



Bringing Antiracism to the Altar

Creating Sacred Space to Help Us
Stay Committed to the Work

Introduction

Across the U.S. and around the world, the brutal murder of George Floyd has drawn millions to the streets demanding the abolition of systemic racism along with the brutal policing that has long been its ally. There are reasons to be hopeful that persistence in these protests will move the needle perceptibly toward racial justice -- but our racist roots run deep, and it is surely true that anti-racist work is a marathon and not a sprint.

Soon, the protests may not command the network headlines or our social media feeds in the way that they do right now, and that is precisely when our personal commitment to the work of antiracism will matter most. When the media moves onto the next news cycle, what will remind you that systemic racism is still a matter of life and death every single day? What will keep you growing as an antiracist and pushing for change?

We suggest making a personal altar in your home dedicated to this work -- a sacred space that keep you centered and focused in your efforts to be and bring about change.

Altars: Meaningful Associations

Spiritual Center: In temples, in sanctuaries, and in even in homes, altars create a spiritual center -- a physical location for recurring ritual, reflection and prayer. (This can be especially important during the pandemic when more public altars are not available.)

Physical Expression of Commitment: Altars help us give outward form to inward intentions. Exercising creative expression empowers us to make our hopes, dreams and plans concrete and tangible.

Juxtaposition of the Divine and the Mundane: Altars imbue ordinary objects with extraordinary significance. They remind us that ordinary things, ordinary people and ordinary actions can mean more than we sometimes imagine.

Atonement/Sacrifice: Altars are frequently associated with sin, the need for forgiveness and the willingness to give something of value to secure right relationship. Taking care not to reinscribe harmful theological systems, reflecting on the sin of racism and the need for forgiveness can be appropriate in our national context. What are we willing to give up / turn from / sacrifice to make things right?

Remembrance/Communion: In the Christian tradition, memory is a pathway to presence. The ritual of Communion is framed by the command to remember. Placing items on the altar that encourage remembrance can lead us to emotional/spiritual spaces that continue to give us power. It can help us draw strength from and honor our traditions and our ancestors.

Joshua 22: The Altar as a Witness Between Us

What begins in Genesis as the extraordinarily dysfunctional family of Jacob develops over time into generations of tribal conflict. In Joshua 22, there has been a brief period of fraternal interest where the Reubenites, Gaddites and the half-tribe of Manasseh have all been supporters and allies of Israel. Joshua blesses them for their help and sends them home with treasure to spare. But it is nearly all undone when having crossed the border out of Israel, they decide to build an "imposing altar."

Israel takes this as a sign of rebellion -- a sign that these tribes intend to sacrifice to gods other than the God of Israel and they rush to meet them armed and enraged. When they get there, the Reubenites explain that the altar was never meant for sacrifice at all. They only feared that one day, their descendents would forget that they shared a common bond with the Israelites, so they built the altar as a way to help future generations remember their kinship. It was meant to be a testimony that they were inextricably connected, "and the Reubenites and Gaddites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us -- that the Lord is God."

The work of antiracism is a call to remember that we are indeed one family inextricably connected. Perhaps as we work to recover those bonds of trust that have been frayed to the breaking point, we can find some value in building an altar that functions "as a witness between us."



Amaris's Altar

Amaris's Altar



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1

I built my altar in this particular corner of my bookshelf, in order to show gratitude for the artists that create spaces where it is easier to breathe. Black fiction has taught me history, made me feel at home, helped me love myself, and helped me see the beauty in God's people, all while telling a good story. The books are a call to remember that AntiRacist work and resistance of white supremacy takes many forms.

2

I wanted to include something that reminded me of my Green Street family. This mini trophy is part of a larger trophy that the Green Machine won. The mighty Green Machine is Green Street's Rec league softball team that kept me connected to our church family. I was never a great ball player. But, I was always encouraged, welcomed, and included. They even let me bring home the trophy one year.

3

There's a photograph of my father and one of my auntie, two nieces, and mom. This is a call to be mindful of generations forward and generations before. We are linked, experiencing similar things in different ways.

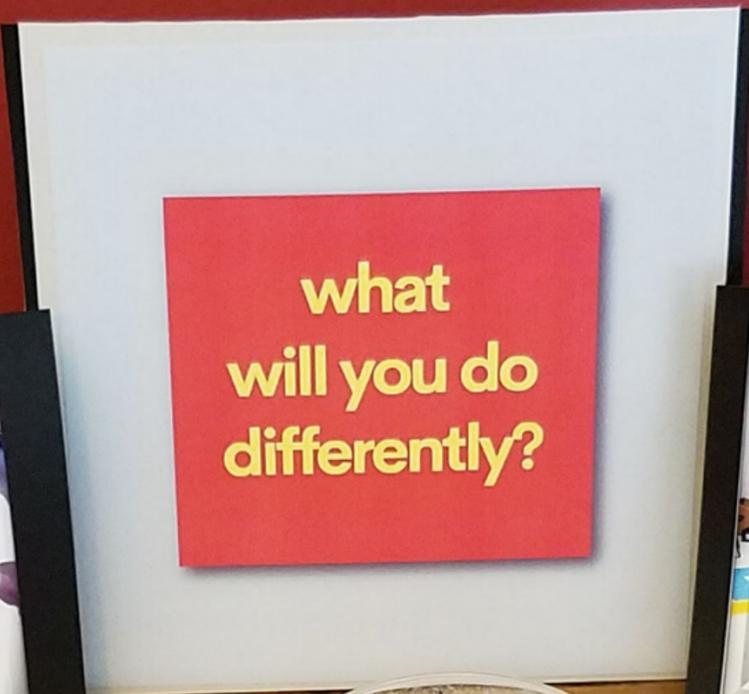
4 I have three parents, my auntie, my mom, and my dad. The three candles represent what I learned from them, their stories, their struggles, their best, and their worst. Children of sharecroppers and teachers, graduates of a segregated high school, workers in oppressive systems, bringers of joy, hopeful dreamers and committed guides.

5 The bracelet is a gift from my mother, made during an Adult care program. My mother was fiercely independent, ambitious, and a leader on all fronts. Her life drastically changed in 2006, when she suffered a stroke because she no longer had healthcare and couldn't afford the medication she needed. It is a call to fight for righteous systems.

6 This stone calls me to remember that I am cared for. It reminds me that I am not alone.

7 The pins call me to affirm an AntiRacist mindset, as well as to stay active in the fight. One pin states Black Lives Matter. The other pin is Okoye, a Wakandan warrior. She is fictional; but what she inspires is real. The pins are an inward witness as much as they are an outward one.

Kim's Altar



Kim's Altar

1



3



what
will you do
differently?

4



6



2



5



1

This is a piece Ben wanted to include on the altar. It's a soda bottle sculpture made by a prisoner in the Philippines. The daughter of Presbyterian activists gave it to him when he was 8. In his words, "This bottle is one of the first things that ever humanized the criminal justice system for me. It made me start to ask questions and think critically about it."

2

We chose this bowl (one that John made) because of the blue and white pattern . Here the colors represent white supremacy and police brutality. The stones are men, women and children that have been murdered as a result of that deadly combination. We each selected names that had impacted us and painted them in red for a memorial.

3

During the George Floyd protests in Charlotte, three generations of black men agonized over yet another murder. The one on the right addressed the 16 year-old boy and said, "If you don't do something different, in 10 years, you'll be right back here." For their sakes, and for the sakes of our children, we have to change the story. *What will I do differently?*

4

We purchased the candle online from a black-owned business called "Sacred Space." Though it's too small to read in the picture, the word "Breathe" is printed on the label. We light it and pray for the courage to build a world where the weight of racism is lifted and equality allows *everyone* to breathe.

5

Junauda Petrus-Nasah wrote a beautiful poem called "Give the Police to the Grandmas." In it, she paints a world where black lives are protected and celebrated -- a world where black joy and promise can thrive. Images of that life and of the "grandmas" are collected and held in a basket made by women in Rwanda.

6

I wanted to include a living plant that requires attention to make sure that I checked into this sacred space frequently. Toni Morrison tended a jade plant for over a decade, and a succulent seemed reasonable for someone like me with a thumb that's only faintly green. Making sure this plant has what it needs to live is another reminder to do the same for my community.

Making Your Own Altar

- **Find a Location:** Any location that makes you feel special, peaceful, powerful or appreciative is appropriate.
- **Reflect on a Theme:** What elements of meaning will keep you grounded, strengthened, committed to your antiracist work?
- **Gather Objects:** Anything you find meaningful is welcome. Consider things that represent different elements of nature, or things that have personal meaning for you.
- **Bless it:** Take a moment to recognize this as holy space. Light a candle or say a prayer.
- **Use it:** What will your rhythm and ritual be? Make a plan and use it .

No one can make an altar for you. Your altar will be unique and empowering because it is yours.

Even so, we can all learn from each other, and if you are willing to share it, we would love to see what you create. Consider taking a picture and telling us about it on Green Street's FB page.

Thank you for your commitment to being an antiracist; let us know if we can support you in any way.

Green Street's AR Team