

## **Present and Accounted For: Creating and Engaging in Rituals to Strengthen Our Values**

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I had an amazing opportunity this Easter. I got to attend one of the largest Unitarian Universalist churches in the country, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, which claims more than 800 members and has both multiple services and three connected branches. There were probably a few hundred people at the service I attended, which included a brass chamber ensemble and a large and superb choir. Some elements of the service would be familiar to most UUs, such as the chalice lighting, the reciting of the affirmation, the hymns and the story for all ages. Other elements were relatively new to me, such as the singing of one of the UU doxologies in both Spanish and English. All in all, it was a wonderful experience for which I am very grateful.

But I mention this service today for another reason, which is that while that service may sound very different from what we do when we gather here in our small group, the two types of services share a profound commonality: both represent important rituals that engage our intelligence, our emotions, our souls, and our commitment to being our best selves in the world. Moreover, since they happen in community, in this case two liberal religious communities, they are ways in which we hold ourselves accountable to other people. Worship invites us to transform ourselves and the world and ideally we readily say “count me in” or, as I’ve titled this sermon, “present and accounted for.” And the activity that allows us to do this is an intentional ritual that affirms our beliefs, values, and priorities.

The word “ritual” can be used in three different ways. Describing an activity or event as “ritual” can mean that it is rote, just a matter of going through the motions, doing what is expected without being engaged in it or getting anything out of it. Pretty much anything can be a ritual of this sort: washing dishes, clocking in at a boring job, attending church out of a sense of obligation, taking daily medications. We might speak of ritualized morning routines, such as brushing teeth, showering, and getting dressed in the same order every morning. Clearly, this way of using the term “ritual” is unhelpful and indeed the exact opposite of what we are seeking.

Another use of the word “ritual” mostly refers to certain kinds of activities in worship services: the components of prayer in Muslim worship, the elements of Communion in a Christian church, the practices of darshan or seeing and being seen by various deities in Hinduism, and many others. Rituals are built on words, symbols, stories, and the use of the body and its senses. What I find interesting about this way of understanding ritual is that it can range from negative to extremely positive. In cases where worship has become rote or meaningless, it falls into the above category and is experienced negatively. The rituals of worship can also be seen as neutral. We could describe our own weekly gatherings in terms of their ritual activities, simply for information’s sake, perhaps to someone who has never attended and wants to know what we do.

But the rituals of worship can also be seen in a third, deeper way, not merely as a neutral set of activities but also as a kind of reorientation, a process of directing ourselves toward the world in a new or newly committed way. Whether in worship or elsewhere, this orientation can happen on intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual levels, though not every ritual reaches every level. Any ritual conceived in this way has as a primary goal our successful refocusing on and

rededication to what is truly important. As such rituals can be a wonderful way to strengthen ourselves for living ethically and can be sources of the joy we so badly need to make an ethical life pleasurable.

Worship services represent a good place to start thinking about rituals as transforming through reorientation. What I'd like to do today is to explore a Flame of Life Universalists worship service as an example of a value-strengthening ritual in painstaking detail, and then ask where we can find or develop such rituals outside of worship settings. And just for the fun of it, let's look at today's worship service in particular as an example of a reorienting ritual.

We began today by singing "Gathered Here." Rituals involving music can work in us very deeply. There is something primal and basic about music. We feel it in our bones; it courses through our bodies. So if we want our ritual to invite the body to participate it is a wonderful idea to sing or dance or drum or play other instruments – anything that wakes us up and grabs our attention and invites us to be fully present.

Standing or sitting erect while we sing when this is possible also suggests that we are engaged in a serious business. The very act of standing or sitting erect is itself a kind of orientation. There's nothing wrong with lying down or reclining or any other position, of course, but a ritual involving standing or sitting up places us in literally an upright position. Those of us who are physically able to stand easily can't stand effectively unless our feet are placed firmly on the earth, meaning that standing to sing immediately involves us in interdependence. And, again for people who are physically able to stand easily, it is more straightforward to start moving from a standing position than from a sitting position or from a prone position. Standing can, in some circumstances, be a signal that we are ready to move. I've long thought that the UU hymn "Standing on the Side of Love" would have been better called "Moving on the Side of Love" or "Living on the Side of Love," partly for this reason. In all of these ways, the physical positions we take when we sing have the potential to refocus us.

Then there are the words of Gathered Here. The lyrics claim that we are gathered in mystery, language which orients us toward the mysterious when our minds may have been totally elsewhere. The lyrics claim that we are gathered in a strong body, which in a small group must be a statement of faith but which again reminds us of our embodiment and our strength, both of which can be put to use for good in the world. The hymn goes on to acknowledge the struggle within which we live: the personal struggle for wholeness and a good life, and the larger struggle for peace, justice, and a compassionate world. And then there's power: ours, the power of others with whom we join, and the power of those against whom we struggle. Finally, we call on the spirit of life to draw near, to be with us, to strengthen and inspire us. Despite music that sounds somewhat ethereal, Gathered Here is a piece of ritual that orients us toward reality in all its complexity and asks us to engage deeply with that reality.

Our words of welcome also orient us, though in a somewhat different way. We have a repeated form: come into the circle, come into the community, come and you shall know. Ideally, repetition captures our attention and this particular repetition literally invites us. And what does it invite us into? Love, justice, mercy, holiness, and health. Our very definition of a good world both for individuals and society more broadly. And we are not merely invited to receive these but

to be part of the circle, part of the community that offers them. We are invited, yet again to be present and accounted for. And if we accept the invitation, if we join in and give and receive, we will know peace and joy. That's a heady promise and a strong incentive. I will at least try to be my best self in the world if I'm pretty sure I'll get peace and joy from doing it.

Another thing about the words of welcome: you'll notice that today I read them alone and invited you to listen to them. Why would I do that? Because listening together is an act of commitment to a community. It goes against every inch of our desire to be the ones talking, a desire that most of us have fairly often. It admits that we have something yet to experience, maybe even something yet to learn, and that others do as well. And in this particular case, you listened collectively to an invitation, aware that those around you were receiving the same invitation, and wherever your heart and mind might have been previously, you knew on some level that if all of you accepted the invitation, if all of you agreed to be present and accounted for, something would deepen in this community as you all grew closer together.

Today's chalice lighting words represent what linguistics experts call a "speech act." In a speech act, you make something so in the very act of saying it. Most words are not speech acts. For example, saying "I love Broadway" is not what makes me love Broadway; it's a reflection of my already-existing love of Broadway. But when a minister or justice of the peace says, "I now pronounce you married" the marriage becomes legally binding at least in part through the pronouncement itself. So what did we say to light our chalice today? "We hallow this time together by kindling the lamp of our heritage." We hallow. We make holy. We make sacred. We bless. Not some external god, us. We've taken up this weighty responsibility and how amazing that it is a human capacity, to make something holy. If we know we are able to invoke holiness we might be more careful about how we engage the world, for if we can invoke holiness we can also invoke evil. But today we choose to bless, not to curse. We choose to hallow, not to devalue. What a marvelous ethical choice. And, of course, hallowed time, sacred time is special time, a time to be more fully awake, more fully aware, more fully present and accounted for.

Then there's the chalice itself as well as our lighting of it. For Unitarian Universalists the chalice is as close as we generally get to a holy symbol that is our own and not borrowed from another religious tradition. Ideally, we treat the chalice, whether real or symbolic, with reverence. Moreover, it is a symbol of the light we carry within ourselves, light to brighten the world with love and compassion and peace. The light of the chalice reminds us that we are keepers of the flame, living chalices, and that our fire can be used for good or ill. And the lighting of the chalice is our commitment to cultivating the flame within and beyond ourselves, specifically for personal and social transformation for the better.

At this point in the service, having engaged deeply with the things of ritual such as singing, communal words, and the act of chalice lighting, we pause. Not to draw the ritual to a close but because part of the important work in which we are engaged is being a community together. So we share joys, concerns, and milestones in a respectful way in which we practice listening each other into wholeness. This may seem a minor matter in such a small group of people but it is a radical act in a world where we are mostly trained to look out for number one and where "wholeness" sounds new-agey rather than practical. Anything that helps us listen better helps us minister to the world better, and the world needs us to do this. Our weekly practice gives us

experience with an important and under-valued type of presence. Listening to each other with love is its own kind of reorientation and recommitment to our deepest values.

Then we spend a few moments in one of the oldest, deepest rituals there is: silence. In the silence we invite ourselves to lay our egos aside and be present and accounted for without any particular expectations, without planning what we will say next, without worrying whether we'll remember to add broccoli to the shopping list. We simply welcome the silence, even when it frightens us, and if we are not able to silence our minds, we take a deep breath and try again. We've already spent some time with the idea of silence in this sermon series; this is a powerful place to put silence to use with the goal of deepening our spirits.

At least on days like today when I'm here, we follow the silence with a pastoral prayer for the life of the congregation. Why do something like this? Because it is a way to seek well-being for ourselves, each other, and the larger world. Many UUs find the word "prayer" problematic, not least if we don't believe in a personal God. But I hope all of us can agree that we wish ourselves and each other and the world well, and engaging silently with a prayer to that effect is also a reorientation and recommitment to the blessing of the world.

Congregational readings are an old and powerful ritual, found in a wide variety of religions and with good cause. Speaking words together, especially words such as those found in today's reading, builds community, affirms common values, and strengthens our commitment to living out those words in our lives. Now, as with prayer, many UUs come from religious backgrounds where reading together is reminiscent of being forced to recite creeds that may not make sense or may even be inhumane. As with many of the other rituals we engage in today, the most important question is whether they orient us toward good or evil, whether they enable us to recommit ourselves to healing the world or hurting it.

So let's consider this particular reading, written for a United Nations Environmental Sabbath service. First, we see that the reading is called a prayer for healing. That already gives us some information about how we are to orient ourselves. Second, the repeated line is about an intentional interdependent action, carried out in order to build the common good and make our own days glad, as one of our hymns puts it. What are we to do? We are to join with the earth and with each other. And for what purposes are we to take this action? Purposes of renewal, wholeness and delight. This reading, too, is a speech act, a practice. In reading together we literally join with each other. Having made this set of commitments in the reading, we may be strengthened to live them when we walk out of this building at the end of the service today.

Most UU worship services have some kind of sermon or message. In fact, many UU worship services are structured so that the sermon or message is the high point of the service. As UUs we certainly don't believe that only ordained clergy or guest speakers have a lock on the wisdom we all need. But we also understand, as our Christian forebears did, that a well-written and well-delivered message presents ideas in mind-opening ways and stirs our passions to heal the world. And our willingness to be present and accounted for when listening to a sermon signals that we are ready to have our minds changed and our lives changed and our work in the world changed. As such, sermons are a substantial part of UU worship for good reason. The many other rituals of

our worship are extremely valuable but because UUs tend to be so intellectually driven the message is often where the greatest opportunity for engagement lies.

My visits include a closing activity keyed to the sermon. After all, I get to do all the talking during the sermon most of the time and why should I get to have all the pleasure and bear all the responsibility that goes with the sermon? My intent for the closing activity is that each of you engage the day's topic in a thoughtful way that further opens your heart and orients you toward joyful ethical living. One reason I ask that everyone avoid cross-talk is that cross-talk makes the closing activity more like a casual conversation. This particular activity, in contrast, should be reverent. It is a time for vulnerability and for direct statements of commitment. As such it can be a powerful way to be present and accounted for but not if it turns into a kind of social hour.

The offering may seem to fall into a different type of category but I'm not sure it does. It is about orienting ourselves toward the good work of the congregation by supporting that work financially. We've talked about extravagant generosity as a spiritual practice and we have a small opportunity to practice it here today and all days that we gather for worship. Whatever good we may do in the world individually, we cannot do much collectively without the necessary resources. The offering is part of the collection of those resources, also done in a ritualized way to signal that it is not so much the coins and paper we are hallowing as the use to which they will be put.

Just as we open the service with singing, we use singing to draw it to a close. Today in particular I've chosen a hymn we know well, one that directs us toward our aspiration as a community that would be one in learning, growing, and serving each other and the world.

In extinguishing the chalice, whether real or symbolic, it is common to use language that reminds us that the real chalice burns within our hearts and that its light, warmth, and fire are ours for our own well-being and for the healing of the world. Just as the flame of the chalice is temporary, so is our service and so, in a different way are our individual lives. But the flame is never fully extinguished, not as long as our passion burns, not as long as this community and communities like it join in rituals of joy and service. And so it is important that the ritual extinguishing of the chalice at the end of worship capture the larger truth of the flame that burns on.

In recent times you have chosen to end the service by singing two verses of "This Little Light of Mine," a ritual that both affirms the blazing of the chalice of our hearts and closes the larger ritual's circle completely with music, exactly as it opened. We affirm that we will let the light we hold shine for our own well-being and for the blessing of the world. This ending beautifully continues to direct our attention and commitment toward becoming whole and bringing wholeness to others. And with this, the ritual of today's worship will end.

Now, all of this is well and good but it does raise one question. Sure, worship services are potentially powerful rituals with elements that are themselves potentially powerful rituals. But we would be ritually poor indeed if we only ritually oriented ourselves toward what is good once a week (and if we are honest, we admit that most of us don't even make every single Sunday). So how can this detailed consideration of Sunday worship as a set of ethical rituals help us the other six days and 23 hours of the week?

One thing we can do is to find or develop rituals that we can carry out alone or with others that partake of what is good about worship. We can listen to or sing music we care about, music that inspires us. We can use our bodies in all sorts of ways that affirm the power and goodness of being embodied, from walking through nature to dancing to touching the person we love. We can read poems or stories or books or any kind of writing, engaging the writing to the deepest extent possible, learning from it and inviting it to inspire us. We can light chalices at home or develop other personal rituals that remind us of the flame within. We can sit in silence, practicing the presence of stillness. We can pray for the hurting and give thanks for the good in the world. We can have conversations with others in which we consider the opportunities for good before us, and the challenges to those opportunities. We can donate our money to organizations that ease suffering and bring joy. The range of rituals in which we might engage is far too broad to list here, and the wonderful thing about developing your own rituals is that they are truly your own. No rote recitation of toxic creeds. No prostrating yourself before a deity in which you don't believe. Simply your own turning toward the world and offering your best self for its well-being.

So friends, may we find that which is healing and beautiful in our rituals and put it to use for our own flourishing. And may we bring the gifts of ritual to our interactions with the world around us, always ready to do good and reject what is harmful. And so may our light shine in the world and brighten it for all the days to come. Amen and blessed be.