

Sacred Places

- Law Baccalaureate
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It is good for us every so often to go to a sacred place. Thank you for coming to this sacred place on the evening before your commencement from the Seattle University School of Law. Going to a sacred place helps us to go within ourselves, to the abode or temple of our love, our family, our faith, our true self, our deepest values.

What is it that makes a place sacred? I believe it is the associations, the experiences, the accumulations of memories of people around the place. This chapel is sacred, not just because it is arguably the most beautiful, single architectural edifice in our region—which many claim it is—but more so it is sacred because of the stories of students who have worshipped or prayed here. It is sacred because it is here that lawyers and judges gather to annually bless the opening of the judicial year. It is sacred because here more than any other place the families, or partner, or child, or parent of someone seriously ill in one of the hospitals that ring our campus comes in silence to pray, to search for hope, to find peace, to accept death, to be renewed in life. These experiences, these memories, these people, these ultimate purposes make this place sacred, not its architecture. Enjoy and absorb some of that sacredness yourselves this evening, add to it with your own life, and allow it to help you go to and find what the sacred place within you is.

I have often asked myself what is the most sacred place in America. There are many possibilities—the Grand Canyon, the great cathedral, Mt. Rushmore, Ground Zero in New York City, a great museum of art, a mountain top. For me the most sacred place in America is in Washington, D.C., but it is not the White House, the Capitol, or Arlington Cemetery. For me the most sacred place in America is the spot where you enter the Lincoln Memorial and look up to gaze at Abraham Lincoln seated in repose, and peace, and power, looking at us and looking over America. It helps that he is flanked by the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. But it is Abe himself and the pilgrimage he began and all those who either literally or figuratively have made a pilgrimage to him and to what he stands for in freedom that makes this the most sacred place in America in my view. Where else more sacred do we as Americans go? It is made even more sacred by turning around and stepping forward a few spaces and finding in the marble the marker which indicates where Martin Luther King stood on that memorable day fifty years ago last August in the March on Washington for Jobs and Peace. He made it sacred; the hundreds of thousands that day made it sacred. Did you know that he had not planned to talk about a dream in that speech? It was only when he and others felt his prepared speech was wilting that Mahalia Jackson called out from near him, “Martin, tell them about the dream!” That he launched into proclaiming the dream, coming straight from his soul. Yes, he and many made that spot a sacred place. What does going there in reality or in imagination right now open up for you on this evening before commencement? What is most sacred for you, and on what pathway or pilgrimage does that sacred place clustered with memories lead you, taking you to the Temple, the Memorial, where what is sacred is seated within you and calmly but powerfully looks upon you?

How about Seattle? What is the most sacred place in Seattle? Is it Pioneer Square, Pike Place Market, the Space Needle, a park, a Cathedral, the Courthouse, or any place from which you can see Mt. Rainier on a clear day? Perhaps. It is different for different people. For me the most sacred place is the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks and in particular the fish ladder and fish-viewing room there. I keep getting drawn back there. There is something about seeing salmon fighting their way up rushing water, the urge, the instinct, the power of it all that is sacred for me. Perhaps it is because it helps me to remember that we live on the land and next to the lakes and streams sacred to the indigenous peoples of this beautiful land and connects me with the Great Spirit and the Ancestors sacred to them and to us. It is also the most sacred place for me because it is the easiest place to go to know and remember how salmon once fought their way home up hundreds of streams around us now buried beneath our street, our buildings, our malls, and even our campus. A stream once ran right under where Sullivan Hall now stands; up it salmon came home. The sacred place of the fish ladder at the Locks is sacred because of memories and people's lives back beyond all recorded history. It still beckons. Is there some sacred space that is opened in you by this sacred place, as we are here and there in our region trying to reopen and recover our streams for our salmon?

This talk of mine is obviously a very personal one: my sacred places are here in this chapel, or at the Lincoln Memorial, or the fish ladder of the Locks. I could just as well have gone to my Green Lake most sacred at 6:00 a.m. each Saturday and Sunday, or St. James Cathedral where I was ordained a priest, or a soft chair in my room where, with a cup of coffee, at 5:00 a.m. I pray each day, or one of our shelters for the homeless. Many sacred places; each very personally chosen because of what they evoke in our lives and in our citizenship. Perhaps for many of you the most sacred place is your family home, brought here today by your family members who surround you in this common sacred place on our campus this very important weekend of gratitude, accomplishment, hope, and love for you and your classmates. It's a personal journey to go to our most sacred place. Let's take a moment of silence for all of us to do just that and to allow it to open the door in us into the chapel of ourselves, the memorial of our life and citizenship, the stream of our memory and our urgent struggle upstream in life.