

A Dwelling in the Evening Air: Rethinking Worship

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“Religion,” said Arthur Darby Nock (a Harvard professor as eccentric as his name would suggest to you), “is what people in community do, say, and think, in that order, with respect to those things, real or imagined, over which they have no control.” Ah, there’s subject enough for a bale of sermons. Consider just one two-letter word: *do*, “religion is what people do” -- indeed, “do, say, and think,” but “in that order.” First and foremost, wise, sly Professor Nock was saying, it’s what people do.

Once I asked a group of Unitarian Universalists what are the things they saw us *doing* in the church. Because it’s what we *do* (individually and together) that tells, most clearly and definitively, who we *are*. I mean this quite literally. (Some of us started The Church of Holy Leaf-Raking just yesterday.)

They spoke up promptly: They saw educational programs for the young and the not-so-young and we agreed that, yes, we are a learning community. They saw social action projects and community-building programs -- yes, we are also a caring and serving community. And they saw committees, a board of trustees, lots of decision-making meetings and fund-raising activities, and the like; yes, we are a self-governing and self-sustaining community.

We readily see and name these things. But is that all? What else do we *do* here? They were stumped, so I gave them a clue. What do we do on Sunday mornings? Oh yes, they said. We *do* Sunday services! It was one of those great *aha* experiences. Oh yes, of course, we do worship services!

A fish, they say, does not know that water is wet. Those things that are the most obvious, because they are always present -- the very medium we swim in -- are most often overlooked. Just so the worship service. We're not always sure what “worship” in a Unitarian Universalist church *is*, but we can’t quite imagine being a religious community without this strange activity, this “defining hour” of our week.

Then what are we doing when we “do worship”? Often we get tangled up in theological questions at this point, when we only need to see and describe what is right before us. Can we tell what we see with our eyes and feel with our hearts? We come together ... to celebrate our faith and explore its meaning for our lives. We are called together ... to give voice to our heartfelt devotion ... to lift up that which is holy ... to be a people committed to something that shall outlast us ... to seek truths that transcend and uphold us.

Here, in the words of the American poet Wallace Stevens, “we make a dwelling in the evening air”:

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,
Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say that God and the imagination are one ...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.
Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

I don't know whether Stevens meant that God is a product of human imagination (perhaps the highest product) or whether he meant that humanity is the product of God's imagination (possibly the highest product, though we often seem the lowest). Maybe he would say, in agnostic fashion, “I do not know, nor do I think we can know. I only know that God and imagination are one.”

What grabs me about these lines from Wallace Stevens' “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” (now there's a title!) is the feeling of hushed reverence they create: acknowledging the obscure yet strong feeling that sometimes overtakes us -- “the obscurity of an order, a whole, a knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous...” As if to say: Life itself is a miraculous meeting, an inexplicable place where we find ourselves and find each other. It feels like an appointed “rendezvous.” I say, so should our worship seek to form “a dwelling the evening air” and celebrate the sacred meeting in which “being here together is enough.”

Worship is always one changeless thing, and yet -- among us! -- it is forever being reinvented. We form and re-form our worship. Worship itself remains our approach to the sacred, and the recognition of how we are changed in response. Our approach to the sacred, and the recognition of how we are changed in response.

Well, but what is “sacred”? Sacred is that in you that stings your conscience, or jolts you with strange beauty. Sacred is that which calls you to surpass yourself. You did not choose it; it chose you. Only what grasps you, and seems miraculous, has the power to transform you. For instance, the birth of a child. Or having a grand-baby. Or gardening. Or working in a soup kitchen. Or contemplating the mysteries of mathematics. Or feeling the late-afternoon glow of autumn light. Or knowing the wonder of being one flesh, in love. The sacred is manifold -- just this is the truth of polytheism. Whatever lays its sovereign claim upon you, shakes you and blesses you, is suffused with holiness. Before we call something sacred, we must awaken to it, be grasped by it. Holiness happens.

This is what Arthur Darby Nock spoke of in cool, academic terms as “things, real or imagined, over which we have no control.” To be sure, we are free to shape our forms of worship; but if they reach to the depths of our being, they will -- in turn and over time -- shape us. What we bring to, and take from, our services of worship will be very different

... when we know that this is not just another meeting. This is our approach to the sacred, and the sincere offering of ourselves to be changed.

Professor Jack Hayward, whose words on the alchemy of worship we heard in the reading -- words on worship as “the symbolic epitome and symbolic transformation of our weekday living” -- said this about “liturgy”:

The word “liturgy” comes from two Greek words, *leitōs ergos*, meaning in their combination “a public act” or “a public work.” Ancient Athenian noblemen were accustomed to provide, at their own expense, public sacrifices to the gods. This was a private offering for the public good. It was primarily an action, not an inwardness. ... The giver knew that for all his wealth he depended upon the strength and order of society. And the society believed that its own strength and order depended on a kind of divine symbiosis. ... This then is the theory of traditional worship across many tribes and nations: it is a symbiotic transaction in which each party gives and receives, thereby increasing the common wealth and well-being of the people and their God or gods.

More simply stated, the lit-urgy, the *ergos* of the *leitōs*, is the work of the people.

Here are Beach’s three dicta for the reform and renewal of worship in the liberal church: (1) more participation, less passivity; (2) more form, less formality; and (3) more heartfelt singing, less fainthearted reading ahead to see if we agree with the words.

We are a paradoxical bunch. On the one hand, we believe in informality. Rather than dress up, many of us dress down for Sunday. Nor have we ever had a highly structured liturgy like, say, the Episcopalians -- in fact, the very word, “liturgy,” seems strange to us. And yet we have been tagged “God’s frozen people.” Have we turned the sermon’s creative word into another lecture and discussion? The end result is something flat, and all too often people go away saying, “I went to church, but it was just another meeting.” What they are missing, I think, is an emotionally involving ritual and aids to deep self-reflection. What they seek is a service that invites hearty participation, and the feelings of joy and sorrow, spirit and celebration that come with participation. That’s why we need more participation and less passivity, less sense of “I’m an observer here, listening in.”

Did I say “less formality”? In a church I used to serve, a young woman would come every Sunday and nurse her baby right down in the front row. I loved it! But some people were offended, and they finally succeeded in driving her out of the church. I say less formality. But I also say more form.

Consider liturgy, the conscious shaping of worship. A famous biblical passage describes four moments in a process of spiritual transformation. Hear the book of the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 6, describing his mystical vision upon entering the temple in Jerusalem. I’ll signal the four acts in this little drama of transformation:

In the year that King Uzziah died (1) I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings:

with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.*

(2) And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

(3) Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven."

(4) And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." [Isa. 6: 1-8]

If you know the classic hymn "Holy Holy Holy" (we UUs sing it "Bring O Morn Thy Music"), now you know where it came from. Or perhaps you have been in the ancient church of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy -- damaged by an earthquake since the time Barbara and I were there. The great frescos by Giotto in the church depicting the life of St. Francis show Isaiah's words: God shrouded in mystery and masked by the wings of six seraphim.

It happens that the most influential theory of worship, set forth by the distinguished Unitarian minister Von Ogden Vogt, takes its pattern from this passage in Isaiah. It is a theory of worship as transformation, as reflected in Isaiah's vision of Yahweh.

First the prophet is lifted up, overwhelmed by God's utter holiness. *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*, the whole earth is full of his glory -- as generation after generation has sung in the Catholic Mass.

Then Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am an unclean man amid an unclean people." He is overwhelmed with the sense of his own insignificance, his unworthiness, his shadow-side (as Carl Jung would call it).

Third comes illumination. The prophet's lips are seared, his voice is purified, his eyes are opened, and his ears hear the voice of God.

Finally the prophet says, "Here am I. Send me." He is sent forth to speak the Word of justice and truth, to prophesy the coming of a new humanity.

Just this, Vogt said, is the fundamental pattern underlying transformative worship. It moves from the moment of exaltation and renewed vision, to the moment of humility and embracing our limitations. Do we reflect this movement instinctively, in the movement from chalice lighting and opening hymn, to a reflective responsive reading and the meditation, prayer and silence? The liturgy of transformation proceeds to the moment of illumination -- our quest for fuller understanding, for wisdom, to the final moment of renewed commitment, the "Send me!" -- as we return to do the work of our free faith in

the world. Perhaps these phases are reflected in our movement from the sermon to the closing hymn and the benediction, a “good word” of blessing.

I am not advocating a literal, step-by-step imitation of the four-part pattern that Vogt saw in the passage from Isaiah. But I do think that becoming aware of it -- seeing in powerful worship a forward movement, a sacred turning -- we can significantly heighten our awareness of these values, and build them into our services. Less formality, more transformation.

These things we do define who we are; they tell what it means to be a member: We are a learning community, for each of us is following a personally defined spiritual path. We are a serving community, for each of us is active in working for a new humanity. And we are a self-governing and self-sustaining community, for each of us is committed to the wellbeing of the whole, this congregation, “this beloved community.” And we are also a worshipping community, celebrating our free faith, making a dwelling in the *morning air* where being here together is enough. No, being here together is *essential*.

Worship does not produce transformation. It reflects transforming moments. Transforming moments invite worship. Our work, the work of the people, is to invite sacred moments into our lives, into our hearts, into our mornings here together.