

# What Does It Mean To Be A People of Sanctuary?

Just saying the word “sanctuary” brings one a sense of peace and safety. It can bring back conflicted memories for some, but for most of us the idea of sanctuary conjures up feelings of being protected. Like its close cousin refuge, it speaks to the universal longing for a space to retreat from the dangers and depletions of the world. One thinks of the family ties and friendships that protect, restore and heal us. The sanctuary movement and its refuge for immigrants is another powerful example of offering life-giving safe space. As the well-loved Irish proverb puts it, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.” So, certainly, the hunger for protection and the call to protect each other is central to this month.

But as we dig deeper, we are reminded that the sanctuaries in our lives do more than simply protect us. They also send us. They don’t just help us heal from our journeys; they also strengthen us for the new journeys ahead. In their fullest, they are not escape houses as much as fueling stations. They don’t just whisper “Come and rest,” but also “Be filled and go!” The archetypal image of a toddler leaving and returning their parent’s leg comes to mind. That “home base” is not a tether but the very thing that allows us to venture out. Having been blessed with shelter, we are strengthened to offer that same gift of shelter to others. In other words, sanctuary always comes with a calling. And so the question for all of us this month is not just “Where do you find shelter?” but “Having been empowered by shelter, how can you share that same gift with others?”

Along the way, we also discover that our sanctuaries need sheltering and protection themselves. It’s a paradox: our sanctuaries can’t protect and repair us unless we also protect and repair them. The green sanctuary movement is a great example of this. The solace of nature and the life-giving interdependent web needs us as much as we need them. The same is true for the sanctuaries in our personal lives. Friendship, silence, stillness: these are all things that wither if we don’t tend to and make space for them. So, in the end, maybe the most important question this month is “How are we caring for our sanctuaries so they can take care of us?”

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## ***Option A : Share Your Umbrella***

There's a beautiful UU children's story called "The Umbrella Sanctuary." Its message is for kids and adults alike. In it, the umbrella represents the many ways others offer us sanctuary from the storms of life as well as the many ways we can pass on that shelter to others. The story also gently reminds us that we overlook opportunities to offer shelter and sanctuary every day. If our attention is woke, we notice that all around us people are "wet with rain."

So this month, you are invited to use the story to wake up your attention and seek out opportunities to offer people "your umbrella." This exercise also asks you to go one step further and use a *literal* umbrella as your daily reminder. Yes, it may feel a little silly at first, but after reading the story, you'll feel differently. Find an umbrella and hang it by the door of your home so you are reminded every day as you head to work. Or take an umbrella with you and let it hang out near your desk as your daily reminder. You might even just let it lay in the back seat of your car for the month. Whatever you choose, use it as a reminder and meditative token of all times someone has noticed you in need and how your gratitude for that calls you to keep an eye out for those often subtle (and not-so-subtle) signs that someone else needs the gift of human shelter.

Here's the link to the story: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/umbrella-sanctuary>

Come to your group ready to share where you placed your umbrella and how it helped you notice those opportunities to be shelter and sanctuary for someone else.

## ***Option B: Your Many Sanctuaries***

Sanctuary comes to us in many forms during our lives. This exercise invites you to meditate on the gift of those many sanctuaries.

Over the few weeks leading up to your group meeting, make time to take stock of all the various places, spaces, relationships and experiences that function and have functioned as sanctuary for you.

Here's the crucial part: As you remember and notice them, identify a symbol or token that represents them. For instance, collect a picture of the person who has been sanctuary for you. If it's a physical space like your church sanctuary, grab a hymnal. If it's the arboretum near your work where you often take your lunch, then grab one of their brochures. Those of us who find sanctuary in music might pull out a CD cover. Those of us who find refuge in the woods might pick up and press a fall leaf. Or you might want to use your phone as your collection device and spend the month taking pictures of all of your sanctuaries.

However to do it, the point is to gather these symbols of sanctuary in one place and then see what that “pile of sacred support” says to you. Indeed noticing the size and diversity of the pile is the point: It’s all too easy to go through life feeling vulnerable and alone. Pulling all our sanctuaries into one space, helps anchor us in the truth that life itself is more of a sanctuary than we sometimes think.

Bring your symbolic tokens and pictures to your group to share.

## **Option C:** ***Sanctuaries of Silence Treasure Hunt***

Like Exercise B, this one also invites you to go on a type of treasure hunt this month. But here we ask you to focus on silence. There is a special relationship between silence and sanctuary. Places and moments of restorative silence are as essential to us as breathing. Some even say it takes silence for us to find the breath of our souls. But in our loud and hurried world, spaces of silence are not easy to come by. They've been pushed to the far corners of our experience and in some case they've been eliminated and must be created again from scratch.

So during the weeks leading up to your group, seek out (or create) as many "sanctuaries of silence" and stillness as you can find. Think of it as a spiritual treasure hunt. Where are the hidden refuges of silence near your work? How might you create pockets of silence in the midst of your daily routine? What secret spaces of silence do your friends know about? Hunt down as many as you can. And then bring your "treasure map" to your group not only as a way of sharing your story but also reminding your group mates that they can find sanctuaries of silence too.

Here's a bit of inspiration for this exercise: **Sanctuaries of Silence**

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/10000005811102/sanctuaries-of-silence.html>  
<https://emergencemagazine.org/story/sanctuaries-of-silence/>

## **Option D:** ***End Your Day with Sanctuary***

Even if we don't refer to them as such, many of us have "morning rituals of sanctuary." We meditate, take the dog for a long walk, swim or read a devotional. It's all about getting the day off on the right foot. But psychologists tell us that ending the day with the experience of sanctuary can be even more important.

So this month, find a practice to "end you day with sanctuary." Here's a great article with a bunch of ideas and explanations why it's so key to spiritual centeredness:

[https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2016/02/evening-ritual/?utm\\_source=pocket&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=pockethits](https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2016/02/evening-ritual/?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits)

Come to your group ready to share your experience of engaging the article and the story of which evening sanctuary practice you picked.

## ***Option E: Sanctuary From Your Cell Phone (and Email)***

If there's one thing that most stands in the way of sanctuary these days, it our cell phones and email. They keep us stuck in storm of doing and cut off from the sanctuary of just being. They are the very opposite of stillness, silence and peace.

This exercise invites you to tackle this dilemma by following the advice of a wellness expert named Dave Radparvar. It's called "Toothbrush to Toothbrush." We'll let Radparvar explain the spiritual trick in his own words:

<https://www.holstee.com/blogs/reflections/toothbrush-to-toothbrush>

After reading the article, give it a try for a week or two. Or use the article to figure out a freeing habit of your own. Come to your group ready to share how sanctuary from your cell phone and email helped alter and enhance not only your time before and after brushing your teeth, but also all the time in between!

## ***Option F: Find Sanctuary in Our Recommended Resources***

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of sanctuary. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of sanctuary. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.