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The Other Sacred Places

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These are hard times for non-believers. The whole world seems to have gotten religion. In the United States, the public face of Christianity can be seen in a growing list of prime-time television dramas, best-selling books and hot political issues.

I remain agnostic on the question of whether organized religion is a force for good or evil. Unfortunately, the contemporary world provides far too many examples of hatred, violence and killing instigated in the name of one denomination or another, and this uglier side of religion often overshadows the many good deeds quietly undertaken by people of faith.

But it is clear that believers reap numerous benefits non-believers do not. Those of us untouched by the religious impulse forgo a sense of community that many religious people enjoy. We have no holy texts, no hymns, no holidays, no rituals and no churches, temples or mosques.

Even for the non-believer, however, there are places that can be holy. On a recent trip to the Midwest, I had the chance to visit two of the world's great museums: the Art Institute of Chicago and the Field Museum of Natural History there. Growing up in the Chicago area, these were places I visited often as child, and it was a great joy to see them again. The Art Institute's holdings include a wonderful collection of impressionist paintings, and the Field Museum now features Sue, the largest, most complete skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus rex ever discovered.

I was deeply moved as I wandered through these buildings. Standing inches away from a Picasso or a 67 million-year-old dinosaur skeleton is an experience that can take your breath away. But I was also acutely aware of the great human effort required to make these places possible.

Museums are not religious spaces, but they are temples built by human imagination - not only the imaginations of the artists and scientists who created beauty and revealed the workings of nature, but also the imaginations of civic leaders who believed that great art and science should be enjoyed by all. Federal, state and local governments and corporate and private donors have provided the funds, and hundreds of staff members and volunteers have provided the expertise and labor.

These places are not created for an elite group. The day I visited the Field Museum, the staff estimated that a thousand schoolchildren would be in attendance. Yes, there is an admission fee that helps support these organizations, but like most great museums, there are many days each year when admission is free. So anyone, regardless of income level, can pass through the doors and see Grant Wood's "American Gothic" or the most complete Tyrannosaurus rex skeleton ever found. Like our public libraries, these great institutions make beauty and wisdom available to all.

So when I am in need of spiritual sustenance and a sense of something larger than myself, I know I can find it in these sacred places. I may not find the hand of God or the promise of a life beyond, but I know I

will find the best of our humanity working together in the world we share right now. That's enough for me.

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