



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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WHAT IS WORSHIP?

When I was 16, I was a member of our high school's *Reach for the Top* team. If you haven't heard of this CBC television show, it's sports for brainy kids. High schools have pre-season tryouts, select their best prospects and put together a team of four whizzes and four backups on the bench. They must be physically agile, and this point is frequently underplayed by those who favour athletics – we teen-aged brainiacs were élites in the quickdraw world of precision button-pushing. Believe it or not, we even practiced our timing and speed, but also our ability to stop our button reflex in a millisecond if our neurons told us, "Nope, you *are not* sure what year the telephone was invented! Halt at once!" If you didn't have such prowess, you risked shame similar to that of missing a penalty shot and worse your team would actually lose points! Imagine the Superbowl tonight if, instead of a 10-yard penalty, the Boston Patriots (surely the Unitarian Universalist favourite) actually lost the 7 points of their last touchdown. There'd be scandal and revolution, but we smart kids took it all in stride. We could shake off the last play and press on, digits poised and ears cocked.

Surely one of the great injustices in the world is that there were no *Reach for the Top* Cheerleading squads. No IQ groupies sighing as we walked through the hallways, our forearms rippling in wait for the next question, our fingers flexing and striking out whenever a useless fact passed through our minds. Actually, there *were* no 'useless' facts on *Reach for the Top*. Take this for example: I love reading maps and became the team's geography master. When the question was, "What country is Hairy Hills found in?" I slammed that buzzer and declared, "Canada!" because I'd seen it on a map of Alberta once who knows when. But I was a good all-round neuro-thlete; when they asked what the letters LSD stand for, I triumphantly mispronounced but enunciated all ten syllables: "Lysergic acid di-eth-ILE-amide." I'd read that in *Time* magazine once and thought, "I'm going to memorize that!" That was my equivalent of endlessly shooting tennis balls at the garage door.

I tell you all this because our team made the national finals held in St. John's, Newfoundland. In those politically incorrect days, all 20 or so teams of us were taken to church. Imagine that happening now! I don't remember for sure but it must have been a Catholic mass as strange Catholic type things took place – like the invitation for someone from the 'congregation' to come forward to read the Bible passage. My church didn't do that. The guy who went up to read was

Catholic and he also went up for communion. My parents had taught me that my tongue would burn off if I ever took Catholic communion, so I sat there afraid my parents might find out that I'd even *seen* a Catholic mass. Heaven knows how the Jewish students took all that.

Over the years, I've worshipped with many communities. The Bahá'ís simply read prayers and writings from their scriptures; then they have a community business meeting, and then they eat. I visited a Quaker meeting house in Chicago where, as many of you know, everyone sits in silence most of the time; one man spoke at some length about something or other, and a woman clearly took offence at either what was said or how long he took to say it. She stood up with her arms crossed while he was still talking, staring at him till he stopped. I think I witnessed what is probably the closest thing to Quakers fighting.

For a course requirement, I attended a charismatic Catholic mass in a Southside Chicago neighbourhood which is 95% African American. It went on for nearly 4 hours; taking the collection alone took 45 minutes! The large church was packed, and when the collection was taken, pew by pew everyone moved up the aisles to two huge pottery jars; the praise band was playing Calypso music, and everyone was dancing and shimmying slowly forward, smiling and waving their envelopes high in the air – they took immense pride and pleasure in contributing money to their church. Canvass Committee take note; next fall; big Egyptian jars. Kerry: tin drums; conga lines. They'll more than pay for themselves.

I've also attended United Church, Baptist, Anglican and Metropolitan Community Churches; visited the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem; prayed at the Wailing Wall and attended Jewish High Holiday rites; and worshipped in about a dozen Unitarian Universalist communities. In all these places what happens in religious services is widely varied yet fundamentally similar. With the Spirituality Development Conference being here this weekend, in which youth and adults are learning more about how to create meaningful spiritual experiences for people, I decided I'd talk to you today about what we do here on Sunday mornings.

First, let's look at some words. We can in general talk about 'services', religious services, in which certain meaningful acts are performed and events happen. Many Unitarian communities leave off the word 'religious' because we're not all of a single mind about whether we are a religion, or feel religious about our commitments to our communities and our relationships to our congregations. What occurs *during* services is in general called 'worship', but again we can have difficulty with that word.

I wonder then if you'll be surprised to know that the word 'service' derives from the Latin word *servitium*, which means *slavery* and the word 'worship' began in Old English as *weortscipe*, which means literally *condition of worth, worthiness* in contemporary terms: the condition of *having* worth. Am I the only one who finds it ironic that we are more comfortable referring to what we do together as a

community with a word related to one of the world's perennial injustices, but are uncomfortable with a word that relates to our very first principle: "the inherent worth... of every person?"

I know that words morph over time and even acquire personal meaning. So we become used to saying 'service' because by now it has a broad range of neutral or even very positive meanings; we speak in this community of wanting to be of service to others, and that in no way implies we want to be slaves of anyone. Likewise, we reject 'worship' because it now more often means the act of devotion to a deity of some kind in which we don't believe, yet I still hold to the possibility that it.

Let me suggest, though, that with our UU feet planted firmly on the real ground, worship can be an attitude we take towards something grander than ourselves that we *do* believe in. There truly is something here that we create when we assemble that has the condition of worth, that is worthy of our worship. *We* create it; *we* characterize it as best suits our own deepest meanings; but we *don't* control it. It's not tangible although it is *sensible* in that we can perceive it around us, if not with our eyes and ears then with our hearts and affections. So what might that be that is a part of us, a part of the human world, yet is worthy of worship.

What first comes to mind, possibly for many of us, is the community we actually create here every week. It is based on friendship, mutual understanding, respect though sometimes just tolerance, and common goals, whether these are clearly and easily defined or constantly under formation. That real, visible, regular community also represents the Ideal Community, historically called Beloved Community, which is only gradually brought forth over time and only in a pale image, emerging as it can from the imperfections and selfish concerns that so often dominate our human hearts.

The seven Principles that Unitarians and Universalists affirm and promote, which can be found just before the first hymn in our hymn book are a bare description of what this ideal community would be like: an integrated, inter-connected human family based on love and justice. Given that we can never attain it, when we come together we do our best to create our reflection of that community ideal. Though potentially made by the connections among us, in itself it is greater than ourselves and thus is worthy of worship.

One function of our community that we perform most often on Sunday mornings is to offer hospitality. Through our worship services we welcome those who are curious about us, or are looking for what we have, or need what we have found. The other side of welcome is what I'm going to call proclamation. We have good news to proclaim: the news that there is a religious way that affirms personal freedom and human choice; that acknowledges your right to decide what you believe without condemning the beliefs of others; and that encourages the use of

one's own mind and experience to determine what is ultimately real and true. People aren't just welcome here for music and soup; they're welcome to what has formed our lives, what has changed us, in all the varieties of formation and change that can happen here.

Yet this way of ours has substance to it. There are boundaries to what we affirm because we elevate human worth and dignity above other values that would reduce human beings to merely being commodities or means, let alone to sinful and damnable wretches. The freedom and choice we take for ourselves we also value for others, and we work on this most often when it's difficult. Of course, I don't mean that we condone the right of all people to do whatever they want, in particular to harm others. Rather, the individual self is the product of all a person's qualities and experiences, both internal and worldly, both chosen and given. Our way calls upon us to deeply affirm the individuality of all, not necessarily to understand every human quality and experience, but to value all as part of the spectrum of human existence.

Just as Noam Chomsky says that we do not affirm freedom of speech unless we affirm it for those with whom we most vehemently disagree, we Unitarian Universalists cannot affirm our own freedom without affirming that of all – and this is sometimes very difficult. Something we find here, rooted in our history and traditions, our current lives and our relatedness to all that is around us, calls us to this difficult way. This call to us to expand our boundaries and to magnify our compassion is also greater than ourselves, and is itself worthy of worship.

We call this room a sanctuary, a pretty churchy word that we seem not to have a problem with, and I suspect that's partly because so many of us find this a real sanctuary from what troubles us outside of here. Frequently, I suspect, what troubles us is the goings on in other people's sanctuaries! But this is also a place of peace, of companionship, of comfort, of respite from daily cares. In all those senses this is a sanctuary for *us*, so part of what we do in worship is to take care of each other and to receive care from others.

In the middle ages, those who were being pursued by the authorities could find safety inside churches and this led to the use of the word 'sanctuary' also to mean physical safety from harm. It's important to remember that in those times, the authorities, meaning the nobility, could not be taken for granted as acting in the interests of justice and the wider community; they frequently persecuted the helpless in order to gain political or economic power. There was no system by which guilt and innocence could be truly determined. I don't say this, however, to suggest that we again offer that kind of sanctuary, as we did in a kind of way to those fleeing the draft during the Viet Nam war.

Rather, I'm reminding us that this sanctuary is not *just* for us. Just as we offer our good news to those who have not yet heard it, we offer companionship, comfort, respite and peace to all who come here. Some who come here are

fleeing the power, authority and control of religions that do not judge well the good or harm in what they do, or do not share our values of freedom of thought. This is a sanctuary from thought-control, and I again point out that sometimes this is difficult. In the thirst for freedom of thought, it can be possible to impose one way of thinking on others. This high concept of sanctuary for human freedom is a grace we offer each other that becomes larger than ourselves. It too is worthy of worship.

Yet this is not just a sanctuary. It is also a school. I have said that a number of the values that we hold dear, that we come here to honour are, when lived out to the full, very difficult. When we come together as a community, we learn to face those difficulties. We learn almost like children, sometimes in the way a child learns language, by just listening, absorbing and bringing forth what we have deeply internalized; sometimes in the way a child learns arithmetic, by being told and shown, by having to think and practice; often in the way children learn about relationships, by making mistakes and facing feelings in ourselves and others, working out ways to connect in peace and affection.

Most important of all is that we learn here the way students learn trades and professions: what to do and how to contribute to the world. Here we learn the work skills of compassion, generosity and participation. Our economics are to pay it forward; to take what we've been given and to pass it on. We do not graduate from this school into life; rather life charges us to continue to learn and to grow. The charge that we receive here together is larger than ourselves, and it too is worthy of worship.

What we do when we come together is to create and experience what is larger than ourselves. The beloved community. The proclamation of our good news. The sanctuary for human freedom. The charge to live most fully when life is difficult. The call to serve.

In Unitarian Universalist terms, this is holy. This is what we revere. This is what strikes us in awe. All of this is larger than ourselves, and it is worthy of worship.