

Sunday Service: Worship – Idolatry or Awe?

By Julia E. Schult, UU Church of Cortland, Feb. 3, 2013

Our Opening Words come from the Thesaurus at YourDictionary.com website:

Think about these related words:

worship, idolatry, [respect](#), [veneration](#), [admiration](#), [love](#), [regard](#), [esteem](#), [devotion](#), [adoration](#), [glorification](#), [awe](#), obsequiousness, [fear](#), dread.

[dread](#) suggests extreme fear mixed with awe or reverence

[veneration](#) implies worshipful reverence for a person or thing regarded as hallowed or sacred;

[reverence](#) means a feeling of deep respect mingled with love for someone or some thing that one holds sacred or inviolable

[awe](#) refers to a feeling of fearful or profound respect or wonder inspired by the greatness, superiority, grandeur, etc. of a person or thing

Sermon: What's 'Worship' To You?

The title of this sermon, or message, is What's Worship To You? This is a very important question for this congregation over the next 8 months to a year, as we embark upon the process of finding this congregation a new minister. I am heading that committee, and I was on the committee that found the Rev. Jan about – was it 4 years ago?

Jan brought something to the congregation that was new and very interesting to me. She was the first UU that was able to change my mind about the word Worship. To me, the thought of having a Worship Service was anathema. Worship was what you did with idols, something that was often done without thought in the case of certain politicians or sports teams or sports heroes, and generally I thought of worshipping as performing meaningless rituals to "honor" someone without having to think about it.

But Jan had a very different experience of worship, some of which came from her Ministerial training through the UU church. I learned that the word "worship" comes from the Old English *weorthscippen*,

meaning to ascribe worth to something, to shape things of worth. "We worship, then, whenever we ascribe worth to some value, idea, object, person, experience, attitude, or activity -- or whenever we give form or shape to that which we have already found to be of worth." (From Worship Web at UUA.org.) Jan convinced me that when you use your mind and your heart to hold something up as worthy of respect, or love, that act is worship – and it is spiritually satisfying and possibly necessary.

Thus, Jan brought that air of reverence and spiritual worship to our services. She helped the Programs Committee come up with a standard Order of Service, and we discussed what bits go where. Now that Jan has had to leave us, we need to review our services, and decide for ourselves whether we want a Worship Service, as opposed to something else, and what that means to us. As we look forward to finding a new minister or spiritual leader, we need to think about what we want from that person, and what we want that individual to bring to us.

Over the next few months, the Ministerial Search Committee will be asking for your thoughts and feelings about our Sunday services. Right now, I'm going to give you a bit of the thoughts of some of the UUA ministers and service leaders on this subject.

Turns out the UUA has a section of their website called Worship Web. This section seems to be under development, but it is designed to help individuals and congregations to figure out how they want to conduct their services. Their section on Worship Theory includes the following thoughts:

Those of us who are involved in the design of the worship experience ... ought to understand why we do what we do. Anyone can take a standard order of service template and fill the open slots with hymns and readings. Doing it well, though—making sure that the various elements of the service work together to weave an experience for the participants—is a little bit more difficult. And as for trying something new? For many reasons, an appreciation of worship theory can be a great help.

As you might expect, there is no one Unitarian Universalist (UU) worship theory, no "unified worship theory" to which all Unitarian Universalists ascribe. That doesn't mean that there haven't been attempts to describe the indescribable. In 1921, for instance, the Unitarian Van Ogden Vogt described an "order of liturgy" which became the foundation for much of Unitarian worship.

Then the web page continues with more sources of people who discussed various models for healthy UU style worship.

From: <http://www.uua.org/worship/theory/index.shtml>

I found a set of papers on the web by the Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove, and it was very helpful to my thinking about "worship".

From: http://www.uua.org/documents/tenhove/worship_essays.pdf UUMN Course – August 2007

Her first paper is entitled: WHAT IS WORSHIP AND WHY DO WE DO IT?

She starts by pointing out that the word "worship" often implies the worship of a deity. Yet, worship, she says, "requires no belief in a supernatural deity. Worship, to put it simply, is a way for us to enter into a profound relationship with each other, the holy, by whatever name we call it, and ourselves." Basically, along the lines of what Jan said – upholding what we value and regarding it with awe.

Worship can be done in community, or, individually. "For many people, the feelings of awe that occur in the world of nature, for instance, are worshipful. In fact, many Unitarian Universalists claim that this is the only time they truly worship. Jacob Trapp, a 20th century UU minister, wrote a poem about this [feeling of awe] which is included in our UU hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition (#441)" – which we read out just before our last hymn.

"Such feelings of awe can and do bring on a desire to worship. Even the most literal and scientific of Unitarian Universalists can be surprised by the power of such experiences. Throughout the course of history, humans have tried to find ways to shape from these experiences a communal ritual where all can share in the mystery.

“How each of us worships individually might best be called our spiritual practice. While not all people feel a need for a personal spiritual practice, those of us who do would likely consider it a worship-filled experience. And such practice is important in creating ways for us to center, to listen to the “still small voice within” and to stay connected to the great mystery of life.

“[Community] worship builds on that spiritual practice but it is not identical to it.” The Reverend Barbara continues “Human beings are, I believe, worshipful creatures. It is in our nature to want to create rituals that bring us together in order to understand that which is most important in life.” That desire to bring us together in worship has been misused in human history by dictators or false priests, but it has also brought people together to build physically and emotionally as a community.

“Modern Unitarian Universalist worship services have their roots in the protestant reformation and its emphasis on the Bible and the sermon. Prior to the reformation, most Christian worship was highly ritualized, and few, if any services were even done in the native tongue of the listeners. Worship was designed to bring on the experience of awe in the presence of the Almighty. The fact that few understood the words being spoken just deepened the mystery. While there is much beauty and power in these ancient rituals, our [UU] religious ancestors longed to understand the meaning behind the rote words and rigid ritual. Thus, Protestant worship services turned away from ritual toward a more educational approach. Church services were designed to teach – and the Bible readings, sermon, and prayers did just that. The “thing of worth” to be shaped in Protestant worship was the word –of God, the Bible, and the preacher.”

Apparently, UUs are accustomed to being educated in our services. Over time, the limitations of that have become apparent. The human spirit craves learning, yes, but it also craves beauty, celebration, emotional depth and that indescribable something called spirit. We are called to create worship experiences that offer more than just education.

Worship can also be, among other things,

- spiritual,
- transformational and
- community building.

So – how to create this kind of spiritual experience in our services?

First, spirituality. One way to approach this might be to look at worship services that are consistently done well within our congregations. Barbara says, “memorial services are a great example of what Unitarian Universalists do extremely effectively. Why are these services so routinely praised? Perhaps it is because they are about something that is truly important, the life and death of a person. They are also full of emotion that is not simply sentimentality. And they are a reminder that religion and the life of the spirit really matters. Rev. Barbara suggests that our worship services would be perceived as more spiritually moving if we approached them the way we do memorial services – with intention, heartfelt feeling, and an experience of awe.”

Next outcome of worship: Transformation. Transformation implies positive change and worship has the ability to change us, if we choose to let it. How? If it regularly invites the worshipping participants to address issues that matter, in ways that cause them to pay attention to their own lives. Worship is all about paying attention; it is all about being in the present. It is a live experience in a time when so much of what happens to us comes filtered through the media. Worship that moves us does so because it shows us not only who we are but also who we might be.

Finally, worship has the ability to build community. In most congregations, the Sunday morning service is the center of church life. We want it to be a place of welcome. Besides educational opportunities, spiritual insights and transformation, it can provide support, and meet the essential human need for care, and human touch. Barbara was once told that she should approach each service as if someone in the congregation has a broken heart – for it is almost inevitable, that someone will. The worship service is a place where people are not only reminded to care; they can care right then and there. The passing of the peace, sometimes called “greet your neighbor” might be an essential element of the worship experience.

So, too, the very acts of sitting together, listening and singing, standing and sitting, praying and reflecting in silence can remind us that we are not alone. And worship is one way humans have remembered their connection to each other and to the holy since the beginning of time.

Liberal worship has the potential to do so much to make the world a better place. Yet, quality worship often eludes us. So, we must look at ways our congregation can create and sustain quality worship experiences for our members and friends.

The Rev. Barbara's 2nd paper is called WHAT IS QUALITY IN THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE?

Unitarian Universalists put an emphasis on education for our ministers, with stringent learning requirements. On the other hand, our belief in the "priesthood of all believers" leads us to the conclusion that anyone, not just the ordained and credentialed clergy, is capable of doing what ministers do. This has often led to a clash of ideals, even within a single congregation. We want talented professional ministers, yes, but we also want to opportunity (and believe we all must have the ability) to do ministry, particularly the ministry that happens in worship each week.

There's also a conflict between our desire for formal or informal approaches to worship. There are those in our religious communities who equate "formal" worship with the clergy and with ritual and liturgy and either like or dislike it because of that. And then there are others who equate "informal" with more lay participation and flexibility and either like it or dislike it because of that.

I agree with the Rev. Barbara that quality worship can be led by lay or clergy, can be formal or informal, and full of ritual or quite flexible. So what are we looking for? The Rev. Barbara suggests that good worship incorporates

- intention,**
- authenticity, and**
- skill.**

The best services are intentional, that is someone puts serious preparation and thought into what goes in the service, and what is left out. That makes the service significant and meaningful.

Authenticity, her second concept, also helps a service be significant and meaningful. There is no place for phoniness in the worship service. Ministers are taught in seminary that the most important tool we bring to our work is ourselves. This is scary indeed but absolutely essential.

How do we manifest our authenticity in worship? We do so by trusting our own voice to speak of what we know; by owning up to the many things that we don't know; by being willing to admit mistakes and laugh at ourselves; by sharing our vulnerability and our strength; by speaking about things that matter. I do not believe good worship can happen unless we allow ourselves to be ourselves, as fully as we can.

But there is more to quality worship than intent and authenticity, as important as those things are. Some of those things are skills that can be learned or taught, including a clear and concise writing ability, a lively speaking style, and, for lack of a better term, a good sense of facilitation.

While writing is crucial, but the ability to convey ideas verbally is even more important in a service leader. Far too many worship leaders (ministers included) read their words as if they came from an algebra textbook. Most of us are not taught how to read aloud in ways that capture the listener's imagination.

Finally, the ability to facilitate the worship experience well, can make or break the quality of the service. Effective facilitators of worship have a good sense of flow and movement. A good worship leader will make sure that the service moves by paying attention to the small but important things like who is doing what when. Your music director forgot she was to lead the hymn? You step forward and introduce her. The family scheduled to light the chalice doesn't show up? You quickly flip through your hymnal and plan how you will do it. Joys and Sorrows ends on a particularly moving note? You wait an extra moment before introducing the offering. This kind of

facilitation skill can generally be learned but it does take time and experience. Quality worship only appears seamless. Good worship leaders are stitching up those seams all the time.

So we as a congregation have decided that we want a spiritual minister who will give us as much time and attention as possible for as little money as possible. Most of all, what we learned in our last search and I think it is still true, we want to grow as a congregation, grow to a size such that we will have the resources in manpower, financially, and resilience, that we can come to church with joy and anticipation in our hearts. This will happen if we pull together in these next few months, help each other do what needs to be done, and work together to make our worship services – or whatever we decide to call them – just exactly what we want them to be.

Welcome & Announcements

Prelude

Lighting the Chalice (Reading 449)

Hymn 188 – Come, Come, Whoever You Are

Opening Words

Sharing of Joys, Sorrows & Concerns

Responsive Reading 551

Offering

Hymn 402 – From You I Receive

Story for All Ages: Come Sunday

by Grimes & Bryant

Singing the children out:

“Go now in peace, go now in peace;
may the spirit of love surround you,
everywhere, everywhere you may go.”

Singing by the UU Cortland Choir

Responsive Reading 441

Hymn 90 - From All the Fret and Fever of
the Day

Sermon or Message:

What’s Worship To You?

Musical Interlude

Silent Meditation

Closing Words

Hymn 347 – Gather The Spirit

Extinguishing the Chalice (456, unison):

“We extinguish this flame, but not the light
of truth, the warmth of community, or the
fire of commitment. These we carry in our
hearts until we are together again.”

Postlude

Other possible Hymn:

- 354 We Laugh, We Cry