

Why We Worship

Readings:

“Kenyon College Commencement Speech” (Excerpt) by David Foster Wallace:

‘This, I submit, is the freedom of real education, of learning how to be well adjusted: you get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t. You get to decide what to worship.

Because here’s something else that’s true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life ... [t]here is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort God or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already – it’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, afraid, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they’re evil or sinful; it is that they are *unconscious*. They are default settings. They’re the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that’s what you’re doing. And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self.’

“What's in the Temple?” by Tom Barrett

In the quiet spaces of my mind a thought lies still, but ready to spring.

It begs me to open the door so it can walk about.

The poets speak in obscure terms pointing madly at the unsayable.

The sages say nothing, but walk ahead patting their thigh calling for us to follow.

The monk sits pen in hand poised to explain the cloud of unknowing.

The seeker seeks, just around the corner from the truth.

If she stands still it will catch up with her.

Pause with us here a while.

Put your ear to the wall of your heart.

Listen for the whisper of knowing there.

Love will touch you if you are very still.

If I say the word God, people run away.
They've been frightened--sat on 'till the spirit cried "uncle."
Now they play hide and seek with somebody they can't name.
They know he's out there looking for them, and they want to be found,
But there is all this stuff in the way.

I can't talk about God and make any sense,
And I can't not talk about God and make any sense.
So we talk about the weather, and we are talking about God.

I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God.
Still, we have pet pounds where you can feel love draped in warm fur,
And sense the whole tragedy of life and death.
You see there the consequences of carelessness,
And you feel there the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived.
The only things lacking are the frankincense and myrrh.

We don't build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained.
Or maybe it can't be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It's the spirit that lives on.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
What would you worship there?
What would you bring to sacrifice?
What would be behind the curtain in the holy of holies?

Go there now.

Sermon:

Take a moment to remember a powerful experience you have had during a worship service.

For me, they are too numerous to name. I think of the preacher who consistently brought me to tears – tears of joy, tears of sorrow, tears of insight, week after week after week. I think of the child dedication service when a whole congregation promised a mom – an overwhelmed, single, teen mom -- that they would help her raise her infant daughter. I think of a moment that happened in this sanctuary last May. At the end of my last service here during candidating week, we sang 'People of Hope' and the room overflowed with love and hope and dreams.

When has worship moved you? Hold that memory. You'll get a chance to share it.

A worship service about worship feels like a great way to start my time as your settled minister. As we begin our journey together, I want to share with you some of my thoughts about worship and my vision of who we might be as a worshipping community.

First, the word worship. In many Unitarian Universalist communities, that's a tricky word. It makes some of us nervous. We've been sat on till the spirit cried "uncle" and are wary of religious language. What should we call what happens on Sunday mornings – the gathering with hymns and a sermon and sharing of joys and concerns? If we call it worship, do we have to be worshipping something? What do those who don't believe in a god or gods worship? If we are all worshipping together, are we all worshipping the same thing or for the same reason? Has the word worship been so tarnished by those who hold different ideas about truth than we do that it is beyond reclamation?

For me, worship is a powerful word and the best description of what happens here at 10am on summer Sunday mornings and 10:45 during the rest of the year. I have yet to hear a better alternative. Service has so many meanings. Social service. Armed service. Tea service. Bus service. Assembly, which is a word used in some Unitarian Universalist congregations, especially those with strong humanist roots, reminds me of all-school gatherings in elementary school. This is very different from those often-tedious assemblies. Perhaps you have an alternate word that captures the power and meaning and mystery of what happens here. I'd love to hear it during the time for sharing.

For me, the word worship is imperfect, but it's the best we have.

So if we worship, does that mean we are worshipping something? If we think of worship as David Foster Wallace does, as consciously deciding what has meaning and what doesn't, then everyone worships. We all orient our lives to something, to some source of meaning. We all have a temple in the secret space of our heart.

Worship is a chance to pay reverence to what is at the center of our lives, which is different for each of us and shifts and evolves for each of us over time. The etymologists tell us that the origin of the word 'worship' is tied to the word 'worth.' To worship is to consider what is worthy. As David Foster Wallace says, it could be "J.C.," meaning Jesus Christ, "or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles." To this list I would add the teachings of science, the power of love, and the interconnectedness of all as ideas worthy of worship. What is most worthy to you? What do you worship?

How do we worship?

My hope is that worship, both the corporate large group worship that happens on Sunday mornings and however else we worship – in other communities, in small groups, in individual spiritual practice – helps us remember that we are not the center of the universe, helps us continue to orient ourselves and our lives to what is most worthy for each of us. My hope is that worship is a time of connection, renewal and transformation.

We make that happen through liturgy, through the special combination of music and silence and words that add up to worship. Liturgy is the term of art for the order of service, for the flow that gives worship services their shape and holds a meaning of its own. In my first weeks here, I have heard from many of you that the liturgy of People's Church is important. You have strong connections to the opening song, the words and rituals that happen every week. The rhythm of what you do here and say here and are here matter. You care deeply about worship. I do too.

As I prepare for worship, as I write, as I page through the hymnal, as I read poetry, as I think and meditate and plan the experience we will create together, I hope that everyone leaves the service with something echoing in their mind, heart, or soul – a hymn, a story, a poem, a line from the sermon, a new idea, an insight that comes during our time of silence, a feeling of connection with others who share your values. And as I prepare, I also hope that there is a moment of discomfort, something that doesn't resonate with you, that isn't meaningful to you. I don't want parts of worship to be meaningless. I believe the only way for all of us in this community of diverse believers to have meaningful experiences in worship is for there to be a variety of expressions. Not everything can be meaningful for everyone.

I take this idea from The Riverside Church in New York City. It is a special place, not only because high in the steeple is where Brian proposed to me and when I said yes the bells rang out across the city.

The Riverside Church is a special place because it is a diverse community. Sunday morning remains the most segregated time in America, but the Riverside Church is a multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic church with 2,400 members. It is also an ecumenical community – made up of all sorts of Christians. It is affiliated with both the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Church. And they hold these two distinct traditions together. It is not easy. There are divergent opinions about worship.

A decade ago, someone asked the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, now the minister emeritus of the congregation, how he made worship work in this integrated community. He responded,

"A truly diverse congregation where anybody enjoys more than 75 percent of what's going on is not thoroughly integrated. So that if you're going to be an integrated church you have to be prepared to think, "hey, this is great, I enjoyed at least 75 percent of it," because 25 percent you should grant for somebody's precious liturgical expression that is probably odious to you; otherwise it's not integrating. So an integrating church is characterized by the need to be content with less than total satisfaction with everything. You have to factor in a willingness to absorb some things that are not dear to you but may be precious to some of those coming in."¹

I paraphrased this quote in meetings during candidating week. It's a powerful idea. I believe it is the best hope for a growing and vibrant congregation – and a growing and vibrant Unitarian Universalism. The best hope for our faith as a community of diverse believers – diverse

¹ DeYoung, Curtis Paul, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim. *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As an Answer to the Problem of Race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

theologically and in other ways – is for all of us to become more comfortable with our own discomfort. There are going to be parts of worship that will not resonate with you, that you might even find odious. The music will be too contemporary or too classical. A sermon or a ritual will be too Christian or too Buddhist or too Pagan or too Humanist. I will use some words that are not your words, words that might even make you shudder.

The trick in those moments of odiousness is to move beyond your experience, to look at the person seated next to you or across the aisle and see their enraptured look or their holy tears or their hand fiercely scribbling notes and know that they are having a worshipful moment. The trick in those moments is to take joy in the meaning that others are finding in something that is not dear to you. The trick in those moments is to remember that it won't be long until you are the one with the meaningful moment and other people will be finding joy in your experience. That's how we live our principles. That's how we accept one another and encourage everyone's spiritual growth. A community where no one's preferences are satisfied all the time and people who worship many things in many ways come together to support and encourage one another is my vision of worship at People's Church. And now, I would love to hear your visions:

As our time of listening and sharing begins, I have these questions to help guide our conversation:

What has been a meaningful experience of worship for you?

Do you agree that everyone worships something? What do you worship? What is most worthy in your life?

What is the best word for the gathering with hymns, and poems, and silence and a sermon that happens on Sundays?

How much discomfort – or even odiousness – are you willing to endure so someone else in the community can have their precious liturgical expression? How much discomfort – or even odiousness – do you think others should be willing to endure for your precious liturgical expression?

What are your hopes for the worship life at People's Church in the months and years ahead?