

How to Make a Room a Sanctuary

by Christopher Forrest McDowell, Ph.D.

To create a special feeling in a place and to do it so that it emits the essence of sanctuary --- this takes both thought and commitment. Remember what it is about sanctuary that stirs your need for it. You want a little time and space to yourself. You want a place that feels peaceful and/or spiritually rejuvenating. You want a spot to show your special connection with life: perhaps therein is a family or spiritual altar, some natural crafts or favorite art, pictures, books, plants, etc.

In your sanctuary you want a place to relax, contemplate, simply *be*, unfettered and undisturbed by worldly cares. This sanctuary is your little retreat from the world. No big thing, no big request. Not like asking for a two week vacation, not even like asking for one day off! Great regeneration can occur in a mere thirty minutes or hour. This is a daily need you should want to think about and make a regular commitment toward. A small form of loving yourself everyday.

What is it about a room that feels enfolding and inviting? We have all been in such settings, so what draws us to them? On one level we are attracted to the physical presence of the place and its assorted objects. But on another level, we are magnetized by a feeling or energy that a room or part of a room emits. Let's characterize this feeling or energy as the room's ambience, its mood or presence. On a deeper level we can even speak about its presence of spirit --- the spirit of the place or its psychic energy.

I believe that it is exactly the purposeful formulation of a room that should be a first consideration in creating a room sanctuary. This is true interior or inner decorating --- determining your intent before actually seeking to fulfill it with objects. Here are some questions to stimulate this inner inquiry:

1. What is your primary **intent** in creating a room sanctuary, or in identifying part of a room as sanctuary? Is it for solitude? Meditation and spiritual communion? Simple relaxation and bodily/mental restoration? Contemplation and inspirational reading, journaling, or music listening? Simple observation (as in a spot by a window looking out onto a natural setting)? Intimate conversation or holding? Of course, a setting may meet a variety of needs at different times, and that is okay. But still in all, your major intent usually has a narrower focus and expectation, so think about this.
2. What **mood** are you desiring to create in your sanctuary setting? What feeling or state of mind do you want to evoke for yourself or a visitor? Is it one of absolute comfort, coziness and enfoldment? Or are you wanting it to be more austere, suggesting focusing one's energy as in a simple meditation setting with altar, pillow or chair? Do you desire a celebrative atmosphere with worldly objects and momentos? Is the setting to be alive with energy or subdued asking for more inner contemplation? Is it to emit a sacred focus, appealing to this level of personal solitude and inspiration? Is it to project serenity and tranquility?
3. What **value of life** do you want your sanctuary to address? Is it your intent to purely honor the spiritual realm, to focus on religious devotion? Do you want to honor and celebrate your relationship to family, friends and relationships? Do you want your sanctuary to embrace a holistic honoring of other cultures, animals, nature, inspiring authors, great works and art? Do you want your sanctuary to reflect the input and value of others --- family members, friends, heroes, dieties --- as they periodically bring to the setting their reverent items and devotions?

When you ponder questions about the nature of your intent, mood, and value of life, as reflected in your indoor sanctuary setting, you are engaging your soul. Your soul is in lovewith life, this physical plane of existence. But the soul, like your body and mind, also needs a little break from the world, some time and a special place to regenerate and contemplate its love for the divine. Your soul, in short, has a special need to maintain balance --- to love the Creation and to love the Creator. This balance is quite evident in the questions asked above, as they continually ask you to consider what it is about sanctuary that can meet your unique needs.

Location

Thoughtfully answering the above questions will spark some ideas about what location in your home has sanctuary qualities. A household of children and activities may appear to limit possibilities, but your desire for sacred space should not feel compromised. You may need to limit the size of your space, perhaps even tuck it into a small corner, but still it can become a sacred space honored by all. Every setting is unique, but obvious locations may be an unused or underused spare room, a basement or attic area, or any other special room. Then there's the little corners and areas of rooms that are worth considering. One woman I know claimed a small corner of her and her partner's bedroom. She screened it off with beautiful tapestries. This is her meditation sanctuary --- her particular need and expression for sacred space. Here are some tips for choosing or screening off a location.

- Consider an area with a window for viewing and natural light
- Determine how much privacy and quiet you really need, then think about those places in your home or room that can best meet your need. At one time in my life, I made do with some room in a walk-in closet --- it turned out to be quite a lovely place!
- Screening with tapestries, indoor plants, room dividers, hanging beads, even specially arranged furniture for privacy is effective
- Make sure to receive input and coordinate your sanctuary space selection with others. Sit down and talk about your needs and theirs, the value of such a place in the home, and expectations for its use
- A door, of course, creates a formal entrance and an opportunity to secure privacy
- Don't be afraid to experiment with rearranging furniture in an entire room in order to create private space

Entrance

I believe that a sanctuary setting must feel inviting, therefore some thought should be given to its entrance. The entrance could be formal, as in the door or doorway of a room. However, in many instances the entrance will be relatively informal --- the subtle but effective suggestion that a certain area is for retreat. Plants or screening can do this well, especially if they (or similar objects) are situated such that an obvious small opening is apparent for one to slip through into the sanctuary space itself (sort of a rabbit hole effect). Here are some other ideas to consider:

- A sign or other special symbol at the entrance makes a formal and public declaration of your sacred space. It doesn't have to be loud and pretentious. Our Project provides registrants with a small 6x8" sign of a soft magenta and white color that reads "Sanctuary --- May All Be At Peace Within." One couple has a mandala symbol on the door to their room. Another a sacred quote from a sage. A young woman simply has a small note card nestled among the plants at the entrance to her small sanctuary corner. All it says is Peace.
- Some people make a formal request for one to remove their shoes at the entrance, and this is kindly noted near the entrance

- Consider having a small table or pedestal upon which sits a few special, if not sacred items. This can set a tone for humility and gratitude before entering. One woman has a bowl of small polished stones and suggests that one take one if desired, sort of like a gift of a touchstone to be carried into the sanctuary space or with one upon leaving. Another woman has put small angel cards and spiritual quotes in a couple of bowls, both for the inspirational taking.
- The entrance (or just inside your sanctuary space) is also a good place to suggest a gesture of honoring. One couple, for example, has a tithing bowl into which they drop a coin or two. Several people I know light incense or a candle to demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to peace.
- The entrance is also a wonderful spot to showcase a vase of flowers, a special plant, a small statue, even a water feature. All of the ideas presented here help to create a spirit or energy to your sanctuary space.

Furnishings

Your intent and desired mood for your sanctuary space will also affect its furnishings. In a more austere spiritual setting, one may desire just a meditation chair or pillow, an altar, and a few symbolic objects. Obviously, the intent here would be to create spiritual and meditative focus, not to suggest a place to lie back and zone out. Contemplate once again what are the parameters of your intent for a sanctuary space, and furnish accordingly. Here are some ideas:

- A meditation chair usually is special and unique in that its purpose is to give support for proper meditation posture (it is difficult to read a novel in one anyway!). However, the chair should not feel so hard or uncomfortable that it disrupts your concentration. Give thorough thought to a meditation chair, try different kinds of chairs at different heights and comfort. Then once selected, adorn it with a meditation blanket or shawl draped on the chair down to the floor (wool or silk are considered to be most psychically grounding). Similarly, choose a meditation pillow (often called zafus) that comfortably supports your body posture while in meditation or prayer.
- Any other types of sitting furnishings in your space should feel especially comfortable and enfolding. After all, this is your special place for your special time, and you should give yourself permission to pamper your sitting comfort and needs. This is a perfect place for that incredibly comfortable rocker, small sofa, or padded chair. Always have nearby a lap blanket --- you'll know what to do with it!
- Many other types of furnishings now can enhance the mood of your setting. Bring in a small favorite end table or the like (antique furniture have a way of congregating in a sanctuary space), maybe an old antique trunk, or a plant stand or two. Lay down an exceptionally nice area rug, a few floor pillows. Definitely consider a bookshelf, maybe a small writing table, space permitting. You see the idea here? You are creating a type of "space capsule", a mini-home space, a place in which you can be yourself for whatever reason you need sanctuary. There is nothing wrong with this, meaning furnishing your sanctuary with whatever comforts your soul, body, and mind needs at the time.
- Furnishing reflective of art is also very important. Showcase an artpiece or two, especially one that emits the feeling of sanctuary and gratitude for life. One couple's sanctuary space is in their bedroom. On the wall is an exquisite painting of a Mediterranean veranda by the sea, but the mood it evokes is purely reflective. Another couple's picture is of a country lane passing a wildflower meadow framed by haunting maples in autumn. Hmmm, if that wouldn't soothe the worldweary spirit. Sculptures and artpieces from other cultures also add to a sacred space. Items from India and Indonesia are especially popular and generally easy to obtain.
- Music may have a place in your setting, and if so, make sure you have a small system that really comforts you. One man I know places small (but high quality) speakers on both sides of his chair. He then totally enfolds himself between the soothing music he plays. Couple this with candlelight, a stick

of burning incense or other aromatic offerings, and a spot of tea or sweet treat and you have an incredible sanctuary experience for the soul!

- A window is a furnishing too. Make sure you do justice to a window, framing it with nice curtains, paint or stain. Especially highlight it with a nearby piece of furniture or chair, or a special plant. A room with a view is a sanctuary experience unto itself, as those of us who relish such a privilege can attest.

Nature

The reflective, peaceful space of a sanctuary seems to naturally want to enfold our relationship with nature. To honor nature in our sanctuary space is to acknowledge the fact that we cannot ever separate ourselves from nature. We live within nature as sure as it lives within us. Unfortunately, most of the people I know never “touch” or acknowledge nature, excepting the need to know what the weather will be like. From the moment they leave their doorsteps, they follow the path of concrete to their car, down the road, into a parking space, and from there into an enclosed building where they stay until they reverse the pattern at the end of the day. I think about the comment that the last thing a fish discovers is water. Well, in sanctuary we can reconnect with nature, even if it is in a small honoring way. I think this is one of our duties when we create a sanctuary space, to ask ourselves how we can show gratitude for nature. Here’ some ideas.

- Your sanctuary setting is a perfect place for a small aquarium. I know one man who considers this to be his form of television watching --- simply sitting in his private space, listening to gentle music and watching the fluid movements of his fish.
- Speaking of water, your sacred space is an excellent location for a water feature. Desktop fountains have come into great popularity today. Why? Psychologically, moving water is very healing and comforting, if not archetypal. But the gentle sound of moving water also affects and salves our mood. Feng Shui experts also suggest that moving water arouses the fluid and powerful chi energy in a room, stimulating healing, regeneration, and creativity.
- Of course, plants also play a key role in comforting the soul. In your sanctuary don’t hold back on having those types of plants and vases of flowers that really uplift you. Even if you desire a jungle of sorts, go for it. You will feel more alive (as Feng Shui consultants suggest), more vibrant and “wellthy”. And if yours is a space where only a small plant is possible, go for that as well. Simply research a little bit to find a plant that can thrive in low light or modicum space.
- Perhaps your sanctuary is a special place to bond with an animal such as a cat, dog, bird, or the like. This is important to consider as well. Sanctuary time especially brings out those tender and loving parts of our soul. A nearby pet can heighten this expression and give us tremendous comfort if not companionship.
- No pets? That’s okay. Find ways to honor the animal realm. Perhaps a sculpture, painting or drawing brings something out of you. On the windowsill of one of my sanctuary spaces I sit an assortment of small animal sculptures (I guess you could say I collect them). They all face looking outside and skyward. I call them sunworshippers, but really they’re my nature worshippers and they keep me in touch with that vast realm of beings that roam the earth as I do myself and which I owe great honor. Small creatures aside, a perfect way to honor the animal realm is with a favorite child’s stuffed animal or two (yes, it is difficult if not awkward to use the phrase “stuffed animal”, but you know what I mean). You know from personal experience the type of tenderness and sweetness a teddy bear solicits from the human heart. This is why a sanctuary space is a perfect home for such an animal.

Altar

The creation of an altar in a sanctuary space serves a key purpose --- it is a symbol of honoring and devotion. Many people establish an altar for religious or spiritual purposes, where they show their devotion to a deity or master. Here they may have a picture and other spiritual icons. Other people create an altar that pays tribute to their family and/or their personal life, placing pictures, quotes, momentos and other types of objects. Still others create a holistic type of altar that celebrates nature, life, and spiritual realms. Here may be found an ongoing collage of nature objects and personal tokens (pictures, momentos, etc.) that depict one's love affair with life. Such an altar usually changes with the whims of its admirers or the seasons.

An altar is different than a mantel above the fireplace, where sits family memorabilia and the like. This is not to say that a mantel is not a heartfelt location. It may certainly qualify as a personal altar if it is part of the space in a room that is felt to be a sanctuary. There are no hard rules here, simply the acknowledgement that an altar usually has deep significance and therefore deserves to be located in a special place. Here's some ideas.

- Give thought to the physical nature of your altar. Many people believe that an altar deserves to be a special piece of furniture or table, perhaps antique or handmade. But an altar may also simply be a piece of cloth placed on the floor or a very low dais, as in a meditation room.
- Your altar's location is important too. Do you wish for it to be a focal point in your sanctuary? Or would you prefer for it to blend in with other furnishings? Is a location beneath or near a window desirable, or how about a more subdued lowlight corner?
- The objects you place on your altar should have extraordinary significance to you and other members involved in its care and upkeep. Each item should have symbolic value. And remember, it is not important what others think --- your personal altar is exactly that: personal.
- Care for your altar regularly. Light incense, place flowers, have a bowl of angel cards or other inspirational quotes or statements, consider setting an inspirational book on it or nearby. And of course, dust it, rearrange it, add and replace items, keep it alive with your spirit.

The Senses

A sanctuary space is an opportunity to treat the senses. Here are some things to consider.

- What colors do you want to display or highlight? Both science and the intuitive arts have demonstrated that color affects mood. For example, reds and oranges energize, yellow tends to increase communication, while pastel blues, violets, greens, and white soothe, heal, and open one's receptivity to the spiritual realms. Feng Shui principles of color and color placement are also worth considering.
- Lighting is important to a sanctuary space as well. The natural light from a window or skylight is invaluable for mood. But so is the soft light emanating from a candle or a fireplace. Lamps can add to a mood, especially if they have a nice lampshade that accents the light, as from a stained glass shade.
- How do you envision soothing your ears? Sanctuary space is a perfect place to seek silence, and it is this need for peace and quiet that should be honored, if desired. Gentle sounds, however, are also in keeping with sanctuary. An open window may allow the sound of outdoor nature to filter in. A small indoor, tabletop water fountain may soothe your spirit, as may the chirping of a pet bird. Finally, the use of music that is gentle and inspiring is a worthy addition.
- Give consideration to treating your sense of smell while in sanctuary. Incense is commonly used. Aromatherapy and essential oils, scented candles, sachets, herbal pillows, and flowers are other valuable additions.
- Your need for touch can be sensitively met in sanctuary. The feel of a plush and comfortable chair, sofa, or pillow can really affect the soul. Also consider having a soft lap blanket or shawl, a furry stuffed animal, even a favorite pet. Finally, consider having art pieces of varying textures that one may

hold or manipulate. Such objects as pieces of wood, polished or rough stones, sculptures, or cloth may also appeal to the touch.

- Lastly, do not rule out your sense of taste. It is entirely okay to use your sanctuary to enjoy a cup of coffee, tea, hot chocolate, or other brew, even a refreshing juice drink. Similarly, a sweet treat, candy, or the like may feel comforting. You may choose moderation in the use of food, but you may also believe that food is not in keeping with your intent, for example if your sanctuary is to be used strictly for meditation and spiritual communion.

In Conclusion

Sanctuary is a gift to yourself. If you identify a certain space in your home as a sanctuary you are investing in your soul. But sanctuary may also be your gift to friends or other family members. Steward your setting with devotion. You will find that the more it is used the more a type of peaceful energy and spirit will dwell within it. As such, sanctuary will become an integral part of your daily life, and your need for sanctuary will be respected by all.

Copyright © 2007 by Christopher Forrest McDowell, Ph.D.

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