

WHAT IS SAINTLY WITHIN US?

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Thinking about saints and saintliness is hard, especially for Unitarian Universalists. And yet, I believe that there is something saintly in each one of us...something in us that yearns toward goodness and mercy.

I found a simple and clarifying definition in an essay by Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and professor of religion. Buechner writes: a saint is a life-giver. A saint is a human being with the same limitations and dark secrets and abysses as the rest of us. But if a saint touches your life, you come alive in a new way.

Is there someone in your life, living or dead, who has touched you and brought you alive? Perhaps for UUs its more difficult to name our saints, because the criteria is less clear. But isn't there someone you have admired, been inspired by- someone who has lived in a way that you wish you could emulate.

Perhaps it's a public figure, perhaps a grandmother...perhaps even a child. Who, in your experience, has been a life-giver?

Think of saintliness and life-giving in small, humble terms...for the spirit of holiness works in people in mysterious and unpredictable ways, who do you know that is extraordinarily alive? Not necessarily just good... but extraordinarily alive? Awe, delight, sorrow, curiosity.

Buechner makes it clear that sainthood is not something you achieve, like getting to be an Eagle Scout ...saintliness is not a human virtue, it's not something people do...but something that God does in them.

And by God, I mean Love...by God I mean the Spirit of Life itself. Love and Life work within us....bring us, once in awhile to express our saintliness.

What is saintly in us, is that which is life-giving...it is our trust, our integrity, our humor, our generosity, our honesty, our loyalty, our dedication. I believe we all have saintly capacities. But some among us live them out, let them out, trust the life within...just a bit more, some among us really live out of that seed of Love....some among us are saintly and we don't even know it! How does the Spirit of Love and Life live itself out within you?

Consider the possibility that you may be considered a saint by someone in your life...and you don't even know it.

Certainly, it's possible that you could tune in a bit more to the saintly seed within you...it's possible that you could be more life-giving... that you could wake up one morning and realize that life is good, that life is amazing, that life is precious. There's a school of thought that suggests that we live "as if"...what if you lived "as if" you could be, might be, perhaps already are "a saint"? What if you lived "as if" you were a giver of life.

What if you lived with faith in your power to be a giver of life? You a life-giver...you, a person, extraordinarily alive. It's true, of course... as you take care of your loved ones, preparing meals, keeping track of the household finances, listening to the days' stories, sending birthday cards, fixing the car, driving someone to the doctor, calling a son or daughter far away, saving photos and letters to pass on to the next generation....in so many ways, each day...you live as a life-giver.

Being on a religious or spiritual journey...means that you try to pay a little more attention to what it means to be human. Thinking about saintliness can help deepen the meaning of our lives. Sainthood and humanity are linked, not opposites.

One thing that inspired me to explore sainthood, was the recent publication of the letters of Mother Teresa. Actually, it was the public reaction to these letters that interested me. The letters, written over several decades of Mother Teresa's life...reveal that she devoted her life to the sickest of the sick and the poorest of the poor, inspiring and teaching others-being a living example of a Christian martyr...all the while feeling abandoned by God...all the while struggling with doubt, all the while, living in the darkness of unfulfilled hope...longing for God's presence, but feeling only absence.

With the revelations of Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles, some people felt relieved, glad almost, that her faith was unfulfilled, that doubt was so strong in her. That she was imperfect in her faith, reassured some that they too were not so far off the mark of sainthood. It made sainthood seem more achievable. It made saints seem more human.

In the early Christian church, all believers were considered saints, and as Christians died they joined the "cloud of witnesses", watching over and blessing those still living.

As Christianity developed, the word saint (which means holy) was used to designate specific individuals who were held to be exemplars of the faith and who were venerated as an inspiration to other Christians. Initially, a saint was a martyr for the faith, believers would gather at the grave of a saint and celebrate the Eucharist there. It was a joyful, triumphant celebration. This person had given their life for their faith.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, a formal process of canonization developed for identifying saints. Within Orthodox tradition, some saints are universally recognized, while others are remembered only by local churches.

There are more than 10,000 Roman Catholic Saints. The Catholic church teaches that it does not make anyone a saint, rather it recognizes saints. A canonized saint is one who aligns one's motives and actions with the will of God. A belief that ordinary humans' can become saints, is a positive view of human possibility...it makes living a religious and spiritual life worthwhile, because it assumes the possibility of, at least, approaching perfection.

Protestants for the most part hold to the belief that all professing Christians are saints because of their relationship to Jesus. Baptism is meant to insure a joining in the communion of saints.

Other faith traditions have concepts similar to sainthood, belief that some individuals have particular holiness or enlightenment. Judaism speaks of Tzadikim. And in Hinduism there are Mahatma, Paramahansa, or Swami.

In many indigenous religions there is a veneration of ancestors.

Buddhists hold Arhats and Arahants in special esteem. Within Islam in some Muslim countries there are Sufi figures who are venerated with shrines and celebrations.

While there are parallels, in these other religions, that these concepts are not identical with the meaning of Christian sainthood.

When we UUs affirm our first principle, the worth and dignity of every person, we are acknowledging that no matter how a person lives, what choices he or she might make in their lives...there is inherent value inside... Being human means being of worth.

What does it mean to be of worth? It might mean that each person has A seed of good within...each person has the potential of being a life-giving being.

The ways of being life-giving...are without limit.

The ways of bringing out what is saintly in us ...are without limit.

The ways of living out the will of universal Love...are without limit.

I read several short stories about saintliness. In each story, as in each life there were surprises, there were moments of opportunity, moments of grace unearned, a myriad of ways to be extraordinarily alive. And in each story, death is the event around which saintliness and human worth emerges...for the living.

One story, by John L'Heureux, was about a priest who had lost his faith. Years ago, his service to his parish had become routine, uninspired... years ago, he had accepted lack of faith as a given, he just went through the motions.

One day he came upon a car accident...several young men were gathered along the roadside, clearly in a panic...pointing to the damaged car that had come to rest at the embankment below...the priest rushed to the car and looking in saw a young man stuck inside, bleeding badly. It was immediately clear to the priest that the boy was going to die.

This priest without faith...used his bear hands to tear a door off the car and he climbed inside and put his hand on the dying boy. In the silence he could hear the boys labored breathing, the priest was at a loss for words, he didn't feel he could say any of the religious prayers or blessings...he knew there were only a few moments left...he knew he had to say something...he spoke into the silence, the only words that mattered...from the saintly place inside of him, the priest said, "I love you, I love you."

Another story, called "The Saint" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was about a father whose daughter died young. The father had reason to believe that his daughter was a saint. The father went to the priest and then to the bishop asking their blessing and permission that he might petition the Vatican to designate his daughter as a saint.

For many years, the father pleaded his cause...making slow progress, little by little convincing the church hierarchy that sainthood was called for. This went on for many more years...one day a traveler returned to the village and saw the father, quite old by now, still devoting himself to the cause of sainthood for his daughter...the traveler was deeply impressed with the fortitude and the certainty, with which the father continued pursuing canonization. Each day the father found new courage for the task, each day, he thought this would be the day that the light of sainthood would shine upon his daughter. More years passed and the father waited for a call from Rome. "It could be just a matter of months" he was heard to say.

After a few more years, the traveler returned and upon seeing the father still faithful, realized that it was, in fact, the father who was a saint...the father who had earned canonization through his faithful actions.

The final story by Francine Prose, was a story of an ordinary girl and an ordinary life...but when the girl died young of a fever, the parents and the whole town began to tell a story about her life...and in the story the girl was a saint...for there was an unusual blossoming of flowers on the day she died, and a change for the better in her father and others who knew her, and with the telling of the story, people in the town felt hopeful.

They found inspiration in imagining that God had sent their town a saint... that a seemingly ordinary girl could be saint material. The story brought comfort on hot nights, the story was passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter to granddaughter. They told the story to reassure and to remind one another that such things can happen...that an ordinary life can be redeemed by extraordinary devotion...that if that wait, if they listen, if they have faith...God might send them a saint.

Could there be a saint among us this morning I say, we all are filled with saintliness. We need not be martyrs, we need not be free of doubt, we need only embrace that within us that is holy.

So I offer encouragement ... meet each day with extraordinary aliveness... trust that times will come when you can Be a life-giver.

Remember that there is worth and saintliness within you... And in each person you meet.

If you learn to see the saintliness the aliveness in others, then, just in time...you will find it in yourself.

There is ...something in us that yearns toward goodness and mercy. May we live "as if" we know the truth of our goodness...as if we know we are part of the communion of saints.

Blessed Be/Amen