



JOURNEY TO THE SACRED

Writing
TO AWAKEN

JOURNEY TO THE SACRED: A SIX-WEEK WRITING PILGRIMAGE

Sacredness is a holy cow in our secular, materialist culture. Like the holy cows of India that block the roads, leave their impressions everywhere you look, and fill the air with earthy aromas, sacredness in American life is all around us but strangely untouchable. There, but not there; observable in myriad forms yet unnamed as a rule and mostly avoided.

What do we mean by sacredness? Is the sacred set apart in temples and churches and ashrams and monasteries? Does the sacred require religion to house it in our lives and consciousness? Is the sacred esoteric, somehow, meant to be partially hidden from view like those secret Buddhas hidden in the back of Himalayan monasteries, more precious for being invisible? Does the sacred require particular treatment, demand special psychological or spiritual posturing for us to appreciate it? Or is it as plain and ordinary as the chair you're sitting on, the light coming in your window at breakfast, the look of a child's eyes in the street? Is the sacred special, rare, set apart, or is it ubiquitous, the very substance of what makes us human, infusing the world with brightness and care?

There is no single answer to these questions, as you will discover during this course. Nevertheless, the answers you do give about what the sacred means to you reveal more than you may realize about how you approach your life, what you expect from yourself and others, how you see, and how you love. The presence (or absence) of sacred awareness means the difference sometimes between bliss and suicide when life gets hard. Why? Because the essence of sacredness is the key to meaning, and meaning is the bridge to what we desire. When our lives have meaning, we can do nearly anything we set our hearts and minds to.

Deprived of it, we're husk-like and vacuous, spiritless, living as if nothing matters. As if nothing is sacred.

When we touch the sacred, we come alive, regardless of how and where we find it. Existence has more heart and we have additional gratitude. Even when times are painful, we maintain a sense of privilege before our existence, thankful to have the opportunity to confront our own miraculous existence as human beings. Awe and wonder are handmaidens to the sacred; they awaken our mysterious nature and rouse us from the stupor of jadedness, cynicism, amnesia, and stunted awareness that blindfolds us so much of the time. We stumble through our blessed lives without truly seeing, paying too little attention to the marvelousness of being alive.

Through this course, you will sharpen your awareness and awaken your senses to what is marvelous, mysterious, and transformational in the world. By the end of Journey to the Sacred, I hope you will be amazed by the consciousness shift that has taken place after contemplating and expressing those glimpses of the sublime, brimming with meaning and human potential where you find sacredness.

Consider me your guide in this process of self-awakening. I welcome your questions, challenges, disagreements, confusions—as well as your epiphanies—with open ears. The Sufis have a wonderful word—*sohbet*—which means the spiritual talk of friends. Please think of this course as our *sohbet* on a path we're all treading and exploring together.

LESSON 1: WHAT IS SACRED?

I would like you to investigate one thing that you find sacred in your life. This 'thing' can be a person, a faith, a connection, an object, a relationship, a goal—even a pet. What matters is that this sacred thing is indispensable and suffused with meaning. This meaning, in turn, connects you to something vital, poignant, and important to your emotional and spiritual well-being.

Nothing is too small or trivial to be sacred. I had a student whose sacred thing was a dusty old flower she kept in a vase on her kitchen windowsill. This ragged old rose, which had lost half of its petals—and which everyone wanted her to dispose of—was the last flower that this student picked out of her father's garden before he died. No one looking at this brittle rose would have dreamed that it was so important to this woman, but for her, it was a profound, irreplaceable link to her beloved father, as well as a remembrance of his final days, the memory of which she continued to cherish.

When writing about your sacred thing, freely explore not only the thing itself, but also the reasons behind its sacredness. Why does it matter so much to you? What does this significance mean to you? How does it change your life? Do you rely on it for strength, comfort, direction? Is there some way in which the sacredness could be altered, and if so, is it actually sacred? For example, I know a woman who considers her relationship with her child to be sacred. When that child disobeys her, however, she switches her opinion quite drastically (and the child becomes her cross to bear). Which version of this relationship is true? Is sacredness conditional? Or is love, for example, an unconditional act. Do we agree with Shakespeare that "Love is not love which alters when it alteration

finds"? Or are love, and sacredness, mutable things? How would that mutability affect their sacred nature?

Please go as deeply as you can into the qualities of your relationship to this sacred thing. Allow yourself to free associate and welcome the shadow side of the sacred bond (which is, paradoxically, critical to the depth of meaning, as we will see next week).