo appearance of Ingrid, our Worship Associate today, who dashed around like a sprite, a feminine mini-Groucho Marx, all movement and twinkle—now with a ladies' hat, now with a mustache—and very funny! We laughed and laughed—surprised, I expect, by how happy we felt! Belly laughs, right? And there was a purity to that laughter—a freshness. Unlike the humor we often share and participate in, this was free of sarcasm or edginess. These days, when many of us are more than ready to fire off a snarky jab (it's so easy to go there), the sweetness of that laughter felt pretty darned sacred.

So, while acknowledging that talk of the sacred *is* “rather religious,” let's go there. Let's acknowledge that what we hold sacred matters. It feeds our soul and holds us when we're shaken. Helps us carry on. What do we, religious liberals, consider sacred? When you drill down into your story, since and even before your birth, and look for your sources of love and inspiration, what comes up as sacred?

It's different for each of us. Maybe you connect with land—land you love, perhaps land you tend and own. Maybe you reverence the whole of Mother Earth and draw strength and inspiration from her majesty and mystery.

Our roots ground us too—families' stories are a key to our identity, to our challenges too. We can draw on them to bring our best selves to life.

For some, religious heritage feels sacred—we may still practice or observe elements of that religion. We may respect the beliefs that guided our forbears through ups and downs or perhaps gave them the wherewithal to come to this country.

For many of us here, this faith, Unitarian Universalism, has shown us the sacred in ways other religions never did or perhaps once did but haven't in years. Unitarian—one God. Universalist—one Love. A faith of sweet invitation and bold challenge: invitation to nourish the soul and challenge to help heal this broken world. This faith asks us to be “rather religious” and to embrace the sacred.

“Take off your shoes,” says the poet. “This is hallowed ground.”¹

You may have seen the photo in our newsletter from Standing Rock in North Dakota. Hundreds of protestors fill a long straight road that goes back as far as you can see, prairie on either side of the road and mountains in the distance. The people in front hold a huge red banner that reads, “Defend the Sacred.”

¹ Macrina Wiedekehr, “Take Off Your Shoes,” <https://followingtrusting.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/take-off-your-shoes/>

The movement at Standing Rock—to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline—touches on the sacred in many ways. Standing Rock is a universal story about the earth—honoring it, giving thanks for it, protecting it. It’s a universal story about water, precious and life-giving—honoring it, giving thanks for it, protecting it. Standing Rock is a universal story about the identity and history of indigenous people—not only in the Dakotas but anywhere. It’s about honoring these first people—their lives, their stories, what they hold sacred. Standing Rock is a universal story about home—honoring it, giving thanks for it and protecting it.

These intersecting stories of the sacredness—earth, water, first people and home—reach our hearts, no matter where we live. The call to “Defend the Sacred” has compelled people who knew next to nothing about this place to get involved, send money, gather supplies. It’s motivated young people here in Tamworth to ask their communities to take up the cause. Thousands across the country have left their everyday lives and joined the protest.

We, gathered here today, represent a broad swath of theological understandings. We identify as theists, agnostics, Jews, Christians, humanists, pagans, atheists. We believe in making room for each others’ understandings, and regardless of the words we use to explain what we cannot know, in these hard times *what we hold sacred is what will get us through*.

[A time of sharing our experiences of the sacred: family, music, Chocorua, sunlight, UUFES, kindness....]

Alongside our outrage, next to our steely resistance and in support of our daily fight for justice, let us hold on to what is sacred. May we have faith in the truths that warm and inspire and hold us. The ground on which we stand *is* holy. Let us defend the sacred.

So may it be.