

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Worship”

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When I was fifteen years old I music directed my first production of Godspell. Actually, that’s a fancy way of saying that I played piano for a student group putting on the musical and tried to help people learn their vocal lines. I didn’t play all that well and they all sounded like the 15-year-olds they were. But the energy was wonderful, and I became taken with this musical about a community of friends stumblingly following a weird spiritual leader in clownface. The whole show was a lot of fun even if the end was, predictably, a downer, but the show introduced me to one particular song that changed my life. With lyrics from an old German Evangelical hymn and beautiful music by Stephen Schwartz, “All Good Gifts” offered me something new to chew on: gratitude and praise.

During my teen years, I was also on a religious quest that landed me in plenty of worship settings for one disappointing visit each. They all believed something I didn’t, or the worship style was awkwardly alien to me, or other people seemed to be having an experience that just eluded me. Ironically, as I was failing at my search for a religion that worked for me, I was worshipping every afternoon and weekend in my own high school auditorium while sitting at the piano. I didn’t recognize this experience as worship because I didn’t understand what worship really was. I thought worship was an activity that took a particular form and that if I just showed up for it something wonderful would happen. I was wrong.

Today we continue our unpacking of religion-related words with baggage, focusing on worship. When I reflect on my experience discussing problematic religious words with UUs in general, “worship” is right up there along with “sermon” and “church.” And this makes sense, since we have long been taught to see worship as worship of a personal God who wants and needs our attention. We may have heard in Christian churches that it is right to give God thanks and praise or that God is worthy of the glory, and we make have shaken our heads because we just couldn’t relate.

If you’ve had that kind of experience and if our Sunday gatherings don’t really seem like worship to you because they are not about praising God, I’ve got some good news for you: it’s possible to conceive of worship in an entirely different way, one that clarifies that what we do here on Sunday mornings, while only one kind of worship, is a valuable type.

As we’ve done several times during this series, let’s go to our trusty friend Wikipedia to understand the etymology of the word “worship.” It turns out that this word is derived from an Old English term that I will actually sprain my tongue on if I try to pronounce. This word in turn has been etymologized as “worthiness” or “worth-ship”, the giving of worth to something. We might put that into plain English as celebrating what is worthy. Worship is celebrating that which is worthy. That’s it. That’s all worship is.

So how did we come to have all these other less pleasant associations with worship and what can we do about them? Once any particular religion becomes the only or main religion of a society, members of that society tend to understand religion in general in terms of that particular religion,

and this is certainly true of Christianity in the US. We think of worship as meaning a certain thing because that's what it means for most people in the country. At its best, worship is a form with a function for these people: it educates and transforms and lifts up and does good things at its best. But if that kind of worship doesn't work for us, we're tempted to jettison the baby with the bathwater. And that would be a real shame. It's not necessary and it may result in our losing access to wonderful, meaningful, life-transforming experiences.

Fortunately, we are not stuck with forms of worship that don't work for us. If worship is really about celebrating what is worthy, we should ask what those terms mean. What is "celebration" and what is "worthy"?

I spent a lot of time in the week leading up to Election Day engaging in political activities. I ran ballots, I drove someone to the polls, I knocked on close to a hundred doors and made close to a thousand phone calls to get out the vote. It was exhausting and exhilarating, and it was worship. Political campaigning, at its best, is a celebration of a number of things of worth: the democratic process in politics, my colleagues on the phones and knocking on doors, the politicians I was supporting, a number of whom I met personally during these days. I developed a respectful and reasonable style of calling that led me to have mostly positive interactions with the people who didn't hang up on me first. I met some very poor people who broke my heart, and I helped at least one of those people vote. It may seem very strange to call this work worship, but it was. It was a kind of liturgy, a word that comes from the phrase, "the work of the people." Now, none of this is to say that the entire experience was joyful. Worship is not always joyful in the sense of being upbeat. Sometimes worship is solemn, as when one is in the presence of a force larger than one's own ego. And that certainly was true during some moments of my campaign work when I was bone-tired from climbing up and down hills, sad to hear people say there was no point in voting, and, let's be honest, fearful of the election's outcome. But ultimately, I was able to bring a worshipful spirit to much of my work and it made the experience better. I knew that the Spirit of Life was moving in my hand, bringing life the shape of justice. I knew I was feeding my good wolf. How much better does it get than that?

There are other kinds of worship as well. If religion is about making sense of our lives, as I claimed in an earlier sermon, anything we do that makes sense of our lives while celebrating what is worthy can be a kind of worship. I can't count the number of UUs I've talked to who find walking in wilderness or encountering nature more broadly to be a worshipful experience. I particularly find looking at the ocean to be awe-inspiring and comforting. It makes me feel like part of something bigger, something deep and powerful and ultimate. It gives me a sense of my place in the world and in the ocean, I find both peace and happiness. Again, if that's not a worshipful experience, what is?

I began this sermon describing some of my worshipful experiences at the piano. These have continued throughout my life, especially as I have turned my focus to liberal religious music, both the writing and the playing of it. I find both music in general and the values and ideas of liberal religion as they are found in song and hymn to be profoundly worthy, wherever and whenever I'm engaging with them. Liberal religion shapes and guides my life, calling me to be in grateful right relation with the world and inspiring my creativity and passion in the service of all of our good wolves. Music is a complicated blessing, a phenomenon of beauty and discipline

and sweat and transcendent joy. Music and liberal religion together are perhaps where I worship most deeply.

Even my nightly ritual of posting things I'm grateful for on Facebook is a kind of worship. It is a lifting up, a celebration, of the worthy things in my life, from my spouse and friends and pets and work and creative projects to a beautiful day or the tenacious morning glory that continues to bloom at our mailbox even in November. Because I share these things of worth and don't merely write them down in a notebook, I have a sense of worshipping publicly. Others can see what I find worthy of celebration and can lift up their own celebrations as they are inspired. Sometimes when I see what others write, especially people who tell me they were inspired by me to post gratitudes on Facebook, I have the strange sense of leading worship over the internet. It's a powerful feeling.

What about you? What do you find worthy of celebration and where do you celebrate it? I hope that you will use the post-sermon discussion to share some of your most valuable outside-of-church worship experiences with each other.

Of course, to say that one can worship outside of church doesn't mean that worship cannot happen in a congregational gathering. I think we celebrate a variety of worthy things when we come together on Sunday mornings. We celebrate friendship and community. We celebrate each other for the good work we are doing in the world. We celebrate shared values that we think are meaningful and important. And we celebrate the joy in the formal worship process itself.

Today I put together a service that focuses on celebration and praise to a greater degree than is sometimes the case. It's worth remembering, though, that these hymns and readings come from our own hymnal; they are from within our tradition, not beyond it. We do not generally give God the glory when we worship. So how do we worship? What do we lift up as worthy? What do we celebrate?

We began today with a well-known song that's full of praise, Eleanor Farjeon's "Morning Has Broken", popularized by Cat Stevens. What does the song celebrate? The singing. The morning. The sweetness of the wet garden. The song invites us to praise with elation, and to praise every morning. Now, this song did begin its life as a Christian tune, but it doesn't need to stay there. We can comfortably lift up singing as something praiseworthy. Singing is a blessed experience, one that gathers us together and brings us to a place of calmness or depth or delight. We should indeed offer praise for the singing.

What about the morning? Why should we praise the morning? We are invited to lift up every new morning in celebration because it signals another day when we can love ourselves and others, experience awe, be grateful for the many gifts we've received, not least the gift of life, and commit ourselves to struggling for the well-being of everyone. Every new morning is a new opportunity. As Dan Fogelberg sang so many years ago, "Yes, it's going to be a day. There is really no way to say no to the morning. Yes, it's going to be a day and there's really nothing left to say but 'Come on, morning.'" And so, we praise every morning, life's recreation of the new day, with elation.

Then there's the sweetness of the wet garden. An image of beginnings, of life, of fecundity, of life's temporariness and thus its urgency. Any of us who find nature a powerful source of spirit may be drawn to the sensuality of the wet garden, its earthiness, its muddiness, its physicality, its realness. These are things UUs miss when we stay in our heads. Even a single line in a song can evoke that garden, those woods, that stream, that ocean, these good things that ground and sustain us.

Then there are our words of welcome by UU minister David Pohl, as good a brief on the meaning of worship as any I've encountered. Let's read them together again:

"We come to this time and this place to rediscover the wondrous gift of free religious community; to renew our faith in the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life; to reaffirm the way of the open mind and full heart; to rekindle the flame of memory and hope; and to reclaim the vision of an earth made fair with all her people one."

From this perspective, worshipping for Unitarian Universalists is about rediscovery, renewal of faith, reaffirmation of the way we walk, rekindling of our flames, and reclamation of a vision. Notice that the word "God" does not appear anywhere in Pohl's words. We can gather for his type of worship and be humanists, mystics, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Pagans or any mix of these or other approaches and worship together in the UU spirit. As long as we see free religious community as a gift; as long as we affirm the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life, even with all its other difficulties; as long as we have claimed the way of the open mind and full heart; as long as we seek to rekindle the flame of memory and hope; and as long as the vision of an earth made fair with all her people one is our vision, our time together is worship – lovely, golden, inspiring, life-changing worship.

Similarly, UU minister Marjorie Montgomery's chalice lighting reminds us that "life is a gift for which we are grateful. We gather in community to celebrate the glories and the mysteries of this great gift." We gather in community to celebrate the glories and the mysteries of this great gift. That's worship, plain and simple. We don't need to give the glory to God. We can give the glory to life, life in all its complications and imperfections and magic and opportunities for connection and vitality.

We're offered another image of worship in UU minister Jacob Trapp's words. Let's read this entire reading aloud together:

"To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand. To worship is to be silent, receptive, before a tree astir with the wind, or the passing shadow of a cloud. To worship is to work with dedication and with skill; it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music. To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth; it is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within. Worship is a loneliness seeking communion; it is a thirsty land crying out for rain. Worship is kindred fire within our hearts; it moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love. Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond. It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak; it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal."

There's far too much to parse in this wonderful passage, but two phrases call to me especially. First is the image of the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond. This is not a new image; in fact, it comes to us from Psalm 42, verse 7, which reads, "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me." And there are variations of the concept in a number of religions, especially Hinduism. Many Hindus believe that the spirit or soul in each person, the atman, is indistinct from Brahman, the ultimate, universal, supreme spirit. There's even a scientific way to imagine this concept; as the noted astrophysicist Neill DeGrasse Tyson recently pointed out, the universe contains us and we contain the universe. We are made of star stuff and the universe is made of exactly what we are made of. What I find so powerful about both Jacob Trapp's words and their parallels in other traditions is this sense of connection that goes beyond my mind and my ego and my hope and my fears and that ultimately lodges me within all that is. Worship celebrates the relationship between the mystery in me and the great mystery. I can hardly think of anything more worthy.

I also find extremely powerful the image of worship as the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal, for pretty much the same reasons. Our lives are inevitably limited. We are imperfect. We stumble. Our work fails sometimes. Eventually, we die. And yet there is a part of us that is eternal. The eternal inevitably lives in the moment since that is how it takes form, and the moment is a piece of the eternal because the eternal is that in which everything lives. And no, the eternal doesn't have to be a guy named God to be worthy of being called the great mystery. Whatever the eternal is, it's in us and we are in it. This insight is powerfully worthy of being celebrated, and when we stand at that window of the moment and look into the depths of the eternal, we are worshipping with all of our being, whether it is in church, beside a stream, in bed with a loved one, marching in a protest, or anywhere that we encounter the fullness of reality.

Finally, we will close today with a song of gratitude, of praise, of celebration. We sing our joyful song of peace to the eternal, to the deep, for the earth forever turning and for the many wonders on that earth and in our lives. We sing for all we cherish. We sing for all creation. We worship in song, lifting up that which is worthy of our blessing.

My friends, we have been trapped too long in understandings of words that keep us from their value and wisdom. If we are willing to lift up what is worthy, to bless that which should be celebrated, we are ready to worship, both here together and in the many walks of our lives. May our lives be full of the best kind of worship, an understanding of what is truly worthy and the bravery to celebrate it whole-heartedly and with great joy. Amen, and blessed be.