

The Mystery Within Us
Reaching Out to the Mystery Beyond
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Why are we here, anyway? Why do good people gather in this room every Sunday? In other words, why do we conduct worship services? Why do we worship?

It might have been prudent at some point in our history – by this I mean the history of humanity – it might have been prudent to offer sacrifices to the gods, to keep them on our side, but that is no longer our view, at least as Unitarian Universalists. Nor does saying “thank you” to God or giving praise to God make much sense.

A nonexistent God is indifferent to our thanks, indifferent to our praise.

An impersonal God cannot appreciate our thanks or soak up our praise.

A personal God probably has matured beyond dependence on human rituals for the fulfillment of his or her needs.

I would hope that a God made in our own image or a God that represents our ultimate concerns is more appreciative of our preserving the world God has given us and of our treating each other with justice, equity, and compassion than of our lighting chalices and singing hymns.

If the prophet Amos is to be trusted, here is what God has to say about worship:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. [Amos 5:21-24. *See also* Hosea 6:6 6 (“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”) and Micah 6:6-8 (“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”)]

Despite all this, worship *is* important for me. I’m not sure why. It may be a passing phase; maybe I’ll outgrow it, though I doubt it. Worship certainly has not always been

important for me – or if it was, I was unaware of its importance. Or perhaps it was important, but I was unaware that there was a place where I could worship without compromising my rationality or my theology (or perhaps I should say my *a*-theology).

But regardless of the importance of worship for me, I must recognize and accept that worship is not important for everyone. In particular, my rational side tells me that one can be a committed Unitarian Universalist without being interested in or attending worship. But my emotional side rebels at such a conclusion.

Among the strongest memories of my childhood is worshiping with my parents at our Presbyterian Church in suburban Detroit. I have no idea what the sermons were about; but the hymns have stuck with me. And I remember worshiping at my grandparents' Presbyterian church, when we visited my father's parents in Lansing. I remember the special treat of sitting in the balcony. My grandparents were among the founding members of their church, back around 1920, and my Hunter cousins still provide leadership for the congregation today.

In the summer, when we stayed on my grandparents' farm in Connecticut – that's my mother's parents – we would worship at the Congregational Church in Tolland. Living with cows that needed to be milked twice a day and without modern conveniences, my grandparents would go into town to worship on Sunday morning.

I am aware that “worship” is a word that some Unitarian Universalists would just as soon leave behind. But worship without theological baggage is possible. At its core, at its etymological core, worshiping is finding worth, or shaping worth.

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Still, I didn't come here this morning to offer you genealogy or theology or etymology but to ask you to imagine with me *that the simple but fundamental purpose of worship is to provide for people an hour or so each week that is completely different from the rest of the week.* Imagine with me *that the simple but fundamental purpose of worship is to provide for people an hour or so each week that is completely different from the rest of the week.*

We don't have to tell people that they need to have such an hour each week. We don't have to tell them that sitting in church – in *this* sacred space – is the way to spend such an hour, if they choose to have one. But we should be here; our doors should be open. We need to be available for those who wish to have one hour a week that is completely different.

What should this hour be like? Let's consider the sermon. While the sermon may be central in worship, it just as well may not be – and the same is presumably true of any other familiar or favorite worship element. Further, for the sermon to be part of an experience different from that of the rest of the week, it needs to be something other than a lecture, something other than the transfer of information or views from preacher to preachee.

My *hopes* for worship are many, starting with the hope that many, many people will not only want to reserve a special hour each week, but that they will want to spend that hour as part of the assembly at a Unitarian Universalist worship service.

I hope that UU worship can be a reliable presence in the lives of those who faithfully attend – dependable, consistent, a source of comfort.

I hope that Unitarian Universalist worship will enable those who attend to become part of a religious community, where they are valued, and where *they* value others.

I hope that UU worship will lead us to feel connected with other Unitarian Universalists, not just with those in *our own* congregation but with those in other congregations. I hope that UU worship will lead us to feel connected not just with those who are worshipping *today* but with those who worshiped in years gone by, and likewise I hope that Unitarian Universalist worship will result in our feeling connected with those who *will* worship, in the decades and centuries to come.

I hope that through being part of a Unitarian Universalist worshipping community we will feel an ever growing connection to the interdependent web of existence – a web of which we are only a part – not the whole, a web in which we are near the edge – not in the middle.

I hope that participation in UU worship will eventually result in our feeling connected to the transcendent, to that which is beyond our imagination, no matter how rational and literal our thinking. I hope that we, like Job, can realize that we were not there at the creation, that our understanding is limited. I hope that we can take Emily's message to heart, and realize, before it is too late, how wonderful the earth is. [see Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*]

Or, to look from a different angle, to use different language, I hope that, for a little while, we can let go of our sense of individual identity, to become part of a greater whole, to feel at one with humanity, to feel submerged in the cosmos.

While worship may be a place to sleep, I hope that however we participate, Unitarian Universalist worship will force us to realize that we are *awake*, will lead us to conclude that we are not only awake, we are *alive!* We are *alive!* Don't forget that.

I hope that if we attend UU worship services long enough it will eventually occur to us to say *thank you* – to say *thank you* to those who gathered this congregation and to those who sustain it, to say *thank you* to our parents, *thank you* to the sufficiently cooperative body of humanity that allows us to survive from day to day and year to year, *thank you* to the irrationality of the universe that results in our being *here, now*.

I hope that in Unitarian Universalist worship we can get a hint of the experience of the realm of God, whether or not the word "God" is part of our vocabulary. By "realm of God" I mean a realm in which relationships are based, not on exclusion and oppression, but rather on love and justice. And if we have during worship a hint of that experience, I hope that we will

feel compelled to embody this experience in our lives, to share it with others, to build a world that proclaims it.

I hope that through worshiping with a Unitarian Universalist congregation we will come to believe that we have been placed on earth for a purpose – or at least to act *as if* we had such a belief – and to work *hard* to discern what that purpose might be.

I hope that when we are afflicted, the Unitarian Universalist worship service will be a source of comfort – and that when we are comfortable, UU worship will open windows to the world, will force us to look out, and will inspire us to act, so that we may be a blessing to the world.

I hope that worshiping as part of a UU community will instill in us the desire to share what we have found, to invite others to join us. If we believe that we as Unitarian Universalists have good news, and if we believe that others are as worthy as we are, then we must be willing to share our faith. We can remain true to our heritage and simultaneously be open and inviting to those who are looking for religion, looking for spirituality. We can invite to join us those who are looking for an unidentifiable something that is missing in their lives. We can welcome those who cannot find satisfaction in a more traditional congregation. And we should remember that part of welcoming the next person through the door is openness to change. We as a congregation are changed by each new person who becomes part of our religious community.

I hope that worship with a UU congregation will result in our feeling not only that we are numbered among Unitarian Universalists but also that we feel connected to people wherever they are on this small globe of ours. I hope we feel that we are part, as some would put it, that we are part of the church universal, that imaginary congregation of all those loved by God, or, as William Ellery Channing put it, the congregation from which none are excluded except by the death of goodness in their own hearts. [see George N. Marshall, *A. Powell Davies and His Times*, 92]

And I hope that those who are part of the assembly in Unitarian Universalist worship will be drawn to participate as a member of the group that makes the worship service possible – by participating in worship planning, by serving as ushers, by making the coffee, by paying the bills.

Having made worship completely different from the rest of life, the next step, the contradictory step, is to make the rest of life like worship – to carry the spirit, the attitude, the generosity of worship back out into the world. Imagine throughout the week that you are always among your friends, that you are among those who love and support you; imagine that your life is a prayer; imagine that wherever you are, you are in the house of God, that you are in a holy place.

Of course, we cannot make the hour of worship completely different from the remaining 167 hours of the week. We bring baggage from the week with us; we interact as ourselves with other people and with our environment – we are not magically transformed as we enter this

space; those around you are not wearing masks disrupting your normal, messy relationships with them. In addition, what will be *completely different* for me might be *same old, same old* for you.

Nor would we want to make the hour of worship so completely different that what we experience in worship we could not possibly relate to what we have experienced before. Rather, in worship we can have a sense of simultaneously being arm and arm with friends and being cradled by long deceased ancestors – a sense collusively created as each of us is in a different world, but also in the same world. What I imagine as completely different is intangible – an openness, a sense of wonder, a sense of the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond, to the mystery beyond all mysteries.

This is my dream, my fantasy, this is my hope for worship. Amen.