

(Angela was out sick this day. The Rev. Bob LaVallee and Kristin Satterlee, Lay Worship Leader, read the sermon on Angela's behalf.)

Kristin:

Omid Safi tells the story of the day he visited the Shinto shrine of Fushimi Inari for the first time. Located in Japan in the city of Kyoto, the Fushimi Inari shrine is 1300 years old. It is a sacred site, as well as a place that attracts many visitors from all kinds of faiths and places. Omid Safi is an Iranian-American professor of Islamic and Eastern studies. And, he is someone who appreciates diverse sources of wisdom and meaning.

Accompanied by a tour guide, Safi set out on the paths of Fushimi Inari. The paths meander and intersect, eventually leading up a mountain. Walking mostly in silence, he and his guide passed under thousands of torii, the traditional Japanese gates found at shrines. We have a torii on our mural. Can you spot it? (Show them).

After about an hour of walking amongst the torii, Omid Safi was beginning to get tired. And, to be honest, a little impatient. This wasn't what he was expecting. Why hadn't the tour guide explained that it would take so long to get to their destination? Finally he turned to his guide and said, "Where is the shrine?"

And the guide, a gentle person, smiled softly. He gestured up, and to each side, and all around, and said, "Friend, the whole mountain *is* the shrine."

Safi calls this moment a "bolt of lightning realization." His thinking had become so linear. He assumed the path led to a destination point. That it was the means to an end. That there would be some pinnacle experience, perhaps at the top of the mountain.

The whole mountain is the shrine.

He writes:

The torii, the Japanese gate, is said to mark the threshold between the sacred and the profane. Yet the torii is famously open. Sacred on this side, sacred on that side. Sacred to the right, sacred to the left. And while the thousands of torii do mark the path that one is encouraged to stay on, there are also hundreds if not thousands of sideways paths into other shrines, other bamboo-filled forests to wander and reflect. Ultimately, all is sacred, all is illuminated.ⁱ

There were reminders to "stay on the path" and to "stay on the right path," yet the right paths were so varied, they encompassed a whole sacred mountain, made the whole mountain a shrine.

Safi says that as a Muslim who was raised with the opening prayer of the Qur'an, asking God to "guide us to and keep us on the right path," these words are especially resonant for him.ⁱⁱ

Bob:

In our tradition, we embrace many paths to the divine. And we also believe that sacred space is not limited to special demarcated spaces. What's special about this sanctuary, physical and virtual, is the intention we set for it, the attention we bring to it, and repetition of our gathering here week after week. But ultimately all is sacred.

Angela writes, "There's a blessing ritual I perform for people who are ill or who are nearing death. It involves a touch of water, so we begin with the words, 'just as a baby who is born is already holy, so too are the substances of life already sacred. And so we pray in this moment not to request the presence of the holy, but to call ourselves into it. For it is nearer than breath.'"

Our daily lives, the places we pass through or by or spend time in, the things we do can all be integrated with that deeper sense of life. The depth aspect.

In his book, *The Power of Ritual*, Casper Ter Kuile says,

We've been taught that there's somehow a line that makes a church building sacred and a supermarket secular. That vertical line is an invention. Instead, imagine a horizontal line between the shallow and the deep. It stretches across every place and every person. When we can sink below the blur of habit, we can be present to that portion of our experience where we find the deepest meaning."

He gives some examples of experiences that can take us there. Poetry, embracing or being embraced by someone we love, watching kids run through a yard, even "a tender interaction at the checkout counter." Who's to say such a thing can't be sacred, he asks?

The culture and pace we live in encourage us to live in a thin way in relation to time and space. Not very deep. Skimming. Scrolling. Going from one thing to the next, or even pursuing our dreams in such a way that time flies by.

We can build in a different way of thinking, a different way of approaching life, so that we experience more deep time. So that later we look back and say, "X number of days or years have passed, and I lived them not only forward, but [gesture up, down, all around, like the tour guide]." As though the whole mountain is the shrine. Which is to say, "I have lived deeply."

How we spend our days is how we spend our lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kristin:

To make a ritual of an otherwise ordinary thing requires three ingredients: intention, attention, and repetition. If you make your morning coffee or tea every day, you've got repetition. But if you always do it in a groggy blur, or while thinking about what you're going to try to get done before dinner, it doesn't have your intention or attention.

Or maybe you plan to do ten minutes of stretching or yoga each afternoon. You've got an intention: to connect with your body and practice gratitude for it. On the first day, your phone keeps dingling ten feet away from you. Six minutes in you decide to check it, and get drawn into

the saga of.. etc. Days pass before you think of your intention again. You had intention, but not attention and not repetition. (It's okay. Angela says: You can toss the phone into the back of a passing garbage truck and try again).

Our reading this morning was an example of an ordinary task turned into a ritual with all three: intention, attention, repetition. A person washing her dishes. "Nightfall I sink," she says. It's a play on words, and also a clue that this is what she does each nightfall. Repetition. "Into dishwasher meditation." She uses dishwashing as a meditation. Intention. And then we see the attention she pays. The patterned plates are like mandalas or prayer wheels. The running water creates a soft rushing sound, a din she calls it, with lulls, or pauses. She notices her muscles soften. And as the bubbles go down the drain, she imagines the "frantic stew" of the day going with them.

That's a ritual.

You start by allowing something to be real and important to you. You decide what it is. Your morning shower, exercise, your commute if you have one. Your cup of tea. Your walk with a friend- you can rope someone else into your beautiful ritual too. We're going to talk more about that in a second. First, here's another example of an individual reflecting on their ritual. It's in the form of another poem. It's called **Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt** by Ross Gay. ^{iv} From his book, *Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude*.

<https://onbeing.org/poetry/ode-to-buttoning-and-unbuttoning-my-shirt/>

Bob:

Oh my god, right? [Perhaps: Do you want to hear that again? Angela thought you would. She asked me to read it a second time. Repeat.]

Kristin:

So, what if you try making something a ritual, and instead of feeling spiritual magic, you feel imposter syndrome? What about the voice in your head that says blah blah blah (you know what it says). That's fine. It usually takes many times doing something a new way before it starts to feel like a good fit. Also, sometimes the first ritual we try isn't the right one. And we need to pick something else. Experiment. It's *your* ritual.

Bob:

There is another common activity we do that could be much more significant than we are letting it be. That is getting together in groups. We do it a lot, especially at church! Priya Parker, who wrote the lovely book *The Art of Gathering*, defines a gathering as involving three or more people and having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Thousands of gatherings per year take place as part of this congregation's life. I personally attend several each week. Groups of three or more that get together for:

- sometimes explicitly spiritual reasons, like the Wisdom Circle or CUUPS

- or for celebration, like the 75th anniversary potluck dinner a couple of months ago
- or for planning and leadership, like the Board meeting yesterday.

Gatherings fit into different categories. Work meeting. Social event. Etc. Parker notices that we often confuse category with purpose. She gives the example of a neighborhood pool party. When she asks the people planning it what the purpose is, they might give her an odd look and say, “Well, to have fun. To get wet.” When she asks who they plan to invite, they say, “I don’t know. Maybe friends we always see. Maybe neighbors. Or maybe everyone?” But when she asks why do these things, what is it they want for their family, then it gets interesting. Then they might say something like, “Well, I want my kids to grow up in a neighborhood where they know their neighbors and feel safe.” Now there’s something quite a bit different in there. Something about what is meaningful. If the deeper purpose is building relationships among neighbors and developing a feeling of safety, the way the invitation is worded, the kinds of activities planned, the kind of welcome given when the gathering begins can all reinforce and encourage that deeper meaning.

Kristin:

Priya Parker tells the story of the first time she attended a Seder.^v A ritual dinner in the Jewish tradition. Parker isn’t Jewish. Her mother was from India and her father was from the midwestern US. She was raised in a two-household family that she describes as “togglng back and forth between a vegetarian, liberal, incense-filled, Buddhist-Hindu-New Age universe and a meat-eating, conservative, twice-a-week-churchgoing, evangelical Christian” one. She didn’t know what to expect at a Seder. Nor did she know if others would also be first timers, or if they’d all been coming to this particular seder for years, and whether she was expected to know more than she did. Then, the host did something simple and spectacular. She started the evening off by saying:

Welcome. We are so happy to have you here. For some of you, this is our 25th seder together. And for others of you, this isn’t only your first seder with us, it’s your first seder ever. And we are so happy you are here. You refresh us. You help us see. And for on a personal note, this is also the first seder that I’ve ever had without my mother. And she passed away last year. And I’m feeling that, and I’m so happy to be with you. Let us begin.

It was just a few sentences. Thirty seconds. But Parker says those words connected everyone in the room, protected them from feeling alone, and made everyone equal. She also demonstrated her own authentic showing up, with a note about her grief for her mother.

Her welcome opened a door for that gathering to have meaning, depth, and connection that might otherwise have been missed.

Bob:

The whole mountain is the shrine. Your whole life is a sacred path. Our gatherings are sacred encounters. May we live more joyfully and deeply, knowing this. May ritual and purpose give our lives depth and shape them with love.

ⁱ <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-the-sacred-path-is-the-one-were-on/>

ⁱⁱ Qur'an 1:5-6

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Annie Dillard. Qtd in Ter Keuile, 31.

^{iv} <https://onbeing.org/poetry/ode-to-buttoning-and-unbuttoning-my-shirt/>

^v <https://onbeing.org/programs/priya-parker-remaking-gathering-entering-the-mess-crossing-the-thresholds/>