

UUFM Sunday Order of Service
“Shaping Worth—Worship in a UU Mode”
Tony Filipovitch
7/16/23

Gathering

Music: <https://youtu.be/qeZwgv4hHgQ> (Gregorian Chant)

Welcome

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, where some of our space is virtual, but all of our worship is not. Our worship is entirely real and vital, life-giving and life-sustaining in all times, including in these times.

All you here today, you are all welcome in this time we make sacred together. All are loved, worthy, and needed. Our human differences are sacred and make us strong. All histories and experiences, all abilities and beingness, all identities and genders. All those seeking companionship and a sense of purpose, ready to embrace and to fulfill our Unitarian Universalist values. Here, you can bring your whole self.

In these times and in all times, may we move into action to create the world of equity and liberation about which we dream. May we hold reverently and tenderly this one life, the here and now of which we are certain.

Before European colonization, the Dakota peoples were stewards of the land on which our Fellowship building sits. In Dakota language, Ina is the word for both mother and land, a word reminding us that we are all relatives. The land does not belong to us, though it holds the history of our conflicts and our attempts at reconciliation.

This congregation commits to an ongoing and intentional journey of humble connection with Indigenous peoples, characterized by understanding our shared history, accepting responsibility for restoration, and building relationship in the here and now. Thus, we seek to be good relatives.

I am Diane Langland, a member of this congregation, honored and humbled to serve the holy as Worship Associate for today's service.

Thanks to
Greeters Deb Fitzloff & Liz Kipp
Tech Squad, Kat Clements and Sarah Sifers
Children's Chapel, Lee Ganske & Danielle Stedman

Announcements

Here we are, gathered through Zoom and in the Sanctuary. We are grateful for technology and loving volunteers making it possible for us to be one congregation. If you know of people who don't like either the Zoom format or the in-person format, please let them know that they can find next week on our website a reading copy and a video of the sermon.

If you are new to the Fellowship, we are grateful that you are expanding the "we" who is "us"! You can complete an online Newcomer Participation form if you like. There is also a form in the entryway a Greeter can help you find and on a yellow strip in the pews.

There will be a chance to visit together after the service at coffee hour in the Fellowship Hall as well, provided by Lee & Linda Ganske and Mary Beth Trembley. Thank you!

Those of you in the Sanctuary, we have collected the Joys and Sorrows you wrote at the table in the back of the Sanctuary. Feel free to make a note at any time during the service for me to read, and someone will run them up to me here.

Having so long been unable to gather as we wish, some of us still not able, these continue to be hard times indeed. Sunday morning worship is not yet again part of our weekly habits. And it is a feeling of belonging to community, to something larger than ourselves, that can help to get us through the loneliness and alienation. No one is alone, no one. And in the words of Bill Withers, "no one can fill Those of your needs that you won't let show." So, let us lean on each other in these times.

Chalice Lighting

Let us now move into a time of worship, shaping worth and meaning from the ordinary as a way to honor the gift of life we all share. Together, let us kindle a flame symbolizing our co-creation of sacred space. If you are joining by Zoom, please write in the Chat that a chalice is lit on your street.

"We are a welcoming people of diverse beliefs who commit to nourish the spirit, broaden the mind, nurture the earth, and build community. May this flame we kindle remind us to strive, today and every day, to love beyond belief."

Song

Let us join together to sing "Just as Long as I Have Breath," Hymn #6 in the Grey Hymnal.

[Share <https://mVA8WiT-hsg>]

Sorrows and Joys

I invite us now into a time to share the sorrows and joys at the heart of our religious community.

I will begin with Sorrows.

And now we share our Joys with the community.

Singing

Friends, I invite you to sing our song of comfort and joy ("Comfort Me")

Offering

We cannot be a religious community without sharing meaning, identity, and purpose. We cannot sustain our religious community without sharing our financial resources. To voluntarily gather as a people and to support ourselves without reference to any higher religious order, these are the true marks of Unitarian Universalism polity. As you listen to Leonard Cohen's Come Healing, consider making a monetary gift to the Fellowship so that our community may grow and flourish, increasingly able to spread compassion and make justice in the larger world. [<https://youtu.be/8pKUwTooZ3o>]

Story for All Ages

Our Story for All Ages is *When the Sun Rose*, by Barbara Helen Berger (<https://youtu.be/PgRrtn1JsLo>)

Reading

For today's reading, let me share with you today a poem from e e cummings, "i thank You God": (<https://youtu.be/axH9A28CTjw>)

Meditation

And now I invite you into a time of prayer, reflection, and meditation.
Settle into your mind and your body as it is in this moment. . .
Close your eyes or simply soften your gaze. . .

These are the words of Lester Burnham's soliloquy as he lay dying at the close of the movie, *American Beauty*: <https://youtu.be/VGil-MuTWf0>

Homily: "Shaping Worth—Worship in a UU Mode"

When your Committee on Shared Ministry assessed our Worship earlier this year, we noticed some confusion among us around the meaning of the term, "worship." We profess to not be attracted to "ritual," but we are sure attached to our patterns of doing things. We are attracted to this community because of the actions we engage in, but somehow for some of us "worship" is not one of those group activities. Some of us aren't sure what "spiritual" is supposed to mean, and in any event who (or is it what?) are we worshipping on Sundays? (That remark reminds me of an old Gahan Wilson cartoon depicting a scene straight from deMille's *Ten Commandments* movie. People are prostrating before a wagon with a huge Zero in it. One observer turns to the other and says, "Is nothing sacred here?") And yet, thoughtful and reflective and sincere people that we are, we keep coming back—*something* is sacred, even if we can't exactly put our finger on it.

Or maybe it's that we each have a different specific answer to the question—the answer is in our common questioning and seeking, not in the response given. So, let me share with you my search for an answer to "What is 'worship'?"

Growing up, "worship" was praying to a god who, if he wanted, would intervene in my life, and in any event would decide my fate after my death. Like some (many?) of us, I was not raised Unitarian or Universalist (back then, they were two different churches with two different traditions). I was

raised Catholic, in a very Catholic household—not only did my parents have 7 children, they often went to Mass on days other than Sunday! Like Paul Stookey’s song, I read the book by colored light of the pretty window picture, and I believed in Him. So much so in fact that by the time I was 8 I had taught myself the Latin Mass so I could become an Altar Boy (funny story—when I was 9 and old enough to be recruited, Fr. Haehner had to un-teach me because I had taught myself using English phonics, rather than the Italianate Church Latin) and at age 14 I entered the Seminary to become a priest. The Gregorian chant you were hearing before the service started? That was (still is) a deeply layered, richly spiritual experience that I still feel in the marrow of my bones.

It’s a long story, but in time I left the Seminary, and then I left the Church (or, rather, my church left me—I came up in the era of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, very different from the popes who followed). I came to see religion and spirituality as a human experience, first as a thread that runs through Catholicism and the other Christian churches, and Judaism, and then Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism, and then animism and Native American practices.... With different words, different practices and expressions, humans everywhere and across time have tried to put their hands around the ineffable. And that made sense to me—Islam teaches that there are 99 Names of God, but if God is infinite (as St. Thomas reasoned) then there must be an infinity of names of God and no single name or set of names says it all. Like Rumi’s blind men and the elephant, each expression of religion, while concrete and real in its individuality, is only a partial expression of... let’s call it “the numinous,” so as not to confuse it with a guy with a long white beard in a long white gown floating on a cloud.

So, for me religion (or “spirituality,” if religion is too closely tied to credal strictures for you) came to mean the experience of standing before the numinous. It’s like the slogan for the Children’s Defense Fund says, “Oh, Lord, the sea is so wide and my boat is so small!” Spirituality was no longer a matter of belief (which depends on some other one’s authority to be held as true), but it was based on my own experience. It is the daily miracle of the sun rising in the story Macey read—the lion having blueberries and cream, and making rainbows all day, and a house full of roses. It is e e cummings’ leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky. And it is also in the hard things, in Leonard Cohen’s healing of the spirit and the healing of the limb. In fact, beauty and terror are not that far apart. As the poet Rainer Rilke wrote, “Then beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us.” Religion/spirituality lurks in the fundamental question of metaphysics—Why is there something rather than nothing?

There is a word for this. It is “awe,” which carries a meaning of “wonderful” but originally also carried a meaning of “awful” or terror-inspiring. It is Leonard’s heart filling up like a balloon, and then flowing through him like rain. As Rev. Mark Belletini writes in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, “Awe’ is the word I use to describe what seizes me when I realize that I live at all, that everything is, that hope is possible, that limits are to be expected, that tragedy is real, that control is largely an illusion, but that love is nonetheless desirable.” In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto says that sitting in face of the numinous brings many feelings—a sense of what he calls “creature-feeling,” a sense of fascination, and (using Medieval terminology) a sense of the *mysterium tremendum* (there’s my Seminary training again—I love Latin!). The *mysterium* is a realization of the “wholly other” of the numinous, the *tremendum* is a realization of the awefulness (in the many senses of that word), the overpoweringness, and the energy or urgency of that otherness. Belletini goes on to say, “‘Worship,’ an ancient and very rich word, well describes my response to that awe: a sense of amazement, a sense of profound gratitude or acceptance, even a bodily trembling.” In other words,

worship is not prostration before some “Oz the Great and Powerful,” but it is sitting in awe of all that is—*all*, the things we seek and the things we avoid, the joy and the pain, and the confusion and the ambiguity and the complexity. It is how I give shape and voice to the awe that I feel faced with the mystery of this life. It’s really awe-full, isn’t it?

But that’s not all. While each of us experiences and expresses this awe-full-ness each in our own way (and often differently at different times), it is important to sit and stand together as we share it. The numinous—let me simplify, and call it just “the spirit”—escapes any one’s ability to express it. The psychologist R D Laing once wrote, “The finger points at the moon. The finger is not the moon.” While I can worship the spirit as I know it in my own way, I know at that same time that I’m missing the mark; whatever words or expressions I use. They are only the finger pointing at the moon. When I come together with you—when we are in community, as so many of you mentioned in the Worship Ministry assessment—my own grasp of the spirit is tempered and reaches beyond itself by each of your unique experiences. I can sing “Just as Long as I Have Breath” by myself. But the experience is so much richer and deeper when I sing it with you and hear your voice—and sometimes hear that “third voice” that blooms between voices. So too the awe we feel and express in worship is enriched by expressing it together.

And there is another reason for worshipping, for experiencing and expressing awe, together, although it is harder for me to describe. Perhaps an analogy will serve. Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, writes about sacred space (for our purposes, a spatial analogue to the act of worship). He says “...For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation.... The manifestation of the sacred...founds the world.” The manifestation of the sacred reveals the fixed point that is the foundation of the world. By worshipping together, each from our own angle on it, we turn together to face the “fixed point” that is the foundation of the world.

To sum it up, worship for me is sharing together our individual experiences of awe as we seek to hold what none of us can grasp. Together, we let the tremendous mystery be.

Song

Let’s listen to *Let the Mystery Be*, is by Iris DeMent. Although she was raised Pentecostal in Arkansas, she captures more than a little of the UU spirit. You can just listen, if you like; but the Chorus is pretty catchy and if the spirit moves you, feel free to join in.

[\[https://youtu.be/nlaoR5m4L80 \]](https://youtu.be/nlaoR5m4L80)

Chalice Extinguishing

As we conclude our time of worship this morning, let us make a promise that through all this threshold time we will remain committed to sustained and robust relationship with each other, to the vision of our faith community, to the values of Unitarian Universalism, and to the interdependent web holding us all.

As we speak our unison words, I invite you to extinguish your chalice or candle at home.

“We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.”

Benediction

This Benediction comes from the Muncie UU Church:

“May the little that we know

Be enough to guide us

As we seek the truth

That no one knows

And no one lives without.”

Friends, let us join in a final song together. Thus, we bless each other, and thus we are a blessing to each other. (“Long Time Sun”)