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The Sacred Work of Being Human

The phrase *The Sacred Work of Being Human* came to mind a number of years ago during a conversation with a person who headed up an interfaith centre. Since that time, the phrase has been pivotal both to my personal reflections and my work with Tree of Life Spiritual Wellbeing. Even though the phrase continues to resonate within my whole being, I find myself posing the question: "what do I mean by the phrase, *the sacred work of being human?*" That which follows conveys my current response to that question.

I write in the knowledge that I do so within a particular context, i.e., an anglo-Australian, post-Christian, western cultural context which draws from an integralⁱ framework of understanding, i.e., taking into account human history as a whole and viewing "all of humanity in the evolutionary process of maturation."ⁱⁱ

The Premise

Within each new era of human history, the sacred work of being human entails: discerning the call of that particular era to discover and take up our human identity and purpose. Such a call invites each one of us to an ever-deepening experience of connection and belonging in daily life, while at the same time continuing to participate in the ongoing evolution of the human family.

Seeking the sacred in daily life

What does the term *in daily life* mean? Vimala Thakar's understanding proves helpful. She wrote:

"There is no other life except what you call "the daily life." The day, the today, the now, the here - what you call this moment is the only reality for you and me. To meet it, to live through it. Life is relationship and the movement of relationship is living. To live is to be related. To be related to and interact with human beings, nonhuman beings, nature at large, constitutes what you call life."ⁱⁱⁱ

If Thakar is correct in her understanding that life is relationship, why then do we humans primarily seek the sacred in the so-called *special* places and solitary peak experiences, rather than everyday relationships?



Seeking the sacred in everyday relationships.

photo by Kaye Twining

Drawing from Thakar's understandings, the meaning within the term *in daily life* includes the way we relate with ourselves, with other human beings, and with the wider Earth community. Within such a context, the intention of seeking the sacred is not to live on some plane of existence where customary joys, fears, confusions, uncertainties, anxieties, boredoms, and disappointments of everyday life do not affect us. Rather, to seek the sacred is to attune ourselves to the primordial call within Life itself to discover our identity and purpose at any given time and place in history. In so doing, we metaphorically *come home to ourselves-in-our-world*. We experience connection and belonging in the here and now.

The sacred

By way of deepening an understanding of the term *sacred*, it is important to recognize that we humans possess the drive and capacity to name. We name all that we touch, see, smell, hear, taste and perceive. We also give meaning to our living and dying through the naming of a Story (a belief system) which offers a coherent response to the time-honored spiritual questions around: "Where did we come from?" "Where do we go when we die?" "What is our reason for being here?" The response to such questions does not solidify into a once-for-all-time Story. Rather the response differs within each new era of human history in relation to the ever-expanding knowledge we acquire regarding the way planet Earth works and the workings of the human mind, body and spirit.

In addition to the time-honored spiritual questions listed above, each new era of human history calls forth a particular question which necessitates our engagement. The question of our era is: "what does it mean to be human within an unfolding universe?" Our response to such a question will form the basis of a new Story of meaning, which in turn will re-shape the way we will live and act in our world.



The particular spiritual question of our historical era:
"what does it mean to be human in an unfolding universe?"

photo by Robert Tyzzer

It is interesting to note that the function of naming involves conflicting motivations. One motivation is the desire to define and objectify so as to control and/or coerce 'it' to bend to our will. Such a motivation causes fragmentation between us and that which we have named. The other motivation to name is by way of nonjudgmentally giving expression to our experience so that we may deepen our engagement with it. In so doing we intensify our connection. One

example of a naming motivated by openness is the term *Earthling*. Such a naming refers to our human connection now with Earth. Within our era of human history, named by some as the Ecozoic^{iv} era, Earth is known to be primary and we humans are derivative.^v As a result, we know ourselves to be Earthlings. Such a naming stands in direct contrast to the previous era where we humans thought of ourselves as primary and Earth as derivative.

With the motivation of naming by way of opening up and deepening our engagement, the word *sacred* is a general term bestowed to the unnameable dimension within our living. We encounter the unnameable dimension in the form of: a drawing towards and/or a calling forth. A calling forth which finds expression in both the outer world and our innermost being. In relation to the outer world the calling forth is experienced through the continuing desire to explore the physical world. In relation to our innermost being the calling forth is experienced as the continuing desire for connection and belonging within Life itself. Connection on the three levels of: the individual, the cultural, and the species.

We engage with the unnameable dimension in daily life through qualities which include: lovingkindness, beauty, joy, surrender, awe, faithfulness, curiosity, hope, goodness, truthfulness, creativity, inner stillness, forgiveness, the capacity to pose questions and discover responses. Such qualities are like threads woven into the very fabric of Life itself and they allow us to transcend the basic evolutionary survival reaction of flight/fight/freeze and guide us towards an ever-deepening experience of connection within the unfolding nature of Life.

While the word *sacred* is a general term given to the unnameable dimension within our living, many poets have sought more particular namings. One such poet is T.S. Eliot who named the unnameable as follows: "with the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling."^{vi} Eliot's naming conveys a gentle, open invitation. Then in response to such an invitation he continues: "we shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time."^{vii} Within the context of this article, such exploration refers to the rediscovery of human identity, purpose and belonging within each new era of human history.



The labyrinth: a symbol of being drawn to explore and rediscover human identity, purpose and belonging at any given time and place in history.

photo by Kaye Twining

The ongoing engagement with the sacred is named by Thakar in the poetic words of: "life is a dance of the nameable and the unnameable."^{viii} Such a dance is well symbolized by the labyrinth. The labyrinth is an ancient symbol and spiritual

practice reclaimed in our time. A labyrinth is not the same as a maze. A maze is designed as a test of logic. A labyrinth on the other hand, is one path with many twists and turns; one path that leads from the outside to the centre and then back out to where we started, knowing that place for the first time.

Work of being human

Within the phrase *the sacred work of being human*, the term *work* encompasses the intention to and practice of discerning the call of our historical era and choosing to respond. While intention, practice and choice involve our will, discernment is not a process which involves the intellect alone. Neither is it a process which can be forced or controlled. Rather as Ann Hillman wrote:

"Discernment is not figuring something out intellectually. It uses the powers of the body, heart and mind, together. It brings the whole body's wisdom to bear on a concern and the body as a whole resolves it. Joan Blackman . . . helped me to clarify the difference: 'Discernment is more contemplative than thinking. It is quiet, reflective. You allow whatever it is you're questioning to work itself through you. You wait . . . And you listen . . . And at some point you feel a sense of completion.' You can actually feel the resolution. There is a subtle shift inside as if something unsettling had settled down - like a billiard ball that had fallen into the right pocket."^x



photo by Kaye Twining

Drawing from Hillman's understanding of discernment, how do we discern the call of our era? Firstly through posing open-ended questions in the light of all the knowledge, beliefs and lived experience we have at our disposal. Then, as the poet Rilke proposed, we live into the responses. One practice for living into the responses is to begin to consciously notice that which we "sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak."^x Then, with an attitude of rational curiosity, we allow such noticings to become an entry point for perceiving new insights and understandings. The practice of posing open-ended questions and then consciously noticing that which emerges within us, allows us to perceive our whole body's wisdom. Therefore, the practice is consistent with Hillman's understanding that discernment is more contemplative than intellectual.

What *call* has been discerned in our historical era? According to Thomas Berry, the call of our era is to: "reinvent the human at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience."^{xi} Wow, what a task! Is it truly possible to reinvent, to reStory the human family's place belonging? Such a calling resonates and yet, in light of the seemingly entrenched nature of human beings to destroy each other and all living things, is it possible? Still, Berry also wrote:

"the basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth. If the dynamics of the Universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun and formed the Earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and the seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structures and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture."^{xii}

In light of Berry's understanding of the natural dynamics of the Universe, it is not for us to create the reinvention *from scratch* so as to speak. Rather, we are invited to participate in the call that is already at work. One act of participation is to: "be the change we want to see in the world."^{xiii} In this way we are each invited to take responsibility for our own actions.

Added to Berry's discernment of our current calling, Vimala Thakar names the call of our historical era in this way:

"If human beings five thousand years ago^{xiv} had the genius to live holistically, then I think human beings today also can have the same genius to carve out a holistic way of living and proceed from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. The twentieth century has been the bloodiest, the most murderous, century in history. Let the twenty-first be a century of creativity. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were ones of specialization, compartmentalization, and fragmentation on race, on religion, on nationality, and so on. Let the twenty-first century be a century



The call: to reStory the human place of belonging within an holistic context.

photo by Kaye Twining

of discovering a holistic way of living, a holistic diet, holistic medicine, holistic exercises, holistic relationships - wholeness as the content of consciousness - a holistic perspective on life. That is the challenge waiting for us."^{xv}

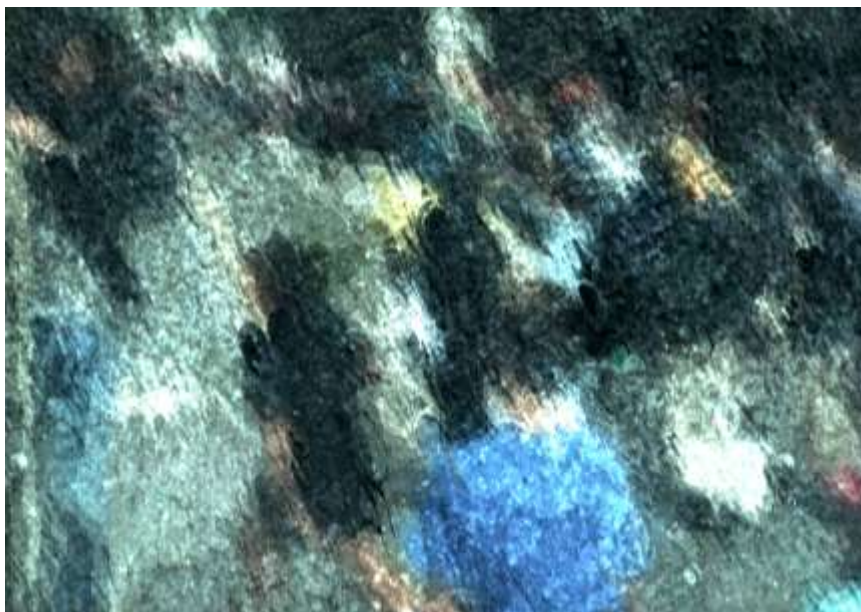
Taking the above two quotations into consideration, the call of our era is to return to the beginnings, within the light of all the knowledge amassed over human history, and reimagine a new Story of human identity, purpose and belonging. A new Story coherent with our current understandings of the way the world came to be and our place within it. To reimagine our place of belonging as individual Earthlings, our place of belonging as interdependent cultures, and our place of belonging as an interdependent species within the wider Earth community. It is a call to reconnect. It is a call to reStory the human place of belonging within an holistic context.

Note: The term *belonging* encompasses the experience of wholeness through unity with diversity. Unity with diversity allows for both individual uniqueness and authentic communal belonging.

Summary

Sacred is a general term applied to the unnameable dimension of our living which is encountered as a drawing towards and/or calling forth of the desire to explore and to belong. As we experience the sacred we are able to respond to the events of daily life rather than react from the basic evolutionary instinct of flight/fight/freeze. We engage with the sacred through discerning the call of the historical era and choosing to respond.

Therefore, *the sacred work of being human* involves discerning the call of the era and choosing to respond to what such a call requires of us in this moment of time: requires of us as individuals, requires of us as cultures, and requires of us as a species. Such a call/response dynamic invites each of us towards an ever-deepening experience of connection and belonging in daily life, even as we continue to participate in the ongoing evolution of the human family.



Choosing to respond to what such call requires of us in this moment in time.

ⁱ For an understanding of the term integral framework see Ken Wilber et al, *Integral Life Practice* and/or see the article entitled 'A New Faith Community' at Tree of Life Spiritual Wellbeing/Resources

ⁱⁱ Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, *The New Monasticism: an Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*

ⁱⁱⁱ Vimala Thakar, *Glimpses of Raja Yoga*, Ebook

^{iv} www.ecozoictimes.com, "The term "Ecozoic Era" was coined by Thomas Berry in conversation with Brian Swimme for their book *The Universe Story* in order to describe the geologic era that Earth is entering - when humans live in a mutually enhancing relationship with Earth and the Earth Community."

^v Thomas Berry, *Determining Features of the Ecozoic Era*

^{vi} T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Section V

^{vii} T.S. Eliot

^{viii} Vimala Thakar, *Glimpses of Raja Yoga*

^{ix} Ann Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love*

^x Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*

For a more detailed description of the practice see [www.treeoflife.or.au/Resources/The Beginner's Guide to Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology](http://www.treeoflife.or.au/Resources/The_Beginner's_Guide_to_Bernard_Lonergan's_Method_in_Theology). Lonergan argues that his method of intentional consciousness is a natural human process. He then shows how the method relates to theology. So, if theology does not interest you, simply read the sections on his method of intentional consciousness.

^{xi} Thomas Berry, "Reinventing the Human," in *The Great Work*

^{xii} Thomas Berry, "The New Story," in *The Dream of the Earth*

^{xiii} Mahatma Gandhi

^{xiv} Thakar is referring to the, "Vedic culture where the rishi were living in the forests developing ways of living so that the potential creativity which human beings share with the cosmos smoothly manifests itself at the physical, the verbal and the psychological level. ...The Vedic culture required a social background and that social background was agriculture."

Glimpses of Raja Yoga

^{xv} Vimala Thakar, *Glimpses of Raja Yoga*