

Creating Sacred Time

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Worship is somewhat of a puzzle for Unitarian Universalists. We unite in covenant and practice, not in creed, and so gathering to honor, contemplate, and rest in the sacred might mean different things to different people. Yet, we find common ground. All are welcome. We connect in the mystery.

Poetry sometimes expresses this better than prose. In poetry, there is room between the lines, there are twists and turns and surprises, there is immediacy, there are pauses for breath. Today's service includes more poetry than usual, and all of my sermon poems are by Unitarian Universalists. I hope poetry brings us a shared experience of the present moment, because being together as one people is part of the point.

In worship, we know ourselves to be in relationship with each other, with this tradition, and to something beyond the horizons of our understanding. We can have different ideas and experiences of the ultimate, while being united in the here and now. There is love in this very moment.

That's what we're trying to do in this hour we set aside for our community of faith. We are remembering, resting in, being inspired by, and practicing the Love that recalls that we are all related. During worship, we practice receiving the experience, responding authentically, and building relationship with each other. If we can do these three things, I believe we will be changed for the better, individually and as a group. Receive. Respond. Relate.

Receive

I learned something about the capacity to receive in sacred space when I was advising a campus ministry group some years ago. The students said they wanted to learn about other religions, so I invited my colleague the Zen Buddhist priest to be a guest speaker.

Our campus ministry group met at noon in the student lounge, surrounded by the bustle of students eating lunch, changing classes, and attempting to study. The microwave and the vending machine in the next room beeped off and on. After meeting the students, our guest invited us to sit comfortably, close our eyes, and attend to our breathing. At first, the noises were distracting. The noise and movement in the room receded into the background.

When our guest invited us to open our eyes, the whole room had changed. The beeping seemed calmer. Other students were speaking more quietly. I don't think that would have happened if we had politely waited instead of participating in the meditation. Because the students were eager to receive the experience, to take in what the room and the sound of their own breathing had to offer in that very moment, we were transformed.

Our religious tradition draws from many sources. We mention six sources in the Unitarian Universalist Association's bylaws, including "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." In other words, spiritual transformation happens when we are receptive to what's going on around us and within us. Worship is a sacred experience when it opens us up to receive the present moment. I am reminded of a poem by Marta Valentín. She writes:

The Golden Present

... is not like the proverbial egg that expects

you to sit on it and wait ...

It is instead a scrumptious feast

to be served when you call.

Look around, it awaits a response from you,

one that says:

"Yes, I see you,

Yes, I choose, you,

Yes ... "

The golden present ever reaches for you

and wonders if you'll come

to unwrap its gifts.

("The Golden Present," by Marta Valentín, from *Voices from the Margins: An Anthology of Meditations*, edited by Jacqui James and Mark D. Morrison-Reed)

Worship moves us along on a search for truth and meaning when we are open to receiving insight from the worship experience. Every person who shows up, fully present in mind and soul, supports the religious growth of everyone else who shows up. Spiritual transformation

might be jump-started by a hymn, or by the way your neighbor says “Amen.” Worship gives us a chance to practice welcoming the present moment.

Respond

Responding authentically is the next step in exploring spiritual transformation. Sometimes worship can inspire a person to relate to loved ones in a better way, or to take up a social justice project. Other times, the response in the moment, the movement in our own hearts, is the response that resonates.

Some people come on Sundays to seek a connection with something larger than themselves. We bring many names for our understanding of the ultimate. What happens if you reach out and actually find that connection?

Unitarian Universalist poet Max Kapp writes about the dilemma of response:

*Often I have felt that I must praise my world
For what my eyes have seen these many years,
And what my heart has loved.
And often I have tried to start my lines:
“Dear earth,” I say,
And then I pause
To look once more.
Soon I am bemused
And far away in wonder.
So I never get beyond “Dear Earth.”*

(Poem by Max Kapp, from *Day of Promise: Collected Meditations, Vol. 1*, edited by Kathleen Montgomery)

The poet knows that words are not the only response when meeting with mystery and wonder. Other responses might include rising in body or spirit during the hymns, taking notes, or lighting a candle.

These external responses follow internal responses. Max Kapp's external response, "Dear earth," follows his internal response of gratitude. An external response such as rising up for a hymn may come from an internal response of toe-tapping joy during the introductory measures. When someone lights a candle of sorrow, the community's compassion is a response that shows the presence of the sacred.

Struggle is another response to worship. Sometimes a worship service sets off feelings like doubt or confusion. Sometimes people disagree with the sermon. Engagement with uncomfortable ideas and feelings can be religious, too.

There's a mural in the sanctuary of the liberal Christian church where I grew up. Mary and Joseph, plainly dressed, hold the baby Jesus under a far-away star. At the top of the mural is a quote from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 9: "And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

When I was a young teen, I enjoyed this mural, with its depiction of the Holy Family as regular folks. I was confused about "Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," because it sounded like God and Jesus were the same person, but I was willing to let that go. As an older teen, after discussions with Jewish friends, I realized that not everybody thinks Isaiah chapter 9 is talking about Jesus, and I began to get uncomfortable with the mural.

Later, I learned that Biblical historians think that the passage refers someone who was alive at the time of the writing. Also, all of the names in Isaiah are messages or praises of God, not descriptions of the person whose name it is. The name of the person indicated in Isaiah chapter 9 is meant to be a tribute to God the mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of Peace. Speaking from the perspective of a Biblical historian, the passage was not written to predict the coming of a future Prince of Peace.

When I learned that, I was irritated. I felt annoyed when I sat in my parents' church and looked at the mural. I felt lied to. Nevertheless, there were family obligation reasons to visit the church once or twice a year. My internal struggle with the mural was prominent for me each time.

Eventually, my attitude softened. I could look at the mural and decide what it meant for me. The voice of the Divine, whatever form it takes, can be a source of good counsel. For people who think most often of Jesus when they hear that verse, the name evokes wisdom and peace, the virtues that Christians hope to achieve with the help of Jesus' teachings. I'm OK with wisdom and peace.

In my struggle with the mural, I went from unexamined contentment to doubt, from doubt to irritation, and from irritation to reconciliation. These were all internal responses to a visual

element in my worship experience. I feel a greater sense of connection to my own spirituality and to the tradition of my ancestors because of the struggle.

Acknowledging internal responses such as doubt, joy, compassion, and gratitude helps us to find meaning in external responses such as lighting a candle or reading in unison. Fully participating in worship means responding, which can open the door to spiritual transformation.

Relate

Being receptive and responding authentically are two ways to make the most of worship. Relationship is the third way. Every person here makes a difference in the worship experience for the whole group. Your presence matters. When we approach worship as something we're all participating in together, our relationships can become another way to encounter the holy. We create sacred time together by acknowledging the power of each other's participation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.

How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor and who honor us!

How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with?

Read the language of these wandering eye-beams.

The heart knoweth.

(Adapted from Emerson's essay, "Friendship," 1841)

Worship is qualitatively different when enough of us approach it as a matter of relationship, when we warmly rejoice to be with each other. Six months from now, the words that have been spoken today will have faded to whispers. The strength in relationship your congregation has gained through planning and experiencing worship together will remain. Sacred time is created through kindness, spoken and unspoken. Worship is a congregation's work together, an expression of shared aspirations on the search for truth and meaning. Relationship is holy.

Conclusion

Receive. Respond. Relate. These are three ways of experiencing worship. We may move through all three at one time. They support each other. The more we can trust in our relatedness, the more we know that our authentic response is welcome, the more we are able to receive the experience of blessing. Kristen Harper writes:

Each day provides us with an opportunity to love again,

To hurt again, to embrace joy,

To experience unease,

To discover the tragic.

Each day provides us with the opportunity to live.

This day is no different, this hour no more unique than the last,

Except ... Maybe today, maybe now,

Among friends and fellow journeyers,

Maybe for the first time, maybe silently,

We can share ourselves.

("Each Day" by Kristen Harper, from *Voices from the Margins*)

Unitarian Universalist worship is not for passive consumers. Full participation asks three things of you: receive, respond, relate. On purpose. As you practice these three things in worship, you may find that they are useful in your life outside the congregation. Receive the gifts of each day. Respond to the forces that create and uphold life. Build relationships with others who share the search for meaning.

May the Spirit of Life, the mystery, the golden present, the dear Earth, be in us and among us and between us, now and always.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.