

"A Material World"

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"The world begins at a kitchen table," writes Joy Harjo in her poem "*Perhaps the World Ends Here*."

At the kitchen table, we eat, we grieve, we celebrate. We gather with babies and elders with pets underfoot. We learn and laugh, weep and argue around the table. We *live* at the kitchen table.

And so, it is not happenstance that so many religious rituals happen around a table. Jewish Shabbat dinners. Catholic Mass. There at tables laden with food and drink we come together as people who are hungry—for physical sustenance as well as for connection, meaning and purpose. We come to the table as people trying to figure out relationships and politics, finances and illness. In my understanding, religion is simply this effort to make sense of who we are and how to live meaningfully and well.

On this day, as the Middle East lurches into violent attacks and counterattacks, I suspect many people are gathering in religious community to make sense of what is happening. As a congregation, we have gathered for nearly 400 years through wars, pandemics, and all manner of economic and political strife. We are here again today.

Why? It is hard to feel safe on our own when the problems are too big for any *one* of us to address. We are stronger and more resilient when we come together—around an actual table, yes, but also in sanctuaries like this one.

Look around and see that you are not alone. You may not know anyone's name, or you may feel you know too much about a person you've known for years. You may be watching on YouTube by yourself. And yet, the very nature of this experience is that it is communal. Each of us knew the door would be open to find a seat in a room with others. Online we know we are connecting to an in-person group as well as to others who are watching from their own remote places. To participate in religious community is to practice being with others in a shared search for meaning. It is to be in shared spaces and places with other people. It is to share a table.

With whom have you shared a table this week? Perhaps it was a literal table—a shared meal, a cup of coffee, or a conversation. Or perhaps it was a figurative table—a phone call, a walk with a friend, or a chat in the lobby of your building.

On Wednesday, I sat across the table from David Shapiro, Executive Director of the Greater Boston YMCA, who speaks powerfully of creating “[palaces for the people where economics is never a barrier.](#)” In our conversation, we shared a sense of the importance of brick-and-mortar institutions like the Y, like this church, for bringing people of diverse ages, economic capacity, and identity together.

On Thursday, I shared a “Zoom” table with an author writing a book on spirituality. Describing to her our practice of holding a “moment of stillness” in worship, we discussed what difference it makes to have such moments of personal introspection *with others*—to perhaps hear the shuffle of feet or a cough, to feel the presence of other breathing bodies. To listen for one’s inner voice while remaining connected to others.

Then on Friday, I shared a meal over a long table at the Congregational Library with archivists and librarians to discuss the upcoming 400th anniversary of Boston in 2030. Listening to what each person brought to the table, we considered how to use our resources and relationships to help tell the *religious* story of Boston’s 400 years.

And this afternoon I plan to attend the ordination of a friend as a Deacon at Twelfth Baptist Church here in Boston. A historic Black church, this will be the first time in more than 175 years that women will be ordained as Deacons rather than as Deaconesses—a remarkable moment of gender equity around the table of church leadership.

So much of life happens at the tables we join. I share these stories as a testament to the ways this church is both connected to other institutions *and* is an institution that can connect us to each other.

We connect to each other in our moment of stillness, in the hymns we sing, in the laughter over a story. We connect around the tables during coffee hour or next Saturdays Stewardship Kickoff potluck. Some of us will connect shortly around the table of our Social Justice Community meeting as we share our struggles and successes of bringing more justice, equity, and peace to our world. And always, always, there are the small tables of one-on-one conversations in-person, by phone, or even by email or text, asking “how are you? are you ok?”; celebrating some bit of good news; or attending to an aspect of our organizational life.

All of this is to say religious life exists in a material world. The ongoing religious work of living meaningfully and well happens around tables of all kinds. It also happens on snowy sidewalks as neighbors shovel one another out or bring groceries to immigrant families afraid to leave their house. Religious life happens in bringing flowers to a friend recovering at home and by advocating to build more housing. Religious life happens in a material world of people who need to eat, a place to safely rest, and other people to share in their struggles and celebrations.

But this was not the message I heard growing up. Perhaps like me you were taught some version of a message that said this material world was *bad, corrupted*. Rather than relish “the world,” I was taught to be wary of the many possible temptations that might distract me from what “really” mattered...the “spiritual” world. Does that sound familiar to any of you?

As a teenager, my favorite verse from the Christian Bible was “Do not conform to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) Without diving into all the possible ways this verse can be translated and/or interpreted, I will simply say that as a white, Midwestern, evangelical teenager who identified as female, this verse translated into being very suspicious of my budding sexuality, deeply cautious around peers who didn’t attend church, and regularly committed to a practice of Bible study, prayer, and journaling. By steering clear of sex and the “unchurched” I tried to resist “the world.” By diving into Bible study, prayer, and journaling, I tried to “renew my mind.”

This strategy began to fall apart in college, however, when I learned about critiques of “dualism” that denounced conceptions of mind *or* body, reason *or* feeling, material *or* spiritual as overly reductive. Rather, doesn’t it make more sense to explore how we are both? To consider how we are complexly interwoven mind-body-spirit beings?

In seminary, this complexity would deepen further in multiple ways.

In Christian Liberation Theology, I encountered the intersection of Marxist materialism with theologies of salvation. This combination produced the maxim: God is on the side of the oppressed. In Liberation Theology, fighting poverty *is* doing God’s work of salvation.

In Transcendentalism, an offshoot of our own Unitarianism, I first discovered a variation of panentheism ... a sense of divinity *IN* the world rather than separate from it. I remember staring at rivers and a single leaf in new ways as I contemplated the divine in each.

And then I heard Peter Mayer’s song, [“Holy Now,”](#) in which he sings:

*This mornin' outside I stood. I saw a little red wing bird shining like a burning bush,
and singing like a scripture verse. It made me want to bow my head. I remember when
church let out. How things have changed since then. Ev'rything is holy now.*

His lyrics reflected my own transformation of religious understanding away from dualism. No longer is there a holy, “spiritual” world distinct from a mundane, “material” world. Everything is holy now.

The kitchen table is a sanctuary, a holy space. We can find meaning and divinity in the everyday places and interactions of our lives. But to be clear, I’m not telling you to stop showing up at church!

People may not *need* to attend a church, temple, mosque, or other religious services to be religious or to be a good person. However, in such spaces, the purpose of finding connection with others and with a sense of the Holy is unapologetically present. Here we know our purpose is *worship*—to name what is worthy of our attention, our love, our *living*.

All this searching for connection with others and with the Holy happens here in a material world. Religion *is* about the *stuff* of life. We find meaning and purpose by gathering around the table with friends—and by simply having a table and the resources to put food on that table. Addressing poverty, housing, *and* social connections all impact how well we live.

And so, religion is not just about *beliefs* we hold in our minds, nor is religion just about our cosmic status in another place and time. Religion, to me, is about supporting the flourishing of Life here and now. It is a holy, wondrous gift to simply be *alive* as an eating, drinking, sweating, singing, dancing, talking, weeping, loving human *being*.

Still, sometimes life can be unbearably hard. Feeling that way doesn't mean there's something "wrong" with you. Sometimes we may need time to grieve. Sometimes we may need help to untangle a difficult situation. Sometimes we may simply need to be loved and held through a hard time. All of this happens at the table too.

So, sharing all of the stumbling confusion, celebratory joy, and everyday experiences of living is why we're here together. We join in religious community not simply for personal spiritual insights, but also for communal experiences of worship in stillness and song, for shared actions that address the material needs of others, and, of course, to share a cup of coffee or a meal around a table with others.

As we continue to face days sodden with heavy news, I hope that you will continue showing up here in religious community not only for yourself, but also for each other. Sometimes you may be the person who needs to look around and see others. Sometimes you may be the person another needs to see. Together we are more resilient for all that life may bring.

May it be so. Ashé. Amen.