

May Theme

Worship: The Practice of Discernment

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~ Charles M. Schulz

Introduction

Worship is an essential component of a church community, because without some form of regular worship service, there is no church. There can be focus groups and service projects, social events and religious education classes, but without having a worship service, there is no chance of an entity being identified as a church.

In Unitarian Universalism there is no single understanding – indeed, no right answers – to the questions of “what is worship?” and “what do people come together to worship?”. In our faith tradition, worship may not be about praising a deity – though there are many Unitarian Universalists who do worship a god or God. “Worship” in the UU tradition is more likely to be in line with the Old English ‘weorthscipe’, from which the modern term is derived, meaning “condition of being worthy” or, as a verb, “to consider what is of worth.”

Worship, therefore, can be described as an opportunity to contemplate what is deserving of our respect, our time, our attention. The discernment of what we value in our faith happens not just on Sunday mornings when we are in community together in the sanctuary. Rather, what we do and how we live our lives every day and in every moment is the true indicator of what we find worthy. We make decisions, we discern – from the Latin ‘discernere’, to separate, set apart, sift – constantly. Various sources estimate that an adult makes about 35,000 remotely conscious decisions every day. Our decisions, and how we discern what actions to take, ultimately show what we find worthy, and thus, what we worship.

As individuals, we find worth in a variety of different things; that is what makes us unique. And, as we do not want to be told what music to listen to, nor what food to eat, nor what team to root for, our individuality is tied to our ability to discern for ourselves what we find worthy. We certainly don't want our choices to be dictated by someone else.

We are each compelled to make choices that add up to an existence that explores the human experience and helps us discern what we find sacred, and how to connect to that sacredness amidst the complexities of being human. We all – each and every one of us – worship something, indeed many things. Through worship we have an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what we value and how to align our values with our actions. Being a part of this community may help us to discern whether what we worship is truly worthy of our time, our love, and our money. Together, we can each strive to live our life in a way that embodies what we value and what is sacred to us, to practice ‘being the person we want to be’.

This month's theme was composed by Alex Businger and Maria Kempner with the Worship Associates.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:

1. What does the word worship mean to you? Is worship a hot button word?
2. What do you find worthy, what do you worship, and to what do you assign value?
3. How do we use worship to help us make choices?
4. When you come to UUAC on a Sunday, what, if anything, do you worship?
5. What does it mean to worship together?
6. What times of the week do you feel ‘worshipful’?
7. How do you worship outside of church?
8. How often do you feel called to be discerning about what you worship?
9. When at church, do you often find yourself in the process of discernment?
10. What do you value doing or experiencing when you attend worship services?
11. How do you decide who or what is worthy of your time, your attention, your money, your love?
12. Is it a problem that Unitarian Universalists do not have a common understanding of what we worship? Why or why not?

Quotes and Short Readings

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 come out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Spirit of life, in us and around us, here is our chance—once again—to live like we wish the world would live. May we find within ourselves the courage to be who we are. May we know when it is time to listen and when it is time to speak. May we trust ourselves to be the ones to find the words that need to be said or to do what needs to be done. May we trust one another and know there are many ways to go through life. May we know that though we cannot change some of what life gives to us, we can choose how we deal with what we are given.

We are coming into our power, and together we can make possible justice and love. We are all connected; we depend upon one another more than we know. We are one body.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.

~ *Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway (co-minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, California)*

The Worship Associates are: Tom Bolton, Alexandra Businger, Alan Cantor, Masha Hoeffy, Margaret Homer, Maria Kempner, Julien Lafleur, Marty Nickerson, Jennifer Ollington, and Penn Young.

Within our tradition, we are able to say: “Worship means praising, confessing, and discerning the word of God.” We are able to say: “Worship is a private transformation done in the context of corporate ceremony and ritual.” We are able to say: “Worship is when we hold up things of worth and value. It is our link to the past and a gateway to our future.” We are able to say: “No matter what our definition of worship might be, we have an embodied experience of being in worship together, and that is what is most important.”

~ *Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, from Worship that Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*

There 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 of 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 finally 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, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

~*David Foster Wallace*

Worship, then, is our opportunity to contemplate what is most worthy in our lives, to discover anew what we value most deeply, to recognize how to align our true values with our actions--indeed, to find what is sacred to us in our lives and to consider how we wish to relate to what we find sacred.

~*From the UUA 'Workshop on Theology and Worship'. Link:*

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/newuu/workshop1/160208.shtml>

I've begun worshipping the sun for a number of reasons. First of all, unlike some other gods I could mention, I can see the sun. It's there for me every day. And the things it brings me are quite apparent all the time: heat, light, food, and a lovely day. There's no mystery, no one asks for money, I don't have to dress up, and there's no boring pageantry. And interestingly enough, I have found that the prayers I offer to the sun and the prayers I formerly offered to 'God' are all answered at about the same 50% rate.

~ *George Carlin, Brain Droppings*

When every hope is gone, 'when helpers fail and comforts flee,' I find that help arrives somehow, from I know not where. Supplication, worship, prayer are no superstition; they are acts more real than the acts of eating, drinking, sitting or walking. It is no exaggeration to say that they alone are real, all else is unreal.

~*Mahatma Gandhi, The Story of My Experiments With Truth*

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We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard of our behavior toward the world - to the incalculable disadvantage of the world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not only our own creativity - our own capacity for life - that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled.

We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it. (pg. 20, "A Native Hill")

~ *Wendell Berry, The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

I often see how you sob over what you destroy, how you want to stop and just worship; and you do stop, and then a moment later you are at it again with a knife, like a surgeon.

~ *Anais Nin*

It was not intended as a compliment. It was a confession. Now that I have made it, something seems to have gone out of me. Perhaps one should never put one's worship into words.

~ *Oscar Wilde, Picture of Dorian Gray*

The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature*

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~ *Charles M. Schulz*

When you know the knower within, you don't need to know further. When you know the meditator within, you don't need to meditate further. When you truly know the worshiper in you, you are to be worshiped.

~ *Amit Ray, Nonviolence: The Transforming Power*

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