

## 'Holy' moments surround us

**You don't have to be religious to know that there's something bigger out there, often in plain sight.**

**By Dean Nelson** Posted 10/26/2009 12:16 AM

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins' character serves a life sentence for a crime he did not commit, but he eventually escapes through the prison's sewer system, makes it through the outfall pipe and collapses in a river. He staggers to his feet, and in a deafening downpour, lightning flashing around him, he stumbles through the water from the earth and the sky, takes off his prison clothing and heads toward freedom. When I first saw that scene, all I could think of was one word — baptism. He had just crawled through some of the worst muck imaginable. He had just lived through the worst life imaginable. And now he's in the water, shedding his old self.

I know that not everyone thinks "baptism" when they see that scene. Baptism (stating our spiritual identity) is one of [seven ancient sacraments](#) that organized Christianity has recognized for thousands of years. Along with Holy Orders (or what I see as vocation or our purpose in the world — not the same as occupation), Confession (revealing our inner lives), Confirmation (commitment to spiritual depth), Marriage (experiencing the shared life), Extreme Unction (recognition of moving from this stage to the next) and the Eucharist (food that represents life, death and resurrection), the sacraments have been celebrated as means by which we experience the presence and grace of God. They're usually conducted during formal occasions, dispensed by religious officials to the rest of us non-professionals.

I've been thinking about them differently, these days. Maybe it's because my young-adult son just moved to a country experiencing significant political unrest, and I'm looking at the world more closely for evidence of that presence and grace. Or maybe it's because we're in that season between official holy seasons — Yom Kippur last month and Christmas on the way. I have decided that thinking about these holy days and moments only in organized religious settings is a missed opportunity.

Throughout civilization, people have looked for ways to experience the sacred and holy. Christians go to church no matter how boring it is, Hindus plunge into the Ganges River no matter how foul it is, Muslims make pilgrimages to Mecca no matter how far and crowded it is. "So it is that monks kneel and chant, that Jews eat a Passover meal, that Polynesians dance, and Quakers sit still," writes Joseph Martos in *Doors to the Sacred*. "In themselves they are just locations, activities, things. ... In this case they are all sacraments, symbols of something else which is mysterious and hidden, sacred and holy."

**'A deeper dimension'**

Haven't we all been part of conversations where they somehow take on a deeper dimension, even though it's just two people talking? It's as if the two (or more) people tapped into something much bigger than themselves. It happened toward the end of the movie *Away We Go*, where the couple (played by John Krasinski and Maya Rudolph) expecting a baby makes promises to each other. But because of the camera angle from above, it is clear that they are making those promises to the universe as well. It's both private and cosmic. Watching it, I thought of the sacrament of confession. And haven't we all had meals with friends or family where there was another level to that experience, and we didn't want to leave the table because of that additional Presence? I've had Eucharistic moments at picnic tables, restaurants, kitchens and the beach.

As we become aware of that additional dimension, those moments take on the quality of the holy. They're thin spaces where the distance between this world and a bigger unseen world seems to briefly disappear. You don't have to be a person of a particular faith to sense that there is more going on in this world than just the activities we experience with our senses. Call it God. Call it spirituality. Call it whatever you like, but it's unmistakable.

With my faith, seeing the day's events through the prism of confession, holy orders, baptism and other sacraments gives me lenses to see those events for what *e/se* they are.

### **That bigger world**

And it's not just for characters in movies. When I taught my kids how to ride a bicycle, running alongside them holding on to the seat, then holding on less tightly, still running, then letting go altogether, I remember raising my fists in triumph as my son, then my daughter, rode away without me. I cheered at their achievement but had tears running down my cheeks. In a sense, I was grieving the fact that they were leaving the life that we knew (where my wife and I were responsible for their transportation), and heading into the unknown. That's the sacrament of Last Rites, too — experiencing something Transcendent, leaving one world for a bigger one.

Our conversations, meals, jobs, transitions point us to something bigger than ourselves. Or at least they can. Seeing them as sacraments helps move us from the known to the unknown world.

Whether we see the sacred and holy in everyday life is not a matter of whether it exists. Wearing the lens of the sacraments can show us that it has been there all along, hiding in plain sight.

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