

WHAT IS WORTHY?
A sermon by The Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
January 29, 2006

Responsive Reading: “To Worship,” by Jacob Trapp

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.

Sermon

It is a hot summer day, out in the country. A little girl floats on an inner tube, down a river that runs through trees. She looks up and thinks delightedly to herself, “I’m me, and I’m in the middle of a circle of trees with a circle of sky in the middle of it. Wherever I go, the trees and the sky and I are the same.” She hugs to herself her individual identity and laughs to feel how it fits into something so big.

It is just before the opening ceremony of the 2004 Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) General Assembly (GA). There are several thousand UUs enthusiastically waiting for the pageantry of the banner parade, waiting for the dozens upon dozens of large, colorful banners representing the congregations and districts of the UUA. The banner carriers are backstage, jostling into their lineup. Suddenly one of them drops to the ground with a heart attack. In the interminable-seeming moments before help arrives, someone starts singing softly, “Spirit of life, come unto me, sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.” Hundreds of voices take it up: “Blow in the wind, rise in the

sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.” From that rending place of agony for another *and* gratitude for being spared, they hum and sing their prayer. “Roots hold me close, wings set me free, spirit of life, come to me.”

It is an ordinary Unitarian Universalist Sunday morning service, full of people who want to hear ideas and get a little inspiration, people who are not always inclined toward sentiment. The minister reads a strange little book called “I’ll Love You Forever,” written by a man who had had two babies born dead. The people in the book, through time, through the annoyances of life, through birth and death and birth again, sing,

*"I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
as long as I'm living
my baby you'll be."*

Tears rise to the eyes of some of the sophisticated UUs. This odd little story, born from the soul of a heart-broken man, calls some to feel for a moment the reality of love that passeth understanding.

Seven people have spent several weeks in open-spirited dialogue about God and death and beauty and love, men and women who feel connected with each other, in affection and respect. One of the teachers tosses out a throwaway line, “I am just tired of people who say, ‘I’m spiritual but I’m not religious.’ What do they think we’re about, anyway?” The other six, to a person, open their eyes wide and glance back and forth among each other. There is a lengthy moment of mutual realization among these comrades. The six each say, rather tentatively, something like, “Well, that’s how I’ve always felt.” The teacher opens her eyes wide and takes a breath. “There’s no way I can dismiss you guys’ points of view, after the kind of time we’ve spent together.” Minds are opened all around, considering the nature of human exploration of Mystery. The conversation continues.

All of the above are occasions of worship, times when matters of **ultimate** worth are on the table. All of the above stories open the fallible, small humans involved to a glimpse—a consideration, a hope, a catching of breath—at the gap between what we are and the hugeness we can never fully grasp. All of them involve emotional depths, without disrespecting the analytical.

The little girl is tickled, in a childish awestruck way, to feel for a moment her rightful place in something she will never understand. The GA banner carriers are brought up short in the face of death, that inescapable fate that makes religious people of us all—brought up short in empathy, terror and gratefulness. The UU congregation hears about a mom driving across town to cradle in love her big, sleeping son, and it is caught by oddness of it—it is taken into the unexpected corner of the heart that recognizes love *is*, in fact, the answer. The class members all have their minds jolted, because their spirits were open to each other—every one of them has to eat a little humble pie, has to

find a genuine openness to understanding a different point of view about unknowable things. (I'm glad to report that they all still have their senses of humor intact about the whole thing, too.)

Worship involves humility, recognizing how little is really in our control. It involves reverence, which arises from humility, a sense of awe and opening. It stems not from the consumerist, "What's in-it-for-me" attitude, but from a generosity that says, "What do I have to offer?" Worship, whether individual or communal, always implies the possibility of transformation—not just mundane change (although that can happen), but soul-deep transformation, shaking us and leaving us closer to love and justice and a realization of oneness. It respects intellect, as well as heart and spirit.

Communally, when we are really and truly worshipping with other people, we have something at our center that is in and between and among us, and also transcendent. What we call it doesn't matter. What does matter is that we are open to its mystery and wonder.

Taoism is, technically speaking, an atheistic philosophy. And yet, when I read these words of Lao-Tzu, I don't care what we call "it"—or don't call it.

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real. (Mitchell, chapter one)

That unnamable eternal is the center of worship.

I have preached on the subject of worship several times in my 18 years here, with an emphasis on the word itself. Here's my usual shtick: I acknowledge how many of us have been "wounded" by bad old definitions and practices of worship, then I plead for an acceptance of the word, as a pointer toward a reality greater than any word.

I am not going to do that anymore. Yes, the word has been associated with practices no one in this room agrees with, and I respect that wounding has, indeed happened. But "worship" is the word we have, and most people in this room can identify with the practice as the human response to the unknowable: worship as transformation of heart, mind and spirit, helping us become more generous and just people. The word isn't our problem. The practice is. [Parenthetical comment: we do, in fact, have good worship experiences, and I would have to leave my chosen vocation if I thought otherwise. It's just that we are capable of coming together in more reverence, more humility, more love, more openness to transformation. We are capable of that response to mysteries beyond human ken, respecting the mind and also going places the mind alone does not go.]

Regrettably often, we have gotten so stuck in our reactivity to philosophies we don't believe in, that we close our consumerist hearts, rather than opening them in genuine offering. Sometimes, we take our own woundedness and demand that the entire institution behave as though it had had our experiences. We have clung so tightly to our precious "marginalizations"—whether we are Christian, pagan, humanist, whatever—that we have closed down our souls to the consideration of what it is that makes this a

religious institution. Sometimes we are so wedded to linearity, to the mind alone, that we equate matters of the spirit with stupidity or soft-headedness.

[Another parenthetical comment. Let us take a moment to take a breath. If you are hurt or offended, I invite you to talk to me, privately or publicly. And I ask you to keep listening.]

Essentially none of us (including me) can articulate the “center” of the Unitarian Universalist faith in a compelling way, and that gets in the way of our spreading the saving gospel of our religion. If our center is fuzzy, primarily made up of an uneasy truce among different theologies, we deny ourselves the rich worship experiences that give us life and joy.

I sense strongly that we are ready to move on. Serving as I do on the national UUA Board, I know that there is concern about helping us move toward a large-spirited sense of who we really are, at our transformative best. I challenge us to give attention to this issue. It is a very big job, and I will just give a few suggestions for this morning.

The simplest—although maybe not easiest—path is for each of us individually to cultivate the humility of true reverence, rising above labels and categorical thinking. This subject warrants at least a whole sermon, which it just so happens I gave in 2002—I have attached it to the copies of this sermon in the north vestibule.

In our congregation, there are plans afoot that go beyond individual practice, plans to help us begin addressing our theological diversity, help us begin searching for a reverent center that is real and honest. This spring, we are offering a class discussing the “issue” of spirituality and religion (guess where the idea for that came from?). In another class, there will be an opportunity to come together and each craft a version of our “elevator speech,” the way we would explain our faith to a stranger on an elevator ride between the lobby and the top floor of a building.

I know that these venues and projects sometimes seem to atheists and old-line humanists like simply more evidence of our Association’s ill-advised headlong tumble into something sloppily called “spirituality”—while others see them as a commendable exploration of what it means to be religious, liberally. I know that sometimes our atheists and old-line humanists regret the current trends, feeling that our religious tradition is turning backward, becoming conservative—while others would see this movement as part of T.S. Eliot’s concept of returning to the place we started and knowing it for the first time (“Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*.) I hope passionately, devoutly (you should excuse the expression) that people of all theologies and philosophies will join our congregational discussions and reflections. We need everybody.

Finally, our denomination (technically, “association of congregations”) also has plans afoot. The Commission On Appraisal is an elected, standing committee of the UUA, charged with serious, in-depth study of relevant issues. They tackle one issue at a time, and take three or four years to publish their findings. The 2005 report is called *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, and is one of the most important issues the Commission has ever studied. It says, “One of the goals of this report is to promote the notion that a healthy diversity requires common ground,” (p.7) and

Because UU theological diversity militates against any generalized sense that UUs are offering themselves to God in worship, we have to ask, just what are UUs doing at their services? (p. 106)

The UUA Board is taking this report very seriously. A task force is upcoming, to decide on a program to bring the report to congregations, to help congregations and individual UUs engage the very difficult questions they raise. Stay tuned to your friendly local UUA Board member for more—but we need not wait for the rarefied atmosphere of national leadership, to do something ourselves. I would welcome with very open arms anyone willing to work with our Adult Religious Education Committee on ways to reflect upon this report—perhaps also our Sunday Services Committee and Committee On Ministry and Membership Committee, and... Careful perusing of this book, followed by discussion with others of all theological and philosophical persuasions, can lead us into deeper individual and communal worship practices.

Worship is at the heart of all religious faiths. We Unitarian Universalists have set for ourselves a very high bar, when it comes to that central event: a service that respects mind and spirit, that lets each of us enter joyously into reverence for Mystery, that lets us offer ourselves freely to the Great Whatever, that lets us truly honor each other as members of the same body. All the while honoring our undeniably-great differences.

We can do it, I know we can.

One of the great worship moments in this congregation was provided by a well-respected atheist, an engineer and long-standing member of this Fellowship. He was part of a lay-led service, in which several people contributed. He chose a fascinating, highly analytical approach to his part of the presentation—that keen engineerly mind was very much in evidence. Then he stepped away from the pulpit and sang:

Where do we come from?
What are we?
Where are we going?

Where do we come from?
What are we?
Where are we going?

Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery.
Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery.

Sources consulted

Commission On Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.

Mitchell, Stephen, ed. *Tao Te Ching: a New English Version*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

Munsch, Robert. *I'll Love You Forever*. Toronto: Firefly Books Limited, 1986. 63rd printing, 2001.

Skinner, Clarence R. *Worship and a Well-Ordered Life*. Boston: Meeting House Press, (Universalist Historical Society), 1955.

<http://www.uua.org/worshipweb/main.html>

Tate, Brian, unpublished Mystic Round, <http://www.briantatemusic.com/>