

True Worship

A sermon given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, on May 6, 2018 The Reverend Cyndi Simpson

Our Worship theme for the month is ***Worship***. This spring, we are spending a month exploring each of our four Developmental Ministry goals that you set.

Worship is the fourth goal and the statement of that goal is:
2U engages in worship that activates and transforms spirit, mind and body.

So, the goal is to be ***enlivened*** in worship and ***changed*** by it. Today, I'm going to talk about what worship means and what it does for us.

Next week, I will be speaking of prayer – what prayer is, the types of prayer. And we will do some praying together. And on May 20 we will be having a hymn sing – of favorite hymns and also revisiting some newer ones. The choir will be singing, too. If you have a favorite hymn, please email me and we will see if it can be fit in!

In a recent book on worship in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, the Reverends Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz begin with an old story. It goes like this.

One Sunday morning, a person wakes up and begins complaining to their partner. "I hate the service! The hymns are boring, the readings are pedantic, the sermons are obscure, and after it's over, I get the feeling that nobody there likes me. I'm not going to church this Sunday!" "Now, dear," the long-suffering partner gently replies, "the people in the congregation don't hate you and the service isn't all that bad. Besides, you've got to go. You're the minister!"

Let me be clear – I ***never*** hate coming here on Sunday morning! I love it. AND, I do look forward with engaging our Worship goal and growing my own ability to create and lead worship.

This morning, I'd like to explore what worship is and propose an understanding of worship that might be more helpful in moving us towards a way of worship that is more meaningful to us, individually and together. A way of worship that is more ***true*** to us as Unitarian Universalists. A way of true worship that helps us grow as individuals and as a community.

Let's start with the word. ***Worship***.

The word "worship" derives from the same roots as the word "worth." And "worth" means: valuable, of merit, desirable. The "-ship" suffix means something that shows or demonstrates a quality, state, or condition.

So, "worship" first of all is an activity that ***demonstrates*** or ***shows*** what is valuable, of merit and desirable. It's an ***active*** demonstration, like fellowship or courtship. A demonstration or showing of what is of worth, of what matters the most.

Regarding **religious** worship, as opposed to the worship of . . . shoes, some other words are helpful. One word is “religion.” All religions share two purposes. Modern religions, ancient religions. From now all the way back to when religion was invented by humans – probably around 50,000 years ago – religions have shared the same TWO purposes:

- Religion exists to give meaning to the lives of humans
- Religion exists to give direction to the life of the religious community

So, religion always has been about providing meaning for human existence and also answering the question: “How, then, shall we live?” Given our faith’s understanding of the meaning of human life, how then shall we live? Because our worship is **religious** in nature, it must address these purposes of meaning and guidance.

The final word to bring to an understanding of worship is “liturgy.” A liturgy is the form that worship takes. It’s the elements of worship and the order of those elements – such as the sermon, the offering, the hymns. In many religions the liturgy, the form of worship, is set. Meaning, the elements of worship and their order cannot be changed, though their content may. Of course, that is not true for us as Unitarian Universalists. We are free to order our liturgy and to add or subtract elements in any way that we wish. Every week!

But what I really love about this word, that’s so important, is its roots. The roots of the word “liturgy” are two Greek words, **leit**, which means “the people.” And **ergon**, which means “work.” So, the liturgy is “the work of the **people**.” Not something imposed by a god or by a religious hierarchy or a rigid tradition. Our Order of Service is the work of the **people**.

I’ve put this understanding of worship and religion and liturgy together into a definition of worship for Unitarian Universalists.

Here goes:

*Our worship is the work of people in religious community to show and honor and give meaning to what is of greatest worth and what calls us to be our most noble selves. And by this showing and this honoring, we are **transformed**.*

Let’s read it together.

It’s clear from this definition that there is an infinity of possibilities for transformative worship, in terms of the elements of worship and their order and their content.

And, above all, there is the possibility of **transformation**. **Transformation** is the purpose of ALL worship, of whatever tradition. When I have experienced worship that matters to me, that makes a difference. It’s because something happens **for** me and something happens **to** me. I leave these worship experiences a changed person. The change and the difference is not always something huge and amazing, but it is significant.

Sometimes I **learn** something new that matters to me. Sometimes, I experience something emotionally that brings me to personal and spiritual growth. Or at least starts me on the path of new growth. Sometimes I have some kind of connection or interaction in worship with someone else. Great, small or in-between. A giant sea change or a slight but important shift in perspective. A new way of relating or connecting. It’s all **transformation**.

So – given all of this, why do we, as Unitarian Universalists, worship the way we do?

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations have a worship structure that shows its Reformed Protestant and Puritan DNA. That is our heritage, where we came from. Part of the Reformed Protestant complaint with Roman Catholicism was that worship was held in Latin, a language no longer spoken or understood by most ordinary people. And also that the Bible – the word of God for Christians – was not available to ordinary people.

There were no Bibles in everyday language for the people at Roman Catholic churches and the Bible was not taught. These frustrations and others ultimately were reflected in the Protestant form of worship. The sacraments of confession, forgiveness and communion are still present, but given in the language of the people. And the centerpiece of the worship service is the teaching and exposition of the Bible – the sermon.

As Unitarian Universalists, we inherited this form of worship through our ancestors the Puritans. And in most UU congregations, you can see this worship DNA still expressed. Our worship service structure greatly resembles a Reformed Protestant one. The key part of the service is the sermon, surrounded by some reading, some singing and other elements.

However, we've also let much go as we evolved as a religious tradition. We no longer have the sacramental elements of confession, forgiveness and communion. And our sermons are no longer based exclusively on one sacred text. This all makes sense, as we now have a non-creedal approach to religion and are no longer a Christian faith.

These changes in our theology have given us the opportunity for a lot of freedom in worship. But we really haven't done a great deal with that freedom. We pretty much worship like it's 1585! Not the content, but the structure.

And, as we left behind the sacramental elements of Christianity, those were not replaced with something that had a similar type of power and meaning. That is understandable, as we do not share a common set of doctrines to be expressed and experienced in sacramental worship.

What this has meant, though, is that the further we have come from our Protestant Christian heritage, especially after the mid-twentieth century, the more we have lost touch with what the form and structure of what our worship can mean.

And, many of us have discomfort with the word worship itself. Unitarian Universalists often understand worship to mean the idea of giving praise and adoration to a deity and therefore reject the notion of worship on that basis. With justification. We do not all share the same notion of god; some of us do not believe in a god at all.

So where does that leave us for worship? I think it's left us, for decades now, struggling to create worship that is meaningful and coherent. Worship that informs how we live our lives.

Once we grasp the basic notion of the purpose of worship as transformation, other realizations and learnings about worship can come to us. One of these is what Unitarian Universalist ministers Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz term the primacy of worship in the life of our congregations. They say:

*. . . all other activities and purposes of congregational life emerge from its worship life. . . Including how it interprets its identity and articulates its mission . . . This is because the worship experience is **the most important way** that a church tells the story of lives transformed by participation in the liberal religious community, and sends its members forth to tell the world that story.*

Arnason and Rolenz go on to note the **institutional** primacy of worship in Unitarian Universalism. They say:

You can have focus groups that talk about how to be a church. You can have lectures that offer new knowledge or prophetic engagement with the issues of the day. You can have religious education classes to teach the [beliefs] and values of your tradition. You can have social events and fund-raisers and parties that build community. You can have service projects and social justice demonstrations that engage people in living out their liberal religious beliefs. However, until you open the doors for public worship, no one in the world, inside our tradition or outside it, is going to identify you as a church.

This reality of the primacy of worship in our faith is reflected in the By-laws of our Unitarian Universalist Association. These by-laws list three mandatory requirements that a group must meet in order to be recognized as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. The group must hold an annual business meeting and must keep records of membership. But the **first** listed requirement is that the group must hold *regular religious services*. Without transformative worship, we are only the Saturday Night Liberal Debating Society and Coffee Shop. Maybe that's not a bad thing to be. It is just not **enough**.

What is needed is an intentional focus on meaning and on worth and on transformation, in the most creative and expansive ways.

And, we need to remember why it is important that worship is a **collective** endeavor. Not only is worship our chance to lift up and honor and celebrate what is of greatest worth to us as Unitarian Universalists, it is our chance to do this together, in community. It's the one regular time when we can all be together.

So, I want to ask you to do something. **I want you to make coming here on Sunday morning a priority.** I'm not asking this for myself. It's not about your listening to me give a sermon. It's about remembering that this is **the** time and **the** place when our entire Beloved Community can gather regularly. When we make this WHOLE that is bigger than just the sum of us. When we can transform together. Not necessarily in the same way, but as a shared experience.

And, worship is also about our relations and connections. It might be that someone came to worship today not because of the topic or because they wish to be transformed, but because they need to see YOU, individually. They want to be here in worship with YOU. And talk to you before or after worship or have coffee or maybe lunch. So, if you're not here, each one of you, **we** are missing something vital. Vital to our transformation. Vital to our shared life of meaning and purpose.

Now that you've had a bit of time to sit with this understanding of Unitarian Universalist worship, I'd like to suggest some questions for you to think about in the coming weeks. Your spiritual homework!

- Why do you come here, to this worship service, on Sunday morning?
- How does our worship express – or NOT – what is most meaningful and valuable to you?
- What is it that you hope will happen, for you and for us, in worship?

- How have you been and how do you think you could be **transformed** by worship?

I want you to think about that for yourself. I hope you will talk about it with each other. And I want to hear what you have to say. It's a conversation that needs to be ongoing among us – perpetually.

It is my hope and my prayer and my aim that our worship together always can present the opportunity for transformation – for shared meaning and guidance for our lives. For you, for me and for all of us together.

So may it be. Amen and blessed be.