

# With Eyes and Ears and Fingertips: What is UU Worship?

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January 10, 2010

“A person will worship something,” says a quote attributed to Emerson<sup>1</sup>, “A person will worship something--have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts-but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

To some Unitarian Universalists, it seems strange to call our Sunday morning gatherings worship services.

Some of us are atheists, some humanists, and we all cheerfully accept the fact that we do not agree on such matters as God, the soul, afterlife, destiny, Jesus, free will or determinism. In more orthodox churches they say a creed and they have a body of doctrine which usually attempts to delineate what it is that is worshiped. We, by contrast, are a proudly creedless church. The Affirmation we say every Sunday expresses values, not specific beliefs or doctrines and those who don't want to say it are welcome not to do so.

So if there is not a common agreement on what or whom we might be worshipping, where do we get off calling our Sunday morning gatherings worship services? Well, let's take a look at that word “worship.” If we look up the roots of the word we find that it comes from an Old English word *weord* which meant “worthy” and *-scipe* which meant shape. So our word worship comes from roots meaning roughly the shape of worthiness.

You see where Emerson got his idea that everyone worships something, for everyone values something, everyone has something they consider worthy. You may value your car, your job, your educational degrees, your membership in the yacht club, your garden, your cat, your home furnishings. A common test for what material things you value is the question, what would you be sure to take out of your house if it were burning, after making sure that your loved ones were safe? Everybody values something and that which you value most highly is that

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<sup>1</sup>This quote is in our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, at #563. However, the hymnbook index does not identify what Emerson writing is the source of the quote, and I have not been able to find the source through word searches, so at this point I say it is attributed to Emerson.

which you worship.

It is clear from this that worship is not confined, could never be confined, to an hour on Sunday morning. The act of worship, the act of valuing, goes on every minute of every day in every choice we make. Should we go to that party or play or concert or stay home to watch that show on TV? Which show should we watch on TV? What charity should we support here at the end of the year? Should we buy a Toyota or a Subaru, an SUV or a hybrid? All of these choices about how we spend our time or our money involve questions of value, or worthiness.

So far so good, but there is a problem. We can't simply equate valuing with worship in a religious sense. In a religious sense, we have the feeling that we are not just valuing something, but we are valuing something which is greater than ourselves. We may say in everyday language that we prefer a hybrid car to an SUV, but it would stretch meaning to say we are worshipping our hybrid. So worship in our common usage does have an element beyond simply giving worth or valuing.

The missing element is a sense of the sacred. What we worship is what we hold sacred. So when we set about to enter into a worship, whether it be on Sunday morning at the Meeting House, or around a small ministry group or on our meditation cushion at home or on a walk in the woods, we do something to mark off sacred space and sacred time. We do something to indicate that we are leaving our everyday world for little bit to communicate with something inside or outside of us.

In the church, the sacred space is usually the sanctuary, which is a word meaning sacred space. We each carry some ideas of how this space is dedicated to performing worship. Many of you expressed your feelings about this space at the discussion on the Universalist windows. But we don't treat this with the hyper-reverence that some churches treat their worship space; many churches consecrate their worship space and thereafter nothing can take place in it which is not worship. We allow magical acts and folk musicians and discussions on public issues of the day to take place in the same place where we worship on Sunday morning.

For us, I would say this space is consecrated only during the sacred time. We try to mark off in the worship service when that time starts and when it stops. We begin to center ourselves during the prelude, and we ask people to keep down their socializing so those who want to listen to the prelude can do so. We have announcements relevant to the community, and then the ritual of the chalice lighting signals that the worship service has begun in earnest.

When I am planning a worship service, whether it is a Sunday morning service in this sanctuary or a wedding on the beach, I usually try to think about sacred space and sacred time, and how to mark them. Sometimes on the beach we will construct an oval of sea shells into which I will step with the wedding couple to conduct the ceremony. Sometimes I will use a chime to indicate that the service has begun. Sometimes I will ring the same chime at the end to

indicate that the service has ended.

But what is it that we are really after in our worship, since we do not agree on points of doctrine? I did a lot of thinking about this in Divinity School, and wrote my thesis on it. I read some of the great thinkers on Unitarian and Universalist worship such as Van Ogden Vogt and Clarence Earl Skinner and James Luther Adams. What I came up with was three different axes on which worship works, three different ways that the experience of the worship service might engage the spirit of the worshiper. These are probably not the only three that could be imagined, but after ten years in the ministry, they still seem to me to be close to the center of the worship experience. They are authenticity, transcendence and transformation.

Authenticity is the feeling that we are reconnecting to a part of ourselves, to something that is real in our lived experience. When we sing a hymn to a tune we have known since childhood, when we take part in a ritual which has been around for hundreds of years, we have the sense that we are being authentic. Authenticity reaffirms that we are OK as we are. Theologian Paul Rasor says it is characteristic of liberal religion that it locates authority in the experience of the self, rather than in the Bible or in church doctrine. So understanding our true selves is an essential part of our religious journey.

Now authenticity is a tricky concept; those who follow any traditional art form know that what is authentic is often the subject of intense debate. This is certainly true in folk music; I remember a folksinger from the mountains of Southwestern Virginia who once introduced a song this way: "I learned this next song from my great-aunt Hattie, who lives at the end of a holler eight miles from the nearest paved road in a cabin with no running water or electricity. She learned it from a Bing Crosby record." You get the same issues in jazz and baroque and in impressionism and the novel; there is always a tension between the old forms and the new content. The whole debate with Garrison Keillor last month over UUs changing the words of Silent Night was a battle of competing authenticities; do we stay true to the Austrian Christian words or to our own different theological traditions?

Once upon a time I wrote a short poem about authenticity. The poem is in a Persian form called a pantoum, in which lines repeat and interlace in a certain pattern from verse to verse. Here it is:

Whatsoever is true and real  
Rhymes recalled from childhood days  
Curtains rescinded to reveal  
A winding way in memory's maze.

Rhymes recalled from childhood days:

The random buildup of mental sludge  
A winding way in memory's maze,  
The taste of Grannie's homemade fudge.

The random buildup of mental sludge  
Validates my here and now  
A taste of Grannie's homemade fudge  
Grounds me though I don't know how.

I validate my here and now  
In keys that open memory's door  
Which ground me though I don't know how  
And fix the present by what's before.

The keys that open memory's door  
Curtains rescinded to reveal  
The present fixed by what's before:  
Whatesoever is true and real.

Now authenticity and affirmation of the self is necessary but not sufficient for the religious life; the danger is that it leads us into narcissism and solipsism, a feeling that nothing matters outside of ourselves. So the second element of the worship experience is transcendence. I am using the term transcendence here very broadly, to mean anything that gets us out of ourselves, that connects us with realities beyond ourselves. This may mean connection with the divine, however we conceive it, but it also may mean connecting to the person beside us in the pew or to the minister or to the story of someone who lives far away or lived a long time ago.

Our consciousness, the mental world which we inhabit, has a great division between the subjective world inside and the objective world outside. We encounter this great division at a very early age and spend a fair part of the energy of our lives trying to cross that bridge. In the early part of our lives we make the bridge by dating and mating and raising families. In the later part, we often turn to religion to help us across that bridge. I have often quoted my Buddhism professor from divinity school, Michael Hennesey: all religion beings from the recognition that the other is in some sense like me.

So transcendence in the worship service occurs when we touch the hem of the garment of another, when a piece of music or a ritual or a poem or an idea from the sermon takes us out of ourselves and gives us an intimation of something larger, grander, deeper than we, a something

which might be God herself or might be the community of which we are a part, or might be the planet we inhabit temporarily, or the grand sweep of history. It is bracing and fundamentally healthy to look through the wrong end of the telescope, to see oneself not as the most visible part of the horizon but as a tiny speck, a small corner of a vast universe, to see one's life not as an all-important, all-consuming generator of fears and anxieties but as a tiny blip in the great river of time. As Humphrey Bogart says in "Casablanca," the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans.

I also wrote a pantoum about transcendence, and to understand it you need to know that Siddhartha is one of the names for the Buddha and his wheel is a figure representing the great cycle of birth and rebirth; also a carapace is a shell on a lobster or crab:

Our divided selves seek the Other  
A pilgrimage we make by feel  
From the womb of the mother  
To Siddhartha's shining wheel

This pilgrimage we make by feel  
Has no map or thought of plan  
And Siddhartha's shining wheel  
Ends at the place where it began

We have no map or thought of plan  
Starting at the edge of what we know  
To end at the place where we began  
And old carapaces to outgrow.

We start at the edge of what we know  
Open to novelty, chaos, chance  
Our old carapaces we outgrow  
And throw ourselves into the dance.

We open to novelty, chaos, chance,  
Out from the womb of the mother  
We throw ourselves into the dance:  
Our divided selves seek the Other.

Authenticity and transcendence, then, are elements which are woven into a good worship service. That is not to say that every worshiper will have an experience of authenticity or of transcendence every time. It is just that we who plan worship services try to allow for the opportunity to touch something deep inside as well as something outside. What actually happens, what you actually experience as you sit in the pews is as much a function of what you bring to the service that morning as it is in any element of the service presentation.

And this element of chance is particularly present in the third axis of worship experience, transformation. By transformation, I mean that the worshiper might leave the worship service a different person than she was when she came in. This can be a radical conversion experience such as happens maybe once or twice in a lifetime, or it can be simply a new insight, a new dedication, a renewal of the spirit.

The worship planner can't plan for transformation. In fact, services in other traditions which have a regular programmed "altar call" start to look inauthentic. We don't ask the worshiper to make a public profession of how the service has affected him or her. But we hope that it has.

There is one special type of change which I try always to keep in mind. I always try to consider that someone might be coming into the service today who is right on the edge of the abyss, who has reached the end of her rope, who can't take it anymore, and is about to lose hope for a turnaround. I ask myself what can I say or do or how can I give this person a reason to carry on. I want a service to uplift people and give them courage to face the things they have to face.

And I have a pantoum about transformation as well, which has a little bit of an Easter theme to it, since resurrection is one very dramatic example of transformation:

Roll away that boulder, boys,  
A new you waits in the dawn,  
Listen for melody amidst the noise,  
Take your leave of Babylon.

A new you waits in the dawn  
Breathe in hope with lucent air  
Take your leave of Babylon,  
Too long have you tarried there.

Breathe in new hope with lucent air,

Praise the source of all that's new  
For too long you've tarried there,  
Heed the call to a deeper you.

Praise the source of all that's new  
You find your life by losing it  
Heed the call to a deeper you  
Midst holy groves of silence sit

You find your life by losing it  
Listen for melody amidst the noise  
Midst holy groves of silence sit  
Roll away the boulder, boys.

So authenticity, transcendence and transformation are three of the fundamental elements of the worship experience. This analysis may satisfy some of you. Others, I suspect, will still be nagged by the question, "yes, that may describe the experience but it doesn't answer the question of who or what is being worshiped." And that is a valid criticism.

But it doesn't have one answer. If there are fifty of us in the sanctuary this morning, it has fifty answers. Each of us brings to the worship service their own sense of what they hold dear.

We gather together and we are together in a sense, but we are also individuals together. We bring our own individual worlds into the sanctuary and part of them we will share and part of them we will keep to ourselves. And when we have been coming for a while, we may find that the more we share of the selves we bring, the deeper is the experience for us. Just as we participate in small ministry groups and find that the more we put on the table, the more we take away.

And let's remember Emerson's admonition that what we worship, we are also becoming. If what we worship is something that is not truly ultimate, such as our own ego, or wealth or status, we are limiting what we can become. If what we worship is open-ended, if it is God or the universe or what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature, then we have built in a path for spiritual growth.

Now let me close by saying a few words about the way the sausage is made around here. I am responsible generally for the content of the worship service but I am assisted mightily by Joan McDonald our RE director, by Frank Toppa, our music director, by our wonderful choir and the instrumental musicians who give of their time, by Melissa who puts out the Order of

Service, and by the Worship Committee, who plans services when I am not in the pulpit and gives me valuable feedback on the services I conduct. Anyone who is interested in serving on the Worship Committee should see its capable chairperson, Barbara Rothenburger. Anyone who wants to make a comment or suggestion about worship is welcome to communicate with her. They meet once a month on the second Monday at 4 PM; there's a meeting tomorrow, in fact.

Everyone will worship something. I invite you to ask yourself what you worship in your life generally, and what it is, if anything, that you think you are worshipping on Sunday morning in the Meeting House. We will take a few minutes to let you offer your answers after we give you an opportunity to worship with your pocketbooks as the offering bag passes among you. Amen.

Reading: Annie Dillard , *Teaching A Stone To Talk* (1982)

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” (40)