

I think of sacred and holy as synonyms with “sacred” typically applied to things while “holy” usually refers to persons or events. The etymology of holy identifies several root meanings: Whole, health, un injured, sacred. I begin with the postulate that the universe and everything in it is holy. I also hold that outside the realm of language and linear, dualistic thinking, there is no distinction between anything in the universe and the universe itself. More on this later.)

Wendell Berry asserts in “How to Be a Poet”:

*There are no unsacred places;*

*there are only sacred places*

*and desecrated places*

Nothing can be made sacred or holy because everything is already holy/sacred. It is its nature. We can however become so alienated from ourselves and the world around us, that we lose awareness of this. With enough alienation from ourselves and others we begin to injure others and the world and in doing so we “desecrate places” and things and persons. This, I believe, is the source of suffering in the world. When Adam and Eve dine at the tree of knowledge of good and evil , they step away from awareness of the unity and sacredness of everything in the universe by entering into the world of duality, the world of good and bad, right and wrong. I believe that the restoration of our holiness is achieved by reclaiming this deep awareness of our essential natures. As Rumi, the Persian Sufi poet, observed:

*Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,*

*there is a field.*

*I’ll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in the grass,*

*the world is too full to talk about.*

*Ideas, language, even the phrase*

*each other*

*doesn’t make any sense.*

I think this suffering is nearly universal and inevitable. I assume that it is an unfortunate side effect of our brilliant and beautiful language-making brain which functions primarily with dualistic thinking. This dualism leads to judgments of good and bad. In order to avoid the consequences and implications of “bad” we begin to ignore or even excise parts of ourselves or others which are thought to be “bad”. This leads to a splintered self and with this splintering we lose touch with our essential holiness and we separate from others (this separation may be motivated by shame). If you like, you can think of this as “original sin” from the Judeo-Christian world view. Alternatively, this is the “separation” that Thich Nhat Hanh references when he says that “we are in this world to awaken from the illusion of our separateness”.

As I noted, everyone and everything is holy. We are born this way. We did not earn and we cannot lose this holiness. We can however lose awareness of it. Each of us is on a quest (whether we know whether

or not) to reclaim our essential “wholeness”, to reassemble our dis-integrated self so that we may live with integrity. Let me add here that I think contemplative practices are excellently well-suited to discern alienation and disintegration and to restore awareness of our essential holiness. Disciplined and intentional practices of stillness, silence, and attention till the soil for the seeds of awareness while also weeding out distractions and illusions that direct our attention away from the central holiness.

Perhaps I can redefine sacred, in the world according to Rod, as “awareness of our essential wholeness/holiness and of our Union/identity with creation”. Borrowing from established Roman Catholic theology, a Jesuit friend of mine teaches that Man and God “are not different, not the same”. Because I am not a theist, I prefer to substitute “the universe” or “the world” or “reality” for God but I assert the same, you and I are “not the same, not different” . When we embody this realization, we know and reveal the sacred.