

Why UU's Worship

by Bill Graves

March 2008

Aristotle is responsible for the aphorism: "An unexamined life is not worth living." In that spirit it seems worthwhile to examine at least annually why we do this. And, this March as you know is stewardship month at SUUF and that is a propitious time for me to invite you to consider why you come here on Sunday mornings? Why do we in effect bet a significant corner of our "one wild and precious lives", that involvement in this fellowship and participating in what some call "worship" is the right choice for us. These are some of the questions I'd like to see if I can tweak your thoughts on this morning.

Over three thousand years ago a cultural practice became hallowed which still has merit. That is the Sabbath day, every 7th day. It is a practice of taking a regular, structured time to rest, to be with loved ones, to be with the inner life of careful critical thinking, considering the meaning of our existence before it is over, to meditate, and, yes, pray. Traditionally, it is a time to reflect upon our work gone on before, just as Yahweh, the God of Hebrew scriptures, did on the 7th day. It literally is a time to count our blessings, appreciate beauty, express gratitude, or perhaps, forgiveness.

So allow me to break these Sabbath practices down. For me there is both a community aspect and a worship aspect involved in attending services of a religious organization like ours. Most of what I have to say has to do with worship but first let me talk a little about community. Last Wednesday on the back table in this room I noticed a copy of the newsletter of East Shore Unitarian Church, where I attended for almost two decades. In it my friend, Rev. Peter Luton, gave me words to describe how it feels for me to come here and be among you people who I have learned to know and love: "It feels like tumbling into joy." I, and others here, experience SUUF as a loving, life-giving, joyful community of kind, dedicated, morally alert, intellectually alive, socially conscious and truly wonderful people. "It feels like tumbling into joy!"

I know we get, certainly I get, caught up in fretting that things are not perfect here; they never are anywhere. Yet, let's not let that stop us from celebrating what we have. In a world that bombards us with the message that we are somehow not good enough because of what we look like, or what we haven't accomplished, or who we love, we have a religious community that loves and accepts us just as we are, celebrating our inherent worth and dignity which we enshrine in our First UU Principle.

In a world that reminds us every day that we are isolated units of commerce living in constant peril of being crushed by the competition or by a failing economy or by evil terrorists that don't like us, we have a faith community that affirms that life is more powerful than hatred and that each of us is more than a cog in an impersonal system. So, let each of us take a moment to soak in those words: "It feels like tumbling into joy" being here, with you...And, I want to stop talking for a minute and invite you to just turn and greet the other people around you with a handshake and smile, or however you feel moved to do it.

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Besides community, the other thing we try to do here on the Sabbath is what I prefer to call "Worship". I'm fully aware that some UU's are not altogether comfortable with that word. I, personally, sense that our services are more compelling when we preserve the few verbal symbols we have left that remind us of our religious heritage. More, I actually think the term "worship" wonderfully captures and reminds us of what we do or should be doing inside these doors. Look in a dictionary and you'll see the word is derived from the old English words "werth scipe" which means "worth shaping." Yes, that's precisely what we are doing! To me, "worship" no longer congers up any images of bowing down to, or asking forgiveness by a 1st Century, deceased male human-like something in the sky. That's why I'm a UU! But it does imply a subject object relationship, a humbling ourselves to something. Otherwise, we are worshipping ourselves, are we not? Believe me, you don't need to come here to do that! You might try the Tulalip Casino down the road for one.

All the major religions teach that the essence of human reality includes a dimension greater than the self; something bigger and perhaps more important than me. Realizing this sometimes causes people to reach for more than self-gratification, self-aggrandizement. If we don't acknowledge that we must live for something greater than ourselves I doubt we qualify as a religious body; we don't differ essentially from

a Kiwanis Club, or a Sunday Morning Marching and Chowder Society. When we worship in this place, hopefully we do remind ourselves and honor that dimension outside our ego-driven existences.

Two Sufi aphorisms come to mind. First: “Be careful who you care about for you will be its slave.” Second: “Tell me your God and I’ll tell you who you are.” I would answer that here at SUUF we take time every Sunday morning to reflect upon what we care about most and least, and it is our choice to worship the God of compassion, justice, hope and love. Let others worship the God of affluence, appearance, consumption, security, domination, if they must.

Let me now drop another word of traditional faith on you: “Holy”. Last Fall in one of my first talks to you I ventured to pronounce that what we try to do here at our worship services is “to engender an experience of the Holy.” If anyone winced at that pontification I didn’t notice. So, let me elaborate. Isn’t there something innate to human nature, that recognizes certain distinctions of worth in the experiences we encounter. A name we have traditionally given to the highest of these is the “Holy”, or, to me, the “sacred” means the same. Reserved for such encounters is an aspect of human nature that evokes an attitude of awe, reverence, ultimate respect, a form of transcendence. And, isn’t that capacity of discernment and appreciation one of the more nobler aspects of our being? What sorts of things evoke such attitudes? Well, it might be a flower offered by another person in a flower communion such as we will do later this Spring. Or, it might be a chord hit just right when I sing in a choir. Atoms formed in the centers of stars millions of years ago somehow got grouped together to form us. That fills me with awe even if it is very remote. But a much more immediate form of creation happened when I got up this morning. This day was created with me in it and given to me freely and I did nothing to earn it. Traditionally, that’s called “grace.”

These days my concept of the Holy is less about divine mysteries and Latin incantations than with a simple recognition of the relatedness of all life, the interconnected web of all existence that our Seventh UU Principle enshrines. The Holy is that which binds us to each other and to the earth that sustains us. That which harms that relation violates the Holy. That which nourishes that relation increases it. Whatever calls us to an appreciation of that relation evokes an experience of the Holy, invites in the sacred. The world’s religions all are seeking to evoke the Holy; they differ mainly in the practices they use to get there.

Talk about honoring our relationships and we are getting very close here to another word you occasionally may hear bandied about in this room: “Religion”. The root of that word is the Latin “religio” meaning to bind together. And, a classic definition of what religion deals with is all about how relationships are bound together or are torn apart. Blues music touches on the same subject, How do I relate to myself, to others, to the universe? I will never cease to continue to remind us here at SUUF that the heart of our religion includes a call to social relationship; to help each other and our wider community. Prophets from our Judeo-Christian heritage repeatedly proclaimed justice for society’s most vulnerable members as true worship; love of one’s neighbor as a testimony to a God of love. And, when we do this worship thing well we may get glimpses of the mystical, relational moments when all seems in balance, and we are not separate from others, or from the earth, and we feel an overwhelming sense of goodwill and compassion towards all living creatures.

As long as I’m on my theological high horse this morning, so to speak, let me bring up one more perplexing word which is “spiritual.” I know it helps only a little for me to tell you it refers to the realm of the “incorporeal” or “non-material”. Yet, it would be a fool’s errand for me to try to nail down for you what that includes. We UU’s tend to want to reify every idea, to make a thing out of it which we can measure or put a meter on, and distrust if we can’t. Yet, like the “Holy” or the “sacred”, much of spirituality is relational such as love or justice; it’s not material or quantifiable. The great theologian, Paul Tillich, described the spiritual world as “The Eternal Now: Moments that are more than the finite moment of the present.” Such spiritual moments can have great power and energy. Consider the experience of sunrise on a clear mountain morning, or your holding your own child for the first time. My main point is that the only way we can really get to the spiritual dimension is by metaphor, symbol, analogy, poetry, and sometimes by music. Interesting isn’t that just what a good worship service contains.

Most all the traditional words of reverence are like that; they are utterly metaphorical, words like God, grace, redemption, salvation, holy, and, yes, worship. It will be a cancer on the imagination if you try to apply a literal or a single meaning to them. Yet, everyone in this room barring any unknown, utter couch potatoes,

knows when something is in-spirational and when it isn't. To return to where I started in this talk, something is usually in-spirational when it calls us to values outside of and greater than ourselves. It helps too if we are offered hope and not just guilt, and if the words are put together in a somewhat poetic manner.

Right now and for many months a lot of us carry a heaviness about the directions our country has been going. We are so numbed by the agony of endless war that we have stopped paying much attention to the latest news report of incomprehensible brutality. How many times can you hear about our own use of torture upon another person, about the suicide bomber who walks into a school and blows himself and 20 children up. Turn to the next page and we are bombarded by news of environmental degradation, about millions of people who are about to have their family homes foreclosed upon. The pain we carry can turn to sarcasm and anger. It can drown out the joy and gratitude I referred to a few minutes ago upon greeting the gift of a new day. We dare not let that happen. So we have to keep opening our hearts to holding both the hurt and sadness on the one hand, and the Holy awe and gratitude on the other. And, we have to hold onto the comfort of having one another in this community. Here, gathered in this room we have a bank of love, goodness and commitment. Together, we will create a sanctuary here from which we will go forth after our Sabbath meetings and create a better world.

I am going to confess something to you which is that I have my own, built in meter for when I am touched by the Holy at a worship service: Tears usually come into my eyes. I cry. Some of you may have noticed. I found these words by Marilyn Sewell, our Portland minister, which eloquently describe why we cry:

We come into this darkened sanctuary from the world where we live,
the world of fact and knowledge, carrying so much inside, and we
unburden ourselves of this world for a while, here in the safety of
community, and we remember the deeper truths that elude us in our
everyday lives. The music takes us to that place where we are
vulnerable. We rise together and sing 'Spirit of Life.' We sing
together, for compassion, for justice; we sing 'roots hold me close,'
for we would be held by the best that we have known; we sing
'wings set me free' for we would be free of pettiness and grasping
and all that keeps us ground down in the dirt of living. Of course, we cry.

Are you not grateful that we have a place where we can feel free to weep and to laugh and to be who we are? Where, if we are open to it, we can catch glimpses of the Holy and a sense that there is a goodness that's intact and holds you above all the muck and dirt that life brings. May we all feel like "tumbling into joy" when we come here and when we give of ourselves to help create this sacred place, as we will be asked to do this Month. Please join me in moment of silence.

So be it. Amen.

PRAYER:

Spirit of love, open unto me.
Open unto me light for my darkness.
Open unto me courage for my fear.
Open unto me hope for my despair.
Open unto me peace for my despair.
Open unto me peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me strength for my weakness.
Open unto me wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me forgiveness for my errors.
Open unto me love for my hate.
Open unto me thyself for myself. Amen

CLOSING WORDS:

Be Glad, be yourself!
Wear your life like a peacock its plume,
And sing your life like Birdsong.