

Honoring and Remembering (Altars Everywhere)

(A FUSIT summer sermon by Rod Howe, delivered 7/21/24)

Opening Words:

(“Forgive Me” by Mary Oliver, *Blue Horses*, 2014, Penguin Press.)

Angels are wonderful but they are so, well, aloof.
It’s what I sense in the mud and the roots of the
trees, or the well, or the barn, or the rock with
its citron map of lichen that halts my feet and
makes my eyes flare, feeling the presence of some
spirit, some small god, who abides there.
If I were a perfect person, I would be bowing continuously.
I’m not, though I pause wherever I feel this
holiness, which is why I’m so often late coming
back from wherever I went.
Forgive me.

The Art of Seeing Altars Everywhere

By the time we are a certain age it is almost guaranteed that we will have lost people who are very close to us. Grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins, dear friends and neighbors and unfortunately, possibly, a spouse, child or grandchild.

At the age of 67 (closing in on 68) I am developing a practice of regularly honoring and remembering by seeing little (and sometimes big) altars everywhere. Being open to these altars is a way of honoring family members and treasured friends and is leading me to a sense of gratitude and equanimity. This morning I'll share my thoughts on this discovery process and journey. It is about moving forward by embracing and navigating my altars. It is not about grieving, although that is an ongoing process, but rather about situating myself in the world and being attentive.

I, of course, recognize that my situation is somewhat unique given that I have been embedded in the geography of my childhood for much of my adult life. But I think anyone can cultivate an altar experience – in one's own personal settings but also adopting common and public altars. It is about developing a mindset.

My altar definition:

'You can't find God before an altar if that is the only place you look for him.' (A. Powell Davies, an influential Unitarian minister of the 20th century.)

I think it fair to say that we all have some basic understanding of what an altar is. We often associate them with candles, perhaps incense,

religious artifacts, and/or items from a loved one. Altars hold spiritual significance, in many religions, and serve as a sacred space for prayer, meditation, and offerings. They have been around for centuries.

My goal is to encourage you to expand your notion of altars.

An altar is a physical space that may hold meaningful objects such as family photos, artifacts, gifts, and special mementos. It might be a permanent part of a home where one can honor ancestors and loved ones. Ancestral altars are common in many cultures.

For me, altars are more meaningful when there is a personal connection that spark memories and evoke fond memories of loved ones – their work, interests, passions and personalities. They are reminders of the care and wisdom that have been passed on to me. My altars serve to remind me of loved ones that are no longer here and who continue to act as guides as I carry them in my heart.

As the idea of this talk ruminated in my mind, I came to understand how many altars I have in my life. Some intentionally created and others that I have come to see as being altars and have adopted. From my perspective altars can be small or large; they can have a widerange in scale. They might be our attics.

Ann Lamott (from her essay “Up Above” in *Somehow*): “Under these peaked attic ceilings, on millions of streets, are shabby museums that preserve our

tokens of love and loss, pretensions, catastrophes, and resurrections, the whole holy enchilada. The party favors, souvenirs, and awards are the merch from life's bewildering gift shop."

So, altars might be a section of a building. Altars might even be a landscape. There is an intimacy and ideally a slowing down and pausing when experiencing altars. Their impact can include any, or all, of the following: Creating a sense of peace, Calming, Centering and Connectivity. My fairly recent altar experiences have instilled in me a sense of gratitude and are helping me find a life rhythm that is in sync with this phase of my journey.

My altars

I'll share a few of my altars associated with specific people that have died. Some are part of my daily or weekly pattern. Some I have to make a mini pilgrimage to. What has emerged is a constellation of altars that I consider my songline (paths used by native cultures to preserve their cultural knowledge; some of you might be familiar with Bruce Chatwin's book *Songlines*). I have started to more consciously incorporate an awareness of altars into my daily life. The combination of experiencing a range of altars, both private and public, on a regular basis, enriches my life and helps to ground me.

I have numerous home altars as I look at what is on my desk, library table, and even my bathroom counter (sea glass, beach rocks, turtles, frogs, shells, pottery, etc. – many of these items I associate with **my**

brother Dick and my sister in law Dian). These home altars contain numerous items that remind me of deceased family and friends.

There may be some here who never knew **my husband Mark Pedersen**.

He collected egg beaters (something like 170). There is the egg-beater wall altar. [side note about what happened to all of Mark's egg beaters].

I will also note that I seem to have created an altar in my office at work.

On the table in my office – in essence an altar – representations of a church, a house, a cottage, a business, a barn and a farm animal. Also my window sill at work – includes items that make an altar – including a place box of wooden tiles that have images of Ithaca landmarks.

On my front porch there is an altar that I call Mark's spirit house. We saw many spirit houses when we had the good fortune to visit Cambodia with our younger son. Family members leave food and small gifts at the spirit houses for their ancestors. This spirit house was made to look like our home at 126 JFR and for many years I did leave small items that Mark would have appreciated on its tiny front porch [Side note – story about that spirit house.]

Grandma Nobles: was known as a great pie maker so the stack of pie plates and pie tins in the pantry I consider an altar (also braided rugs and quilts).

For **Grampa Howe** the altar is an 1850s barn on land that has been in the Howe family for over 200 years where we got our milk every evening

of my childhood.

The Newfield covered bridge is **my Mom's altar** because

For Dad, the altar is the concrete circular staircase at Johnson Museum of Art designed by I.M. Pei.

My mother in law Barbara Pedersen – the china cabinet in the dining room full of china and the corresponding drawers full of silverware. Mark inherited her love of china and silverware.

A new headstone at Pleasant Grove Cemetery has become **an altar for Mark and my son Veasna**. Although I have not left anything on the Headstone, I am mindful of artifacts that I buried with them.

Then there is our former **neighbor Clara Goodman** who adopted us when we moved to Forest Home. The altar I ascribe to her is Elfreide Abbe's Yarb Woman statue at the herb garden. People leave items at the base of this small statue.

My older sister Donna: Where her ashes were spread in a tree hedge between fields at the Howe farm marked by a stone, two of her Sculpture pieces and molten glass left over from Corning Glass.

My whole home office feels like entering an altar. So many gifts and visual cues of loved ones. On my desk is a picture of **my Uncle Pete** and behind my chair is **my Aunt Jessie's** accordion. Uncle Pete and Aunt Jessie – their altar items call me to be true to them. Some have sought to rewrite their history – at least my Aunt Jessie's history. She was a lesbian but lived at a time that she most likely never used that term to identify herself. Some family members are now questioning whether she was a woman who loved women.

I look for ways to incorporate and acknowledging these altars into my daily life. I recognize my past and those who influenced me while living in the present. For me the connection between the past and the present is seamless. I do not feel tied down by the past. I am a stronger person through this honoring and remembering.

Other Altars/Public Altars

There is an overlap between my personal altars and public altars. My position in the world is not only marked by family and friends but by generations of people associated with broader historical and cultural threads.

One example of that overlap is the Howe-Nobles Story Vault at THC. Lakeview cemetery – **Carl Sagan's burial site.**

Hazels Back Yard – and the bench overlooking the stream constructed of the church's former portico.

In many ways this entire building we are in is an altar for me and not just because of Mark but also because of the incredible people I had a chance to get to know through FUSIT.

Because of living in Forest Home for 28 years, many of my other altars are public altars associated with Cornell Botanic Gardens and the Arboretum and surrounding natural areas. They are full of public altars: Benches named in honor of someone (**my former neighbor Robert Mooney**); Sackett's bridge; the Winter Garden's mill stone; a sprawling aged tree. Also the top of Comstock Knoll where I have gone almost every Sunday morning for the past 28 years to say prayers and honor my ancestors.

How many of you have been to the Cornell arboretum overlook with the bell? We had a ritual of going there to ring the bell as the seasons changed. Yesterday when there we came upon two women who were spreading the ashes over the hill of the father of one of the women. I already thought of that area as an altar. It was confirmed for me.

Taughannock Falls overlook as an altar. And when I think of the falls I am

reminded that native people have lived in this area for 14,000 years.
Gayogohó:nq? - – all of the land is sacred (an altar). **Kurt Jordan**. The
Gayogohó:nq? **People in the Cayuga Lake Region**

The Falls leads one to think from even a larger scale.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: “All things are engaged in writing their history...Not a foot steps into the snow, or along the ground, but prints in characters more or less lasting, a map of its march. The ground is all memoranda and signatures; and every object covered over with hints. In nature, this self-registration is incessant, and the narrative is the print of the seal.”

Barbara Brown Taylor: “I can set a little altar in the world or in my heart. I can stop what I am doing long enough to see where I am, who I am there with, and how awesome the place is ... Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”

Closing

The question I pose for you: How might one develop a practice of regularly honoring and remembering by seeing little (and sometimes big) altars everywhere?

Little Altars Everywhere by James Crews

“There are little altars everywhere
in the world, places where you can
lay down your suffering for a while.
Hollowed-out oak trunk by the forest trail
where you leave acorns and pine cones
and worries you’ve gathered on a cushion
of moss, whose patience softens everything.
Or the bench at the busy intersection
where streams of people crossing the street
parted around you, and you fell in love
with each of them—the men in suits, babies
strapped in strollers—and left your fear
crumpled there like a useless receipt.
Or the shelf where you keep the box
of your mother’s ashes next to an electric
candle that flickers day and night, how you
give your grief to the yellow glow of that
false flame over and over, knowing
that even the plainest of light can be

enough sometimes to hold your pain”

This essay written by Rod Howe for
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