

SACRED SPACES SPECIAL PLACES



An anthology by members of
the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource
and their friends

SUFFOLK INTER-FAITH RESOURCE
A PROJECT FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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members of Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource
and their friends

**Supporting
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This is one of a series of booklets written by local people and produced by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. Details of SIFRE's activities can be found on our legacy Web Site:

<http://www.sifre.org.uk>.

The Cover Picture:
'Night and Day' 1995
by Surinder Hayer Warboys
A Stained Glass Panel measuring 48" x 50"
in St Nicholas' Hospice Chapel
Bury St Edmunds
From a photograph by Ian Hulland

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Sacred Spaces / Special Places

This was the theme for our inter-faith programme for 2000-2001. We hoped that it would catch the imagination. We arranged events and excursions, and made various suggestions of things to do, but we particularly wanted our members to contribute their ideas to the study. We asked them to send us a paragraph telling us what kind of places were sacred or special to them.

We said “You may remember somewhere from long ago. You may have a picture in your mind's eye. You might want to describe a place that is sacred or special to you now. It could be a religious building, a corner of a cemetery, a garden, a wood or seashore; it could be a room or alcove in your house, an icon or picture; it might be in a book or on a cyber-highway. If there are ways in which others can share the experience, please make suggestions.”

We enclosed some reflections on the topic as an introduction to the process and invited responses to them. We hoped that at the end of the year we might have collected enough ideas to form a substantial study pack (or book).

This anthology is the result. We begin with the original reflections, and then offer you what we have collected. We hope you find it stimulating.

Cynthia Capey

Sacred Spaces / Special Places - Reflections

“There an angel of the Lord appeared to him as a fire blazing out from a bush. Although the bush was on fire, it was not being burnt up, and Moses said to himself, “I must go across and see this remarkable sight. Why ever does the bush not burn away?” When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to look, he called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” He answered, “Here I am!” God said, “Do not come near! Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’

Holy ground, sacred spaces, special places; what are they, who defines them? In this very familiar passage from Exodus, God indicates to Moses that the sacred space he is approaching will be violated if he, a mere mortal, steps upon it. This way of thinking is ingrained in the cultures with roots in the Abrahamic tradition: the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum, the Name that cannot be spoken. To this day a toddler running up the aisle of a small parish church and hiding behind the altar will offend and upset a number of people. Sacred space may conjure up memories of not being allowed to speak, having to wear uncomfortable clothes and look serious, all that is most up-tight and tight-lipped about religion. Dictionary definitions somehow enhance this image of the sacred: “dedicated to religious use, consecrated; dedicated or dear to a divinity; set apart, reserved or specially appropriated; sanctified by religion, reverence etc; not to be profaned, inviolable”

Yet surely sacred spaces should be special places, places that speak to the person who is entering them. Places or spaces that transport people from the dailiness of our ordinary lives, encouraging them to leave behind the material and consider the spiritual. Places that make us want to sing, to cry, to be still, to pause and put our lives and thoughts into a bigger context. Or not. Maybe they are places that strip us of our thoughts and make us simply happy to BE, to experience a rare moment of ‘connectedness’ of feeling a part of a

jigsaw that does, despite all the jarring and the clanging of life, still fit.

SIFRE's aim in considering 'Sacred spaces, special places' is to help people/you/us think about what we consider sacred space is for us. We may also want to think about what it should be for our faith community if we belong to one. Do the "official" sacred places manage to retain their integrity despite the inevitable commercialisation that surrounds many of them? If we're honest with ourselves are our sacred spaces in fact places we have found for ourselves: that hillside, this wood, the bend in that river, the garden, the home, that bit of coast? The thing that makes a place sacred can be very subjective, which is why this is such a fascinating project.

We are hoping that this booklet will help our members (and anyone else who's interested) to explore their sacred spaces. Many people find that their most sacred place is in their mind.

Elizabeth Wesley

Sanctuary and Hospitality

In parts of the ancient world, the stranger and/or fugitive was treated as a sacred guest. The altar of a temple and the hearth of a home were places where people could claim absolute refuge. In classical Greek the same word could denote stranger, friend, guest and host because it was a sacred duty to receive, lodge and protect the helpless stranger, as it was also in ancient Israel and among the Celtic peoples. In contrast among the Romans the original Latin word for stranger came to mean enemy. Both these attitudes exist today.

As we explore the idea of sacred space perhaps we could revisit this concept of sanctuary in this rich sense and consider the terms on which we receive strangers - whether they are welcome into the heart of our homes, our communities, our religious buildings. When we gather together in school or place of work does the newcomer feel welcome? Do we respect and value the person who is different, or do we treat them as strangers and enemies? Is our religious building, our school or work place a sacred place in this sense?

Cynthia Capey

Pilgrim or Tourist; Sacred Space or Secular Pleasure Dome

I recall there was a time when certain places (churches, cathedrals, valleys, and moorlands) had a special ambience about them. On entering certain of our great cathedrals, I was stopped in my tracks, I was uplifted by the vibrancy that pervaded the space, my spirit soared with the architecture, I just wanted to stand in quiet self-indulgence and breath in the atmosphere of the place. Now, when I return to many of these same cathedrals and when I visit others for the first time, I am struck by the craftsmanship, the artistic, the beauty; I am welcomed by the guides; I can often get a good cup of tea and some fine home made cake from the refectory; BUT I am no longer transported into “seventh heaven” There are still places which can have this effect upon me, but they are now few and far between. Is it me, am I getting hard in my ageing, OR have my special places changed?

Time was, when most, who entered our cathedrals, did so as part of their life’s pilgrimage. They were, like me, aware of the numinous quality of these special buildings which have been places of prayer and worship for many centuries.

Now, cash strapped cathedrals have had to move with the time and make themselves visitor (tourist) attractions. Those who go in their thousands and millions are not on a pilgrimage, they are there to see the show, to buy the trinkets and the tea shirts. They enter the buildings with secular intent; they wander round to admire the craft of the craftsmen who laboured to render glory to God. They leave the building having given little or no thought to their own existence and mortality.

I wonder, if the very stones of a building can be infected with the numinous by centuries of worship and prayer, can they similarly be polluted with secularity through the visits of millions of tourists?

David Capey

A Parable of the Sacred Place

There was once a great desert in which nothing grew. Through the desert ran a long road, along which many wandered. Most of them were tired, thirsty and afraid of all the bandits and demons which, they had been told, inhabited the desert and preyed off the unwary. Yet on they walked.

At one point, beside the road, there bubbled a spring. No one can remember who first discovered the spring. Yet for countless generations travellers stopped to refresh themselves from the sweet waters. Those who did so found that not only was their thirst slaked, but they were healed in body and soul. The waters made the remainder of their journey easier. So it was that this spring came to be called the Waters of Life.

As time went by, some people placed rocks and stones about the spring, with inscriptions of gratitude carved upon them. As the centuries rolled past, what started out as a few boulders became a vast mound of stone, encasing the spring like a great wall. The carvings on the stones became ever more elaborate, till it ceased to be a wall of rocks and became a great fortress or, some said, temple.

Some travellers gave up their wanderings to settle by the spring. They became its guardians and protectors. They developed their own special costumes, their own language and rules. Disagreements broke out as to who was allowed to become a guardian, or who could drink the water, when and how. Some of these disputes grew so violent that wars broke out.

The victors of these wars always added new wings to the fortress-temple, in gratitude for their success. So it became grander still. At some point, no one is sure when, the spring was sealed over. Some travellers complained about this, but the guardians ignored them. The guardians held beautiful ceremonies to remember the marvellous healings that the water had once granted, even while people died at the gates from thirst.

To stop the travellers' incessant complaints, the guardians had different water piped in, at enormous expense and difficulty, from

far away. Occasionally some strange wanderer would appear and decry the new water, and demand that the guardians make the original spring available to all once again. Some said these odd people were prophets and mystics. Others said they were insane. Usually they were just ignored, or even executed.

Eventually most of the travellers stopped bothering going to the now near-impregnable fortress-temple. They wandered on as best they could and somehow survived. Many cynics said that the old stories about the spring were just a fantasy, that it had never existed at all. Others, exhausted by their journeys, would occasionally sneak into the fortress-temple late at night, when all was quiet and still. There some of them thought that they could hear, just barely, a sound from somewhere deep within the great building. A tiny, faint sound, almost like running water. And tears would brim in their eyes.

*Adapted by Robin Herne from a story found in
'For Christ's Sake' by Tom Harper, OUP 1986*

Sacred Spaces, Special Places for Pagans

Different traditions of Paganism would give varied responses to this topic, but most would agree that ALL places are, ultimately, sacred and of value. There are no places which can be dismissed as profane or worthless in the Pagan world-view.

The land itself is alive sentient, feeling, purposeful. Each place has a spirit, the *genius loci* of Roman lore, which both shapes the humans who live there and is, in turn, shaped by them. Strong emotions leave their residue for future generations to respond to great love, deep peace, joy of learning, intense hatred, utter despair etc.

What is a special place for us, is somewhere which echoes the needs of our soul at a given time. A serene woodland grove calls to the soul hankering for peace; a dusty mausoleum may open its arms to one seeking connection to their ancestors; a bleak, storm-wracked coast may grant a broken heart catharsis.

The Pagan seeks to embrace darkness along with light, for all things have their purpose in the universe. A place of great horror, like Auschwitz, may have as much to say as any cathedral. Being sacred does not automatically mean being serene or happy. Pagan creeds do not necessarily strive to redeem or transform that which is disturbing, ugly, discordant. A dangerous volcano is as special as a peaceful forest glade.

Sometimes the most potent sites for a Pagan are those untouched by human hand of which there are increasingly few left in the world. As we stand at the doorway of the 21st Century, with our scientists and their financiers striving to seize control of the very building blocks of life itself, it is worth reflecting that some of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring sites are those that remain just as the Gods created them. When humans seek to improve upon, add to, make more convenient, or just plain demolish, what nature has created the results are, all too frequently, disastrous.

Though Pagan civilisations have been as much part of this remodelling as anyone. Many modern Pagans find the vast temples of Egypt, Greece and Rome to be sources of immense wonder and

spiritual uplift. Yet, for all the desire that emperors and pharaohs had for imposing themselves upon the landscape, much of the architecture is informed by a love of the natural world. One only has to think of the megalithic stone circles that dot Northern Europe, aligned to the passage of stars, sun and moon with baffling accuracy, to see that so many of these religious sites were means of studying and reflecting nature, rather than dominating or sublimating it.

Suffolk has no grand Pagan temples to speak of, no stone circles, no Hanging Gardens, no Mount Olympus. Yet there are magical places; quiet corners of woodlands, a particular babbling brook, a lonely field where the deer can be seen to run. Secret places where not many people go, and where (so far) no supermarket chain has felt the need to stick yet another ton of concrete and glass. That is how, I feel, they best remain. Secret.

Robin Herne

More Reflections

The Abrahamic faiths were all founded in desert countries. So perhaps it is natural for them to think of a lone oasis, the precious waters of life, the unrelenting light of God etc.

Druidism was born in rain-drenched Europe, surrounded by fertile forests. Rather than communities huddling around a single precious water-source, there were endless rivers and lakes. And countless Gods, rather than just one solitary one to turn to and depend upon.

How about looking at the places / eco-systems in which various faiths originated, and how the images of landscape affect not just early myths but the whole mind-set, that gets carried by believers where-ever they migrate to?

Do the attitudes of desert-dwelling tribesmen still influence Christians 2000 years later? Do the cold reaches of Scandinavia still exert a pull on the minds of modern Heathens? Does a Sikh living in Hounslow still think / act like a Sikh living in the Punjab?

Robin Herne

Flower Gardens

Reflections on Sacred Space

In May 1997, a few of the women, (Moslem, Sikh and Christian), from SIFRE (Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource) made our way to the Chelsea Flower Show. Our visit to the gardens of Chelsea with friends from different ways of life and faiths was a reminder of togetherness, friendship and oneness. Our long journey enhanced our shared thoughts and memories. Once at Chelsea among the crowds of many hundreds, for some while I got separated from my friends. I did not get in a panic! It gave me a chance to see myself, thus alone but somehow part of all. It gave me moments to sit down and contemplate.

It felt as though we were all on a pilgrimage to give homage to beauty. The enthusiasm, joy and quest for beauty was vibrant. The search for perfection, colours and freshness was breathtaking. My thoughts took me back to one of the verses from the Qur'an: "We show them our signs till it be manifest unto them that it is the truth." (41:53)

I felt that if we only look truly by heart at these gardens-we shall see the signs of God everywhere through the beauty of flowers and the enthusiasm for their quest. They were all there submitting to God's creative power. They all tell us something about God's activity within creation. They reminded me of another verse of the Qur'an: "Have you not seen how whatsoever is in heaven and the earth glorifies God?". (24:41)

My heart was filled with the joy of remembering, yet again another verse of the Qur'an that says: "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115)

I felt the warmth of tears in my eyes, how wonderful is the joy of closeness to Allah. I felt the natural human response to a God who is conceived in these terms, that is to feel close to him and to love him.

After a while I continued my walk to the Garden of Provence, my favourite garden of Chelsea. Passing through the huge crowd who all, like me, seemed fascinated by this garden, I eventually managed to find a space in front. I stood there quite a while, stood looked and wondered.

At these moments, while my eyes were soaked with the reflection of the natural beauty of this particular garden, I felt so blessed by Allah touching my heart once by reminding me of the wisdom of the Qur'an. I remembered some verses of the Qur'an that conveyed the message that earth represents the place where heaven displays its properties and displays the signs of God. The display of peace and serenity in this particular garden said it all, "display of nature in harmony".

An old stone step led to the rustic farmhouse. The flow of a spring was running through the garden. A bench, carved from the stone, sat in the shade of an olive tree. A simple rustic archway, in the high, surrounding wall, led to a small lavender field. A blend of stone, foliage, flowers, pomegranate tree and the sound of water all echoed a reflection of paradise, or as I say it in Persian, my mother tongue, "Paradisa", the heavenly garden. No wonder why this beautiful word has found its way into the English language. "This is a Paradise indeed", I thought.

It only takes a few hard-hearted human beings not to be moved by a garden full of beautiful flowers, trees and splashing fountains. It felt that the earth only expanded to let heaven into its midst.

The huge crowd around this, the most natural garden of Chelsea, was the sign of the people's strive for simplicity and natural beauty. In the Moslem view, beauty is God's attribute. The prophet of Islam, Mohammed (Peace be upon him) said "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty." This took me to the thought that we are all from God; even the ones who deny God, their nature, unknowingly, leads them to the quest and admiration of beauty. This is what links us to our spiritual nature, makes us to search for our link to our origin which is from the beautiful Allah.

Eventually, with all these packages of thought, I find my way to my friends. We all enjoyed our visit and surely we all collected our own individual thoughts and experiences which we will cherish forever.

Elahe Mojdehi

Holy Places, Changing Times

When the Rev. John Fairfax preached at the opening of this Meeting House on 26th April 1700, he took as his text part of a verse from Exodus, chapter 20. In one of the most modern translations, that text - from verse 24 - reads: 'Wherever I cause my name to be invoked, I will come to you and bless you.' For Fairfax, that verse gave the reason why special places are set aside, and special buildings are erected, for worship but do those words have any meaning for us today?

Fairfax made the point that God is present everywhere, but that in certain places there is a 'specialty of presence', and it was his hope and belief that this Meeting House would be one of them. I think the intervening three centuries have proved him right. But what has made it so? In part, it was the intention of those who built it. From the very beginning it was their dedication of this place to divine worship, to the things of the spirit, and to loving fellowship that marked it out as a holy place, a place with that 'specialty of presence'. But that was not the end of it.

Many places once dedicated to God and to worship have lost that 'specialty of presence', or retain it only as a faint echo amongst the ruins, or amongst the trappings of whatever secular use the building has now been put to. Fairfax would, I think, have seen this as the withdrawal of God's blessing from a place where 'his name' is no longer invoked'. We might see this as the fading of that sanctity that seeped into the structure from the faith of those who once worshipped there.

But here faith and worship have been maintained without a break since April 1700 - though at times their survival has been tenuous. And so as the witness has continued, that initial 'specialty of presence' invoked by our forbears has been continued too. But it is the people that have kept this place holy. Without them and without their heartfelt worship. without their questing minds and spirits, the 'specialty of presence' would have seeped away - even if the structure had survived.

But although this has remained a holy place, and although it has remained relatively unchanged structurally, this doesn't mean that much has not changed here. People have gathered here week by week for those special times that are as necessary for our spiritual health as special places, but the way they have worshipped and behaved, the way they have spoken and believed, the way they have viewed their role and their relationship with each other and with the wider world, have all changed a very great deal. It is a spiritual truth divined by such teachers as the Buddha and the anonymous author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, that all things are subject to change. Not only is the fabric of this Meeting House constantly subject to change - however timeless it may seem - but the witness and worship that sanctify it are similarly mutable. Thus both continuity *and* change are of the nature of this building and what happens in it.

Sacred times and places are a constant human need. But if those times and places are to meet new needs, and to meet old needs in new ways, then they must be ready to accommodate change. Sometimes a religious community sets its face against change; refuses to admit new insights and new perceptions; nails its colours to some illusory 'old-time religion'. But by doing so it risks becoming rigid, losing touch with the living Spirit that cannot be bound within a creed or a book. And a rigid faith, fearing change, becomes an intolerant, even a violent and persecuting faith.

This Meeting House represents continuity - a sacred place existing through time. Its witness and worship also represent continuity, for folk have come here through three centuries to share their faith, their dreams, their lives. But it is also a place where the inevitability and the necessity of change have been recognised, for a *living* community worships here, and to be alive is to change, evolve and adapt.

The living eternal process that Fairfax saw as God's coming to special places and to the people who gather there 'by his Spirit', still moves through this place and its people. Our Meeting House, though part of a rich heritage, is not a museum. And the life of the

spirit that we celebrate here is no museum-piece. We move forward in faith, treasuring our inheritance for the sake of those who will receive this world from us.

In this service we will hear the voices of some of those who worship here today - the inheritors and the moulders of a living tradition.

*Address delivered by the Revd. Cliff Reed
at the 300th Anniversary Service
of the Unitarian Meeting House
Friars Street, Ipswich. 30th April 2000.*

'Sanctuaries and Synagogues'

As the occupants of one of Suffolk's most important historic places of worship, and as beneficiaries on several occasions of the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust's generosity in the maintenance of this Meeting House, it gives the congregation here great pleasure to host the annual service of the Trust this morning and to welcome its members.

Suffolk is more than usually blessed with historic buildings, including two other early Unitarian meeting houses besides this one, namely Framlingham, built in 1717, and Bury St. Edmunds, built in 1711. They also include one of the very earliest Nonconformist buildings in the country, Walpole's Congregational chapel, dating from the 1640s, and, of course, about five-hundred pre-Reformation parish churches. It was these that John Fairfax referred to in his opening sermon here in April 1700, as, *'those stately magnificent and sumptuous structures, our public churches, which the Christian piety and liberality of former ages erected for the convenient assembling of particular congregations in their parochial districts every Sabbath Day....'*

As Fairfax would no doubt agree, our heritage of church buildings is an asset of incalculable value, and it is a cause of thanksgiving that a body like the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust exists to look after them and to help their congregations to maintain them. But church buildings can be very controversial - and not just because of their architecture, furniture and fittings. There are those, and not just outside the churches, who are highly sceptical about whether we should have them at all. Even in Fairfax's day there were clearly those who opposed the building of this Meeting House, as we can glean from this remark: *'I cannot censure as some do but must commend this congregation that they have at so great charge erected this large, spacious Meeting-Place, and adorned it both without and within.'* Here, surely, is the echo of the same sort of controversy as that which greeted the decision to build the tower on Bury St. Edmunds cathedral and generally complete the original plans for that building.

The view is often expressed that congregations should get out of the property business, stop being the curators of museums, and instead focus on the work and witness of the Christian faith, and worship in hired halls, community centres and even private homes. This argument is not without force and I do not dismiss it lightly. A living congregation exists to practice a living faith, not to look after a building. Which is why, of course, a body like the Trust needs to exist, relieving something of that proprietorial burden so that the church can get on with the real purpose of its existence. Historic church buildings, as part of the national heritage, deserve the support of the nation, be that through taxation, corporate donations or the pounds and pennies given by individuals; but if this also helps the congregations that worship in them, so much the better. And I do not only say that because this makes life easier for those with responsibility for historic buildings. I say it because the value and interest of those buildings is enhanced by their being used for the purpose for which they were built, namely worship and the fellowship that flows from it.

A disused church building, even if it is well-maintained as a historic monument, lacks that certain something, that *'specialty of presence'* as Fairfax called it, that indwells the spiritual home of a living faith-community. To help a congregation maintain not only its building, but also - albeit indirectly - its witness in that building, is to everyone's benefit, even those whose only interest is in the architecture and the history. And for those who do value it and use it as a place of worship, the benefit is all the greater, for although one can indeed praise God anywhere, there is something special about doing so in beautiful surroundings created for that very purpose and redolent with a sense of the numinous. As Jacob expressed it at Haran, *'Surely the Lord is in this place... this is none other but the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven'* (Genesis 28:16,17).

In his sermon here three-hundred years ago, John Fairfax, while affirming that, *'God's essential presence is everywhere. He filleth heaven and earth'*, also spoke of God coming to or being present with us, *'in one place more than another'*, so denoting *'a specialty of*

presence'. Quite why or how a place can be said to have this quality of sacredness or holiness is an interesting question. It may well be, of course, that it derives from our own perception and feeling; from the divine impulse in the human soul rather than from any objective source. Or it may be that a place is made sacred by people gathering there for worship over years and centuries. It is we who set such places aside because there is a need to have them: places to take time out from the everyday concerns that distract us, special places to remind us of the sacredness of all places on this earth.

Indeed, the root of the word 'church' lies in the Greek word *κυριακον* (*kuriakon*), meaning literally 'a thing belonging to the Lord', and from an early date applied to a building set aside for the Lord - the house of God, the special place where God is worshipped. A church, according to this understanding, is indeed a building, a sacred space. It is often said, of course, that the church is not the building but the people, and this is how we also understand it today; which is why the word 'church' can be rather a problem.

Today 'church' can mean a building, it can mean the congregation, it can mean the denomination, and it can mean the whole Christian community throughout the world! It is the word used to translate two separate Greek words. Not only *κυριακον*, which became 'Kirche' in German, 'kirk' in Scots and 'church' in English; but also *εκκλησια*, meaning an assembly or meeting. This became 'ecclesia' in Latin, 'eglise' in French and 'eglwys' in Welsh - all translated as 'church' in English! *Εκκλησια*, in the Christian context, originally meant the meeting for worship, the congregation, and only later came to denote the building as well!

Perhaps it was to get away from this confusion that the Protestant Dissenters of the 17th and 18th centuries went back a stage when naming their places of worship, quite apart from the fact that the word 'church' was firmly and legally identified with the Church of England. In naming this building, and others like it, the Dissenters looked to another Greek word, namely *συναγωγη*, or 'synagogue'. For the Jews, who the Dissenters saw as their spiritual forbears, the synagogue - meaning both a congregation and the place where it

meets - was and is a 'meeting house' intended and reserved for religious worship and teaching. This is precisely how the Protestant Dissenters saw the places they were building. As Fairfax said, *'We are now in the tabernacle of meeting, where we meet not only one with another, but all with God.'*

Among most of the Nonconformists, the Society of Friends excepted, the term 'meeting house' later fell into disfavour, giving way to yet another word. This was 'chapel' (Latin 'cappella'), originally meaning a temporary structure used to house a sacred object or holy relic, but by a somewhat tortuous process through many centuries coming to mean, in England and Wales at any rate, any place of Christian worship that was not Anglican, that is, Nonconformist or Roman Catholic! Nowadays, 'chapel' in that context is becoming or has become archaic. Most denominations favour 'church' while some of us, such as the congregation here, have reverted to 'meeting house', which seems to us the most fitting.

From this linguistic confusion two important tendencies emerge. On the one hand we have the concept of the sacred place, a space or building set aside for God and dedicated to worship, devotion and prayer. On the other, we have the concept of the assembly or meeting of the faithful, and of a house within which that meeting takes place. Some may see this as an 'either/or' situation, but I do not. This Meeting House, as its name suggests, is a place where we meet for worship and fellowship, but that doesn't entirely sum it up. For me, and I know for others, it is also a sacred space, a house of peace, a sanctuary to which I can come when no-one else is here and still feel that 'specialty of presence'. Apart from our Meeting House in Framlingham, there are others that I seek out - usually when out walking - to spend a time of quiet reflection and prayer. The delightful little church of All Saints in Little Bealings is one, the ancient church at Iken on its yet more ancient monastic site is another. I'm sure you all have such special favourites too.

Such places are not necessarily ancient, there are some modern church buildings that also bespeak the 'specialty of presence', but

then this Meeting House was brand new when Fairfax coined that phrase. This being the annual service of the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust, though, as well as the tercentenary year of this building, it is appropriate that we reflect on that heritage today. But our ecclesiastical heritage is not just about the past and its monuments. It is also about the maintenance, in a changing and confused world, of places of sanctuary and peace; but places too where loving faith and healing fellowship are affirmed, and offered to the spiritual hunger that surrounds them.

Fairfax quotations from: 'Primitiae Synagogae. A Sermon Preached at Ipswich, April 26. 1700.

At the Opening of a New Erected Meeting-House. By John Fairfax, A.M. Minister of the Gospel to the Congregation there Assembling. London, Printed for Tho. Parkhurst in Cheapside, and sold by Henry Truelove at Ipswich, 1700.' Facsimile copies are available from the Meeting House.

*The Revd. Cliff Reed
Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House,
4th June 2000*

Buildings for God and man

At its simplest, making church buildings available for community use is just a matter of good stewardship which is important in terms of Christian ethics. Wastage is destructive and irreverent in its failure to value the work of those that raised the capital and created the buildings in the first place. More positively, however, sharing offers new relationships and the promise of new opportunities for collaboration and partnership. This moves the argument for sharing the use of church buildings onto different and more fertile ground.

It's important not to get pretentious about the simple act of making church buildings available for community uses. It could be that the church needs to share its buildings for the very good reason that in doing so it relates itself, as one organisation within a community, to others that also have an important part to play in it. The mutuality of interest then goes beyond the economical and practical. It begins to beg the question of whether the church can be true to itself if it does not share its buildings wherever it can. Can a church that doesn't share its buildings with the community share anything else with it?

"The medium is the message", wrote Marshall McLuhan. In the church's case, its buildings are part of its message. In medieval churches the message is engraved and sculpted into the stone. Churches and halls all speak to their local communities, though the messages received may not be the ones intended. For example, they may say, "This church welcomes all respectable, white, middle-class, affluent, car-owning people with good manners, well-behaved children and no problems." Or they may say, "This church is sick to death of graffiti and vandalism and has given up reaching out to you and walled itself in." Or maybe, "This church hasn't got enough income to do the job properly, but at least it's still here and trying to serve you as best it can."

All of these messages, and a thousand others besides, take the discussion into the world of corporate spirituality and a church's

willingness, or unwillingness, to make sacrifices for others or reach out to them or ask for their help. The issue of church buildings and how they are used, and why, turns out to be more complex and challenging than expected. It has much to do with, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also!"

There's another strand in Christian thought that breaks in at this point. It is the idea of the People of God forming a Living Temple. There is more than just a metaphor or parable to be made here between the shared use of church buildings as a means to link church and community. What is at stake here is the church's understanding of itself as a human construction which is meant to embody the divine in the human. That's the message its use of buildings is meant to convey.

In simpler, less portentous language, if the church isn't sharing its buildings with its local community, and if its people aren't sharing fully in the lives of those communities, then the church isn't being the church.

*Taken from "Church Buildings in the Community"
a report prepared for the East of England Churches Network
Published with permission.*

A SIFRE Summer Outing

Tea in a garden, a stroll and two remote churches... Wednesday 9th August at 3.30pm.

The garden at Tunstall Old School. Cottage-style with a lot of native wild plants. Can you identify them!?!

Wantisden. Nothing but a church - and what a church! Tiny, utterly remote, no electricity. Quite unrestored with Norrn work. It speaks.

A stroll past the disused air base (ugh!!). Then a nice little lake.

St. Gregory the Great at Rendlesham. Redwald's ham, of course: and the Saxon king was probably baptised around this site. Bede says it didn't quite 'take'! A lovely church with definitely sacred space.

Wednesday, 9th August (a day on which it didn't actually rain!) found a group of us taking tea in Michael Hamilton Sharp's lovely garden at Tunstall Old School and what follows was my own reaction to the places visited. We set off from the garden after briefly considering the theme "Sacred Spaces/Special Places," aided by Robin's reading of a poem on a Celtic theme.

First of all, we went to Wantisden church - very old and very small, extremely remote and, for me, rather oppressive. There had once been a wall-painting of the Virgin Mary and the baby Christ, but this had been obliterated during the Reformation and had at some time been replaced with the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed - which seemed to me to be strange because I believe that most of the people who attended for worship would have been farm labourers and their families who probably could not read. I don't know why, but I felt unhappy here although this remote church was very much to be marvelled at for its age and simplicity.

Outside Wantisden church door we turned 450 and were faced with some very ugly buildings which stood on the perimeter of the former Bentwaters Air Base - whilst we all agreed on their ugliness,

we felt that we should remember that their original intent was not imbued with beauty but rather with the defence of our freedom.

From here we drove to St. Gregory the Great at Rendlesham which, for me at least, had more feeling of the sacred - possibly because, being Jewish, the presence of candles (albeit lit electrically) is something I very much associate with religious feelings. In spite of the presence of very modern (for "modern" read "tacky") items of furniture, I liked this church and felt happy there, even though commemorative items spoke of the worship of position in society rather than just the worship of God.

However, something (and I can't remember what) sparked off thoughts of the followers of one religion imposing their religion upon a place of worship of people of another religion - for instance, a synagogue in Toledo from which the Jews had fled (subsequent to the 15th century Inquisition) having been taken over by the Catholic church and where the Ark of the Covenant had been replaced by an altar, and of the magnificent mosque in Cordoba where, in similar circumstances, a small cathedral had been built in the middle of the mosque! This imposition was felt to amount to a type of desecration and a feeling of shock when entering such a building or site.

This was truly a most enjoyable and thought-provoking afternoon thanks to Michael Hamilton Sharp.

June Bell

Meditation: Missing Vitality

CHRISTIANS in this country are so demoralised or confused (or both) by the escalating evidences of a meltdown in support for the Church that they seem prepared to acclaim any signs of an interest in morality or the paranormal as surviving belief in religion. 'Attitudes formerly considered ordinary superstition are now re-evaluated as first steps towards faith: the earliest indications of moral consciousness are now judged to advances in caring.

One dimension of this almost desperate pursuit of any kind of popular adhesion to Christian belief is the preparedness of the organisers of the Church to identify their own mission with the secular priorities of the ever-burgeoning heritage industry. The great cathedrals have become "sermons in stone", which somehow speak to their visitors about authentic Christian truth; the charming folk-crafts of the past seem to be pointers to a simple faith from which the modern world can learn profitably of human aspirations to spiritual understanding. The fact is that the modern leaders of the Church have been disposed for decades to identify trends of thought and moral enthusiasms of the educated classes as basic Christianity. In the 1960s they reinterpreted Christianity in the rhetoric of progressive political activism: today they represent it in the images favoured by the heritage lobby. But there are dangers in this. For a start, the great buildings that are supposed to speak of the faith of the past do not unambiguously do so: they may tell of past territorial and hierarchical ambition, of the allure of style, of entrepreneurial skill. They also convey a knowledge of Christianity which is static; a series of tableaux in which the religion is interpreted as an expression of a dead culture, an illustration of folk-ways which have departed from the social landscape.

Religion as heritage is also a class concept. To the extent that it represents past Christian belief as an element of folk culture, or as the evidences of patronage by the powerful, it does so because that is how the social romanticism of modern members of the professional class intelligentsia wants to see things. Visiting cathedrals is popular but most visitors are not moved to religious

reflexion, or even to extended sequences of aesthetic pleasure - they are fascinated by the mechanics of construction and the bodies in the vaults.

A living Church should not need buildings - or music, or art or drama - to convey its message, though these things will enrich an existing celebration of faith. A living Church is the body of the Lord himself: it indeed exists, often, alas, in spite of the priorities of those charged with its leadership in our day. It exists because of the promise of Christ, and it is present wherever two or three are gathered in His name. Symbols only have meaning when the knowledge that they are supposed to convey has already been learnt. The Christians of the present time are poorly instructed in an understanding of their own faith, and they are making little effort to transmit it to future generations. What the future *will* inherit is professionally restored evidence in stone and art of the enterprise of preceding ages: a deed culture handed on to a generation ignorant of the spiritual vitality which once inspired it. Men will gaze upon St Paul's as now they behold the classic temples of Greece.

Edward Norman
Daily Telegraph
12 May 2001
Published with permission

Pilgrims

And still they are coming,
a tip-out of coaches,
a creak of old knees
in search of the toilets;
a fall-out of T-shirts
to gaudy the transept.

A straggle of ladies
in sun-hats and sandals
confuse in a cluster
then flip-flop the cloister.

A nod to the nave
and a crick to the vaulting
an altar too far,

they are buying their notelets
and still they are coming
from far beyond Bath.

Are you still breathing,
stone lung of Beckett?

Are you still holy,
Augustine's new Rome?
The knives are still falling
on Turbulent Thomas,
still falling on Thomas
cold-written in stone.

Mandy Archer

Meeting for worship

We all go in
The room is quiet
No one speaks
Silence reigns
Peace is here
Why do I feel?
That I must
Get up and speak
And break the peace
My heart thumps
I will not speak
I will sit here
Waiting for someone else
To take their turn
At last no longer
Can I wait
I rise and speak
The words may not
Be clear
But I know that
The meaning is
Afterwards
Someone says
Thank you
Your ministry
Has met my need
I am surprised
For it was not I
Who spoke
But someone else
Indeed

*Dorothy Crowther.
The Friend. 1st September 2000
Published with permission.*

Prison Guards?

Being a Meeting house warden is much more than just unlocking the building and preparing it for its users. The warden has a role to play in making the Meeting house a place of welcome and refuge, as well as providing information to all sorts of enquirers.

The warden has a role to play in making the Meeting house a place of invitation and refuge, both to members of the Meeting and to outsiders who are wandering by.

My husband Trevor and I have been wardens at the Devonshire Street Meeting house in the heart of Sydney since September. We have been thinking and talking about what role we play and should play in the life of the Meeting, and also in the world - that is, why do Meetings have wardens?

(Actually I have argued to be called Friend in residence as I am a member, and warden conjures up a sense of the prison guard!)

For myself, I am aware of some motivations to do with 'I was hungry and you fed me; naked and you clothed me; homeless, and you took me in.'

Many Meetings say they have found that they can manage the work of the Meeting house and have done away with wardens. But this seems to me to be missing the point. The warden isn't just the caretaker of the building. The building is not the Meeting!

No, the warden has a role to play in making the Meeting house a place of invitation and refuge, both to members of the Meeting and to outsiders who are wandering by. Our Meeting house is one block from Central Station, and a block from a large government housing estate. The whole world passes by our door. We extend kindness and warmth to those who approach. Recently Quaker Service Australia has begun holding a monthly stall on the front stoop. This has had a marvellous effect - 'strangers' now knock during the week and ask who we are. Isn't some of our (Quaker) purpose to act 'in the world' for social change? And how else does social change occur

but by every person deciding that things in the world must be different?

Exiting our gate, we come across all sorts of curious looks. The Meeting house is a large 100-year-old building. There is great interest in it from the neighbours. Last month the Lower Hall was hired by the city council for the elections. As people came in to vote, many said 'I've always wanted to see in here.'

'Just knock anytime', we said and we will show you around.'

When we meet passers-by at our gate, who give us a curious look, I almost always introduce myself, and say 'This is the Quaker Meeting house and we live here' and then let a conversation takes its course.

We have never met with any response but friendly or interested. But sometimes we have long talks.

'Aren't you the people who don't use electricity?' No, actually, that's the Amish.'

'Don't you forbid the use of chrome trim on cars and make your members pull it off?'

'Where did that one come from?'

'Are you vegetarian?' 'Are you Christian?''

If we are on our way in, or someone is asking about hiring the hall, we always offer a tour. 'Would you like to see inside?'

*Jacque Aldridge & Trevor Rislop
The Friend,
1st September 2000*

We owe this article and the preceding poem to the kindness of Bert Irvine, who regularly sends on his copies of the Friend to the SIFRE Centre.

At Strata Florida Abbey, Ceredgion

Quiet in August sunshine
this vale of flowers speaks to me
of ancient piety and present beauty
of peace outside of time.

Within its soil
rest abbots, bards and princes,
would-be saints, forgiven sinners,
united in tranquillity.

Divinity is tangible here today in Ystrad Fflur,
where blue harebells nod under green oaks;
where White Monks prayed
and red kites soar.

Cliff Reed
23rd August 2000

St Paul's makes a spectacle of itself

ST PAUL'S Cathedral is repackaging itself as a place of "spectacular adventure" to try to boost flagging visitor figures. The promotion sells Sir Christopher Wren's cathedral along the lines of a family theme park.

"Discover St Paul's - a spectacular family adventure", say the posters offering free entry for children, adventure trails and viewing platforms.

St Paul's is also employing actors as storytellers to dramatise the mosaics and paintings of St Paul and Adam and Eve. Children who climb the 530 steps to the Golden Gallery - London's highest observation platform at 350ft - get a free badge.

The cathedral hopes to attract British families to make up for American tourists who have stayed away because of foot and mouth and the recession at home. In the first week of July last year the cathedral welcomed 25,000 visitors: in the same week this year only 22,000 paid to enter. In 1992 St Paul's introduced entry charges of £5 per adult and £2.50 per child, which provides about 40 per cent of its annual income.

John Milne, the registrar, said the aim was to ensure longer-term security for the cathedral. He said there was no danger of it being mistaken for a theme park. The Lord's Prayer was read aloud on the hour each hour and visitors were asked to be still and quiet for a minute.

*Victoria Combe
Religious Correspondent.
Daily Telegraph
Saturday 21 July 2001.
Published with permission.*

Trees

I think we all know how the rain forest is disappearing, and what a devastating effect it is having on the world's climate, the wild life and the peoples that live in the areas, but what about the beauty and the resources (medicinal and otherwise)?

Trees have been worshipped since man first appeared on this planet. Primitive man used to identify himself with the spirit of an animal as with that of a tree. People worshipped trees, addressed their prayers to them, comparing them to the great spirits and secret forces of nature. Various Gods were said to have sprung from trees. The Egyptian God Horus made his appearance on earth in an Acacia tree; Ra and Hathor (the sacred cow) both stood on a sycamore. In Greece, the tree of Zeus was an Oak; Apollo's was an Olive, to name but a few.

Coming more to the present day, the Native American Indians believe that trees are here to keep watch on the Earth. They would often go into the woods and meditate in front of a particular tree, the Sioux would often use a cottonwood tree, held sacred because their leaves moved so readily in the wind, they were always praying to the Great Spirit, like their brothers, the Poplar and the Aspen.

The Indians believe that the wisdom of the tree comes from standing and waiting, and that only a creature that has to stand and wait, and therefore trust in nature totally can teach us patience. They use sacred trees in the building of their totem' poles, a practice much misunderstood in the West. These sacred protection poles teach the tribe to respect nature, because the animals depicted on them can be called upon to help and protect the people in many ways.

When choosing a tree for carving, the Shaman will spend considerable time talking to the tree, and apologising to it for what is about to happen. But, when he eventually raises his axe, he will suddenly turn and strike another tree, his real intended target. This is because the Indians believe that trees can 'switch off' or 'sleep', so as not to feel the agony of their brother.

While writing this, I felt humble. How could I carry on with what I wanted to say? How can I possibly do this justice? Taking the other stand, the stand of so called progress', why should we save a few trees? They are only plants after all and they stand in the way of money. If they are cut down, not only would the space produce money, but the timber produces money as well. When browsing the Internet, I have visited many sites and one in particular, <http://rain-tree.com> listed some very good reasons, economical and profitable, as well as natural and historical.

These points listed below, I think, are good enough reasons to begin with:

The rain forests are the "lungs of the world". The Amazon rain forest alone produces about 20% of the worlds oxygen. The loss of this and other sites of oxygenaters, I believe, is the main cause of the Ozone problem.

The rain forest contains some of most important medicinal plants. Currently 121 prescription drugs sold worldwide have derivatives in them, which come from 90 species of plants, found only in the rain forest.

3000 species of plants, found only in the rain forests, have been identified as being active against Cancer.

25% of the active ingredients in cancer-fighting drugs come from organisms found only in the rain forests.

More education is needed to show that there are more profitable resources to be found in the rain forest, other than timber. It has been worked out that if the fruits, nuts, oils and other resources such as rubber and chocolate were harvested, and the medicinal plants were harvested in a sustainable way, it would prove to be five to ten times more profitable than chopping down trees and clearing plants to make way for subsistence crops. This would provide income today and for generations to come, and without destruction and loss of the forests, its creatures and the beauty.

The Blackfoot Indians believe that the Earth will break apart if the trees are destroyed, as their roots hold the Earth together. If we look at the various natural and man-made disasters and how the Earth is changing, coupled with the change in the weather trends, I think that their prophecy should not be taken lightly.

For us, other dedicated groups (religious or otherwise) and the American Indians, it is no longer a matter of choice to heal and love the natural world, it is a necessity.

As you may know Ipswich Earth Healing Group has been responsible for planting three trees to date, with more in the pipeline. People who come to the meditation group, normally put loose change in a box to help with the cost.

*Jane Jay & David Livingstone
From the magazine of the Ipswich Earth Healing Group
Published with permission.*

Sacred Places of Asia

Notebook Jottings

Animism:

A sensitivity to the forces and energies of nature. It matured eventually into Hinduism and Buddhism. From these came the sacred sites and places.

Vastu Vidya:

The knowledge of the dwelling place. The science/art of living in harmony with the celestial beings.

Verbal knowledge handed down as to how buildings, structures, should be built from a hermits hut to a palace or temple. Sacred knowledge held by priests, monks. A divine science aligned to the laws of Nature. The aim of life is to live according to ones *dharma (tao)*. If one does not health, fertility, social cohesion and the pattern of existence fails. This Natural Law works through the laws of nature, presiding spirits, gods and goddesses. The Sacred Site is where we reconnect with these Natural or causal forces.

Building of temples, sacred places; merit, in praise of donor, testaments to particular rulers (this furthers dharma). Aids to elevate the whole of society.

Evolution:

First earth, ancient mother of the gods, holy, Divine. Then simple shrines are formed/made. Showing what is holy ground - mountain, tree, rock. Places where the invisible beings that govern the world are known to congregate; where they have been felt or seen either by their direct revelation or witnessed. A miraculous event, a punishment, healing, vision; all indicate the presence or congregation of these forces/beings at that place. Their powers are infused in the place.

The site becomes a place of pilgrimage, a hub of the community. People settle nearby to gain benefit. Ritual specialists move in -

healers, soothsayer, dancers,. Artefacts etc. are left on the shrine to absorb the magical powers/forces.

The shrine attracts the attention of the rich and powerful. A local leader prays, say, for success in battle - it comes - he makes an altar in thanks. Other patrons come. Permanent buildings are erected - a visiting teacher decides to found a temple.

Sacred Places

Sacred Springs

Water is life and it has always been seen as a gift of the gods both by those on land and sea. There are many sacred rivers, especially in India. Here the confluence of two rivers is considered especially holy. A river in Thailand is called 'Mother'. In Bhutan streams are used to turn prayer wheels. Tibetans read omens from images in their sacred lakes. The ancient Khmers had their rivers flowing over images of the gods to empower the water and ensure the health of the crops. Water is the feminine element. Slow, nourishing, adaptable, able to find its own level, having invincible strength.

Hindu images are lustrated with sacred waters, milk, ghee, honey coconut milk. Buddha images receive bowls of water as offerings and washings.

Sacred Stones

Stones are the first monuments marking out the the points of holiness on the earth. From neolithic times they have stood, the one creation of nature that abides indicating stability amongst the constant changes in life.

In the east, before the time of images, stones were either single slabs or outcrops of rocks, or man made.

Japan's Shinto adorns such piles of stones with sacred straw ropes hung with with cloth or paper strips to show their sanctity. Chan and Zen Buddhists make stones the central feature of raked sand/shingle.

Stones may represent: a seated Buddha, or a head of Ganesha. Foot prints of Buddha, Vishnu - very many in south-east Asia.

Man made : Shiva's lingam, as the transformer, embodies invincible energy. Buddhist stupa.

Sacred Trees

The connector of heaven and earth. The embodiment of service. Shade, shelter, fruits. A symbol of life itself: a tree of Life, a tree of Wisdom, a tree of Knowledge. A link with the invisible world, each village has its sacred tree with its presiding deity with a shrine in the shade. Shade/tree/parasol. Justice, royalty, divinity. Parasols in Balinese temples. shading Buddha, deities. Buddha's birth, enlightenment, teaching and death all under a sacred tree. Shiva taught Yoga under a tree. Trees as living beings, homes of the spirits - hung with coloured threads, garlands, daubed with paint and powder and libations of water.

Peeples, banyan and bhodi trees. Entwined they represent Vishnu / Lakshmi: Rhada / Krishna.

Sacred Mountains:

The connecting of earth to sky/heaven. From them the celestial beings/ energies reach down to bless the human realm. Where human meets Divine. They are the dwelling places of the cosmic gods. Their courts etc. Kailash, Meru, Fuji (cf Olympus, Sinai, Athos). An auspicious place to build shrines, temples monasteries. Tensing/Hilary. Forces of nature. As we ascend our perspective of the peak changes. 'Enlightened' - 'he who is established on the peak'.

Gunung Agtmg, Bali.

Semi active volcano. Located where the elemental forces of sky, sacred mountain and fire all meet. Above the peak - home of Siva; Aditya. Below then the other gods including the divine ancestors of the Balinese people, who own the earth.

Kaikh, Tibet:

The most sacred in all the world. Abode of Shiva/Parvati. The Place of the Nine Tiered Swastica. 'Precious snow mountain 'for the Buddhists. The throne of Demchog. For Jams their founder gained enlightenment on its peak. One circuit of 32 miles wipes out the karma of a hfe time. The subtle form of Mount Meru, the domain of the gods. Recognised by all faiths.

Benares: Varanasi, Kashi.

On the banks of the Ganges. 1,250 miles of sanctifying waters. A link to the Himalayas where only the saints and gods live. The religious capital of North India. A centre for Sanskrit learning and sacred expertise. Just up river the funeral pyres continually burn at the cremation ground of Manikarnika Ghat. 'If a place is held to be holy for long enough, the Divine takes up residence there.

Bali:

A sacred society. Early Hinduism and animistic beliefs. The individual is born into a mix of obligations; the forces of nature, the gods, ancestral souls, demons and fellow human beings. A good life comes from the recognition and fulfilment of these obligation. Co-operation gains support from Nature - family, region, organisations and voluntary associations. A balance between heavenly and earthly forces. When the sun sets then the earthly forces take over. The heavenly powers are focussed on the semi-active volcano Gunung Agung, to the east of the island. The earthly forces are unpredictable, potentially dangerous, allied to change and death. All aspects of life are governed by this dualistic scheme.

Amritsar: The Golden Temple.

15 miles from the Pakistan border, in a wild frontier town. Sacred capital of the Sikhs. Established in 1601 on the site of a healing spring. Tollerant 'new' religion. Foundation stone laid by a Moslem. Sited in a sacred tank. An island of calm in life. The central point for the Sikh universe. The use of gold represents the

celestial light of the finest levels of creation, that level of life which is closest to the purity of the Divine itself

Bodh Gaya:

Site of Buddha's enlightenment. 'The Garden of Enlightenment'.

Enlightenment under the Bohdi (fig) Tree. Full moon on a May evening he gained Nirvana. Buddhists paradise garden. Mahabodhi Temple (great enlightenment). Quiet devotion under the tree. The leaf of the peepal tree is heart shaped, a gentle reminder of the importance of love and compassion, lest humanity is abandoned in the search for divinity and eventual enlightenment.

Borobodur, (Java).

A stupa set atop a vast stepped pyramid. 800 AD. Probably Hindu base. 'The mountain of Virtues of the Ten Stages of the Bodhisattva's Path'. 1.6m blocks of stone, cut dressed carved. Five ascending square terraces, three circular ones, a central crowning stupa. All the terraces represent the 'world of forms', as we ascend we progressively become free of desire but still bound by our limited individuality. The three round terraces, decreasing in size, representing the world without form where the mind is free from the transient world. At the summit is a stupa symbolising the level of life that is beyond any personalised limitation, the transcendent Void.

Martin Spettigue

The Moor

It was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
Breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.
There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions - that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.

R S Thomas
Submitted by Bart Seaton
Permission to publish requested

A book review of 'Sacred Space'

The pressures for all who are involved in the delivery of care, both within the health service and wider community are immense. The problems and potential for burn out and associated illness cannot be underestimated. All those involved in front line work in either an institution, or a local community face the pressures of being overcome by the issues and problems they face.

The traditional approach of help through tranquillisers is not to be underestimated; additionally the use of complementary medicines can make an important contribution to better health. A new approach is also being developed by practitioners who see the value of what is called 'sacred space'. The space between people in right relationships and the physical space that resonates with an individual's feelings and where they may find the healing that comes through an exploration that is wider than that associated with medical care.

The ideas of 'sacred space' are not only being developed in the context of health, but are also used within the business community by managers who recognise that their employees are whole beings. This may be a radical approach for business, but it is equally challenging to those who are bound to the medical model of health care.

The concept of 'sacred space' challenges the status quo and offers an alternative approach to care for both individuals and communities. The challenge for the reader is not to reject out of hand what may seem like new-age jargon. The ideas behind the development of the concept have much to teach those who take a more conservative approach to care of the whole person.

At a time when so many people feel under overwhelming work pressure, the search for a special and sacred space can be very creative and lead both to the healing of the individual and to the creation of right relationships. The challenge is for the sceptics to consider an idea that may challenge accepted norms of care and lead to healthier, sustainable environments and communities.

*Sacred Spaces is written by Stephen C. Wright & Jean Sayre-Adams;
published by Churchill Livingstone.*

St Nicholas' Hospice Chapel

Some pilgrimages are travelled inwardly. Facing issues of illness, loss and bereavement raises many questions about life and death.

These might include issues like how we understand ourselves. What is the meaning of what is happening to us? Where do we find courage and hope? What values do we choose as being able to make sense of things or to help us when we can't make sense of anything anymore?

The Hospice includes concern for spiritual support alongside the other forms of care offered to patients, carers and families. Often the questions involve issues to do with religion and God. Then it is important that proper and appropriate support is given. But often God is not part of the quandary. What is needed is human support and insight as a person wrestles with a new situation and faces the challenge of asking again "Who am I?"

The chapel is kept open every day. It is a place for people to find space and an opportunity to reflect quietly. There are books and music that will be helpful to some. The candle can be lit as a sign of continued concern or prayer, love or longing, even when a person leaves.

The Oak Prayer Desk was made by the Reverend Canon Arthur MacMichael, Canon Emeritus of Canterbury Cathedral, and was used by his wife to say her daily prayers. It invites each one of us to pursue our own journey deeper into God's love.

The glass sculpture in the chapel crafted by Surinder Warboys is entitled "Night and Day". It was designed to encourage people of all faiths or none to reflect on issues that concern them. Its imagery is based on the constant life giving movement of water, and its colours

pick up both the warmth and the shadows of life. The lighting both in the chapel and behind the glass is variable to match mood, and music can be played.

It is not unusual to find that a visitor or patient has sat quietly in the chapel using the sculpture to assist them in their journey. Its fluid shapes and colours invite us to continue our travelling whilst finding safety and strength to move into the unknown.

John Stroud. Chaplain. St Nicholas' Hospice, Bury St Edmunds

The Stained Glass Panel

the artist writes:

The design and construction of this stained glass panel took many months and has many associations for me. I would like to mention just a few.

For me, perpetual motion is indicated by the bold circle, while the strong vertical of autumn colour is stillness and clarity. There are areas where the circle and vertical meet and overlap.

Immediately before starting work on the panel, I had visited Venice and my memories and photographs from this visit suggested to me the images expressing the movement of water and its mysterious and changeable nature should become a part of the panel.

Through intensity of colour I wanted to evoke a positive atmosphere which would help in contemplation and be uplifting for the spirit.

As well as light I wanted to include shadow, so I have used paint which is fused onto the glass to create obscure areas in order to contrast and emphasise those areas of clarity and so allowing the imagination space to wander.

There was much deliberation over the colours to be used, because, in this panel, I wanted colour to be the most significant element amongst line, shade and texture. The two reds in the vertical underwent numerous changes: they were like keystones in an arch - so much depended on the right intensity and hue in order to achieve a balance with the other colours.

I often listen to my radio in my studio and whilst working on this panel I found that two pieces of music complemented my thoughts. One was Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp, and the other was Henryk Gorecki's Symphony No.3. These contrasting pieces of music perhaps helped me with the panel as I strove to create an image that brought together movement and stillness, light and shade.

A few weeks after the completion of the stained glass, I had a visit from a class of children from the local primary school. On seeing the panel one child expressed the opinion that the red section of the vertical suggested the rising and setting of the sun. Another child mentioned that the yellow between the two reds made her think of mid-day. In response to their visit, I decided to title this stained glass: "Night and Day"

Surinder Warboys

From Little Gidding

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same
You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid
So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

T. S. Eliot

Little Gidding, 1942

Read at the Millennium Service for England

at St. Paul's Cathedral, 2 January 2000

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Sacred...hesitating...now, a film is reeling through
My brain, and through my memory, of our sacred rendez-vous,
Of our meeting, of our parting, of my tears, as sweet as ice,
Of my numb incomprehension of a shattered paradise.

Sacred, oh so sacred, was our sacred rendez-vous,
And your ferocious anger when you found we weren't like you,
But if I should make an act of faith, in a voice, both firm and clear,
That there's something sacred to me, you start drowning in your
beer.

Ah, brother, I am searching for the sites, sacred to you,
But the rivers, clear as crystal, smell like sewers full of spew
From the pipe and pump polluters, and the nukes that fleck the
foam,
Would you let a man, with dirty boots, go walking through your
home?

Sacred means that...sacred...it's a place where spirits rise,
With the rainbow wings of sunset, on the edge of paradise,
Sacred...that's my father, that's my mother, that's my son,
Sacred...where the dreaming whispers hope for everyone.

Ah, brother, I am searching for the sites, sacred to you,
Where you walk, in silent worship, and you whisper poems, too,
where you tread, like me, in wonder, and your eyes are filled with
tears,
And you see the tracks you've travelled down your fifty thousand
years.

An Aboriginal Poem by Denis Kevans

Updating Our Image of God?

God comes to you in whatever image you have been able to form of God. The wiser and broader and more gorgeous the image, the more the grace and power can flow from the Throne into your heart. God is saying . . . “Be very careful then, My servants, and purify, attune, and expand your thoughts about Me, for they are My House.”

Rumi

Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, “Grow, grow.”

The Talmud

O Holy One,
we come in humility and awe, waiting on Wisdom,
Holy Sophia,
to reveal to us Her way.
She, incarnate in Jesus,
embodied in cells and centipedes,
woos us with a wink
into an unknown and unknowable future: except that
it shall be delightful,
for She is delighted by creation;
and it shall be beautiful,
for beauty is the path She walks;
and it shall be good,
for She is the irrepressible goodness of creation; and
it shall be just,
for She is outraged by oppression,
of all Her children,
human and other-than-human.

O Holy One,
we turn now from our foolish ways to walk the path of Wisdom
— lightly, lovingly—upon this beautiful green planet.
Amen

Walking with Wisdom (Proverbs 8:31)

Taken from the An Tairseach Newsletter for Christmas 2016.

An Tairseach Dominican Farm and Ecology Centre, Wicklow Town, Ireland. An Tairseach is the Irish word for threshold and it suggests a new beginning, an alternative and more sustainable way of working with the land as well as a renewed relationship with the whole community of life, human and divine.

A Celtic Blessing.

May the Blessing of Light be on you.

Light without and light within.

May the blessed sunlight shine upon you
and warm your heart till it glows like a great fire
and strangers may warm themselves as well as friends.

And may the light shine out of your eyes,
like a candle set in the window of a house,
bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm.
and now may the Lord bless you and bless you kindly.

Amen.

