

Worship among the Unitarian Universalists

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Last autumn, my offer to the services auction was the right to name a subject for a sermon to be preached by me here at the church. The high bidder for that service was Don Kent. Several weeks ago, Don and I met for lunch and an opportunity to discuss the topic he had in mind. We had a very pleasant time getting to know each other a bit better, but he admitted that he really didn't have any particular sermon topic in mind. As the conversation progressed, however, he did comment that there are a few words that get used around here on occasion that he is not completely comfortable with--words like "sacred" and "holy" and especially, "worship." That later term seems to be a transitive verb, calling for an object. Whom or what do we worship? Just what is it that we are doing when we gather for worship?

As I listened to those questions, a dormant uneasiness began to stir deep in the well of my consciousness. They were not new questions. They are questions often asked among Unitarian Universalists, particularly by those new to our movement. I answered as I often do, by pointing out that the word "worship" derives from an Old English term which referred to the process by which we ascribe worth or define what is of value and that is the focus of what we do on Sunday morning. But while that is an accurate response, I could not escape the feeling that at some deep level, I was begging a fundamental question. And this, despite the fact that last fall I taught a full semester course entitled "Preaching and Worship among the Unitarian Universalists" for students at Drew Theological School.

It was just thirty-nine years ago this month that I conducted my first worship service and preached my first sermon. Ever since, I have earned my living in this trade. And most of the time, the habits of nearly four decades have proved strong enough to paper over whatever misgivings and uncertainties lie buried under deep layers of necessity. But every now and then, in the midst of the music, or while singing a hymn, while sharing a reading or even delivering the sermon, the awareness comes flooding over me that at some fundamental level, I really do not know what we are doing here or why we are doing it. I look out at the congregation and find myself wondering what in the name of all that is holy are you doing here, and more important, what do I think I am doing here. And at that moment, I have no adequate answer. And it is that I allow habit to come to my rescue. Then it is that I give myself over to familiar patterns and as the service progresses and we get caught up together in the process, the question is resolved. It is not so much that I find an answer, but rather that the question dissipates in the experience itself.

There are other times, however, when the question simply will not go away. My conversation with Don Kent proved to be one of those times and I have found myself

over the past few weeks trying again to understand what worship means to contemporary Unitarian Universalists. This morning I would like to share with you the sermon which is not quite the auction sermon, but is the sermon provoked by my conversation with Don.

There can be little doubt that the Sunday morning service is at the very heart of our religious movement, thus betraying our roots in classic western approaches to religion. Nor is there much doubt that the Sunday sermon is at the very heart of our understanding of the Sunday service, thus betraying our roots in left-of-center Protestantism. Whenever we survey people in our congregations to find out what is important to them in the church, we discover that while a religious institution must be able to address many interests if it is to thrive, the single largest concern is the nature and quality of the Sunday service. Whenever the congregation goes through the process of seeking a new parish minister--while it may desire a host of special qualities, including the ability to walk on water and to fund the institution without asking the members and friends to part with their hard-earned cash--the central concern usually focuses around how effective a prospective candidate is in the pulpit. And while there are a number of different kinds of ministry honored among us, for a great many people, the "real minister" is the one who occupies the pulpit with greatest frequency and effectiveness.

And yet, when we begin to explain what the Sunday service is all about, or the role the sermon plays in our lives, we find ourselves reduced to a few generalizations which are so vague as to be embarrassing. We talk about the importance of being together with people who hold common values. However, when we seek to define those values, the most important common value seems to be the inalienable right of each of us to disagree with the rest of us.

That leads us to abandon our efforts to define worship and to focus on the sermon. The sermon is the really important thing. All that other stuff--the readings, the hymns, perhaps even the music--is sort of thrown in to fill out the hour and give us an opportunity to make a few necessary announcements and take up the offering, while we wait for the congenitally tardy to get here for the really important thing--the sermon.

In some Unitarian Universalist congregations, this kind of response has led purists to the conclusion that we really don't need all that mumbo-jumbo, all those leftovers from other times and other faiths. Why not get rid of hymns and robes and responsive readings and openings and closings. All we really need is a good music program, a speaker, a baby-sitter, a coffee-pot, a couple of collection plates, and maybe a copying machine, and we're in business.

This back-to-basics approach actually gets tried in our smaller groups when they are having trouble funding professional leadership and decide to make a virtue of necessity. And for a while, the radical notion of having a religious gathering in which the speaker is free to address almost any subject is exciting enough to carry the institution. Everyone feels liberal and naughty because Sunday was devoted to a discussion of the emergence of exogamous marriage among the primitive communities, rather than some more conventional religious topic. But eventually the novelty begins to wear thin, and people

begin to wonder what is missing from their Sunday gatherings. And not a few decide that what they really need is fewer lectures and more sermons.

When, however, they are pressed to explain the difference, they are usually reduced to declaring that sermons, "Uh, you know, uh, are more, uh, you know, spiritual." And what is spiritual? Well it has something to do with worship, and we are back to the beginning of a circular argument.

Whenever a group of intelligent, well-educated, highly verbal people is reduced to that kind of confusion, it is only reasonable to suspect that there is something here which touches such deep levels that it resists definition. That suspicion has been reinforced on several occasions when I have had the opportunity to interact with members of a variety of congregations concerning the worship service. Usually people indicate that what they are interested in are sermons which are "intellectually stimulating." And that while readings are sometimes interesting, and they look forward to the music, and are willing to tolerate the hymns and the responsive readings, they are just a little uneasy with the thought of ritual. And yet, in virtually every church I have ever served, changes in the familiar order of things--introduction of new elements such as ringing a gong or lighting a chalice at the beginning, or holding hands at the end of the service, or moving the prelude to after the announcements, or the allowing applause in the midst of the service--generate a surprisingly strong and often negative reaction.

Indeed, the nature of those responses suggests to me that our verbalized attitudes toward religion, our rational explanations of who we are and what we are about in the process of worship simply do not square with our visceral reactions. Because our behavior often contradicts our expressed desire to dismiss ritual, I suspect that this contradiction offers important insight into the real reason our congregations exist, the real function they perform in our lives and what worship means to us.

Increasingly I am convinced that the explanations we offer for our participation in the life of the congregation are only half-true. The fact is that the rational, logical, intellectual values we receive from any given Sunday service are simply not strong enough to explain why most of us leave a comfortable bed and the Sunday Times to come here. There are other factors at work, and the religious institution survives precisely because it serves emotional needs which frequently elude verbal expression.

Our Sunday service is more than rational; it evokes deep and profound responses to the world. What us draws together on Sunday morning is not intellectual stimulation; it is the need to worship. It is precisely for the ritual that most of us are here--the ritual which begins in the driveway or the entry-way as we greet and are greeted, and continues through the coffee hour and the extended leave-taking time. To be sure, some of us edit the ritual or create our own--by slipping into the building just as the service is beginning, by refusing to read responsively, or refraining from the vocal athletics of the hymns, or slipping out before the closing portion of the service, or by never braving the crowd at the coffee hour. Nonetheless, I submit that it is the ritual for which we come--either the ritual we find or the ritual we create in response to what we find.

Perhaps our error in trying to understand the nature of our central religious act lies in assuming that intellect and emotion, reason and ritual are mutually exclusive, rather than mutually supportive aspects of an unbroken continuum. To suggest that it is the ritual which brings us back to this place is not to imply that we are all mindless robots, creatures of habit, driven by our emotions. Ours is a ritual which incorporates highly rational, persistently intellectual components, but that does not make it any the less a ritual; nor does it suggest that the ritual aspects of our gathering are unimportant. Indeed, once the centrality of the ritual is assumed, it seems to me possible to make sense of the Unitarian Universalists at worship.

For example, we are--by and large--a nomad people. Not only have many of us wandered from the geographical region in which we were born, we continue that wandering through most of our lives. In addition to this physical wandering, many of us are also spiritual nomads. We have traveled far from the religion, the politics, the social strata, the corporate identities and the intellectual assumptions in which we were raised. In the process, we have acquired some special baggage of our own: a strong sense of individual identity, a fear of being trapped by subtle orthodoxies, a certain persistent loneliness, a thickening of the membranes which constrict the emotions, a desperate need for involvement with others, and a profound fear of failing in our human relations. Because this is so, central issues for Unitarian Universalists focus round the need for community, the integrity of the individual, and the tension between the individual and the community. And those issues find expression in our Sunday rituals.

Because for many of us community is not a given part of our experience, but rather a fragile, sometimes fleeting reality which must be evoked, called into being, carefully nurtured, our services of worship tend to resolve themselves into a ritual and symbolic re-creation of the community. This aspect of our gathering permeates all that we do here together, particularly those things which are so familiar that we cease to notice them consciously.

In the service, we constantly restate the terms, the boundaries, the nature of this particular community. The lighting of the chalice defines us as part of a global movement. The statement made before the covenant or the affirmation--our denomination's historic freedom clause--affirms our determination to bind no one's conscience; the covenants and affirmations themselves, declair the nature of our commitment to each other; the statement before the offering, defines the free and voluntary nature of our association; the welcoming of new people and the regular invitation to membership express our understanding of this as a community not of necessity but of intention--a community created and sustained by the free choice of individual women and men, distanced from their birth communities, who, out of their need, come together to create community. Sunday after Sunday, we reenact and reaffirm the process which called this congregation into being and has sustained it through the generations--the process by which most of us found our way to this place. On Sunday morning, we reenact the original founding.

More than symbolically recreating the community, we experience and celebrate it. That is

the function of the marvelous music we share, the responsive readings, the singing of hymns, the times when the children join us for special services. We experience the community and celebrate it by being together, by listening together, by speaking together, by singing together. There are moments of high discipline, as when the responsive reading suddenly becomes something more than rote, and rich drama invades the interaction between us. There are moments of real struggle, as when the hymn is a bit stranger than usual and we find ourselves stumbling through it, listening for a voice strong enough to carry us along, drawn by the need to be part of the group, embarrassed by the fact that we cannot find or effectively pursue the tune. There are moments of wordless sharing when the music shakes us to our very roots and all words become superfluous.

Our service of worship also seeks to make a symbolic and ritual statement about the mysterious relationship between the individual and the community. That is really the point of our central sacrament, the sermon. (And the sermon is a sacrament for us, in the same sense that the mass is a sacrament for Roman Catholics.)

We make the sermon the center of our worship, not because we all learn so much from it, or because it is a source of such profound wisdom. As a writer of sermons I know better than to accept that explanation of what we are about! Rather, the sermon is a sacramental act which makes visible and present the inevitable, creative tension which exists between the individual and the community--a tension which is part of our experience and which makes us the people we are. We understand and affirm that there can be no individual without a nurturing and sustaining community. No one has ever learned to be human, no one has ever found meaning in life without creative interaction with other people. We also understand that communities do not exist apart from the individuals who comprise them, and that communities cease to be creative and nurturing and can become demonic and destructive when they cease to honor the individuality of their constituent members.

The sermon, then, is a celebration of that mysterious relation between the person and the group, that essential tension between the individual and the community. That is the symbolic import, the ritual significance of allowing one person to spend twenty or so minutes a week addressing the gathered congregation on a topic of his or her choosing, and then inviting the group to respond as part of the ritual. We seek to give expression to the individual--the insight of the single person--in the amplifying context of the group, affirming that truth and creativity and meaning arise neither from the group nor from the individual but out of the holy tension between them.

Beyond this, our worship seeks to affirm that the world is more than the individual or the group or even the interaction between them. There is that in existence forever beyond our ability to order or manipulate or control. The fact is that we are rooted in and are expressions of a process so vast in scope, so ancient of days, so all-pervasive that we cannot begin to understand its full significance. This mysterious process weaves new and unanticipated strands through our experience, surprising us and startling us into unexpected awareness, casting our rituals and habits into strong light and strange perspective so that they become new and exciting and plastic and mysterious in the most

powerful way.

This is the portion of the service we cannot program, the part of the service we hope will happen, but cannot force into existence. We wait upon it; we try to be open to it; we witness to it each Sunday when we join hands and speak of that "unity which makes us one in spite of time and death and the space between the stars," but it is not ours to command. It depends upon a mysterious something which comes and goes and hovers between us. When it happens, we find our experience comes alive, that more has been said and more has been heard than anyone intended, that a sudden power enters into our midst, moving us and transforming our experience not only beyond the ordinary, but in ways we did not anticipate.

While it does not always happen, we know that our little local universe, this particular community we have evoked, can be invaded and enriched by a larger reality which lends our experience cosmic significance, illuminating past and future, calling us to deeper compassion, to greater understanding, to new ways of being in the world. We seek to celebrate, to welcome, to become a channel for that larger reality which makes our gathering here, in this place, infinitely more than the sum of its components, an experience of syntropy in a universe often defined by entropy.

This, then, is what we are about on Sunday mornings. We gather to celebrate, experience and recreate the intentional community. We gather to witness to the creative interaction of the individual and the community and to the creativity which can evolve from the inevitable tension between the single, individual voice and the group which gives it resonance and depth. We gather to witness to the presence in our experience of a depth of being which is often obscured by the surface realities with which we daily wrestle, a depth of being which eludes our efforts to manipulate it or manage it, a depth of being which "bloweth where it listeth" and sometimes invades our experience, expanding and renewing and reinvigorating us and lifting us out of our little local selves, inviting us to encounter levels of reality not fully present in our day-to-day existence.

This, I believe, is the focus of worship among Unitarian Universalists: the centrality of the individual and the community in which the individual is rooted; the creative power which springs from the interaction of the two; and the existence of something more which underlies the surface appearance of things and which has the power to break through and infuse the static and habitual with power and life. It is this focus which engenders dissatisfaction with every formulation and which, through its ritualized and symbolic structures, enables us to be open to and to embrace that novelty we did not create, did not intend, but which is bodied forth out of the great depths of being.

To return to the question with which we began, is it legitimate to call this worship? I believe there is no other word in the language to describe the central ritual and symbolic activity around which a religious community structures its existence. And so, on those Sunday mornings, when I enter the pulpit and find myself wondering what in the name of all that's holy are we doing here, I shall try to remember that we are engaged in worship, and that more is going on here than any of us may ever be able to explain.