What Is Holy?

I seem to be on something of a literary kick lately. Two weeks ago I did a run with Kerouac, whose 95th birthday, by the way, is today. (Slipping that one in right at the beginning here). Last Sunday it was Kurt Vonnegut. Staying with that motif, today I'm leading off with Allen Ginsberg.

In the summer of 1955 Ginsberg was a 27 year old aspiring poet, but not widely published. He'd spent all of his life until then in the New York City area, and was now giving San Francisco a try. Several years earlier he'd been treated at the New York Psychiatric Institute for various mental and emotional matters. The advice he was given by those treating him was that he needed to suppress his homosexuality, divest himself of his fringy bohemian friends, get himself a girlfriend, and attempt to live a "normal" life in accordance with the norms of mainstream American society in the early 1950s. This was considered sound psychiatric advice at the time.

In this West Coast phase of his life Allen actually gave that advice a try. He got a job writing copy for marketing agency, put on a coat and tie, carried a briefcase to work, and got himself a girlfriend. It was a nice try, but it didn't work. In the spring of that year, 1955, he met a young man named Peter Orlovsky. They began what became a life-long, partnered relationship, albeit one with its numerous complications.

Allen also decided that the lifestyle he was attempting to cultivate was, in effect, destroying his soul. He further decided that, contrary to the opinions of those who had treated him some years earlier, the problem was not within him but within a larger culture that demanded he live his life in ways that were alien to him. He quit the job; broke up his heterosexual relationship; and decided to risk heeding Thoreau's call to march to the beat of one's own drummer. He knew all about this month's Soul Matters theme, which is risk.

So it was that in that summer of 1955, while sharing an apartment with Peter, Allen began writing a long, epic-style poem that began with the words, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness…" and it went from there to page after page after page. He later titled his poem "Howl for Carl Solomon", the name of a man he'd met at the New York Psychiatric Center and who became a life-long friend.

Over the decades since, the poem that launched Allen Ginsberg's literary career—with the help of an obscenity trial following its initial publication—has found its way into many anthologies of American poetry and literature where it has become a basic staple. Even so, there are parts of it I would not read even from this liberally oriented pulpit.

Between the time when he first read *Howl* at a gathering of poets in the fall of 1955, and when Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Press published it, Ginsberg added a section titled *Footnote to Howl.* This *Footnote* begins with the word "Holy" being repeated fifteen times with an exclamation point after each "Holy." No one could ever accuse Ginsberg of a lack of excess.

As with the larger poem itself, there are some parts of *Footnote to Howl* that are more, shall we say, pulpit appropriate than others. But I especially like the lines that read: "Holy the solitude of skyscrapers and pavements; Holy the cafeterias filled with millions; Holy the mysterious river of tears under the streets."

It all makes for an intriguing juxtaposition; Ginsberg seeing something he calls "holy" right in the very midst of all he perceived as being destructive of the soul.

Moving past Ginsberg now, there's a similar kind of destructive/holy thing going on in some of the songs and poems of Woody Guthrie. They are set in a very different kind of setting than those of Ginsberg's and on a much more literal level. While just barely out of his teens, and living in Pampa, Texas after moving there from his hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma—and now with a young wife and a couple of kids—Woody witnessed the severe dust storms that blew across Oklahoma and Texas in the late 1920s. They destroyed what meager existence the folks making their living from the land in those parts had.

"So long, it's been good to know ya, this dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home; I've got to be drifting along." Mr. Guthrie did not, originally anyway, mean those to be whimsical words. Like many of his dust bowl ballads they described the terrible plight of people forced off their land, and who were moving westward—as did Woody Guthrie himself—desperately seeking other ways of making a living and supporting their families.

But in the midst of all that desperation, Woody saw a certain kind of sacredness or holiness in the land he traveled; however severely beaten down it was in places. He wrote a song called *Holy Ground.* He never set it to music, but other musicians have done recordings of it: "Take off, take off your shoes. This place you walk is holy ground….Every step on earth I traipse around; every step it's holy ground."

I could cite other examples, but I'll leave it with Ginsberg and Guthrie for today. Examples, that is to say, of persons with artistic, poetic, or literary sensitivities who seek, and at times find, a certain kind of sacred or holy dimension to life; even in the midst of all that diminishes or demeans life.

But one need not be in the ranks of poets and artists to see what many of them see and sense. And I happen to think there's a bit of the poet and artist in all of us. These two examples point to a way of looking at the world; a lens through which to see all that we encounter. I call this a religious lens; religious in the sense that it gives a certain kind of depth or deeper meaning to the lives we live, and the settings in which we live them.

Over these past near two years I've shared with you some of how I see my world through my religious lens. For some of our remaining time together, during the next three months, I'm going to revisit some of what I've shared, without—I hope—getting too repetitious about it.

My lens, as you've probably noticed, does not require belief in God as a supernatural being; but it does offer other ways of imagining the sacred or the divine or the holy. I get some good help, when I get to thinking along these lines from a book by a biblical scholar and professor of religious studies, the late Dr. Marcus Borg, called *The God We Never Knew.* It was my privilege, quite a few summers ago now, to take a summer seminar with Dr. Borg at the Pacific School of Religion, right when his book had been published.

The Pacific School of Religion sits up in the lofty heights of the Berkeley Hills. Its campus offers a beautiful panoramic view of much of the Bay Area. Whatever one's theology may be, it's a good place to think about God; a good place to sense the holy. That particular area of Berkeley, in fact, has several seminary campuses in it, including that of our own UU Starr King School for the Ministry. Reflective of what I just said, that piece of Berkeley is often referred to as "Holy Hill."

To return to Dr. Borg, the story he tells in the opening chapter of his book is similar to many I hear from persons coming into a UU congregation. He writes of how the childhood faith in which he was raised—in his case it was Minnesota Lutheran and straight out of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon—eventually went by the board for him. As he puts it, "By the time I was thirty, like Humpty Dumpty, my childhood faith had fallen to pieces." Unlike "all the king's horses and all the king's men," however, Borg was able to reconstruct his faith, albeit in a radically altered form.

What fell to pieces was what Borg calls "supernatural theism;" God, that is to say, as a Supreme Being who exists outside the working of the natural world and universe and who can intervene—as He, She, or It chooses—in those workings. This is the God I knew as I was growing up; and while He could be a punishing Deity when it came to non-believers, the image I mostly got was a positive one. This God of supernatural theism was One who loved and cared about me. "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me," as the very comforting words of a hymn I heard over and over put it.

But for all the comfort I derived from such a God at an earlier point in my life, I am now, and have been for some time, with Dr. Borg in saying that if the only belief-in-God possibility is that of supernatural theism, then I'd have to declare myself an atheist. I would guess, furthermore, that most persons who call themselves atheists are those who have rejected a Supernatural God.

What Dr. Borg offers is an alternative to atheism—a "third way" if you will. He calls it "panentheism." It is a rather convoluted word, but still has only half as many syllables in it as, say, Unitarian Universalism. Panentheism is not so much a definition of God as it is a description of a set of lenses through which one can see, and relate to, the world. It holds that there is something sacred or holy contained within the ordinary or the everyday, and if we stay open to it that sacredness or holiness will, on occasion, break through.

This is the perspective at which I've arrived in my religious and spiritual journey. I lost interest some time ago, quite frankly, in trying to come up with any sort of defensible definition I could put after the word "G-O-D."

What I'm more focused on now is the challenge of walking through life and really seeing it.

While Borg wrote as a liberal, if not radical, Christian theologian, he invokes the Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore to describe what could well be called a panentheistic moment. The words are at the lead-in to today's Order of Service. Tagore: "I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had been lifted from my sight and the ultimate significance of all things laid bare…and no person or thing in the world seemed to me trivial or unpleasing." That, I feel, is what it means to realize life, or to get a glimpse of the holy—to see no person or thing as trivial. From the standpoint of panentheism, that is what it means to believe in God.

OK, enough theology; how about a story. It's about one of the more profound experiences I've had during my years in the ministry. A few weeks prior to my going to study with Dr. Borg I was asked to officiate a funeral in Nashua at a funeral home not far from the church I was serving. It was for a young man named Trent who had died homeless on the streets of San Francisco. He'd grown up in Nashua, and his parents wanted to have him buried in a family plot in the nearby town of Hollis.

In talking with members of Trent's family I learned of a very gifted and talented individual who, for whatever reasons, could not adapt himself to the usual patterns of living that most of us do. They acknowledged his struggles with alcohol. He was a very capable writer; and I was shown some articles he'd written about the homeless for some of San Francisco's alternative newspapers. He wrote with passion and anger and conviction.

Following the service a gentleman from Connecticut approached me. His daughter, a recent graduate of Boston College, was working for a human service agency in San Francisco. She'd known Trent. She'd even arranged for a memorial service to be held at the vacant lot where he usually slept. She'd asked her father to attend the service in Nashua on her behalf.

When I told him I'd be in the Bay Area later that summer, he gave me some contact information so that his daughter, named Connie, and I could meet. That was how I came to find myself, a few weeks later, in the battered up lobby of a battered up store front human services office, asking for someone named Connie. People from the streets came in looking for leads on jobs, places to stay, any available assistance, and the like. While it wasn't that

many miles, I was still a long, long way from rarified aura of the Berkeley hills.

Connie and I began our walk. San Francisco is a beautiful city, but this was its underside—a place where no tourist map will direct you. We passed a line of people waiting to get into a church to be served a meal. We were stopped by someone with a story as to why he needed money. In a calm, cheerful, but firm way my walking companion told him where he needed to go to get the help he needed. She was pretty firm about not handing out cash. I'm not sure how I would have felt had I been taking this walk alone, but I did feel completely at ease walking in the company of a young woman less than half my age.

We met a few people who had known Trent. She introduced me to them and told them I'd conducted his funeral back east in a town called Nashua, New Hampshire. They'd never heard of the place but they did thank me. We came to a small vacant lot where a couple of buildings met at a right angle back from the street a ways. This, Connie told me, was where Trent lived, under a forlorn looking tree. There was a pile of withered flowers still scattered around the trunk, placed there by friends a few weeks earlier. Connie asked if we could stand next the tree, and have me say a prayer for Trent. I obliged. Then we walked back to where she worked, said our good-byes, and I drove back over the Bay Bridge and back up to the lofty Berkeley Hills.

The last thing I want to do here is romanticize or sentimentalize homelessness or poverty, as there's none to be had. There's no one explanation or one single culprit as to why some persons struggle for existence in the midst of the relative comfort most of us know. It's a tough and complex issue, and not one to be easily untangled.

But what I saw on that short journey was about more than struggles for material survival. It was that, but it was more than that. There was also a need and desire by my companion and guide for a brief time, as well as those we met up with, to affirm a life that had touched other lives; a life that had its own kind of sacredness and holiness, however broken it may have also been.

The withered flowers and the hard dirt at that site were evocative of those lines of Ginsberg's: "Holy the mysterious river of tears under the streets;" And those of Woody Guthrie: "Every step you take; it's holy ground."

As I said earlier, I'm not putting forth a belief system with all this so much as I'm offering a lens through which we can look at the world around us. It's a lens that can open us up to both beauty as well as to brokenness. It's the lens through which Albert Schweitzer looked when he proclaimed, and lived out, what he called a "*reverence* for life." For seeking, and at times finding, an essential holiness or sacredness to life provides one a call to awareness and a call to response when that holiness is violated.

When people go hungry or are innocently caught in the ravages of war, the sacred, the holy, is violated. When the earth is despoiled by human greed and overreaching the sacred is violated. When a person's essential human dignity is demeaned because of their race or gender or ethnicity or faith stance or sexual orientation or station in life, the sacred is violated. When we see the holy profaned, or when we violate it ourselves, we are then called to renewal and to recommitment to be persons of faith in the best sense of the term; the faith that we can be agents of healing and reconciliation and transformation in the broken places of life.

There's common message in the two settings I've described: The beauty of Holy Hill, and the holiness beneath the river of tears of broken streets. The message is that contained within the beauty of life, as well as contained within the meaner and crueler aspects of life, is the truth that none of it--to recall Tagore again--is really trivial. There is a Presence, a Power, a Spirit within that ordinariness--even within that meanness--that can bless us and summon us to keep faith with the life we live and the life to which we aspire. Do not lose touch with that during the time in which we now live.

Finally, to let go of the God of Supernatural Theism is not, as I see it, to let go or give up on catching glimpses of the Divine, or finding the Holy that runs even beneath a river of tears as it flows through this infinitely natural world and universe in which we all live and move and have our beings.

I trust you will continue on your own quests for the holy in your days and years ahead; and that you keep your lives in a holy place. [Hymn 1008—Teal.]

Stephen Edington—March 12, 2017