

«How We Worship»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, August 3, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

For all our Unitarian Universalist diversity, worship is our most common activity. When I use the word “worship” I use it in its most original sense to mean to ascribe worth to something or to shape things of worth. Sunday after Sunday, whatever else we do here during the week, on Sunday morning we gather to shape things of worth; to be reminded of our highest aspirations, to be reminded of that which is sacred to us.

When we gather as a group in this way, we make an assumption that we can create some sort of common, meaningful experience; that the gathered community shares certain values, certain ideal and attitudes; that while we respect diversity among us, we also share common ground. Our worship is, or ought to be, a deliberate shaping, ordering, or recalling of the things we find worthy.

How do we *intentionally shape* this time we spend together in order to create the *space* to remember and to understand that which is important in life? If you look through our order of service today, what does it tell you about what we value as a community? If you were here for the first time and had never heard about Unitarian Universalism, what would it say about us? Let’s look at each of the elements in the service this morning to look for clues about what we value and what we worship. (Members here are invited to talk about service elements and their meanings to them. Following are some of my own thoughts.)

Welcome and Announcements

- Welcome because we value the participation of the wider community
- Announcements because the life of this community outside this space and time is important to us
- Announcements should in most cases reflect our mission and the values we want to take back into the world

Music

- Music is a gift of the heart
- Music is transformative, able to carry us to a place beyond our immediate thoughts and concerns
- Not just “filler” but critical to the worship experience
- Hymns give us a chance to breath into worship, to embody the worship experience
- Religious or spiritual experiences people claimed to have during worship were always during musical pieces

Chalice lighting and extinguishing

- Links us to our Unitarian Universalist heritage and history, as well as linking us to all present UU congregations lighting chalices this morning
- Symbol of our individual flames being held and supported in community
- Creation of sacred space, an invitation/reminder that the Holy is in our midst as we seek the truth together in love
- An emotional container for that exploration
- Marks the beginning and end of our worship together

Joys and Sorrows (milestones)

- Ours is a *living faith* tradition, which means that our theology, our sense of worth and value, comes in part out of our own lived experience and through listening to the experiences of others, and the ways in which they derive meaning from those experiences
- Reminded of a phrase used during the consciousness raising meetings of the feminist movement decades ago – that women were *hearing each other into speech* – meaning that often hearing another person’s story can help clarify our own ideas and ideals

Children’s Story

- Not in our order of service this morning, but the active participation of our children in worship signifies that we value the education and participation of our children
- A time to engage them in a special way, not a time to show them off or entertain the adults

Offertory/Offering

- Gratitude and giving is a spiritual practice
- We are self-supporting! We have no diocese to keep us afloat

Sermon/message

- quote by Garrison Keillor: “When a minister stand in front of people she is interrupting what the people have come to church for. She had better have a good reason for doing that. Otherwise she shouldn’t stand up and talk. We don’t need the minister unless she has something that the Spirit has put in her heart to say. The important thing is to have something in your heart, look out at the people, and try to find a way to say what is in your heart right then and there.”
- This is really the essence of a message that is appropriate for worship. Most often my sermons are the result of something I’ve been personally grappling with, either alone or with one of you, and I find that I need to think it through in more depth. As I do that reflecting and reading and more reflecting – wa-la – I begin to come out the other side of that process with a sermon. So sermon writing is a spiritual practice for me.
- The real message of a sermon lies in that weird and crazy place between what was in my heart that I needed to say and what lies in your hearts that you needed to hear. It’s not unusual for me

to hear from members who have read the written form of a sermon on our website, who say, are you sure that's the message you gave that Sunday, because that's not the message I remember hearing. What that says to me is that real worship was taking place there. That individual was open enough to accept a message that was needed at that given time.

- What else to add? – ceremonies that mark rites of passage, such a child dedications, deaths, new members joining, the commissioning of teams, such as the new care team that we'll commission this fall.

Where to go from here?

Tom Owen-Towle writes that “in pursuit of Beloved Community, the past is cherished, the present is celebrated, and the future is charted.” Our lives together on Sunday mornings should speak to all three. To do that well, both the minister and the congregation need to have a sense of history, both for the Unitarian Universalist movement and the congregation in particular; they need to know what they want to lift up as worthy in the present; they need to know where they want to take the congregation in the future.

I confess that because I'm fairly new here, I sometimes feel like I'm working from the Lone Ranger model of sermon writing, because I do not yet know all the stories of this congregation that would help me put my thoughts in the context of this community. I'm also not clear whether this congregation knows how it wants to chart its future. This fall we will begin facilitating a series of leadership workshops called “Harvest the Power” which I'm hoping will generate discussion about the congregation's future. There are also ways the congregation's past and present can be addressed. For instance, some congregations have a group of trained worship associates that meet with the minister on a quarterly basis to help brainstorm topics for upcoming Sunday services. The group talks about what's happening in the congregation, what seems pertinent for discussion; what readings and music and poetry would flesh out the topic; what stories from members in the congregation would be important to lift up. I would love to see that happen here at some point.

In the meantime, you can all help me with services. If you read in the Newsletter or the order of service that a particular topic is scheduled and you think of some music or poetry or a reading that might peak to that topic, please email me. If you know of someone with a story to share, please let me know. If you have a child you would like dedicated, an anniversary you would like celebrated, a rite of passage you want to share with the community, let me know and we can work it into a Sunday morning service. Let our Sunday morning time together be the work of the people. May it be so.