

“WORSHIP: WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO”

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INTRODUCTION

As we slept under a blanket of new snow, Sunday morning came and went elsewhere on the globe. Our congregations in Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines have already kindled and extinguished their chalice. The Unitarians (or, in some cases, Unitarian Universalists) in Hong Kong and Singapore have sung the hymns or songs that speak to and for their Southeast Asian context. Our fellow religious liberals in India and Sri Lanka lifted an offering in support of their various congregations. Prayers and meditations were offered in Nigeria. Sermons were delivered in our sister churches in the homelands of Poland and Romania. Benedictions were pronounced in Spain, France, the Netherlands and Germany. Postludes signaled the end of worship services throughout England, the cradle of American Universalism and Unitarianism. And here, on this continent – from Nova Scotia to Miami, Boston to Columbus – politics, cookies and hugs punctuated coffee hours and sermon discussions.

Chances are, children were dedicated in some of those congregations. Loved ones were remembered. Illnesses and accidents were reported. Birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated. Volunteers were recognized. Accomplishments were shared. Injustices were scorned.

One need not have attended all those services to know these things, for they are part and parcel of this thing called worship. And, to get biblical, I'm neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I can make yet another observation about all those services that preceded ours: Every one of those worship experiences was *local* and every one was *universal*.

Local, because, like politics, all worship is local. The intimate meeting of souls involves particular, real-live persons in real places and real circumstances. If we've learned nothing else from century upon century of trying to get worship experiences right, we know that effective worship must include a sense of tribal belonging; the worshipper says, "I am of *this* people, in *this* place, under *these* circumstances."

And universal, because deep worship always points to that which *transcends* (or at least enlarges) tribal belonging; the worshipper says, "I am of *all* people, in *all* places and under *all* circumstances." The former is about identity and belonging, and the latter is about spiritual awareness and global interdependence.

But wait a minute. Before we get much further, let's be honest enough to admit that not every service in every Unitarian Universalist congregation hits the mark every Sunday. (If you didn't know that before I came to Nora, you surely do by

now!) Sometimes we worship leaders focus on the local to the neglect of the universal. When that happens, we allow you and ourselves to keep new and threatening truths at a safe distance; too much abstract stuff and we're off the existential hook for changing self or congregation.

And when ministers and lay leaders sacrifice the universal for the purely local, we risk becoming isolated and exclusive; too much stuff about ourselves and we signal to others a sense of religious arrogance and intellectual superiority.

Those are tough standards, the local and the universal. Back to our Unitarian Universalist cousins in other parts of the world, how effective was the worship service in, say, Manila or Hamburg or Toronto? The answer to that question turns on the answers to two additional questions:

1. Did the overall experience speak to *the gut-level lives* of the "regulars" as well as the visitors and newcomers?
2. Were they invited to see a bold and broken world rife with the very same messy, yearning stuff of their own lives?

The local/universal thing sounds obvious and simply, but those are tough standards, indeed.

A 15-minute sermon can't do justice to either the philosophy of liberal religious worship or its practice, but my real goal here is to get you thinking about why we do what we do come most Sunday mornings. Are we really like my former parishioner, the one who boldly told visitors that Unitarian Universalists are just atheists who can't kick the Sunday morning habit, or is something deeper going on? Something potentially profound?

WORSHIP DESCRIBED, NOT DEFINED

You probably know that the word, worship, comes to us from the Latin for worth or worthy; translated loosely, it's often described as recognizing – in word, deed or ritual – that which is of utmost value. *It's the self giving way to something (or someone) greater, bigger, more.* Perhaps that's helpful on some levels, but religious liberals are often a hard sell. We can be downright suspicious when slippery religious experience is reduced to definitions – things that can be *defined*.

I don't think the sneaky, invisible, near other-worldly sensation that life is good and worthwhile after all can be defined. *Described*, sure, but not defined. Never defined. Better to try to define God or love or O.J. Simpson! (Uh, good luck on that last one, by the way...) But what if we respected worship as an opportunity to enter sacred space and time? What if worship were freed from the confines of thoughtless repetition? What if worship no longer required that we surrender

power to human intermediaries and fear-inducing deities? What if worship can't be trapped in the bottle of historic creeds?

But, to bring this thing closer to home, what if worship is code for *what might just occur* when you and I enter this sanctuary on any given Sunday? We might just be challenged. We might just sing. We might just laugh. We might just meet a visitor. We might just comfort somebody. We might just be moved to tears. We might just learn something. We might just teach something. We might just disagree. We might just get a hug after a tough week. Maybe worship is code for what might occur when we come together.

WORSHIP AS INHERITANCE

Recall that I began this church year by talking about the Catholic and Lutheran influences in UUism in general and Nora Church in particular. My goal was to lift up the many ways in which our understanding of worship bears the thumbprints of the Roman and Lutheran traditions: pulpit; pews; clergy; invocation; music; readings; candles; homily; offering; benediction. While some of our family, friends and neighbors might not want to admit it, our services look a good deal like their own in terms of form; it's the *content* that stands us in stark relief to those two traditions. Content aside, much of the way we worship was inherited from early Christianity as passed down through first Catholicism, then Protestantism. Like it or not.

Given that both the Unitarians and the Universalists were rooted in liberal Christianity, it's no surprise, all these similarities. Romanian and Polish Unitarianism was primarily a *theological* phenomenon, not a liturgical one. The Unitarianism that reached England in the mid-1700s looked every bit like other congregational-polity Christian churches. Likewise the Universalists. And neither time nor the migration to North America was enough to push the two denominations outside their liturgical comfort zone. Kristoffer Janson, Nora's first minister, led worship in a style familiar to the former Lutherans who founded this church on the hill, as did Amandus Norman, Janson's protégé.

My point here is that we do what we do on Sunday morning as an echo of the past. Of course, there have been some changes over the course of the last 126+ years, but Nora's first two ministers would recognize the form if not the content of today's service. The way we worship – however one chooses to describe that experience – is our *inheritance*. That goes a long way toward explaining why we do what we do most Sunday mornings.

WORSHIP DESCRIBED

Let's review. So far, I've suggested that in order to be relevant in the lives of cerebral types like you and me, liberal religious worship has to be seated in the local community, yet engaged in universals. I've also said that the best liberal congregations rightly understand worship as an experience to be described

rather than a formula to be followed. And my last point had to do with some of the primary influences that helped shape Sunday morning right here at Nora Church.

What I want to do next is to offer a mix of voices, each reaching to understand and describe this experience we call worship. (It's important to give ongoing thought to what we want our worship time to think, feel and look like – partly for ourselves and partly for those who come looking for a tribe and people to call their own.) What follows is a worshippers' hodge-podge – reflections on what it is to be intentional about the Sunday morning experience. Perhaps something here might resonate with you.

From Ralph Helverson:

We go to church in expectancy, to find the missing part, to relate to what we can never explain, to live with unanswerable questions. We go to church because we are looking for human fellowship, a community where we think of helping one another rather than exploiting one another... We go to church to find the strength to go the second mile, to offer forgiveness, to make amends, to find the good with the evil, the healing beyond hurt, to rise again after we've fallen. We go to church... still feeling the pull of the many centuries of humans who have found faith and renewed their lives, who have moved beyond the hobbling traditions and renewed their minds with a vision of what life may be.

From Donald McKinney:

This free church of ours is – as I trust ever will be – all of us walking together, working and worshipping together. It is centered in this place, this precious sanctuary which is our treasured legacy from those who have walked and worshipped together here during the long years of our history...

From Davidson Loehr:

Too often, people come to church only to listen to the words or soak up the experience of the service, then go away... But the real treasure of the church is neither the minister nor the Sunday worship. The real treasure is the community of people who have made all of this possible, who have invested time and money to make this kind of spiritual oasis possible... So if you're coming only to take some nourishment from this garden, you're missing the real treasure that is here – if you like the garden, do get to know the gardeners.

A Hindu proverb:

The narrow-minded ask, "Are these people strangers or are they members of our tribe?" But to those in whom love dwells, the whole world is but one family.

From William Houff:

I happen to believe that a spiritually vital church is a holy place, a place we come in order to get in touch with a deeper spiritual center within ourselves, to be reminded of the interconnectedness of this universe. There we may be gently reminded of what I call “the nourishing mystery in which we live and move and have our being”... There we celebrate our comings and goings, the transitions and passages of our lives. There we pause to remember that, as members of one organic body, we are indebted to each other and responsible for each other...

From Mark Belletini:

Worship invites us to focus on the transcendental, the intimate and the worthy. Worship helps us to regain our grip on the fragmented, the obsessive and the divisive. Worship reminds us that we – empowered by the love we receive and give – may challenge any idol of greed or violence which pollutes the human condition... Worship helps us regain a sense of ourselves...

From Joan Kahn Schneider:

Good worship results in the True and the Good in us emerging and growing... Worship must engage the whole person with aesthetics, symbols, centering, ritual silence, words and music.

From Bruce Southworth:

To do worship you must have Good News. What is your Good News?

From Scott Alexander:

Good worship shows us how to live our fragile and foibled lives with more dignity, with more gentleness, with more sanity, with more purpose, with more direction, with more love... Worship shows us that not one of us has this bizarre, yet powerful business of being human figured out.

All these views of worship tell us that something important is at stake when we gather for worship – something worth thinking through before deciding what goes into that hour together. None of us can beckon the Magic simply by planning a coherent service, but we can be thoughtful – even discerning – about why we do what we do.

VIA NEGATIVA

Before we take a quick look at the order of worship I more or less use in leading our services, keep in mind that we don't have to know much about worship in a

liberal religious church to know what it isn't. (The Latin phrase here is *via negativa*. It means to explore something by taking note of what it's not.)

Put bluntly, worship is not entertainment, although it might be entertaining. Worship is not therapy, although it might be therapeutic. Worship is not education, although it might be educational. Worship is not performance, although it might be skillful.

THE SHAPE OF WORSHIP

Fair enough, a church service shouldn't look like a carnival ride or a support group. So what *does* worship look like? Permit me some highly subjective and biased thoughts on why we do what we do here at Nora.

- We ring the bell as our salute to tradition – a signal that the beloved community is gathering
- We hear the prelude – music that brings us to the here and now, helping us center or just settle in
- We welcome one another and our guests – my chance to introduce myself to newcomers and crow about what a good congregation you are
- We make our announcements – I could make the case that our time together would be more fruitful if we disciplined ourselves to get our announcements to Cindy in time to be printed, but I know what battles to pick and what ones to leave alone, for those announcements are the building blocks of community
- We light the chalice and hear the opening words – the bowl of light is the signature symbol of Unitarian Universalism, invoking both unity and wholeness, and the words bring us focus and direction
- We sing – we sing because in singing we become a single voice and a single people, *we sing because we must*
- We covenant – I've begun writing a covenant for each service, the goal being to speak in something approaching a poem the values we hold in common, lifting up our spiritual kinship
- We listen (often) to our choir – what a gift to the rest of us, this little choir with heart, soul and talent, simultaneously comforting us and challenging us
- We share our candles of community – candles on this table have represented all manner of human experience, drawing us closer in times of danger and promise, joy and sorrow
- We hear stories – I have two aims: to connect with our children, and to make it clear that this is their church, too
- We hear readings – women and men throughout the ages have framed life in words and images, introducing the morning's topic better than I ever could
- We lift an offering – we recognize that Nora is an institution as well as an experience, and so we give of our treasure

- We sing “Spirit of Life” – not everyone enjoys singing it nearly every Sunday, but it’s become a form of prayer for many here and elsewhere
- We meditate, pray or share silence – even if silence isn’t comfortable for all of us, those quiet moments remind us to breathe and reflect, opening space amidst sound and word
- We listen to music– whether instrumental or vocal, music facilitates the transition from silence to words
- We hear sermons – the duty of the preacher, according to Emerson, is to pass one’s truth through the fire of life before standing in front of others under the assumption that one has something to say that is worth hearing (I’d preach a lot less often if that were my only guide, so I try to weave together three threads: what I know about our shared values (religious freedom, caring community and engagement with the world); what I hear is important in your lives; and something about which I have some personal passion or interest
- We (often) respond – not every sermon or service is suited for discussion, but I always find it helpful to hear your thoughts about what I’ve said
- We sing again – music touches mind, body and spirit as we prepare to part company and return to the rhythms of our lives
- We close with a blessing or benediction – words to summarize the message and encourage us for the coming week
- We listen to the postlude – our musicians mark sacred time by sending us out with the gift of their talent

For me, worshipping with you is intimate, honest, fun and challenging. You endure my excesses and make room for my imperfections, personal as well as professional. You give me permission to experiment. And you invoke Minnesota Nice when I’ve preached a dog!

Why do we do what we do? Tradition. Community. Loneliness. Curiosity. Courage. Freedom. Pain. Injustice. Laughter. Fear. Celebration. Why do we do what we do? Because our spiritual inheritance. Because time and knowledge, wisdom and truth have shaped us. Because we live locally and dream globally. Because we are stronger together than apart. Because gratitude demands it. Because, as Annie Dillard said, God need not play to an empty house.

Why do we do what we do? From Robert Kaufmann’s “House of Worship”:

*Call it what you will...a church, chapel, a temple, a hall, a shrine.
Call it none of these or all of these.
Call it what you will, but remember this.
Its name does not make it a house of worship.
Priestly robes do not make it a house of worship.
A choir does not make it a house of worship.*

*Prayers do not make it a house of worship.
Fear does not make it a house of worship.
Tradition does not make it a house of worship.
Only you can make it a house of worship...you and I.*

*...A house of worship is where we go to seek ourselves.
It is a place where we may seek peace if we are too disturbed...
Or perhaps to be disturbed if we are too complacent.
...It is a place where we go not to pay penance for our shortcomings,
But to recognize anew our potential.
...It is a place only for those who believe.
It is, therefore, a place only for everyone...
This is a house of worship.*