On the eighth of November, 1519, Hernando Cortes and four hundred Spanish soldiers entered the Aztec Byzantium, the magic city of Tenochtitlan. Mexico City. They stared in disbelief at what lay before them. Bernal Diaz, who was present, wrote in his diary that the dazzling beauty of the Aztec capitol, its sculptured gardens and masterfully engineered canals and arboretums, were beyond almost anything in European imagination.

As the Spanish were welcomed into Montezuma's city, they walked through spotless streets, through plots of full-blossomed flowers, arranged in patterns and in colors pleasing to the eye; through irrigated fruit orchards. Everywhere there were roses, and, Bernal Diaz wrote, "in the hour before sunset, everywhere the air was filled with the whirr and flutter of birds, and lit with birdsong." (see, Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground*. Vintage Books, New York, 1989. p.194)

All around the huge beautiful city, the Aztecs had built large aviaries, where thousands of birds -- white egrets, energetic wrens and thrushes, brilliantly colored parrots, fierce accipiters -- were housed and tended. They were, writes Barry Lopez, "as captivating, as fabulous, as the display of flowers: vermilion flycatchers, coppertailed trogons, green jays, blue-throated hummingbirds, and summer tanagers. Great blue herons, brooding condors. And throughout the city wild birds nested." (Lopez, p.195).

Even Hernando Cortez himself, intensely preoccupied with his meeting with Montezuma, noticed the birds. And he was particularly struck by the affinity of the Aztec people for these creatures of beauty. He took the time to write to King Charles V in Spain, describing it all.

One year later, Cortes returned to Mexico City with a larger army. On June 16th, in a move correctly calculated to humiliate, stun, and frighten the Aztec people, Cortes set fire to the aviaries. Witnessing this desecration, the Aztecs were almost paralyzed in horror.

The image of Cortes burning the aviaries is not simply, for me, an image of a kind of destructive madness that lies at the heart of imperialist conquest; it is something much more than that. It is exactly what the Aztecs saw it to be -- an act of singular desecration. A brutal violation of the most basic and fundamental human regard for beauty and innocence. An offense against all standard of human decency.
Theologian Matthew Fox remind us that one of the most telling questions we can ask about our own spirituality is, "what is our sense of the holy? What, finally, do we consider sacred?" (see, Matthew Fox, Original Blessing. Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983.) Fox says that "a people's grasp of what constitutes the holy will affect its entire way of living, of questioning, of celebrating." (Fox, p.110)

Although I suspect we might spend all day, as a group, trying to agree upon a definition of what mean nowadays by the term "holy" or "sacred," I think we would probably quickly agree on what constitutes an act of true desecration, true sacrilege. This much we seem to know when we encounter it. And we know it, I suspect, on an instinctive, a visceral level.

For the Aztec people, birds were sacred. For their beauty, for their song, for their feathered brilliance, their wondrous flight. The Aztecs saw birds as gifts from heaven, a species closer than our own to the original source of the divine. It does not take a particularly religious sensibility to recognize the intentional burning of the aviaries as a repulsive and reprehensible act of desecration.

I would argue on pragmatic basis that there is something innate to human nature, something basic to civilized sensibility that recognizes certain distinctions of worth in reality. And the name we have traditionally given to the highest distinction of worth is "the Holy," or "the sacred."

Now, of course, we can and will wrestle with vocabulary here, but -- as my high school English teacher used to say to us -- try not to let the words get in the way of a good idea. I am suggesting that there is a part of human experience that evokes an attitude of reverence and awe and ultimate respect, a category of transcendence. And that category, I would posit, is recognizable to the traditionally "religious" and the "non-religious" alike.

Theist and atheist, agnostic and pilgrim, we all stand humbled, we all stand under judgment before those terrible flames of the burning Aztec aviaries. Just as in like manner, four centuries later, we stand in horror before the flames of the Holocaust. Why? What is it about these particular acts of destruction and desecration that strike at our very sense of human value?

In a world where the very existence of any Divine authority is resisted or rejected, in an age when the very notion of a recognizable Divine Law seems less and less respected, and when the traditional, implicit boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane, seem less and less honored and understood, we occasionally need to revisit, to reconsider, and to restate what our dearest values are in this changing and confusing world. Is anything still considered Holy any more? Is nothing Sacred any more?
In classical Western dualistic theology - which is to say, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the legacy of Greco-Roman thought - all creation, physical and experiential, is divided into two categories: the sacred and the profane. Even the dimensions of time and space have sacred and profane divisions. A house of worship is sacred space; the hour of worship is sacred time. A "sanctuary" is a space "sanctified" - that is, made holy, set aside from the everyday, the worldly, the secular, the profane activities of ordinary daily life.

The German theologian, Rudolf Otto, wrote the classic text on The Idea of the Holy in 1923. (Oxford University Press, London, 1923; paperback published in 1958 and reprinted 1972) He said that the Western mind falters as it approaches the idea of the Holy, especially in any attempt to articulate its definition. He said we can only know the Holy by experience. Otto calls the Holy, "Mysterium Tremendum Fascinans" - the attraction of deep mystery, that which "opens us up to the full terror and grandeur in which we live and are ourselves."

For myself, I would have to say that my own concept of the holy these days is less concerned with divine mysteries and Latin definitions than it is with a simple recognition of the relatedness of all life and our place within the web of existence. The Holy, for me, the sacred, is that which binds us to all other living things and to the Earth which is our home. This definition may disappoint some, I am sure, but such is the peril of dealing with the ineffable in theology. What name shall we call the unnamable?

If there are those who claim that a divine spirit is the source of the Holy and Sacred, I can accept that language. But I would add that even if no such divine spirit existed, for me the relationship of all living things, each to the other and to the world which sustains us, is Sacred. Whatever violates that relation, violates the holy. Whatever nourishes that relation, increases the holy. Whatever calls us to an appreciation of that relation, calls us to holiness, invites us to the Sacred.

The burning of the aviaries by the Conquistadors is a soul-crushing affront to the Holy because it is an affront to our human relationship to all that is beautiful and fragile and interdependent in Nature. Those flames symbolize the abandonment of human responsibility to all the other species of the earth, the human willingness to destroy not only other people and cultures, but all that those cultures are capable of loving and respecting and sanctifying.

And of course, viewed this way, we certainly need not go back centuries for examples of ways in which human beings are capable of violating the Holy. The Holy is violated wherever the fragile ecosystem of Earth is wounded or polluted or uncared for. The Holy is violated when the seas cough up floating garbage, when medical waste washes up on beaches, when a pristine Alaskan bay is coated in sludge, when a thousand-year-old rain forest is leveled in three weeks time.
The Holy is violated, how else can we say it, by our slowness in changing destructive policies of ecological abuse. The Holy is violated, shamefully so, the Earth is affronted, whenever we fail to act as zealous stewards of Nature's gracious bounty.

The Holy is violated too, I submit, whenever hatred and racism are allowed to displace human community and mutual care. The Holy is violated, the basic connectivity of covenant between people in community is intentionally harmed, whenever a minority is marginalized or oppressed, wherever the less fortunate go unattended, something sacred is stepped on wherever the homeless huddle without shelter from the storm.

The Holy is violated, the Sacred is most certainly damaged, wherever a single child is abused or neglected or made to feel unloved and unwanted in the world. Surely there can be no greater offense against all that is Holy than that.

My colleague the Reverend Laurel Hallman writes that we religious liberals too often associate the Holy with "sickly-sweet piety: a kind of hands-folded, eyes-raised-heavenward spirituality." (Laurel Hallman in an unpublished paper presented at UUA General Assembly, 1986)

I for one will not leave such important notions (as the Sacred) to be owned and defined solely by religious reactionaries or by fundamentalists. I grant to my more conservative religionists their right to define the Holy and the Sacred as they discover it in their lives. But I will be doing the same.

A parishioner in a class of mine the other night said the Holy was like art. "I can't define it," he said. "But I can recognize the real thing when I see it." And where is it to be found? Where do we go to discover the holy and sacred dimensions of our lives? Sophia Lyon Fahs, who was the great voice of Unitarian religious education for children in America in this past century, used to speak of helping children to discover the sacred dimension in their lives by helping them view their lives "in a religious way." She wrote,"

"Instead of helping children on Sunday to think about 'religious things,' we need to learn how to help children to think about ordinary things until insights and feelings are found which have a religious quality. And what is this religious quality or way of studying?

The religious way is the deep way, the way with a growing perspective and an expanding view.... The religious way is the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles of the heart of every phenomenon. The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide, and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship.

And if God symbolizes or means those larger relationships, the religious way means finding God; but the word itself is not important. It is the enlarged and
deepening experiences that bring the growing insights and that create the sustaining ambition, 'to find life, and to find it abundantly' that really count the most. When such a religious quality of exploration is the goal, any subject, any phenomenon, any thing animate or inanimate... may be the starting point."

(-- From Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage by Sophia Lyon Fahs)

It occurs to me that virtually all my life I have been searching after the Holy and the Sacred in this world, in one form or another. I think I may even have encountered it on a few fleeting occasions and in a very few special persons I have been privileged to know. And I think Sophia Fahs has it right when she intimates that the holy only becomes manifest when we educate ourselves to view the ordinary world in a religious way.

There's a wonderful passage in The Color Purple, where one of Alice Walker's characters is berating another for thinking that God - and anything holy and sacred - can only be found in church. Her character says:

"Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show up. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God....God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifests itself, even if you are not looking, or don't know what you're looking for."

Finally, this may be the truth of the matter: whatsoever things are holy and sacred in this life, I suspect, are neither stored away on mountain tops nor locked away in arcane secrets of the saints. And I doubt that any church has a monopoly on them either. What holiness there is in this world - perhaps like God - resides in the ordinary bonds between us and in whatever bonds we manage to create between ourselves and the divine.

We make visible the holiness of this world, you and I, by the manner in which we treat one another as ethical beings. We invest the world in holiness, by the quality of our respectful relation to the earth which is our home and all the living things which share our home. We act as agents of the holy, you and I, by our choice to view this world in a religious way. We are co-creators and preservators of God's beauty in the world in our art, in our science, in our service to high ideals, in our devotion to the good and the just.

I think most of us feel a very real sense of the sacred and the holy in our lives, whether we call it that or something else. I think most of us have known moments when the extraordinary bondedness of our lives was akin to what Moses must have felt when he felt compelled to remove his shoes before an overwhelming presence. At the
core of our lives, at the center of our existence, it is that which calls us to live and act, finally, for love, for justice, for mercy, and for something beyond our selves.

Amen.

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