

Address from the President

Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming to the *First Ever* meeting of the Sacred Secular Sanctuary. We are looking forward to getting to know *each* and *every* one of you and learning your story.

Each of you is here by invitation, so the one thing we know about one another is that we are all spiritually inquisitive people.

Most – if not all - of you have left the faith tradition in which you were born, and migrated through various ideologies to arrive here, like nomads coming to an oasis. We hope that what we are about to offer will help quench your thirst. Perhaps you will take a drink and move on or, perhaps, you will decide to stay and pitch your tent with us.

My quest started when I was 13, and my Evangelical Lutheran confirmation classes required me to accept too many implausible things “on faith”. It was the early 60s, the brave new world of hippies and the Beatles, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Hare Krishna movement, and the exiled Dalai Lama.

For several years I tried on religions like trying on clothes. Buddhism came closest, but nothing really fit. It was like being in a maze – all blind alleys and dead ends. I became increasingly disenchanted with all religious traditions.

Then, in the late 1980s, I discovered Joseph Campbell. I learned about comparative mythologies, spiritual metaphor, the power of myth, the Hero’s Journey, following my Bliss, and lots more. Unfortunately, my “Saint Joseph” died in 1987, so I never did get to meet him but he had a profound affect nonetheless.

Who here can explain the difference between a maze and a labyrinth? That’s right. A maze is a perplexing series of choices, often ending in dead ends and requiring backtracking. A labyrinth, on the other hand, is a single pathway, leading inexorably (although it may not always feel that way) from the entrance to the goal.

Joseph Campbell showed me that I was not in a maze, but a labyrinth. At about that time I became a neo-pagan, having discovered that the earth-based traditions worked best for me. Although I stayed with that tradition for over 20 years, I kept on reading and exploring. The difference was that now I was studying religions from an anthropological perspective.

I went to India and joined worshippers of Durga in her temple, and experienced the exquisite Lotus Temple of the Bahai’is, and attended prayers at Sunni, Shiite and Sufi masjids (mosques). I missed out on seeing the Kali temple in the mountains, but learned that this may have been a blessing, given that tourists occasionally still end up as sacrifices. (Look up the origin of the word “thug”.)

I spent 10 years as a member of Interfaith Grand River, getting to know clerics from all the religious traditions in the Grand River watershed, and discussing with them the nuances of their beliefs. It was great fun, particularly when it came to challenging their preconceptions about what it meant to be a

neo-pagan. I had read the Koran and the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the I Ching and the Eightfold Path, but most of them knew virtually nothing about neo-paganism. Many of them were genuinely surprised to learn that earth-based spirituality still existed.

During that period, I helped organize several different lecture series presentations in which teachers from Encounter World Religions taught about each religion and then took the class to a worship service of that tradition, to meet with practitioners, share a meal with them and ask questions.

Then, in 2007, I got myself a backpack and some hiking boots and walked the 850 km. El Camino pilgrimage, across the top of Spain, in the footsteps of pilgrims from as far back as the 800s. I slept in some of the same stone barns that they had slept in, and visited the cathedrals that must have awed them over the centuries. The pilgrimage footpath traverses three mountain ranges, a desert, wild forests and lush vineyard regions, abandoned villages and cosmopolitan cities. It took six weeks, away from everyone and everything I knew, away from all my routines and with only the supplies I carried on my back. I experienced all forms of weather and plenty of hardships. Day after day of 'walk, eat, sleep', living completely in the moment. Many hours with no-one to talk to but my shadow (and that's Shadow with a capital S). It was a powerful metaphor for Life's journey.

This past summer, I spent an intensive week in Toronto encountering world religions in a setting where we could engage with Native Elders, Zen Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Rastafari – not easily accessed in K-W, among plenty of other traditions. Meals were included and it was not unusual to spend 12-hour days listening to lectures, visiting sites and discussing ideas late into the evening with classmates. I had done this twice before, but this time it felt different, like a recap, a summing up, a final loop in the labyrinthine journey.

Now I feel like I am right here. (show on labyrinth) Far from being blind alleys and dead ends, each exploration along the way has been an important bend in the path, bringing me closer to the destination.

What a treat it was to find Jax and Sheila also arriving here, having made their way through their own labyrinths.

Is this the end of the journey? No indeed! As you can see, we have as far to go as we have already come. But what a different journey it will be!

Here in the heart of the labyrinth, the inspiring voices one hears here say things like this:

"Recognize that the very molecules that make up your body, the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the galaxy, enriching pristine gas clouds with the chemistry of life. So that we are all connected to each other biologically, to the earth chemically, and to the rest of the universe atomically. That's kinda cool! That makes me smile and I actually feel quite large at the end of that. It's not that we are better than the universe, we are part of the universe. We are in the universe and the

universe is in us.”

~ Neil deGrasse Tyson

“A book is made from a tree. It is an assemblage of flat, flexible parts (still called “leaves”) imprinted with dark pigmented squiggles. One glance at it and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, the author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another. Books break the shackles of time, proof that humans can work magic.”

~ Carl Sagan

“Our story is the story of the Universe. Every piece of everyone, of everything you love and everything you hate, of the thing you hold most precious, was assembled by the forces of nature in the first few minutes of the life of the Universe, transformed in the hearts of the stars or created in their fiery deaths. And when you die, those pieces will be returned to the Universe in the endless cycle of death and rebirth. What a wonderful thing it is to be part of that Universe, and what a story, what a majestic story.

~Professor Brian Edward Cox

If you follow our Facebook page you will see these quotes and many more. What they have in common, aside from being profound, is that they all come from scientists; scientists who find their awe and wonder in the natural world, in the world of scientific investigation and discovery. These are *secular* voices.

In addition to the voices of scientists, you encounter here the voices of people who observe the human condition from outside any particular religious tradition, voices saying things like this:

"If you will think of ourselves as coming out of the earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the earth, we are the consciousness of the earth. These are the eyes of the Earth. And this is the voice of the earth."

~ Joseph Campbell

“Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through ... millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms... probably once belonged to Shakespeare, [and] Buddha and Genghis Khan and Beethoven, and any other historical figure you care to name. So we are all reincarnations - though short-lived ones. When we die our atoms will disassemble and move off to find uses elsewhere - as part of a leaf or other human being or drop of dew.”

~ Bill Bryson

The voices of secularists, agnostics, humanists and atheists can be deeply spiritual, *without* the agenda of trying to convert you to a specific religious tradition. Instead, the agenda is to make you think. To make you question and discuss and debate and internalize and evolve.

These are the kinds of voices we hear at the Sacred Secular Sanctuary. In addition, we want to hear YOUR voices. Each one of us can be a source of wisdom. As I discovered on the Camino, you can learn something from everyone you meet on the journey. The trick is not just to hear but to listen.

Can the secular be sacred? Absolutely!

I'm going to conclude with four rhetorical questions that may be questions you would like to ask. There will be time for more questions a bit later.

1 - Is the Sacred Secular Sanctuary a Church? No. It is a place in which to explore ideas and discuss concepts freely and safely. It is a place to enjoy gathering with other seekers who have spent time thinking about spiritual issues. It is a place for learning, via seminars and workshops and guest speakers. It is a virtual place, a place that can move around with us, wherever we decide to meet. It can be on a beach or in a park or in a café or in a meeting hall. Maybe someday we will have a home base, but we are not in a hurry for that. In fact, the Sanctuary is not necessarily a *place* at all, it can be considered more like a social club, a group of individuals sharing a journey.

Sanctuary can also mean a place where Nature is protected, (as in 'bird sanctuary') and we include that meaning because our worldview is Nature-based.

2 - Are we anti-religious?

No. In fact, Jax will be going over our Principles in detail and Principles 8 and 9 deal with that. We could accept being called atheist or non-theist or secular, but we are not anti-theist.

3 - Isn't Sacred Secularism just another religion?

No. We celebrate, we investigate, we affirm, we honour, we respect Nature and the Natural world around us, but we do not 'worship' per se. Our "revealed knowledge" comes to us from our life experiences and from Science. We have no pantheon of imaginary beings, and we do not "believe in" anything that is not evidence-based. We question everything; we accept nothing "on faith". Where there are mysteries for which we do not yet have answers, we embrace the mysteries as things waiting to be explained.

If someone tells you this is a religion, feel free to answer them with Bill Maher's succinct line: **"That's like calling abstinence a sex position"**.

4 - Are we trying to change the world?

What a great question - I'm so glad you asked! (You wanted to ask, didn't you?)

As part of my answer, I would like you to listen to this bit of music (cue) Be patient, it takes time to develop. _____

Do you recognize that? Do you know what it's called?

That piece is a "tone poem" by Richard Strauss. It is called "Thus Spake Zarathustra". Zarathustra, in case you don't know, was also called **Zoroaster**, and was the founder of Zoroastrianism, nearly two thousand years BCE. He was the first person to propose the idea of "One God". Before that, there were known to be many gods, which is why Moses' First Commandment says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me". Over time, Zarathustra's teachings changed the face of Judaism, and thus Christianity, as well as Islam.

Interestingly, for ten years he had only one convert, (*but he didn't have the Internet and Social media*). The music conveys that by starting softly and going along quietly until suddenly he speaks – Ta-Da! - and the world is forever changed.

The total population of the world at Zarathustra's time could be counted in thousands, not millions. Now, however, we are up to 7 Billion and reaching the tipping point in terms of what the planet can sustain. Unless humanity somehow comes to see the planet as sacred, unless we change direction from the way we have been going, we as a species are doomed. Do we want to change the world? In a word, yes. Science has been telling us for years about climate change and overpopulation, **but lectures and graphs don't grab people by the heartstrings, they don't give the emotional catharsis that makes people "get it" and take action.**

Did we invent the concept of sacred secularism? Of course not. It has been around for years. What we want to do is to make the idea "juicy", so humanity will feel viscerally that the earth is sacred and the biosphere is our source of being. We want to help people *experience* it through celebrations and rituals, meditations and music and art.

We hope to do that here, locally, and, eventually, to reach out to people across the world via online meetings and webinars and YouTube videos. There are already over 100 individuals worldwide who like what we are doing and want to participate.

As Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Are YOU ready to be part of that small group of thoughtful, committed citizens?

If so, we have Membership Applications right here - which we will get to shortly.

We CAN change the world. And, regardless of how long it takes, we are going to have a lot of fun on the journey.

Thank you.