

Sanctuary
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UUMSB

My freshman year of college I was paired with a roommate named Cheryl, from Cleveland, Ohio and we became fast friends. We lived together on campus for three years and still stay in touch, though of course not as much as we might wish. I am going to share a story with you about Cheryl's family, and I want to say that even though there are scary parts, I promise it has a happy ending. My friend Cheryl's grandfather Max was born in Lithuania in the 1920s. During World War II his town was occupied by the German army, and at age 18 with many other Jews in the town, Max was shot and buried in a mass grave. But, Max woke up in the grave, climbed out, and escaped into the woods with three bullet wounds. He needed a place to heal, and a local young woman, who was not Jewish, risked her own life and provided Max sanctuary in her barn, bringing clothing, bread and water to his hiding place. Max ran as soon as he could, hoping to fight, though eventually was caught again. He was taken to a ghetto, and then Dachau. As I was re-reading Max's story this week, I learned that he was liberated from Dachau at the end of the war, and since *my* own grandfather was part of that liberating force in the US Army, Cheryl's family and my own are connected in ways we never knew. After the war, Max married and emigrated to Cleveland, Ohio. He raised the daughter of two of his friend's who had died, as his own, and instilled in her his values and Jewish traditions. His daughter grew up and had a daughter of her own, my friend Cheryl, who has two children, a girl and a boy, named after his great-grandfather.

Max faced some of the worst actions humanity has ever inflicted upon each other, and was still loving and engaged with the world. He always wanted to thank the woman who saved him, and in his seventies, he had the opportunity. A book was being written about Max's story, which allowed him to travel back to Lithuania to find the woman who had helped him. They found her farm and knocked on the door. They asked "During the war, did you shelter a man named Motl?" She said, "Oh, yes I did, but he died." And Max stepped forward and said, "I am Motl." They cried and hugged and she was so relieved to hear that he had made it to safety after all. Her name was Veronika and she was honored for what she did to save Max and other Jews in her town by the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vashem.¹ Max passed away in 2010, a great-grandfather, and good man, remembered for his kindness and warmth.

A sanctuary is a holy place, a safe place, a refuge. It can mean the space where worship happens, or where wildlife is protected from hunting, it can be a state of being. For hundreds of years in many cultures, including, ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Anglo-Saxon, sanctuary was the state of being protected from the authorities and the mob in a designated place. I was talking with Tadd the other day about what you call that place you can touch in a game of tag that means safety. He insisted that it is called safety, I insisted that it is called gouls. And when you touch it, you have to say the rhyme. Anyone else with me? "My gouls, 1, 2, 3..." In some cultures, sanctuary was just like gouls. It wasn't always a sacred building, but sometimes even a statue in a town square, but once touched, a person couldn't be harmed. Many cultures

¹ This story is also told in Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul, and here <http://db.yadvashem.org/righteous/family.html?language=en&itemId=4015520>

used sanctuary as a means to break cycles of violence. For example if someone accidentally killed another person, they could admit guilt and seek sanctuary, and the family of the slain person could not enact a blood feud. It was also used as a way to protect political dissidents. Historian, William Ryan wrote in 1987, "It is said that in time of war the Greek asylums were crowded with supplicants, while in time of peace they were often deserted." This was the principal purpose of asylum in classical times: to save the lives of those defeated in war.² For almost 1,000 years first in the Greek and Roman empires and then into European cultures, sanctuary was a broad cultural understanding that brought together state law and the church. Sanctuary put the breaks on the human tendency to pass judgment and act rashly when someone has broken a law or custom. Sanctuary was the place where reason could be applied before a mob killed an innocent person, or where those who were seeking to change someone or something more powerful than themselves, could have a space in which to make their case. Henry VIII in England in the 16th century, identifying sanctuary with the Catholic church and finding it inconvenient for silencing dissidents, knocked out the last of the legal power of sanctuary as a means of defense in criminal court. However, because sanctuary in and of itself was never taken out of the Common Law, the concept was still there, and because our legal system was built on the British one, including the Common Law, attorneys in the 1980s used this fact to support more than 500 houses of worship in North America, including many Unitarian Universalist congregations, that were part of the sanctuary movement, providing protection for 1,000s of Central American refugees fleeing wars and violence at home and seeking asylum in the US and Canada.³

Today, many Unitarian Universalist congregations are part of a New Sanctuary Movement, offering support to families with members facing deportation, who have experienced injustice in the immigration system. The Unitarian Universalist Association is partnering with immigration attorneys to help these families, as congregations share their stories, and witness to the need for immigration reform. Later this morning we will hear about the work that the Berkshire Immigrant Center is doing to support our neighbors who need their help, and we will share our collection with BIC, to aid in this work. But before we get there, let's dive a little deeper into sanctuary.

The vast majority of us, or our ancestors, came to this country, by choice or force, from somewhere else on the globe. The movement of people around the world has been driven by war, violence, climate, opportunity, trade, greed, over-population, and so many more factors. Many people came to the United States seeking a sanctuary, a place that would allow them to be fully themselves without being in danger. Because we are human, and flawed, we made many mistakes as a society, and often, once one group found their safety and sanctuary, we began a pattern of being fearful and blocking the next group who needed that same care from getting it. So much of the story of the early United States is a group of people finally getting it together to be in community and then being terrible to another community in turn. And of course layered on this is the fact that the first immigrants and settlers from Europe sometimes unintentionally, but often with purpose, perpetrated genocide on the people who had called this place home, had their sanctuary, for tens of 1,000s of years. Then we built an economy based on the enslavement of

2 The Historical Case for the Right of Sanctuary Author(s): WILLIAM C. RYAN Source: Journal of Church and State , Vol. 29, No. 2 (SPRING 1987), pp. 209-232 Published by: Oxford University Press (Embedded quotation in Trenholm – 1903), 212

3 More from Ryan, 232

people and tortured generations of African, and African American people. We have a violent and troubling legacy and history as a country. And yet, we are still held up as a beacon, a place of sanctuary for those who are fleeing from danger in other parts of the world. Sometimes we do a good job helping people, and sometimes we fail utterly. Our immigration system is broken, and outside of the particulars of law and enforcement, we human beings, are collectively on a precipice of failing each other in our humanity. We often seem to forget that we are talking about real and individual human beings, just like each of us when we talk about immigration and refugee crises. We are talking about Max and Veronika. The Syrian Refugee Crisis is not a monolith, it is millions of scared, lost, and real human beings. The people living in places that will no longer be sustainable due to climate change, are real people, who will need to find new homelands, new places of holiness and safety. The people still fleeing violence in South and Central America are real people, often coming from countries with civil war and unrest that our own US policies and actions helped create. Each person on this earth is imbued with inherent worth and dignity, and this is a foundational principle of our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Sanctuary is linked to place, and that is why when it is violated, when we lose our homes or sacred spaces, it is so hurtful. Sanctuary is also a state of being. It is being physically safe in a place away from home. It is also taking a breath and calming down before making a decision. It can be that place we run to and tap for safety when we are running from something, literally or metaphorically. It is not reasonable to expect that we each will go out and solve our world's political and social problems that lead to mass migrations and suffering. But we each have the opportunity to hold the individual lives in peril in our thoughts, prayers, choices, and actions. When we do this, when we are faced with an opportunity to make a difference for a particular person, we are ready. When we have the opportunity to change laws and make a difference for a whole lot of people, we are ready. When our hearts might break for seeing sorrow and suffering in the world, we can remember that each person helped, each person we lift up through our actions is connected. Max and Veronika, Max and my grandfather, Cheryl and me.

We have sung a song together many times that evokes this, would you sing it with me?

Make us aware we are a sanctuary
Each made holy and loved right through
With thanksgiving we are a living sanctuary anew

May it be so.
Amen.