

The Four Needs for Daily Sanctuary Need #4: Celebration of and Communion with Life by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

One of the most beautiful moments in my life occurred on my birthday when Tricia was six months pregnant with Sonji. On a warm April day we drove to a nearby wildlife refuge and walked off the beaten path to lay in an isolated sunny meadow of wildflowers. Tricia bared her protruding belly to the warmth of the sun while I lay my head on her chest. The deep feelings of love, peace, and joy that I felt were partially in response to my own emotional pregnancy as a man who, in some respects, was experiencing the awakening of his own maternal and paternal energies. But there was also this heightened sense of being held in the sacred arms of nature. The gentle breeze playing at the flowers' cheeks and the skirts of the grasses. The songbirds creating whimsical melodies. The distant gurgling of a brook. A deep blue sky dotted with cloud ships and passing butterflies. The subtle drone of the earth beneath our bodies. Such celebration and communion — with nature, animals and insects, my beloved partner — transcended all other awareness.

Far different than the previous needs for sanctuary is the inherent need of our soul to reconnect with the celebration of creation. Here, we may feel the pull to commune with life, nature, a friend or loved one, even an animal, and to do so deeply.

In our book, *The Sanctuary Garden*, we use the word *enchantment* to describe this particular need for sanctuary. Thomas Moore partially defines enchantment as “a state of rapture and ecstasy in which the soul comes to the foreground, and the literal concerns of survival and daily preoccupation at least momentarily fade into the background.” He goes on to suggest that “. . . to make local nature a concrete element in daily life is a necessary initial step in the re-enchantment of our individual lives.”

The Need for Relationship

Enchantment (and re-enchantment) embraces the soul's desire for interconnectedness. M.C. Richards, in her book *The Crossing Point*, states it eloquently: “One of the truths of our time is this hunger deep in people all over the planet for coming into relationship with each other. People are hungering and thirsting after experience that feels true to them on the inside, after so much hard work mapping the outer spaces of the physical world. They are gaining courage to ask for what they need: living interconnections, a sense of individual worth, shared opportunities.”

To see sanctuary as an opportunity to celebrate relationships at all levels is one of the most accessible uses of sanctuary. There certainly is nothing that feels more secure than the safe haven of an enduring friendship. For example, I had a musical partnership with a cellist for almost twenty years. During most of that time we communed regularly one day a week for up to six hours or more. Our personalities and views about life were different enough to provide interesting philosophical discussions, yet our music came from one great spirit. More than anything, however, our unconditional fellowship supported each one of us through major life crises and marriage difficulties.

Tricia and I accept in our marriage the value and need to experience sanctuary in celebration and communion with special friends. We consider such a need to be unconditional and uncompromisable, knowing full well that our lives and our own relationship are enhanced by immeasurable degrees. Tricia takes periodic sojourns, for example, to see her dear friend, Morgan, in Utah. Not only do these pilgrimages revitalize their friendship, but they also have a profound effect on regenerating Tricia's own

soulfulness. She is able to explore spontaneity, laughter, and intimate friendship far differently than with me, yet when she returns I benefit immediately from her renewed vitality.

Sanctuary within partnership and family is also an express route to the heart. Tricia and I have a special fondness for alone time together, engaging in some activity that deepens our connection. You should know that, being self-employed with our cottage businesses at home, we are in each other's presence almost 24 hours a day. But we have also chosen to incorporate experiences that deepen our loving service to each other. We are fond of identifying a heartwarming movie to view then a small meal afterwards. Sometimes we enact our ritual of enchantment to candlelight, inspiring music, and holding. Quite frequently, sanctuary time together occurs on the comfortable living room couch, giving each other foot rubs while listening to the songs of Hildegard de Bingen. These are unconditional moments which we have unspokenly agreed over the years not to trivialize with unnecessary conversation about petty subjects (work, bills, gossip, etc.). Still other times, our alone time together is simply a walk on our land, or working side by side in the garden.

Do you see what I am getting at about the accessibility of this particular need for sanctuary? We can incorporate activities and experiences into our day that increase the well-being of connectedness and intimacy with our world. It is not just about plopping down in front of a 27-inch television set for four hours every night with another human being or a dog or cat at your feet, believing this connects you to the world. That is too simple, too familiar, *too separating from others*. The mind gets filled up with sound bites and visual bites, clogging the way to the heart. The quality of sanctuary experiences that we should strive for in intimacy with the world is *spirit lifting and life enhancing*. We must feel within our soul an element of celebration, perhaps enchantment.

The Need to Deepen the Soul

Being a dedicated musician and composer most of my life, I feel qualified to speak about the incredible sense of sanctuary music has given me. It has allowed me to tap into the depths of my heart and soul, to feel the auditory sound of love, passion, sadness, pain, and joy. Musical sanctuary is what has salvaged my aching heart or broken spirit. It has allowed me to experience the total sense of freedom and spontaneity of spirit that so eludes people. It has offered me countless opportunities to experience the serendipitous genius of creation. It has opened my heart in ways of generosity that I could never have imagined, allowing me the courage and humility to "give it away" in auditory and emotional pleasure to others. In all its cleverness, mathematics, and logic, music of high quality remains the magical and mystical connection to God. I have been so fortunate to receive and harbor this gift in my life.

I tell you this because the accessibility of sanctuary as a means to enhance the spirit of your life is every reason to find an experience to grasp onto, as if it were a lifeline to your soul. Years ago I saw this happen to Tricia as she fully surrendered to gardening. Gardening for her became her form of music. I am the first to admire how her long periods of solace in the garden have profoundly affected her compassionate outlook on life. I am also aware how much gardening was a necessary sanctuary from the early years of intensity and friction in our relationship. The nurturance and compassion I was not able to fully appreciate and receive from her in those formative years of our marriage I saw her pour into loving care of the soil, plants, and creatures of the garden. I too found sanctuary in gardening as well, rediscovering my soulful connection with rock, wood, water, light, and soil. Both of us have evolved tremendously from those early years, and undoubtedly our sanctuary garden has been a great and necessary teacher about reverence, compassion, and non-judgment.

The Need to Connect with Nature

It must be in our human DNA that we gravitate naturally to seeking sanctuary in communion with Nature. After all, we supposedly rose up out of the mud, and our very name *human* (from humus or soil) seems to remind us of a necessary connection. Most of our vacations — well-planned isles of grace from work — are specifically geared toward experiencing nature in some way. It is hard to find fault with the underlying need we all have for this, even if our little isle of sanctuary is a beach blanket amidst a sea of thousands of other sun-worshippers. Or, our mobile home or tent sanctuary is packed tightly next to hundreds of others beneath the awe-inspiring granite walls of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

Furthermore, we should not hastily pass judgment for such vacation choices, rather we should look at the subconscious purity of intention, the *participation mystique*, as it has been called: we are but children of evolution in need of occasional comfort in the arms of Mother Nature. We need proximity to Her presence and Her creatures, for we ourselves become re-empowered and realize to some degree that we must also share life's stage with other beings. And the truth is, we don't have to create expensive, well-planned vacations to make this connection. We can tend a garden, a balcony of plants, or a plant in a window. We can choose not to eat our lunch in a cafeteria or restaurant but on a park bench (in fact, one woman I know makes this a conscious choice for sanctuary time from her stressful job every day!). Our soul needs such refuge, our mind needs such respite, and our lives need such grace.

Think about your own life. What personal activities or experiences would you say definitely fit into the concept of sanctuary? Are any of these with dear friends, animals, or a particular aspect of nature? For almost seven months out of the year, Tricia and I go out each evening to the edge of our wooded ridgeline and sit on what we call our Sunset Bench. This is sacred time and space for us, as we silently watch the light of day fade over a distant lake. Do you have a ritual in your life that is sacred and inviolable, one that gives you a deep sense of peace and calm, a deep sense of grace amidst the world?

I want to leave this particular need for sanctuary with the following inspiring quote from Henry Moore. I keep this quote in front of me all the time. When you read it, think how you too can find deep celebration for life in some experience or with another being. Perhaps the great challenge Moore speaks of is simply that which seems most impossible in life today: to give ourselves the sacred time and space for sanctuary.

“The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something that you cannot possibly do.”

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

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