

The Lost Art of Sacrifice©
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I went shopping at Target this week, and found myself being checked out by a young woman in a hijab. I thought it was a safe bet that she was Muslim. It was early, there was no one else behind me. So I asked her “how is your Ramadan going?” And she said “well. We’ve just finished the first week.” And then I ventured, “is it hard being around so much food all day, while you’re fasting?” And she said “no, not really. I don’t think about it.” Well, Ramadan Mubarak, I said, which wished her a Blessed Ramadan. It was a simple exchange, but it also reminded me that for Jews, Christians and Muslims – this time of year, and this week, is one of the holiest religious observances in the liturgical calendar. And each one of these religious observances touch on the theme which we’ll be exploring for the month of April – sacrifice.

For Muslims, the daily practice of refraining from daytime eating and drinking, and from thinking impure thoughts, requires a sacrifice of one’s comforts and routines built around food and drink. For Jews their annual practice is different this week. This week begins Passover. At this season observing Jews have rid their homes of hametz, or bread products.

This week they remember the sacrifice made by of their ancestors, whose hardships and liberation is recalled in the Seder meal and the reading of the Haggadah. And for Christians, this first week of April this year is the beginning of Holy Week, which starts today with what’s known as Palm Sunday. It’s the day that the story is told of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of donkey, and the people celebrating his entry by laying down palm branches in front of him. Holy Week unfolds with a much more somber story, as Jesus is arrested as a threat to the state and condemned to die on the cross. In the traditional interpretation of Jesus’s life within

most Christian traditions, his death is understood to be the ultimate sacrifice – the sacrifice of one life for the salvation of all humanity.

So it's a rich and complex time for these three different religious traditions, but each of the sacred times these traditions are celebrating have something they share together: they all have to do with Sacrifice. And as Unitarian Universalists, we honor and recognize all three, while not necessarily engaging in all the spiritual practices that these faiths require. We may go to a Seder, but we don't scrub our homes of bread. We may do intermittent fasting, but we don't do it every day for a month. And, hopefully some of you may attend the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, but we don't hold an Easter vigil service that keeps you up until sunrise on Sunday. So it is worth asking ourselves – what does *our* faith teach us about sacrifice?

Before I go much further, I have to confess – I've really struggled throughout my life with this word and this concept. The first place my mind goes is the book of Genesis, when Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. There are many interpretations of this passage, which could take up a year's worth of sermons, but the very idea of killing one's child because God said so – that first interpretation is still pretty tough.

And then, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, many pages are devoted to different kinds of sacrifice – grain, birds, sheep, goats, bulls – it's well, bloody. And then, when we get to Jesus and the most conventional understanding of his life and death are that he was the perfect sacrifice for my sins – I just never have accepted that.

So when I – or presumably we – found out that Unitarian Universalists don't believe in sacrifice as a theological or spiritual practice, it relieved some of the tension and anxiety about this seemingly naïve understanding of how the world really works. We don't get right with

Yahweh by sacrificing a goat. We don't have to give up dessert to be spiritual. We don't have to sacrifice anything to be a religious person. Or do we?

By way of an answer, we need to look at the root of the word "sacrifice." It comes from the Latin *sacre*, or "to make holy." It means giving something up for a higher purpose. When most people think of sacrifice these days, we immediately go to the most extreme examples of sacrifice.

We talk, for example, about those in military service paying the ultimate sacrifice in war, but sometimes that is for justifications that we later find questionable. I think of the police officers who risked their lives charging into the school in Nashville. Of course both military and police know that this may be part of the job, but they also are asking our legislators why it is so easy for anyone in this country to become better armed than most police? And then there are the stories of people put in extraordinary circumstances who make unquestionable decisions to sacrifice for the lives of others. Russian Activist Alexi Navalny who had the chance to escape Putin's murderous regime, and who willingly went back to Russia and was imprisoned for speaking truth to power. What good did he do sacrificing his and his family's life for imprisonment and likely death at the hands of Russian authorities? That's the thing that is so discomfoting about sacrifice. We don't know what impact it may have in the larger scheme of things. We only know in the moment that it is the right thing to do.

One important aspect of this particular faith tradition – of Unitarian Universalism is that we must go beyond our first impulse to either embrace or reject stories that we know, religious or secular. We are called to enter into those stories instead, and ask ourselves what they mean to *our* lives? We are called to ride into Jerusalem with Jesus to understand what that story means to us. We are asked to sit at the Seder table and to eat Matzoh though it crumbles dry in our

throats. And we are challenged to fast either in body or spirit – and refrain from those things which diminish our capacity for compassion. So even though we may not have explicit rituals that help us learn about sacrifice, we have a community of worship and faith that can help us understand not only what this word can mean for us – but how we might engage in sacrifice that is life-affirming and life-sustaining. Not sacrifice that is born in violence or related to redemptive suffering-- but sacrifice that nevertheless can be redemptive for us all.

When Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem, I don't believe he did that saying to himself "this is all part of God's plan. I'm going to celebrate Passover with my friends, one of them is going to betray me to the authorities, I'll get arrested, tortured and die a horrible death on the cross. But it's all going to be okay, because centuries later, everyone will see my death as the ultimate good." No, I believe Jesus's greatest gift to us was being faithful to his own teachings – and as a result, rode into Jerusalem, in the word of civil rights activist John Lewis, "to make good trouble." That's a kind of sacrifice that cannot be found on any altar, except the one described in this morning's reading by the poet Debora Leipzig. Remember, she wrote "*Sacrifice those things you no longer need. Temples lost and burning. In Paris. In Jerusalem. In yourself. Reach out to the universe calling out to you. Verify, purify your heart. Wake up to the pain of those around your table.*"

If we no longer think about religious practice as necessarily involving formal sacrifice, we can still inquire why it has been such a big part of human religious evolution.

When Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees for allowing tax collectors and sinners to eat with him, he quotes the prophet Hosea, and says: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus understood that the practice of physical sacrifice was too easy – and that the spiritual sacrifices

we are required to make – were much harder and, he believed, more consistent with what God was calling human beings to do.

It's not about slaying things on an altar; it's about examining your heart and soul and mind. The lost art of sacrifice requires us to search for those places in your own life – and in the world – where something or someone is suffering – and ride towards that.

Why? As my colleague Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker notes, “ Because we know that not a single thing is born without sacrifice – not a child, not a work of art, or a social justice movement. To be a parent, we sacrifice time for ourselves, our freedom and a great deal of money. To create, we sacrifice our minds and hearts to the temporary obsession of the work. To build social justice, people in dominant culture must be willing to give up our privatized privilege.”

So our understanding of sacrifice becomes more nuanced. The first step is to ask ourselves: what are we personally willing to give up for the greater good? Unitarian Universalism has long insisted on the individual's right to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. That has crudely been interpreted to mean “I can think whatever I want.” While that's true – there is no thought police here – we do live in community with one another. Just as we can't yell fire in a crowded theater, nor can we be oblivious to the impact our beliefs have on each other – and on the wider world. It means that every opinion we offer must also be considered in the context of the community.

Although the sacrifice of the free expression of one's speech may seem small in comparison to a life – it is nevertheless, part of what it means to engage in the lost art of sacrifice. We sacrifice some of our egos – our personalities – our tendency to be witty or sarcastic or critical because we realize it does not enhance the common good.

The problem with how we think about sacrifice today is popular culture is that it is usually devoid of any understanding of how power, privilege and social position decide who and what is asked to be sacrificed. A sacrifice that is imposed upon us is not a sacrifice. It is an oppression. Whether Abraham deciding to offer up his son, Isaac, or when the neighborhood called Rondo here in St. Paul was broken and diminished to develop I-94 – this is not a sacrifice. It is imposing one's will on another because you – or the government believes they know the greater good. This is the spirit that I believe the Prophet Amos was leaning towards. He said "I hate, I despise your religious festivals. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them." Instead, Amos says "let justice roll down like water, and righteousness a never-failing stream!" In other words, don't mistake an empty gesture towards justice for the real acts of justice. There IS a greater good which we are called to sacrifice for and to.

I have been thinking deeply about this most recent school shooting in Nashville as it relates to this month's theme – and on my next point you may not agree with me – but it may open a conversation that will enlighten us both. I believe we must persistently ask each other to sacrifice some of the legal permissions we all enjoy under the constitutional right to own and bear arms. No civilian really needs to own a semi-automatic rifle. Those who are gun collectors may have understandable reasons for owning a high-capacity assault weapon. But honestly--the fact that an irresponsible, emotionally unstable person can purchase an assault rifle as easily as a law-abiding citizen means that something -somewhere must give. Can we sacrifice some of the individual permissions and pleasures our constitution guarantees for the greater good?

At what point do we realize that our own personal lifestyle means death for someone else? Although assault weapons are the most dramatic ways in which we can sacrifice for the greater good – there are other ways as well.

I'm countering my tendency to buy disposable clothing, knowing that it likely exploits someone else across the world, but its winding up in a landfill that will never be digested by the earth. I'm rethinking my relationship to plastic, to fossil fuels, to energy, to all those things which make a disposable life so easy – and so deadly for our planet and our future. I'm aspiring to follow the example of my Muslim friend at Target – giving up these things is something – as she said – that I just don't think about. These are sacrifices I do or am working towards doing because sacrifice requires us to give up something of worth for a greater good.

In ancient times, sacrifice always required an altar. On that altar, , the seeds for next years plantings were offered, the first fruits of harvest were laid and yes, animals were slaughtered with the hopes of appeasing a needy God. Today's altars are different, but they still require something else from us. We learn to sacrifice our egos and individualism for the sake of community. For those of us who believe ourselves to be white, we sacrifice whatever privilege we have been given for a deeper understanding of equality.

For the sake of the planet, we sacrifice some measure of comfort and ease for the survival of our future. And for the sake of our children and grandchildren and the generations to come, we sacrifice our need to protect ourselves by violent means and work towards peaceful ends. There is no guarantee that our sacrifices will result in a good harvest, in equitable community, in a sustainable planet. Yet, to do so is an act of faith.

Remember our poem "Altar" who reminds us of what we need to do: *Conjure up spring and salvation. Sacrifice those things you no longer need. Verify, purify your heart. Wake up to*

the pain of those around your table. Exonerate those that have not partaken, not delivered, not arrived. Those who seek. Yearn for justice and freedom. Bring your Zeal to the celebration.

“The lost art of sacrifice does not require mourning and lamentation. Instead, it asks us to bring our zeal to the celebration of this one, wild precious life we share. May it be so.