

## Creating Sacred Spaces:

### Using a Home Altar

©Anne Marie Gabrielle, 2000, 2008



*For many who grew up traditionally religious in America (perhaps especially those of European descent), it was not part of their religious tradition to create a home altar. This article will give you some ideas how (and why) to do that. Much of this article was first published in **Unity Magazine**, May 2000.*

We carry a sacred space around with us wherever we go--our inner temple. Even Scripture says that "Our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit." We do not so much have to *create* a sacred space but find what is already there. Then clean it out, dust it off, make it ready to be what it already is—sacred. We want to be able to create a channel inside—create the neural connections if you will—so that no matter where we are, we can readily open the channel to this inner temple or sacred space simply by having the intention to tune in. One of the things we can do to help ourselves, to help remind ourselves of this inner Temple, is to create an outward symbol of the sacred which we already have within.

A home altar can be an outward symbol and reminder of our inner Temple, our sacred space within. Because it is concrete, made of things from the material world, the home altar can be centering and grounding. Many Latino-Christian homes have altars which contain candles, statues of Mary and Jesus, and pictures of the ancestors. Most Buddhist homes have altars. Some Hindu friends first showed me the central role a home altar can play in practicing their faith, and I was astonished to recall words from Judeo-Christian Scriptures to match their actions.

Meena and Krishna pray in a special room dedicated to prayer and meditation. They take off their shoes and put slippers on when they enter their

house—but the sign that their prayer and meditation room is very special is that they even take off their slippers! They enter the room barefoot (“Take off your shoes, for the ground you are standing on is holy.”). They light a candle (“God is light.”) and a stick of incense (“Let your prayers rise as incense before me), and sit before a 3-foot square altar. Meena and Kris’s altar contains representations which reflect their Indian-Hindu background: white-painted patterns called rangoli, several small representations of their gods, coins and flowers as offerings, and a picture of their guru. They meditate in silence daily. When they invited me to a festival to honor the goddess Durga, who brings power and strength, I was amazed to feel the vibrations in the room begin to rise as they moved from one Sanskrit song to another—not unlike the rising vibrations at a Christian holy event.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, I learned, every family has its own altar. The altar is the center of the home, much like it is the center of many Christian sanctuaries. Soon after visiting Meena and Kris’s, I set up my first of many home altars. It was helpful to me to put my home altar into context, to understand that I wasn’t simply adopting some other religious tradition but reinterpreting it into the Christianity which I already practiced. So while my altar reflected my eclectic tastes and tendency to learn from many traditions, I was happy to consider similarities between what I did and what my Jewish and Christian ancestors had done. There were some small rocks on my first altar. I am very drawn to rocks and stones—but they were also reminders of the **original** Jewish altars. Those original altars were made of stone (Jacob made the stone upon which he had dreamed of angels into an altar). I used flowers on my first altar—indeed many altars contain flowers. They are symbols of the natural world . . . and beauty . . . God and I both love beauty. Whereas Meena and Krishna placed a picture of their guru on their altar, I knew I didn’t have a human guru in that sense, but I did have Spiritual Masters, so I placed representations of them on mine. My first altar contained a picture of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of environmentalists. It also held a small, metal statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who I feel a special kinship with. And I hung a picture of Jesus on the wall overlooking it all. A special picture—as it had seemed to beckon to me in a religious shop soon after my father died. Holy water reminded me of my baptism and to periodically cleanse myself symbolically. I also used a beeswax candle on my first altar. The element of fire symbolized purity and additional cleansing—beeswax because it was from nature. A wooden cross dominated the altar. This particular cross held special meaning as it was the one my daughter received as the youngest camper at church camp about 25 years ago. Coincidentally, all five elements of the creation were represented on my altar—wood, metal, fire, water, and mineral (or earth). Non-Catholics may not have had the experience of holy water. Catholics know you can get some in most churches, or you can make some yourself by praying over and putting the sign of the cross over water.

I encourage you to set up your first home altar right now. If you’re like most people, you probably won’t have an entire room to dedicate to that purpose—it’s great if you do. But you can create an altar by placing a cloth on top of a dresser or even a file cabinet in a corner of your bedroom. On the cloth, you can place things of symbolic significance. And because your altar represents sacred

space, you probably should make an ironclad rule to never use the altar as a resting place for coffee cups or anything else.

Next are some ideas on how to use your altar. I was intrigued by the “sacrificial” origins of many altars. In many ancient religions, altars were places of sacrifice, sometimes (horribly) humans. After human sacrifice, the sacrifice of animals or food in Judaism was deemed an improvement, although most of us would still consider animal sacrifice objectionable and food sacrifice a waste. A case can be made that even the God of the Bible began to feel that way as well. In some of the prophets, God seemed to lose patience with sacrifices because they had seemed to become empty rituals. (Paraphrasing God, to do a sacrifice which was a mere empty ritual seemed to be an attempt to *control* God rather than to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God”) which would seem to be more ultimately pleasing to God. That is a possible reason why in Christianity, there was an evolution, with Christ becoming the **ultimate** sacrifice, which is reflected in the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

I kept trying to get behind the reason for “sacrifices”. Attempting to *control* God is a distortion. And yet to make an “offering” seems more noble while being true to the original meaning of the word. Most of my “offerings” are simply prayers, although I offer other things as well. You can “offer” prayers for others as well as yourself. You can also “offer” the parts of yourself you perceive you need to release and let go of as well as your intentions for moving forward on your life journey. One way you can do this when a situation or person needs ongoing prayers, is you can place a piece of paper stating the intention in a small prayer box which you can leave on the altar. When a situation no longer requires constant prayer, you can say a prayer of thanksgiving and “offer” (release) the energy on the piece of paper in a sacred ceremony of burning. (Do this outside of course where and when it is safe.)

In essence, your prayer of thanksgiving and release will symbolically rise to heaven in the smoke. (Psalm 141:2: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”)

You can also offer the parts of yourself that need to grow and change. (Life often gives you this information, but you can also use your journal to ask questions like the following:

Do I feel angry right now? How strong is my anger? Is it more like rage?  
Can I feel the anger in my body? Where? Who do I think I am angry at?

Do I feel sad right now? How strong is my sadness? Can I feel the sadness  
in my body? Where? Why do I think I am sad?

Do I feel tired right now? How tired do I feel? Where in my body do I feel  
this tiredness? Muscles? Joints? Heart?

Do I feel bored right now? Am I paying attention to what I am doing? What  
would I rather be doing? Are there feelings I am trying to avoid?

You may be surprised to see that feelings often arise that you would not have been aware of if you had not asked the questions. You can bring these feelings as an intentional offering to God, just as the Psalms contain all of the deep feelings of the Psalmist.

You can also place newspaper articles describing events which touch your heart on the altar. These can serve as a reminder of what you should pray about, and they are a symbol of your request for constant prayers for the situation (even when you are not consciously praying).

When you have the time, perhaps on weekly, monthly, or quarterly “retreat” days, prayer time can begin after you’ve journaled and read Scripture. Light the candle while singing words adapted from one of the Psalms. I particularly like the 23rd Psalm, “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want, Alleluia.” Thank God for nature and the world and for being alive and for whatever else arises spontaneously. Make prayers of blessing for your family and ask for blessing for specific people and groups in your life. Pray for a particular world situation or for nature itself, especially because of climate change issues. Bring your special deep concerns to this time. Speak them out loud if your life situation allows for privacy. If tears arise spontaneously or you see beautiful colors or something else in your mind’s eye, rejoice. Those are often signs that your prayers are deep, although your spirit may have other ways of showing you that. Often, people can feel God’s energy moving through them as they pray—the spirit praying through you, but again not everyone “feels” in that way. Don’t worry if you don’t. Sometimes you will find that all you want to do is just sit in silence before your altar, like a time of silent meditation or the spirit praying with more depth than words can convey. (See Romans 8:26-27) (And when it feels right extinguish the candle with the same Psalm you sang to begin with. And, of course, never leave your candle unattended.)

Paul said to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), and as you develop your practice, you may notice yourself praying throughout your day whether or not you are near your altar. Your altar represents a sacred anchor and it reinforces and helps to grow the part of you that contains the secret sacred place—the Temple--within.

And you will find that it feels good to gaze upon the concrete manifestation of the sacred that is your home altar. As you pray around it, the vibrations increase and it will feel more and more holy. The ritual of praying with your altar will help you acknowledge and experience that sacred space within. And the mindful repetition will help you build the neural network to easily connect with your inner sacred temple.

---

Much of this article was first published in **Unity Magazine**, May 2000. Contact Anne Marie Gabrielle by returning to [www.healingandwholeness.com](http://www.healingandwholeness.com) and following the link to her e-mail address.