

III. Acknowledge the Value of Sanctuary for All

Affirmation:

In Sanctuary I love myself and the world anew.

The Franciscan mystic Jacopone da Todi once wrote these beautiful words:

*Love above all language,
Goodness unimagined,
Light without measure
Shines in my heart!*

When I read this I imagine myself enveloped in an impermeable cloak of grace. A boat moored in a serene harbor. I re-experience the incredible freshness and vitality of the first warm sunny day in Spring, or the haunting musk of misty woods. I can feel again my beloved's embrace after a long absence; the sympathetic touch of her hand on top my own. I remember again standing in line pouring out a silent prayer for each of the other harried shoppers and the clerk. I relive the mesmerizing gaze into my eyes of a wounded dying deer as I sit next to her on the side of a country road, admiring her beauty, telling her how much I love her.

I find the feeling of sanctuary — given and received — to be the most comforting experience in my life. I know that by embracing my sacredness and that of the world, I am prepared to acknowledge the value of sanctuary for myself and all other places and beings. There is divine love here to embrace anew, both for others and myself.

Eknath Easwaran poetically interprets Todi's evocation:

"Love above all language": your heart is flooded with love; it bursts its barriers. The dam of separateness breaks, and a great sea of love surges up from inside.

"Goodness unimagined": love for all creatures, all individuals, all countries, even those who may have offended or wronged you.

And *"light without measure"*: even the sun blazing in the sky, the source of all physical radiance, borrows the effulgent light from your heart and mine. To understand all this is to realize the immense glory of being human.

This is the feeling sanctuary can evoke — to realize the immense glory of being human — almost as if a new kind of light is allowed to stream through the curtains of our soul. I know exactly what this feels like. I have lain in such light upstairs as it permeates the drab Oregon winter sky to cascade in veils through the woods, through the bedroom windows, and fall upon my face. I have lain in such light in my beloved's arms. I have lain in such light by a mountain brook. In such light I infinitely feel more love and loved, basking in St. Augustine's own revelation: "I entered into the secret closet of my soul, led by Thee . . . and beheld with the mysterious light of my soul the Light that never changes, above the eye of my soul, above my intelligence. . . He who knoweth truth knoweth that light: and who knoweth it, knoweth eternity. Love knoweth it."

One of the most appealing features of sanctuary is its universality. It is both a place in the world and a feeling of inner safety. It is a home or temple, cozy corner, garden, or deep woods; it is the arms of a loved one or friend and, yes, it is even a moment of time at our workstation or while standing in line. For many people, sanctuary is their refuge in God. In every instance, sanctuary is a harbor for the soul,

and a means for the soul to give harbor to humanity. It is an extraordinary opportunity to love the world and ourselves anew.

In the sacred space and time of sanctuary we are often able to see and feel our inner and outer worlds without interference from judgments, opinions, criticisms, fears, or desires. Released from these burdens of the ego, we may also feel the peacefulness that is unconditional love, forgiveness and acceptance, even if for a few moments. We embrace more clearly the principle that all are sacred at play in a sacred world and universe.

What is it about places, people, animals, and experiences of sanctuary that endear the soul's daily journey? I believe it is because the states of *wonder*, *healing*, and *celebration* are repeatedly evoked. There is opportunity in every action to show what we love and hold sacred, but we are more clearly assured of this if we experience wonder, healing, or celebration, both as a gift to others and for ourselves.

Think for a moment, under what circumstances are you most drawn to sanctuary? What reoccurring experiences especially lend toward the need for sanctuary? What places (or people, etc.) in your life have you created, or are drawn to, that emit a feeling of sanctuary?

Can you acknowledge the need in your life to experience *awe and wonder* over the miracle of creation? Can you acknowledge the daily need for bodily, mental, emotional, or spiritual *healing and regeneration*? Can you acknowledge the need to *celebrate life* reverently by saying Yes! to life?

Over my many years of counseling I realized that it is often very difficult for people to take action on their needs unless given permission. Even if I could just say "it is okay to feel shame or sadness or anger," the individual would easily surrender deeper into those feelings. One time, in a state of playfulness, I came up with a few "assertive rights" that I thought would make life a little easier. The first assertion was the right to do nothing. I simply felt that people needed to give themselves permission to *not* have to do something, resolve something, or take action on something right away. My clients loved it, and then the idea spread to others who heard about my rights (for example, the second assertion was the right to procrastinate). I immediately saw a type of empowerment take place in my clients. They were given permission to take responsibility for their life in another way. In retrospect, I can now see that I was indirectly promoting sanctuary by their taking a little time and space away from worldly or personal preoccupations.

To acknowledge sanctuary as a necessity of life is to give yourself permission to seek *wonder*, *healing*, and *celebration* within yourself and others. You need to find sanctuary in special places. You need to create those special places and experiences that enrich your soul and heighten divinity. And you need to be open to giving your time and energy to others as sanctuary. The task need not be difficult if you are to love yourself and the world anew each day.

A woman friend of ours, for example, has engaged in a lovely ritual of sanctuary for years. Each evening she lights candles in her bathroom and takes a long soak. In fact, so precious is this time to her that the bathroom has been remodeled to evoke enchantment: cedar walls, skylight, cascading plants, altars, mirrors covered with inspiring images, incense, and good literature. A longtime male friend carries out his unique ritual early each morning for an hour or so before he heads off to work: sitting in his easy chair with a large cup of coffee reading great works of literature. Both these people believe that after their rituals they reemerge with the world as more heartfelt individuals, merely because they have created the space for sanctuary in their lives.

Nature is perhaps the most frequent resource for acknowledging sanctuary for ourselves. Thoreau shares the same sentiments when he wrote in 1851 in *Walking*: “When I would re-create myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature.” Through the efforts of our family’s nonprofit organization, the Cortesia Sanctuary Project, many people have been inspired to acknowledge the value of sanctuary in their life through the *sanctum sanctorum* of their yards and gardens.

We received a letter recently from a single mother and her three children who live in Detroit. She described their simple way of giving back to nature right in their own tiny backyard: researching and planting the types of flowers that would attract butterflies. Within a year the yard had become a haven for wildlife, not just butterflies. But the real thrill was discovering how much their efforts created family solidarity amidst tight economic conditions.

On another occasion, we received a call from a woman in Michigan. Inspired by an article that appeared about our work in a national magazine, she described how her cul-de-sac of neighbors created a special place in a small, unused parcel of ground by the street. The impetus was to honor, by planting a tree, the life of a neighbor’s husband who unexpectedly died. But neighbors saw it as a wonderful place to gather and chat, so a couple benches were set by the tree. And then children were inspired to plant and maintain flowers. She told how a tremendous sense of solidarity and pride had grown between the families, and that special place was a key daily sanctuary.

Give yourself permission to create a beautiful path between you and the world, between your personal sense of sacredness and sanctuary, and the sacredness of all beings and places on this earth. On this path, give yourself permission to look for wonder, healing, and celebration. “*In sanctuary I love myself and the world anew.*” This affirmation for the Third Principle of the Sanctuary Path is your light as you journey. Be willing to share your discovery of sanctuary with others. Light their flame, give them your wonder, healing, and celebration.

Be inspired anew in your efforts with this profound thought from Victor Frankl: “What is to give light must endure burning.” The grace of a well-lit Sanctuary Path is that it rekindles your sacred connection with the world each and every day.

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Excerpts from forthcoming book: *Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life*. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell