

Erin was nervous as she walked through the doors of First Unitarian Universalist Church for the first time. You see, Erin identified sexually as lesbian. She knew of some Protestant churches where her sexuality was accepted, but Erin was also a seeker. She did not believe that Jesus Christ was God incarnate on earth. She wasn't actually too sure about God. What she did know is that she needed a religious community

where she could explore her beliefs, could seek out answers. She needed a religious community where she could bring her son without fear of judgment--of him or her. She needed a community beyond her circle of gay and lesbian friends. A place where she could reveal who she was. She needed a place where she could worship, whatever that meant.

Worship. What does that mean in our faith tradition? One of you brought this up at a "Meet the Minister" coffee last spring. Worship, you said, was about paying homage to a deity. That's not what many of us do, so why do we call it worship? To me, worship had a larger definition--it was more metaphorical. But I hadn't thought more deeply about it. I decided after that conversation that I needed to explore this a bit. And here we are. I'm giving a sermon on worship.

I started with what the dictionaries have to say about worship. Not surprisingly, there was no Unitarian Universalist definition. Definitions centered around expressing reverence toward a divine or supernatural power. That doesn't work for some portion of us here, although we should note, parts of it do work for some of us. Another definition came

closer; a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual. We do have ritual here on Sunday mornings. Creed. Not so much. We are explicitly non-creedal, meaning that we don't have a statement of what we believe in that we agree to when we become members.

This question about what our worship is has been around for UU's for a long time. In 1982 our national association convened a Commission on Common Worship. In their report the Commission found that the ancient English root of worship can be translated into 'considering things of worth.'<sup>i</sup> This is a far cry from 'expressing reverence toward a divine or supernatural power'.

In 2005 Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, co-ministers of West Shore UU Church in Cleveland, Ohio, set out to explore what made for good worship. What was it? What was its purpose? What were the elements that made it work? They did not just look at UU worship, but explored the worship of various denominations all over the country. Their book, *Worship That Works* (2008), was the result of that exploration.

In answer to their first question, what is worship, UU ministers gave a variety of answers, as one might imagine. For some the answer was "praising, confessing, and discerning the word of God." For others it was "holding up things of worth and value." Yet others said that "worship is a private transformation done in the context of corporate ceremony and ritual."<sup>iii</sup> We should

expect this. Members of our congregations represent a wide range of theologies. So, too, do our ministers.

That second question that Arnason and Rolenz asked? What is the purpose of worship? For some it was to lift up the highest and holiest of human values.<sup>iii</sup> Or we gather together to hold up those things of ultimate worth and value.<sup>iv</sup> For others, we come together in worship to be reminded that we stand in the presence of the holy.<sup>v</sup> Some reframe this by saying that worship leads us into the experience of transcending mystery and wonder.<sup>vi</sup>

Our worship here does all of these things, depending on your own theology. And it's okay that we don't agree on what worship is or the purpose of worship. As Unitarians and Universalists, we have redefined what it is acceptable to believe or not believe and call ourselves a religion. We have played a significant role in helping to redefine the concept of marriage. Why should we not redefine worship to be more inclusive?

"Our worship life should tell a saving story" we heard in today's reading.<sup>vii</sup> "Rooted in profound human experiences of awe, wonder, fear and family, the impulse to worship is an original response to finding ourselves alive."<sup>viii</sup> We wish to make meaning of our lives.

Rev. Roy Philips, in a 2002 essay written for the UU minister's Prairie Group, has proposed five meanings around which we covenant, or make promises to each other, in worship.

1. We share a common human journey.
2. We each bring unique dignity and gifts.
3. We have a responsibility to improve the world.
4. We engage the mystery of life and creation with praise.
5. We cultivate and explore our religious response to the mystery.<sup>ix</sup>

Each of the elements of our worship together addresses one or more of these meanings. Our sharing of joys and concerns touches on our shared human journey and the unique dignity and gifts which each of us brings to our community. In your sharing with each other, you open yourselves

in ways that are uniquely yours, but also in ways which are common to each of us. You open yourself to support, but you also affirm for others that their experience of joy or tragedy is not unique. We are not alone.

When we sing or listen to music, we engage in the mystery with praise. Music reaches us in a different way than the spoken word. I often hear music from a place that transcends the words. This is why I can sing and be moved by the great liturgical works of Bach and Mozart without taking umbrage at the words I am singing. I have experienced

transcendent moments, moments of feeling part of a larger whole, while singing with a group. This has happened in preparation for concerts and it has happened here in worship.

The Story for All Ages touches on each of the meanings Philips attributes to worship, but foremost among these is our responsibility to improve the world. Many of us returned to church because we wished for our children to be brought up in a religious environment where they were exposed to the big questions. Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is our response to suffering? We hope to improve the world through the legacy of our children. And for those who may not have children, we share in the responsibility, through this community, of raising the children of others.

Like the story, our prayer and reflection touches on all of the meanings. We engage the mystery in praise and we explore how we respond to the mystery and suffering of life. We ask what will be our response to improve the world. We acknowledge our common journey and uniqueness.

By giving we respond to improve the world through support of the institution of this fellowship and through support of local nonprofits that promote our values.

In our historically Protestant tradition, we still assign the sermon a key role on most Sundays. A particular sermon engages primarily with one of the meanings we explore in worship, be it our interrelatedness with each other and with Earth or how we are called to address injustice.

Finally, the whole is greater than the parts. On most Sundays we move through a familiar pattern of worship. This familiarity brings its own peace. We relax into the flow. When worship works well, we let go of time and enter into a place that transcends our everyday lives. We engage with the mystery. We are moved. We leave here ready to reengage the world, renewed.

And what about Erin? Fortunately, Erin found what she was looking for on that Sunday morning. She found inclusive worship. She entered a Welcoming Congregation that day. This congregation had done the work of exploring their own beliefs and prejudices regarding alternate sexualities. They knew how to welcome Erin into their midst. !Of

course there was a place for her son in the RE program! They were exploring Earth centered religions today. In her welcoming words, the minister explicitly invited those whose sexuality was not mainstream. Erin looked around the sanctuary and saw other people like her. In worship on that day Erin experienced people of different beliefs asking questions through their common understanding of being connected. The minister spoke about forgiving oneself. Hymns sometimes mentioned God; some were more focused on human responsibility. There seemed to be room for her to explore and grow here. Part way through the service, Erin started to cry. She wept for joy. She felt like she had come home to something she didn't know existed. She felt like she belonged.

For those of us not born into UU, how many of us have experienced this sense of coming home when we first entered a UU sanctuary? Perhaps we were taken by the sermon, which seemed to

be written just for us. Perhaps we enjoyed singing familiar hymns, but hymns with words that matched our beliefs. Perhaps we were taken by the conversation with

the person next to us or the personal sharing that took place in Joys and Concerns or through the Worship Associate's reflection. We relaxed. We began to imagine that this might be a spiritual home. And for many of us here today, it has been.

Blessed Be and Amen

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One sentence summary: As Unitarians and Universalists, we have redefined what it is acceptable to believe or not believe and call ourselves a religion. We have helped to redefine the concept of marriage. Why should we not redefine what it means to worship to be more inclusive.

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<sup>i</sup> Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Works*, 2008, p 10-11

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* 11

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* 10-11.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* 19

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* 13

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.* 21

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* 21

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.* 4

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* 18