

## SHAPING WORTH TOGETHER: HOW WE WORSHIP

Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 4, 2008

The late Kenneth L. Patton, a staunch Humanist preacher, poet, and hymnist, wrote these words, which I feel are a fitting beginning for our time together today:

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;  
let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation  
in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young  
and the very old,  
the wistfulness of people in all times of life.

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance,  
the fear behind pride,  
the tenderness behind clumsy strength,  
the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life,  
if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

Let us worship, not in bowing down,  
not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,  
with the full outstretching of our spirits.

Life comes with singing and laughter,  
with tears and confiding,  
with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind  
and heart and body,  
to those who have fallen in love with life.  
Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

Kenneth L. Patton

The word “worship” is scary for lots of Unitarian Universalists, evoking as it does the idea of adoration of a deity. And that is one definition of the word “worship”. It’s just not the one we use.

It can also mean rituals of reverence and praise and it can mean ardor or passion toward another person. These are all legitimate definitions of the word “worship”. Again, they are not the definitions we Unitarian Universalists generally use when we think about worship.

No, we tend to go back to the original language, the Old English, the combination of two ancient words, “weorth” and “schippe”. One word means worthiness and the other means to shape. What we UUs usually mean by the word worship is “to shape that which is worthy”, to take note of, to treasure, to think about, to share that which is worthy.

I’ve always liked this way of defining the term worship. For me, it goes beyond what is normally meant and expands its meaning beyond deity, beyond prescribed adoration, beyond personal preference.

My own experiences with worship, with shaping worth together, have been as varied as yours may have been, beginning in my Baptist childhood with a pretty conservative rehashing of ancient King James Version Bible passages, interspersed with some great hymn singing, an occasional communion service, and long prayers.

When I first walked into a Unitarian Universalist sanctuary for worship, my experience was rather different, though it was still pretty much the same format, with much better preaching, meditation instead of a long pastoral prayer, and hymns whose words seemed more in line with my thinking though without the energy my Baptist pals had mustered.

As I got more accustomed to the differences between the Baptist worship services of my youth and my Unitarian Universalist experiences with worship, I started to develop ideas of my own about how things should go.

As a member of Jefferson Unitarian Church in Colorado for almost 25 years, I had my gripes. Gosh, I'd think, this preacher sure is boring, or, over my head, or too flip, or looks weird. Gee, the choir sure sounded flat. Boy, I wish my neighbor wouldn't talk during the prelude. And, I like Joys and Concerns but does it HAVE TO go so long? I had my complaints, for sure.

And then I had a remarkable two by four between the eyes. After I had given a short homily one Sunday as a member of the Committee on Ministry, our minister Robert Latham got up in the pulpit, turned to me, and said, "Kit, you missed your calling. You ought to be a minister."

And Sunday worship began to take on a whole new meaning for me. As a congregation leader and potential seminary student, I was invited to go to the district's Leadership School, where I began to learn about what worship means. I learned the idea of "shaping worth together". I had a chance to share my own ideas about what was worshipful and what was not.

I learned that my gripes were common gripes but that they really weren't getting at the heart of worship. That is, what I disliked often meant something entirely different to someone else.

My boring or too intellectual preacher was a source of wonderful stimulation to someone else. Another person appreciated the hours of work that went into a choral performance and forgave all the flat notes. For every gripe of mine, there was a response that helped me see that my worship experience was not just about me and my preferences, that other worshippers needed something different.

The Rev. Barbara Hamilton Holway, our teacher for Worship Arts at Leadership School, told us all that in corporate worship----and that means when we all come together in the same place to experience the same hour of meaning and value----in corporate worship, we have a chance to receive several different gifts of worship.

There's the gift of silence for those who crave a contemplative time. There's the gift of the spoken word for those who learn by listening. There's the gift of singing together for those who love to be part of voices raised in song. There's the gift of poetry or artistic expression for those whose reverence is inspired by creativity.

There's the gift of the responsive word for those who love to speak aloud the beautiful words of others. There's the gift of the joys and concerns of the gathered community for those whose love and care for friends and neighbors is at their essence. There's the gift of laughter for those whose spirits need a lift and the gift of solemnity for those who are in a serious place.

And so, Barbara reminded us, when we are in worship together, every element may not serve us individually perfectly. But a UU worship service is designed to offer the many gifts of worship to the great variety of people who gather there, and what is not meaningful and worshipful to me is very possibly deeply meaningful and worshipful to the person sitting beside me.

When I started seminary, I was immersed in an interfaith stew of fellow students and learned to appreciate the many gifts of Christian worship, and of worship with a pagan flair or in the contemplative style of Buddhism, and found great meaning in some elements and less in others. When a fellow student griped about some less-than-meaningful-to-him element, I was able to share my mentor's teachings.

But I continued to be a little bit frustrated by my experiences in corporate worship. Some of this was because I was in seminary and attuned to critiquing what I saw being presented in worship. Some of it was because worship wasn't well-conducted. But somehow even JUC's high quality worship services didn't always inspire me.

And then I came to the point in my training where I had to qualify for inclusion in the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, by jumping through the credentialing hoops of a committee called the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the dreaded MFC.

I'd read everything on the reading list, I'd done all the seminary work, gotten good grades, high evaluations on my chaplaincy training and my internship. I figured I was probably THE best candidate ever to arrive before the MFC----secretly, of course, I was scared to death. So I did what I often do when I'm scared and that is come across extra strong.

After my half hour interview with the MFC, I went out to the lobby of the hotel where we were being interviewed to wait for them to decide and call me back in. And I waited and waited and waited. Finally, after almost an hour, a wait which was a lot longer than most other candidates had endured, somebody came to get me.

My heart was pounding. What did the delay mean? I sat down in my appointed seat and the chair of the committee said to me, "Kit, we're giving you a rating of 2, not a 1. 2 is a passing rating, but we think you're way too intense to be easily accepted by a Search committee or a typical congregation. We want you to spend your final seminary year with a Spiritual Director before you are qualified for Preliminary Fellowship."

Well! I was polite. I didn't scream out my defensive objections. I thanked them sweetly and went out silently fuming. Intense? Me? I saw the rating of a 2 and the assignment of a contingency to be completed, as failure. I was unable to see anything positive in having gotten anything less than a great big gold star!

Fortunately the years I spent in 12 step work were invaluable to me, as I cooled down later and got over my sense of embarrassment at having been less than a perfect student, I could acknowledge that yes, I am intense, I am strong-willed, I am even egotistical at times. And maybe Spiritual Direction wouldn't be so bad.

For those who are not familiar with the term, Spiritual Direction is simply the undertaking of a spiritual search with a companion who is trained to guide another person through the common spiritual questions and dilemmas of life. It's a bit like counseling, but it's spirit-oriented, not goal-oriented.

So I hunted up a Spiritual Director. Her name was Ann and she agreed to meet with me for a year, during my senior year in seminary. At our first visit, she asked me to think about what spiritual practice I would like to develop.

That was in September of 1998, ten years ago, and when I chose to develop a prayer life, with Ann's help, I never dreamed what effect it would have on my spiritual development, and, in fact, on my ability to find meaning in ordinary human experiences of all kinds. It changed my perspective and my life.

My colleague the Rev. Susan Maginn, of Wy'east UU Congregation in Portland, has written: "There is a pretty profound relationship between...(having a spiritual practice and coming to worship services.)

"In our personal spiritual practice, we are able to go into the quiet of our being and meet our own personal needs for engaging the spirit. We all have our own ways of developing our spiritual maturity. For some of us spiritual practice is expressive - in art, music, writing, hiking in the woods.

"For some of us it is more contemplative – prayer, meditation or memorizing poetry. We choose a practice that is our holy task. We regularly set aside holy time to make it so.

"When we come together for Sunday worship, we are doing something different. My hope is that our spirits will certainly be enriched by our Sunday worship services, but this time is not personal spiritual practice. It is an expression of our shared path. We are a people who are bound together by a covenant to walk in the ways of love. Worship is a celebration of this.

"When we do one without the other, our spiritual needs will not be met. If all we do is personal spiritual practice, we will be missing the sacred community. If all we do is community worship, then we will be asking the community worship to meet our very personal needs, which community worship is not designed to do. A new member of ..this congregation... described this eloquently. She said, 'One goes deep, while the other goes wide'."

And this is what I learned from developing a personal spiritual practice: that focusing on my own spiritual life in a regular, conscientious way helped me find meaning in every worship service I attended, whether it was well-done or not, whether it met my individual need that day or not, whether the choir was great or the preacher was boring.

It was no longer just about my needs, for my individual spiritual needs were being met by my personal spiritual practice. Being together in worship was about being part of a loving community as the community experienced a loving time together.

Last week, our guest preacher, the Rev. James Kubal-Komoto spoke to us about “how to become a more spiritual person in 15 minutes a day”. Do you remember what he told us about the four elements of spiritual living? Let’s remind ourselves of them. James spoke about integrating four attitudes or behaviors into our daily lives.

He spoke about compassion and kindness, how much more deepening is an attitude of care for other human beings than is an attitude of criticism. That was the first thing he suggested: compassion and kindness.

The second thing was gratitude, the ability to be thankful for what we have in life instead of wanting more and more and more stuff or money.

The third was acceptance, and he used the Serenity Prayer as an example: Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

And the fourth was faithfulness, faithfulness to our values, faithfulness to a life of integrity and commitment.

A personal spiritual practice brings these elements of spirituality into our daily lives. You may find your deepest yearnings satisfied by time in the woods or on the water or in your garden; you may find it listening to music or creating something beautiful; you may find it in silence and meditation. You may find it, as I did, in a daily prayer time.

I'm certainly not advocating that you should all do any one thing I suggest, as a spiritual practice. I can suggest things all I want---that's the freedom of the pulpit! But you have the right to disagree or to choose your own path---that's the freedom of the pew! A very important freedom in UUism.

But I would like to suggest strongly that in order to get the very most possible out of any worship service, any time of corporate worship, whether it's here or down the road at a more conservative church, that each of us should have a personal spiritual practice, a time in which we think about and focus on such attributes as compassion, gratitude, acceptance, and faithfulness.

One of the remarkable things that I have gained from my daily prayer time is an ability to feel a kinship with even those religious folks who are on the other end of the religious spectrum from me: compassion and understanding for how important their faith and their own practices are to them; gratitude for having found my own path which resonates for me so well; acceptance that this is who they are and that their paths are right for them, at this time in their lives, as are mine; and then faithfulness to my own values and a commitment to continue to work for those values in the world.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak to my ministerial colleagues about my own spiritual journey, my odyssey, a privilege which most ministers in our district receive once or so during their career. I spoke to them for about an hour about my life and then asked if anyone had questions.

During the Q and A period, one colleague raised her hand and asked, “Kit, where does your spirit of “happy positivity” come from?” She went on to say that this was her experience of me, that not much got me down very permanently, that I seemed to be able to grow and rise above fairly negative experiences.

I pondered that for a moment, surprised by the question as I certainly have my down times, my low energy, depressive moments, but I realized, and answered her thus, that I had faked it for a long time, for many years of my life, and that it had shifted in the past twenty years or so because of my experiences in such programs as AlAnon and my regular prayer practice.

Without these two discoveries in my life, I think I would still be faking it, not wanting to reveal myself too much, afraid that others would criticize. And it was learning about myself through 12-step work and prayer that gave me the courage to be truly myself, to survive the low blows that life always delivers.

As we think about our worship times together, our corporate worship, and plan how to make these times even better when we move into our own sanctuary, filled with our own symbols and a deeper sense of our own identity as a congregation, I hope that each of us will consider how we might deepen our personal spiritual lives, whether by disciplined repetition of a practice like meditation or prayer, whether by time spent creating beauty out of the earth or fabric or paint or music or words, whether by contributing to the wellbeing of our community by service to others or by spending time in nature or in reading poetry.

I'm not sure it matters just what we choose as a spiritual practice, just that it must invite us daily into deeper consideration of our own relationship to ourselves, to other beings, and to the earth on which we live. When we are able to set aside worries and anxieties for a time and focus on who we are and what we may become through a personal spiritual practice, we deepen our own lives and give ourselves more "worth" to share when we come together as a community. In addition, we will have more to share with the community beyond our walls.

It is my prayer that we each may find within ourselves that wellspring of compassion, gratitude, acceptance, and faithfulness, and that we will bring a renewed vision of worship to our times together, as we grow and prosper as a congregation.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn #318 "We Would Be One"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our own spiritual lives are enriched and deepened by the personal spiritual practices which we undertake. May we recognize their value to our life together in this Beloved Community and may we come each week with joy and anticipation of our time together here. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.