

To Shape Things of Worth
The Rev. Paige Getty
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, MD
Sunday, September 23, 2007

Call to Worship — Richard S. Gilbert

We meet on holy ground,
For that place is holy
Where lives touch, love moves, hope stirs.

How much we need this moment before the eternal,
The time to be in reverence before the ultimate,
The pause that renews,
The interlude that refreshes,
The space that gives us room to be.

We meet on holy ground,
Brought into being as life encounters life,
As personal histories merge into the communal story
As we take on the pride and pain of our companions,
As separate selves become community.

How desperate is our need for one another:
Our silent beckoning to our neighbors,
Our invitations to share life and death together,
Our welcome into the lives of those we meet,
And their welcome into our own.

May our souls capture this treasured time.
May our spirits celebrate our meeting
In this time and in this holy space,
For we meet on holy ground.

Benediction — Ralph Waldo Emerson

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, our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

Sermon:

Among persons unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism, one of the most prevalent quandaries is, “What do you worship?” (It is second only to, “What do you believe?”) The implication being, of course, that if you don’t share a common theological belief system – if you don’t as a body affirm the existence of God – then what exactly are you doing together on Sunday mornings? I hear this from the skeptics in my own extended family, but also from newcomers here – even those who have attended one or more Sunday morning worship services, but still are unsure about its motivation, its focus, its unifying character.

I usually reply to the question by reframing the premise – by explaining that the act of worship is not necessarily dependent upon an object; that worship isn’t merely an act of prostration before a deity; that we come together as a community of religious seekers, yearning for hope, inspiration, community, insight into truth, glimpses of the divine; that we come together to acknowledge that there is some truth greater than or individual experience and that together we see that truth more fully; that *that’s* what we’re doing together in worship on Sunday mornings. I say that worship is about how, not what.

But I have come to recognize that the question sometimes goes much deeper than that – that the curiosity sometimes disguises discomfort, worry, or worse... fear. That for some of us – newcomers and longtime Unitarian Universalists, alike – “worship” is a wounded word.

“Wounded words...” A colleague of mine coined the term a few years ago to describe words that hurt – not only words, such as insults, that are *intended* to hurt, but also those words that may be spoken with benign intention, but which still cause pain. (Wells) For many of us, those words are religious words. For me, they are words like *Lord, Creator, salvation*. For some of you, they are *God, Jesus Christ, prayer*, and yes, even *worship*. Words that, as Rev. Wells explains, “over time, have become invested with incredible power by many different groups and individuals.”

They have, indeed, become invested with incredible power – and yet we do ourselves disservice if reject them outright just because we don’t like the meaning someone else has given them. Words are, after all, merely symbols. (One of the linguists in our congregation asserts that language is a very inefficient way to communicate.) Words have no meaning apart from the idea or object to which they point our attention. And many of these wounded religious words are powerful not because they hurt, but because they help us relate to / grasp / better understand ourselves, our lives, the human predicament, and some of what is most important and meaningful in the world.

Which brings me back to worship... because I have, more than once in my years of Unitarian Universalist ministry, been encouraged to reconsider my use of the word worship to describe what we do together in these Sunday services. And each time I have insisted that “worship” *is* what we are doing. I wish the word weren’t upsetting or off-putting for any of you, and yet I

know it is. But I hope in the next few minutes to bring some new perspective to the idea of worship, to open your minds to it, to allow for healing, if necessary.

In our world, we have the opportunity to join many kinds of groups that gather for many different reasons. Professional organizations meet for networking, to hear lectures about the newest innovations in the field; civic organizations meet to encourage citizens to be active in service to the community, and perhaps to hear lectures about pressing concerns; advocacy groups meet to prompt individuals to action in justice-making; social groups meet to build personal relationships through fellowship and entertainment.

So, what distinguishes a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and any religious group, really from all these other organizations? Some of you come here for inspiration to act for justice; some for fellowship and socializing; some for networking. But I believe every one of you comes not for any of those reasons alone, but for those reasons *and*...

And because you seek transformation; *and* because you wish deliberately to explore the mysteries of existence; *and* because you know your life is whole—or will be whole—only because it is connected to others, because it is part of a greater reality, and because here, in this sanctuary, perhaps every week, perhaps only on occasion, you receive the gift of *experiencing* a connection to that greater whole.

And *that* is why—and what—we worship. And also why we give our gathering a name to distinguish it from all those other gatherings.

Recently I attended a Roman Catholic funeral mass. Surprisingly, it was my first funeral mass ever—and the first Catholic mass of any sort that I've attended in many years. And it was one of the most moving worship experiences I've had in a long time. I was moved in ways that I really didn't expect—and by rituals I thought would be meaningless. I *expected* to be moved emotionally by a granddaughter's eulogy; by the singing; by watching the pall being draped ceremoniously over the coffin. I did not, however, expect to be moved by the monsignor's homily—words that felt inclusive to me, an agnostic Unitarian Universalist, when I expected to feel excluded in a foreign religious community. I did not expect to be moved by the confident and enthusiastic voices of the church's members—those who knew the timing and the words of all the responses, and who said them resoundingly. And I did not expect to be moved by the dramatic display of tangible elements—the water being not drizzled but flung over the casket as a reminder of the deceased's baptism into the body of Christ; the incense and bells that wafted throughout the sanctuary. These were not demure, subdued rituals. They were dramatic reminders of the very real person who lived, the very real presence of God in her life, the very real grief of all her loved ones gathered together. There was no avoiding the sounds, the smells, the feelings.

And I, arguably the stranger, became a part of the drama that day... a drama of life and death and love... a dramatic reminder of what is holy and sacred in our brief, mortal lives.

That is worship. I am not likely ever to be a regular attendee in the Roman Catholic mass. I'd have to make too many theological translations. But what I experienced that day is what we, in our own Unitarian Universalist ways, attempt each Sunday as we, too, gather in corporate worship.

A Presbyterian minister named Charles Olsen distinguishes among three different centers of prayer and worship—the closet, the house and the sanctuary. He says the closet is for individual, private devotion and prayer; the house (by which he means small gatherings of people) is for communal prayer; and the sanctuary (corporate worship) is for the “public recital of the drama of grace!” In worship, he says, we rely on resources of the tradition and the wider corporate church to move us through a universal drama—affirming the unity of the religious body and what in his tradition he describes as “the basics of the gospel of grace.”

We cannot, as a body of 100 or 200 persons, meet the individual needs of every person here. But we can, together, turn our attention toward that which universally brings meaning to our lives—the Unitarian and Universalist affirmations of progress and hope for the future; of salvation from our own shortcomings and wrongdoings; of the power of love and forgiveness; of the inherent blessing and goodness rooted deeply inside each of us; of the admonitions that the only “hands of God” are our own, and we must therefore respond to the call for justice and healing on this earth.

Here, on this holy ground, in this sanctuary, we *worship*. We shape things of worth.

Some of us—probably not those who actually chose to be here this morning, but some among us—argue that we don't *need* corporate worship. That s/he is a “spiritual person,” but doesn't need to participate in a religious community on Sunday mornings. Dr. Bill Schulz, Unitarian Universalist minister and now Executive Director of Amnesty International, calls this the “I-get-my-religion-from-a-walk-in-the-woods” refrain. And while he says he has on occasion felt considerable sympathy for this perspective, he is usually in church on Sunday mornings. Because, he writes...

I go to [worship] to interrupt the flow of everyday events just long enough to take a moment's peek at those things which matter most in life: things like mystery, enchantment, love, death, and transformation. This can happen even if the minister stumbles or the choir sings off-key. [And I “join others in that peek” instead of simply trying “to snatch it by myself” for three reasons...]

[1] ... if what we discover in the woods is to realize its full value, even for ourselves, it needs to be shared, pondered, tried out with others.

[2] ... the holy—those things which matter most in life—does not show all its colors in solitude and silence. Sometimes it requires the clarity of another’s voice, sometimes the cacophony of community, and often the touch of other pilgrims’ eyes and arms and hands. ... [the face of the holy] shines brighter when we are in relationship with others.

[3] ... whatever it is we value, be it freedom, courage, love, can only be preserved and only be transmitted with the help of institutions. No one passes on a heritage all by herself. No one by himself alone can provide a countervailing force to sheer iniquity. Our worship signals the institutional incarnation of our faith.

He concludes by acknowledging, “No one knows better than I that the Holy Spirit often fails to keep appointments with our congregations on Sunday morning. When that happens, it is often useful to go for a walk in the woods on Sunday afternoon! But even so, what has happened Sunday morning is not without value. For even when the Spirit fails to show, the church is where we learn how to touch It elsewhere, what to look for in the woods, and how to see.”

Dr. Schulz’s essay is published in a collection titled *Finding Time & Other Delicacies*. We do not have a lot of spare time in our schedules of employment, housework, schoolwork, extracurricular activities, doctors appointments, mealtime, consumption. In those luxurious moments when we do have time, we can name those things that are most important and meaningful in our lives—that which is sacred, holy. And what if I then were to ask, “Where in your life is the space and time for devotion to those things?” “The church,” says Schulz, “is where we learn how to touch [the Spirit] elsewhere, what to look for in the woods, and how to see.”

On Sundays in this congregation, we *worship*. At other times, too, but especially on Sunday mornings. And I, in time, have come to realize that worship is not just about *how* we are together as a religious community. We do worship *something*. I call it The Holy. It is not a being. Not a person. But a spirit—a Truth, a Love, a Reality that is greater than I alone, and greater than the sum of these human parts. And here, together, with the flame and the music and the warmth of these companions, that Spirit does shine brighter, fuller, more clearly. And, if I am fully engaged, I leave here more open, more able to see It elsewhere...

So may it be for you, too. Amen.

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