

*Hanukkah—What is in the Temple?*¹
Rev. Myke Johnson, December 5, 2010
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: What's In The Temple?

Tom Barrett²

In the quiet spaces of my mind a thought lies still, but ready to spring.
It begs me to open the door so it can walk about.
The poets speak in obscure terms pointing madly at the unsayable. ...
The seeker seeks, just around the corner from the truth.
If she stands still it will catch up with her.
Pause with us here a while.
Put your ear to the wall of your heart.
Listen for the whisper of knowing there.
Love will touch you if you are very still.

If I say the word God, people run away.
They've been frightened--sat on 'till the spirit cried "uncle."
Now they play hide and seek with somebody they can't name.
They know he's out there looking for them, and they want to be found,
But there is all this stuff in the way.

I can't talk about God and make any sense,
And I can't not talk about God and make any sense.
So we talk about the weather, and we are talking about God.

I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God.
Still, we have pet pounds where you can feel love draped in warm fur,
And sense the whole tragedy of life and death.
You see there the consequences of carelessness,
And you feel there the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived.
The only things lacking are the frankincense and myrrh.

We don't build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained.
Or maybe it can't be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It's the spirit that lives on.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
What would you worship there?
What would you bring to sacrifice?
What would be behind the curtain in the holy of holies?
Go there now.

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2 From *Keeping in Touch*, 1993. Posted online at http://www.panhala.net/Archive/In_the_Temple.html

Sermon

There is a tradition in many religions to take a look at an old story, and think about how it relates to one's life in the present time. During the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, I like to look at the old story of the Maccabees, and ask what it might teach us as Unitarian Universalists. This story comes from over 2000 years ago, during a time when the Syrians had conquered the land of Judea. They took over the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jews were forbidden to practice their religion. The Maccabees were a group of Jewish warriors who fought to reclaim control of their lands, and reclaim their temple.

The temple was the center of the Jewish religion at that time. It was the most beautiful building in all Judea. Have you ever wondered what it might be like to have a place where one could go to talk to God whenever we wanted? Or even to go to see if there was any such a thing as God. It would have to be very beautiful, and light, and full of music or silence. The Jews had such a building. They believed that God was close to them in the temple. Only the priests could go deep inside to the very center room—they called it the holy of holies. But just being in the building gave people a sense of goodness and joy.

So when the Syrians conquered their country, and took over the temple—they captured the most important thing in the people's lives—the very center that gave the Jews their purpose and their strength. That is why the Maccabees fought so hard to reclaim the temple. They were reclaiming freedom and dignity and purpose for their people. When they finally regained the temple, they cleaned it and purified it, and then rededicated it to once more serve their God. Hanukkah means dedication.

We can look to that old story and think about what it might mean for our lives today. What is our temple, today? To what is it dedicated? Does it need to be purified?

We don't have a physical temple here at Allen Avenue. This room is a multi-purpose room—on Tuesdays and Wednesdays there are bridge games here, and yesterday there was a really rockin' church fair. Lots of different activities happen in this space. The poet Tom Barrett says: "We don't build many temples anymore. Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained...or.. sustained inside a building. Buildings crumble."³

He talks about finding something like a temple in the animal rescue league, "where you can feel love draped in warm fur....the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived." Have you ever visited the animals in a shelter? Did you feel love draped in warm fur? Margy and I went to the Brunswick shelter, the Coastal Humane Society last Sunday. The cats and dogs seemed so eager to be petted, so eager for a human to take them home. It was fun to hold the kittens, and watch them cuddle with their brothers. But we didn't find the right one to bring home that day, and I felt kind of sad when I left. It didn't really feel like a temple to me. Maybe when you bring a dog or a cat with you when you leave, it has that kind of temple feeling.

3 All Tom Barrett quotes in the sermon refer back to our reading of his poem, "What's In The Temple."

Tom Barrett asks, "If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, What would you worship there?"

James Luther Adams said that every person worships something. The word "worship" comes from worth—to worship means to honor the thing that is worth the most to us. Every person has some sort of God that lives in their heart. Whatever we give our deepest allegiance to—that is our God. It could be something like money or fame or being popular. James Luther Adams said it is important to choose something worthy of our allegiance.⁴

What do you hold in the center of your heart? What would you be willing to fight for, to die for? Is your heart filled with junk? Or something worthy of your commitment? When you clean up everything, what stays in the room?—what is the thing you would never throw away?

The Buddhist teacher, the Dalai Lama, has said, "My religion is very simple. My religion is Kindness." In the temple of his heart, he has chosen kindness to worship, he has chosen kindness to commit his life to. He has tried to live with kindness, even when the Chinese government took over his homeland of Tibet, and he went to live in exile. When he could no longer go to the beautiful temples of his childhood, he opened the temple of his heart, and chose kindness and compassion for all people.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?

You see, people worship different things within the temple of their heart. It is a very personal choice, to find the thing that is worthy of your worship.

One of my teachers is named Starhawk. She calls herself a dirt-worshiper.⁵ She points to the soil beneath our feet, and reminds us that all of our food comes from that soil. The soil is the place of Life. So it becomes the most valuable thing in the temple of her heart. She gardens in the soil, and replenishes it with compost. She creates ritual to worship the earth, and celebrate all the seasons of the earth—fall, winter, spring and summer. She tries to stop the companies that are wasting the soil by using too much fertilizer or cutting down the forests. Sometimes she even goes to jail. She is really committed to the earth and to the soil. It is at the center of her heart and her life.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?

4 James Luther Adams was a UU theologian. These ideas are found in his essay, "A Faith for the Free," reprinted in *The Essential James Luther Adams*, edited by George Kimmich Beach. (Skinner House, 1998) We use this essay in our UU Theology class at A2U2.

5 See <http://starhawksblog.org/>

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote,

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt -- marvelous error!--
that a fiery sun was giving
light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.
Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt -- marvelous error!--
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.⁶

The word "God" can be a confusing word. Tom Barrett says, "If I say the word *God*, people run away. They've been frightened--sat on 'till the spirit cried 'uncle.'" *God* is hard to talk about—whatever we can say about *God*, that is not really what *God* is. Perhaps that is why Machado calls it a "Marvelous Error." He knows that words can't really describe what he has found inside his heart.

We might call it the power of life, or the force of creativity, or love, the connection between all beings. The Eastern religions speak of *God* as present in everything—that all is *God* and *God* is all. Whatever we can say, it doesn't really describe the mystery or the vastness of Life. But saying this word *God* is a good reminder to choose something big enough to worship—not to give our devotion to anything which is not worthy of us. When we give our lives to a larger purpose, whether that is god, or kindness, or the earth, or something else of great worth, we find meaning and peace. To worship something too small can distort and cheapen our lives. Even spiritual or religious things can be too small.

Thomas Merton, who was a Trappist monk as well as a writer, said, "there is always a temptation to diddle around in the [spiritual] life, making itsy-bitsy statues."⁷ When we get attached to our ideas, or dogmas, or ways of praying, we can forget what it's all about. Rumi, a Sufi Muslim poet, put it this way: Don't be a cat toying with a mouse. Go after the love lion.⁸

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?

Writer Annie Dillard said: "There is always the temptation in life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is all so self conscious, so apparently moral...But I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous...more extravagant and bright."⁹

⁶ Antonio Machado, "Last night as I was sleeping," translated by Robert Bly.

⁷ Quoted by Annie Dillard.

⁸ *The Soul of Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, p. 184.

⁹ Annie Dillard, responding to the quote by Thomas Merton. I can't find the original source, but it is posted at

Life is bigger and more mysterious than the things we do, or the ideas we think, or the stuff we buy. If we get too attached to any small thing—wearing the right clothes, or going to the right parties, or having the latest gadget—we are filling up our temple with junk.

Sadly, people sometimes do fill up their hearts with things that aren't so good to worship. The temple of our hearts can get messed up and overrun with garbage, or even taken over by invaders. When we are too attached to something too small, we call it an addiction or an idolatry. When we are addicted to something, it has captured the temple of our heart and taken over, just like the Syrians in Judea.

I once had a friend that got caught like that. This was back in high school, and she had gone to see the movie, *Bonnie and Clyde*, about the two famous gangsters. Somehow that movie became the most important thing in her life. She started dressing like a gangster, and smoking dope, and drinking beer; she stopped paying attention to school, and started hanging out with kids who were skipping school and going to stores to shoplift. It was like she became a different person, who didn't care about anything or anyone anymore. I don't know what happened to her after I left school. I hope she found a way to clean out all the junk in her heart.

When our heart has been taken over by something unworthy, it is a battle to win it back. It can be the hardest thing we've ever done in our lives. Like the Maccabees, we may need to dedicate all of our strength to reclaiming our own temple again. We may need to gather others together to help us. The miracle of Hanukkah is first of all believing that change is possible. Even when all seems hopeless, if we take the first step, if we light the first candle, we believe the way will open up. We take the second step, and light the second candle. We can make a choice to worship the thing that has true worth for us.

Frederick Buechner says, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."¹⁰

Rumi says, "Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray."

And Tom Barrett says: If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
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Go there now.

http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5209.Annie_Dillard?page=1

¹⁰ *Now and Then: a Memoir of Vocation*, quoted at <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1998318>