

## **Unitarian Universalism: A Different Kind of Worship**

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Here is my ideal sermon:

The Cosmos. Earth. Life.

Wow!

Let's be there for each other.

And everyone else, too.

It's all about relationships.

And it's usually complicated.

I love you all! Blessed Be.

And now some of you who were at the social supper with me last night know that I was being encouraged to let out a big “whoop” at this point. Sort of Howard Dean style.

I may bring different words, and more words, each week, but between the sermon and the other parts of our worship service, those brief ideas are pretty much the message no matter what the title on the sign board out front.

Worship is about paying attention to the things of worth in our lives and in our world. The word worship does not have to carry around with it images of deities or doctrines. Worship is about what is important. Worth-ship.

If you have come here out of a different religious tradition, you may be more aware than some of us (especially the life-long Unitarian Universalists) of how different our service can be than what you have experienced elsewhere. Number one: the Catholic priests probably do not let out a whole lot of whoops in the middle of their sermons.

Unitarian Universalist ministers enjoy a very special privilege on Sunday mornings – called Freedom of the Pulpit. I am not limited to speaking about doctrine or trying to convince you that our way is the one true path to salvation. I am not limited to using any one (or even two) specific texts for our readings and lessons. There is no UU lectionary mandating the subject of the day. I can even criticize Unitarian Universalism. And have.

I believe these kinds of freedoms are essential to living out the chosen means by which Unitarian Universalists have agreed to “do” religion. If we believe in the value of each person's individual religious journey, and if we require no creedal statement for membership and participation, then Freedom of the Pulpit is the natural outcome.

I am very grateful that I have and am encouraged to exercise my freedom of the pulpit. I believe it to be an important difference between our tradition and many others. I remember a New Testament Biblical Criticism class in theological school in which many of the students from

more conservative or traditional denominations were intrigued with what we were learning and with our discussions but they made it painfully clear that they knew they would literally lose their jobs if they ever preached on any of the ideas that were being taught in this class. For example, in the class we were learning that Biblical scholarship is fairly certain of the fact that there were some significant changes and additions to the texts of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John over the ages as was deemed necessary by The Church to support the developing theological doctrines of emerging Christianity. I knew, however, that I would not ever have to worry about compromising my beliefs or my knowledge with requirements of my tradition. I would enjoy Freedom of the Pulpit, and in fact, this freedom is a part of the official agreement between most UU ministers and their congregations.

And yet, while it does open up avenues unavailable to many of my fellow clergy, this freedom of the pulpit can also create more work for those of us who do not have lectionary guidelines to follow. Because we have no required topics or themes for our worship services or sermons, and because each of you has come here this morning with different needs for spiritual or intellectual or comforting or prophetic worship, the expectations of the congregation for Sunday morning worship are greatly expanded. I will tell you that it is not an easy thing to accept that I will never be able to completely satisfy everyone in this room all of the time.

And so you can perhaps understand why it is important to me that our worship themes and sermon topics are varied, interesting, and rotate among the needs of all of you over the course of our Sundays together. I believe that some services should provide stimulating or new ideas to move us along on our private spiritual journeys, and some services should help provide sources of hope and comfort in our lives that include both joy and suffering. In some services we hear snippets of wisdom that provide guidance, or catch glimpses of beauty and wonder that feed the springs of our strength and resilience. Sometimes we talk with both honesty and heavy hearts, or even anger, about the problems of our world and how we might be of help to ourselves, our neighbors, and the Earth itself.

From the congregational survey done in preparation for the Search Committee in 2005, I learned that quality of worship services is very important to you – as it is to me. I also found out that at least 90% of you or more were comfortable with the so called heretical theological position of naturalism that I would be bringing to the pulpit. The comments that really caught my attention were “Please get someone who is passionate,” and “Humor is a plus.” That’s when I knew we were meant for each other.

It is the beginning of many UU church, fellowship and society worship years, and the emails about orders of service for Sunday morning worship have been flying around our ministerdom lately. There are the perennial questions about joys and concerns and where to put announcements, if at all, and most of all how to keep them out of joys and concerns; and what about that carefully chosen and practiced postlude that becomes inaudible as we all rush to move on to the next activity.

My own personal questions, beyond these scheduling problems, have to do with how to fit most of the needs of the congregation, and the needs of the *people* in the congregation, into every service in some way. How can I/we fit everything intellectual, pastoral, spiritual, and get-off-

our-duffs-prophetic idea, all of which are important on any given day, into a one-hour time frame?

I've attended worship services in any number of Protestant churches, even some Catholic services, and since meeting my husband, some Jewish services as well. I would say the problem of meeting needs is universal, not limited to Unitarian Universalist services. But something else I have observed is that the different parts of our services each fulfill a different purpose and a different need. Let me tell you a little about how I think our services work to meet the needs of the people.

One of the things about which I am most particular in our order of service is in the flow of what happens from beginning to end. To me it is important that the worship part of the service not be interrupted by announcements or other distracting activities – which is why announcements have always come before the Prelude and Choral Introit, that is until this most recent experiment to convince people to submit their announcements for inclusion in the Order of Service Bulletin, and then to actually read them, too! It is also good to keep to a routine order of service as often as possible. Routines create comfortable safe places in which the sometimes difficult work we are called to do can be more readily accepted. Worship services are one place for the minister and the congregation to build trusting relationships.

To me it is important that we have a Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting that call us into *this* space and time, not the space or time or activities we left at home this morning. Our sharing of Joys and Concerns is partly community building and partly a ritual of UU theology – that we are one, and what affects each of us affects us all. Our small ritual of sharing what I call “the gift of our lives” with each other models right relationship with the larger world as well.

In our worship services it is important to me that we have some time for silent reflection or personal prayer. It is in those times that we sometimes find ourselves open to ideas or voices we had not heard before, or been able to come to grips with. Starting this fall I am trying to provide a few quiet minutes after the sermon before jumping into our closing hymn. I am appreciative that our Board President, Alison Curphey, who attended NELS, our UU Leadership School this summer, felt comfortable telling me that she found this a satisfying part of the worship services at NELS and would I consider bringing this practice into our worship experience. Definitely, I would.

It *is* important to me that our worship services provide opportunities to feel as well as to think, to laugh and to cry, to experience the beauty of music and flowers, and to participate in the creative joy of making beautiful music together, too. Our closing circle, which you have been doing since long before my arrival, is a beautiful illustration of the strength and welcoming nature of this religious family and my hope will be that even if our size eventually necessitates some changes in the format of our closing, that the circle's power to bring us together will never be lost.

I would like to mention some significant changes to our worship, as we moved away from the strict Protestant worship of our liturgical ancestors that came about through the ideas and practice of two ministers from our UU history. One is James Freeman Clarke who, in his

Unitarian ministry of the early to mid 1800s, brought both the custom of having lay members participate in the service along with the minister, and the use of texts other than Scripture into the customs of our worship. “Clarke formulated three key principles of a church – the social, the voluntary, and the congregational. Socially, members should make strong interpersonal connections, and gather not just for worship but in committees and study groups to further the church’s purpose. Members should voluntarily regard themselves as equals in the church and voluntarily assume stewardship of the community, supporting it with their financial pledges and offerings. And congregational worship, like the church’s other activities and property, should be common to all, with the congregation singing hymns, reading and praying responsively, and even sharing in the preaching. The order of service Clarke developed was ecumenical; he drew on Quaker-inspired silence and meditation, Catholic-inspired holy days, and Methodist-inspired lay singing and preaching.” ([www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jamesfreemanclarke.html](http://www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jamesfreemanclarke.html))

His was also the first Unitarian church to enjoy the many church committees we now enjoy!

A couple of quotes by James Freeman Clarke that might interest you. The first I think applies to the everyday seemingly endless list of things we each have to do. He said “I can do small things in a great way.” He also could have been seeing into the future when he wrote “A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman, of the next generation.”

You know one of the reasons I am so interested in James Freeman Clarke? He married a woman from Meadville, PA, and formulated his ideas for changes in worship while spending time with his in-laws in Meadville and attending the same Meadville Unitarian congregation that was my home before coming here.

Some of the most important liturgical contributions to our Unitarian Universalist tradition, in my opinion, came from another minister of mention this morning, Kenneth Patton. Patton was invited by the MA Universalist Convention, in 1949 to be the minister for an experimental congregation at the Charles Street Meetinghouse in Boston., which was to become a center for the development of contemporary worship materials and services. “Patton combined his artistic background and his belief in a universal religion that draws upon all the world’s faiths to publish numerous volumes of liturgical materials” which we are still using today. Our Call to Worship this morning was by Ken Patton.

Our service this morning has in many ways been an actual illustration of the ideals for Unitarian Universalist worship. Our Call to Worship by a UU minister. Our Chalice Lighting words from the Jewish tradition. The reading was from a book published by Hallmark, and our Closing Words will be from yet another, totally unscriptural source.

But each of these has meaning and wisdom for our lives and for the world. Someone on the UU Humanist email chat sent this message on Friday: “I am reminded of what a Baptist once said to me: ‘You Unitarians are all alike. You can turn anything, an invocation, a prayer, a benediction, into a [complete] sermon.’”

If this is true it is because we UUs believe that revelation is ongoing, and comes in many forms and flavors. I am so proud to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, able to draw freely from all of these sources.

Worship comes from “worthship.” We look inward and we look out beyond ourselves and these walls in search of the things to which we would direct our attention, our gratitude, and our commitment. Our services tell us, and our visitors, of our identity. They are the face with which we greet the public. Our worship services are also a source for the inner growth to which we aspire.

Two summers ago our Association president, Bill Sinkford, (with whom I do not always agree and would even here have some reservations) wrote these words as part of an issue of World Magazine dealing with Worship, the central act of a religious community:

*“Over the centuries since the Puritans settled in Salem, many ideas have spread through what today are Unitarian Universalist congregations. Of course, we have not changed in lockstep with one another – lockstep is not in the UU skill set – but we have changed. After the rise of humanism a century ago, for example, many of our congregations dropped their prayers, and sermons gave way to addresses. But now the pendulum is swinging again. Sermons are about real-life issues are becoming more common, appealing not just to our minds, but also calling us to be our best selves as we go back out into the world and face another week. People are coming to church to be part of a community that affirms their humanity and value, and to get their spirits nourished. In many congregations I visit, the sense of awe, the sense of reverence, are growing with the sense of celebration. And my sense of excitement is growing as our worshipping communities live out the promise of what our faith can be.”*