

“WORSHIP”

A sermon delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
On February 2, 2002
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

A couple weeks ago, I began the service here with opening words by my colleague Gail Geisenhainer, a reading that concluded with these words:

We gather to yearn. We gather to remember.
We gather for solace and for challenge.
We gather for worship.

Before the hour was over, I had talked about the way that Unitarian Universalists use traditional Western religious language. Or don't use it. Or use it, but in unconventional ways. The word of the hour that day was God, but it occurred to me later, “worship” fits into that same category, a religious word that has long been used, that is still widely used in other faith traditions, and that is used by many UUs, too, though usually with our own understanding.

I think that understanding has changed in my lifetime. UUs seem to be more comfortable using the word to refer to their religious services, and mostly to what happens there. Now it's true that when I was growing up, worship might have been used as the name for what went on in church Sunday morning, but not always. Back then, a fair number of our churches and especially our fellowships (smaller groups that often operated without a minister) avoided traditional language, so sermons were talks or discourses, hymns were songs, prayers were meditations, and what went on Sunday mornings might be called a meeting, what happens here in the meetinghouse, a fine old New England term. In recent decades we seem to have become less divided about the use of such language, less touchy or defensive, more apt to the word “worship” without provoking much upset, although we use it in our own way.

There's been another change, though. It used to be more common for people like Jacob Trapp, minister of the Unitarian church I grew up in, to use the word but define it much more broadly than what goes on in church. His piece that we read responsively this morning has been a UU standard since the last hymnbook. If you ask an old-time UU like me, what does it mean to worship, his words leap quickly to my mind. “To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.” And so forth.

This is more than just a clever use of metaphor on Trapp's part. He is more than suggesting that worship – what most people think of as something that happens in so-called places of worship – can happen in all of life. He isn't even explicitly including church services on his list. He is the patron saint of all who tell their minister, priest, or rabbi that they are sorry about their poor attendance at services, but they've been worshipping on walks in the woods. Or on the ski slopes, or the golf course.

And I believe it. (Well, I'm not sure about the golf course.) I grew up with this guy as my minister, and at a time when people talked that way, used “worship” to mean any

time the soul is touched or moved, whenever life takes on a particular vividness, or creativity or activism stirs the spirit. In case it's not obvious, "worship" used to mean what most of you, being younger than I, might refer to as "spirituality." Back then, only Catholics had spirituality. Others had religion, or, if they were as inventive and expansive as Jake Trapp, they had worship.

But if "worship" has come to mean more usually and simply, what goes on at church or temple or mosque when folks get together for their religious observances, I think it still has hopes of accomplishing all Trapp brings to mind, but with the added benefits of happening in community. I still like the notion that much worship is accomplished in solitary moments. But I know that worship in its corporate sense has blessings and benefits of its own.

I was thinking about this last Sunday when I attended the Sunday service at our church in Billings, Montana. I was there visiting my parents in the nursing home where they now live. As many of you know as well as I do or better, nursing homes can be distressing places. What can become of human bodies and minds can be dismaying to behold, both in sympathy for the residents and those who tend them, and in concern for, if not dread about, our own future states.

By Sunday morning, the prospect of a worship service seemed especially welcome, though not altogether so. There was the worry that we introverts have of being too heartily greeted, especially in a congregation that fills its small worship space with its forty friendly attendees. I wondered if I wouldn't rather have the anonymity of a service at some big Episcopal service, but no, that's not my faith. I'm a UU, and as few UUs as there may be in Billings, Montana, they have services scheduled for Sunday morning, bless their hearts, and that's where I wanted to be. It was Sunday morning. It was time to gather for worship.

And they were great. Some of them warmly said hi as we stood around or sat in our folding chairs for the service to begin. But I was in the mood for stillness, as I usually am before a service begins, and they let me have that, too. For the prelude, some of them gathered around the piano and harmonized on the old pop hit, "But Beautiful." For the offertory, the pianist played "I'll Get By." It wasn't New England, and it wasn't Polly and our choir, but it was fine, absolutely fine. It was all part of our worship.

It was part of our gathering, of our being together away from the everyday world, gathered to think about matters other than the immediate and material, gathered in community, and though they live 2500 miles away in a culture very different from South Middlesex County, Mass., we gathered as Unitarian Universalists, with a common sense of tradition and outlook, a common sense of the importance in our lives of being in a UU community on Sunday morning for worship.

By now, though, the average person might be impatient for me to get to answering the question, but to worship whom, or to worship what? You might be wondered that yourself. I have two answers, one of which I like better than the other.

Here's the answer I like less well, though it's a good one and maybe it works great for you. We gather to worship, to pay homage to, to reverence, to venerate what we hold most dear and important, which some of us call God and some of us know by other names: love, justice, peace, kindness, beauty, life itself, or some combination of those things. Looking at Jake Trapp's reading, one could say that he calls us to worship stars, flowers, leaves, sand, silence, clouds, wind in the trees, and so forth. The etymology of the word supports such an interpretation: worship comes from the same word as led to our word

worth. To worship is to acknowledge the worthfulness of something, maybe a god, maybe a person, maybe a value. We gather to worship what we each believe to be of greatest value.

The other answer – and the dictionary approves of it, too – is to say that worship is not a transitive verb but intransitive. It requires no object. We don't gather to worship anything or anyone, we gather to worship, period. It is something we do. You can say, with Jacob Trapp, that we do it other times than here, and often by ourselves, that we do it whenever we are truly attentive to stars, flowers, leaves, and all the rest of the items on Jake Trapp's list, whenever we “work with dedication and with skill” or “listen to a strain of music.” Those aren't just nice things that happen, they can be acts of worship, of relating to life in a deep and significant way.

But one of the places that can happen is here, as in other churches, temples, mosques, and the like. For me, last Sunday in Billings, Montana, or today here in Wayland, as for you, that place is in a UU congregation when we come together, come together to be attentive to life, to relate to life in a deep and significant way, to find an inner quiet and strength, to put things back in perspective, to review our ideals and revive our commitments, to reaffirm our part in this community and in the human family.

The Puritans who founded this church had an interesting attitude about this. It was clear to them that no one place was sacred space, for all space was equally God's, and no one time was more religious than any other, for all time was sacred. But they still – to a person -- came together every Sunday to the same place, a special time and place, to be reminded that all of time and space is special.

In those days, that special time of worship took up most of the day. Now, we try to revive our souls in not much more than an hour, not counting the coffee hour. For me and I know for many of you, that time means a lot, even when it doesn't mean anything monumental. For most of us most weeks, Sunday's worship may just provide some camaraderie, maybe some laughs, an insight or two, a provocative idea, a chance to hear some good music, some peaceful time apart from the office and/or the kids. This is nothing to be sneezed at, either as a regular part of a well-ordered life, or a rare but welcome event. I was there in church last Sunday in Billings in no small part just because it was Sunday morning, and I find life seems on firmer footing when there is that hour out of all the rest of life's hubbub to give the spirit some tending.

And then there are the weeks when the spirit needs more than a little such tending, when maybe it's feeling “tired, weak, and worn” [Thomas Dorsey, Hymn 199], and needs the chance to sit, unhook, reflect, regroup, revive, restore, and get ready to return to the hubbub or nursing home with greater peace and balance, calm and resolve, and worship is a greater gift than ever.

What worship tries to provide, week in and week out in the small ways we may need it, and what it can provide more amply when we need it more, are things like these: a sense of peace and perspective; an appreciation of life's meaning, blessing, resiliency, and hope; comfort in our losses, failures, and despair; a vision of the people we want ourselves to be, and of the world we would help to create; and some uplift for the spirit.

I'm guessing that many of us here have come today with the tragedy of yesterday morning much on our minds, as well as the possible impending invasion, maybe the plunge in the stock market, maybe our parents' health, or our children's, or our own. On any given week, some of us are struggling or suffering, and maybe it helps to be together, or maybe

though we still feel pretty alone in our troubles, it helps to hear words of solace and encouragement, to enjoy beautiful music, or just to have some time to ponder one's own thoughts.

And the thoughts that get pondered often aren't such somber ones. Probably every minister has had people say how their lives were transformed by some decision they reached as they sat in the pews. Part of worship can be an inner acuity, a moment of self-realization, hard to come by dashing through the rest of the week.

So I figure we'll go on doing it. I'll go on saying, many weeks, as the service begins, that we gather for worship. With different words on different weeks we'll try to remember what matters most, what helps us get by, what brightens our mood, what kindles our kindness, what sends us back into the week more appreciative, more hopeful, more determined, more alive.