

## **What do we worship?**

**The Rev. E. Arlen Goff  
May, 2006**

### Opening Words #435

We come together this morning to remind one another  
to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,  
to resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,  
until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude,  
taking the time to look into one another's faces  
and see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.

This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope,  
is hallowed by our presence together.

- written by the Rev. Kathleen McTigue  
chosen and read by Bob Farquhar, Worship Leader

### Responsive Reading #441

#### TO WORSHIP

To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars,  
before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.

To worship is to be silent, receptive,  
before a tree astir with the wind,  
or the passing shadow of a cloud.

To worship is to work with dedication and skill;  
it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music.

To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth;  
it is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.

Worship is a loneliness seeking communion;  
it is a thirsty land crying out for rain.

Worship is kindred fire within our hearts;  
it moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love.

Worship is the mystery within us  
reaching out to the mystery beyond.

It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak;

it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.

- written by Jacob Trapp

Meditative Words #563

To live content with small means;  
to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;  
to be worthy, no respectable, and wealthy, not rich;  
to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;  
to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;  
to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.

To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.  
This is to be my symphony.

- written by William Ellery Channing

Sermon The Rev. E. Arlen Goff

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

- written by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Several weeks ago, several of us from High Street attended the Mid-South District's Annual Meeting at UUCA in Atlanta. UUCA is the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, the "mother" church for UUs in the Atlanta area, and our district's largest fellowship of UUs.

One of the presenters at this year's meeting was the Rev. Kathleen C Rolenz, who along with her husband, the Rev. Wayne B Arnason, serves as Minister to the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church in suburban Cleveland, OH. Their congregation recently gave them a four-month sabbatical, during which they traveled across the country, visiting congregations of various religious traditions (along with numerous Unitarian Universalist churches), in an effort to study what works and what doesn't work in worship. They were searching for those "best practices" which might be applied to worship in UU congregations, both their home church and in other churches across our denomination.

While I'll not go into details about her presentation, it did provide a springboard for this morning's effort to deal with some basic questions about Unitarian Universalists and worship. It provoked me into an examination of what "worship" really means for UUs, the what, the why and the how.

What do we worship?

Commonly, the word "worship" is connected with paying homage to some god, spirit, or deity. In this sense of the word, it would be hard to characterize what happens at 11:00 AM on Sundays for most UUs as "worship". While the outward trappings of a UU worship service might resemble what one might experience in other religious communities, it is entirely possible that an entire Sunday

service might pass without a single reference to a god, deity or supernatural being. Thus, for many UUs, it is more appropriate to refer to what we do on Sunday mornings as the Sunday service instead of Sunday morning “worship”.

It is possible, however, to find “Christian” congregations within our religious movement, where Sunday morning is all about “worship”. I’m thinking specifically of King’s Chapel in Boston, the oldest Unitarian congregation in our country. There, you will find robed clergy and choir, leading worship in a high-church (liturgically formal) Anglican style. Worshippers at King’s Chapel utilize their own edited version of the Book of Common Prayer, and hear sermons and prayers which regularly address a Christian God, albeit in Unitarian terms.

At High Street, however, as in many UU congregations, what we do on Sunday mornings is more eclectic. Reference may be given to the sacred, the divine, the holy, but it will be in more general terms. Recognizing our significant theological and philosophical diversity, hymns and readings may be selected from a variety of worship styles and religious traditions. Buddhist meditations will be as common as Christian prayer, and readings from contemporary literature and poetry are given as honored a place as the sacred writings of the historical religious traditions.

For UUs, the “what” of worship is not as important as the “why” and “how” of worship.

Why do we worship?

So, why then, do we gather together on Sunday mornings? What is it that brings us together in this place? For what purpose do we gather?

In my own personal opinion, the “why” can be addressed if we look closely at the word “worship” itself. It comes from two Old English root words meaning “to shape, form or create something of worth.” While the word’s etymological derivation may elicit visions of graven images and idols (an artisan crafting an image of what he or she considers to be divine), I am more drawn to the inherent reference to a creative process. In this sense, worship becomes a creative experiment in making tangible what I hold to be sacred, or divine, or holy. Or, to put in another way, worship is a way for me to make my values visible.

Seen in this light, worship takes on a whole new meaning. For me, worship is the attempt of the gathered community to create a time and a space where the sacred and the holy can be encountered. It is an effort to carve out a niche in the day-to-day life of its members so they can come apart, to be together with each other, to learn from each other how to take our “faith” back into the marketplace with us.

In his book, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, Jack Mendelsohn says that the true test of religion is in getting from Sunday to Monday. That is to say, it is in helping its followers, believers, adherents to live in the creative tension between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the mundane, to realize that each moment is pregnant with the possibility of encountering that which is far beyond us and yet deep within us, that we do not escape the divine simply by going out of this space into the community beyond its doors. We both take the holy with us, and find it out there.

Or, to quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God.

But only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit around it and pick blackberries.

But I also think, to extend Mendelsohn's image, that Sunday morning worship helps us get from Monday to Sunday. It provides us with the spiritual energy, the refreshment and the rejuvenation many of us need to make our values visible. It provides us with sacred space and sacred time to connect with what we consider to be holy, and to receive what we need so desperately, the feeling that we are not alone, that we are partners with the holy and with each other in the bold task of creating a better tomorrow.

How do we worship?

All of this leads us to the final question: How do we worship?

Now I'm not speaking merely of mechanics here. The simple answer, of course, is that we sing hymns, listen to readings and sermons, and spend a little time in silence. When I ask the question, how do we worship?, I'm not focusing on how we order our time together ... what goes first, what comes next, and how we draw it to a conclusion.

I'm thinking more along the lines of how I worship, how you worship, how we worship ... what we bring to this sacred time and this sacred space.

Several words come to mind ...

The first is integrity. This means that I bring all that I am to this holy hour. I bring my mind and my heart, my doubt and my faith, my joys and my concerns, my fears, my questions, my talents, my gifts, my abilities, everything that makes up whom I am. If I hold back any part of my being, if I do not offer up myself in all its complexity and beauty and ugliness and peril and promise, then I am closing off parts of my unique self which may need blessing and healing and, pardon my use of the word, saving. Not bringing my whole self to the experience of worship is like trying to bake a cake without all the ingredients. The result may look like a cake, but the experience is not all that it could be.

A second word is reverence. Even though we do not all believe the same way, even though our spiritual, theological and philosophical journeys take us in differing directions, by coming together as a gathered community we affirm that there is the real possibility that something holy can happen here. On any given Sunday, what we say here, what we sing here, what we do here, has the potential for becoming a transformative moment for any or for all of us, that moment when heaven touches earth and we are all changed. With that anticipatory stance, we enter this space at this hour with a sense of holy mystery, not knowing exactly what might happen, but aware that something may happen, and we will leave this place at the end of the hour as changed persons, if only for the experience of being together with each other.

A third word is participation. Worship rightly done is never a spectator sport, but involves my willing involvement in the creative process. I may not be able to carry a tune in a bucket, but that shouldn't stop me from "making a joyful noise", even if it's not so enjoyable for me neighbor. Even listening to readings and sermons and homilies requires my active participation; attentiveness to what is going on around me, even if I'm not overtly an active player, is a way of participating in the creative flux of the gathered community. If every one of us entered this space on Sunday morning with a simple determination to be "present", to be attentive, to be active participants in the worship of this gathered community, I daresay that not one Sunday would pass without blessing, and healing,

and challenge, and offering, and, yet again, here's the word, salvation.

Seven years ago, I ended a sermon entitled "The Disappearance of God" with these words:

I know not whether there is a God ... out there ... somewhere. But I do know that I touch the sacred as I touch you, I hear the divine in your voice, I feel the holy in your presence. For me, the face of God is all around ... in the faces which I encounter each day, each one bearing the lines of pleasure and pain, the marks of peril and promise ...

As a religious humanist and an agnostic, I see theology or faith as relational. It is in my interactions with those who are "created in the image of God" that I experience the divine. It is in the niceness and the nastiness of life in community that the sacred impinges on my life, and I am changed, I am made whole, I am saved. What you gift to me is immeasurably more than I can ever return, for you make me a better person and provide me with both the comfort and the challenge to fulfill our common mission:

As people of faith, we seek to better ourselves, our community and our world through integrity, justice and hope.

So may it be. So let us worship.