

Worship? What's That???" a Sermonic Travelogue by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
assisted by Beth Jenkins and Bonnie Kyle.
October 24, 2010 Unitarian Church of Edmonton

Preamble- Brian: This morning's service is about worship, about why we do it, how it is shaped and planned and the purpose of each element. It is often said in our churches that worship comes from the Anglo Saxon term meaning 'worth shape' -- that is shaping the things that are of greatest worth to us. Now, that can be some concept of God and praising God, but there is more to it than that. A worship service is where we wrestle with meaning in our lives, with identity, with the powerful emotions and ethical dilemmas that both challenge our living and give those lives meaning.

I am standing here in the middle of the congregation this morning to illustrate something you might not have considered: This is where worship begins and ends and has meaning. Right here on the floor of the Sanctuary. Worship does not begin or end or even happen up there on the platform where Bonnie Kyle and Beth Jenkins are patiently waiting to begin the service. It starts here with you and among you. You are 'audience' but also 'participants'.

Without you there is no service. I think that's pretty obvious. You have to be here or nothing much takes place.

What's less obvious is how much of a role you play in what goes on up there as well. Who you are, what you want from this church plays a large role in what goes on up there. Yes, it is true that I am contractually given the 'freedom of the pulpit', as it is historically called -- the freedom to address topics in any way I see fit. I am also given the ultimate responsibility for worship, a responsibility shared with the Worship Committee. Technically you cannot tell me what I must and must not say. But as in many things there is a balance. If the service does not address your needs, and if the message of the sermon does not fit your view of the world, pretty soon you will stop coming -- maybe not all of you, but enough that anyone's ministry would lose viability. What this means is that the minister and the Worship Committee has an obligation of creating worship that meets your collective needs all the time and your individual needs some of the time.

There is a famous story about a UU minister who used to put names on a series of toy figures he kept on his desk. Each week, depending on the sermon, he would change the names taped to the figures on the desk. He wanted to be conscious that he was writing something meant to communicate with real people in the church. This idea might please Joe or Mary or not. But by naming the specific people he was writing for each week he remembered to address real needs, steer clear of real minefields ("say that and George will blow his top") and so on. He wanted his sermons to speak meaningfully to people he knew and not just be ego driven flights of fancy. And he did not want to accidentally offend others so they would stop listening. (Every minister occasionally knowingly offends someone if only to challenge their thinking).

So the service starts out here with you, the members and friends of the congregation. Whether you know it or not you are weekly engaged in a two way communication, a conversation that shapes the structure and content of worship. Your posture, your responses at coffee hour and elsewhere and your very presence tell us whether or not we are on track. And when you stay away, we begin to wonder what

we're doing wrong.

With that in mind, let us begin with the welcome – the purpose of which is obvious, and the announcements that remind us that as members of a congregation we are engaged in shared endeavours with opportunities and responsibilities that come with that connection..

Welcome and Announcements Beth

Prelude and Lighting of Silent Candles of Care and Connection Bonnie

Kindling the Chalice #420 Annie Dillard Beth

Brian: There are many theories of worship underpinning services in Unitarian Universalism. Our service most closely follows the five step approach of early 20th century philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman. Wieman saw us as co-creators of the universe with God in a process called 'creative interchange'. Perhaps Wieman's work will be the subject of a separate service, but for today, it is enough that he sees leaders and congregation working together to create the mood of worship.

The first stage is the Approach. It is a time to begin to move from the outside secular world of day to day activity, the world of jobs and home and family- into a space that is more sacred, more constructively and spiritually self-focused.

Sacred space has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. In the horizontal dimension we consider our relationships and connections with others. People enter and leave sacred space horizontally, that is concerned with their relationships with both the people we know and the larger world beyond these walls. And for some worshipping in that dimension of celebrating relationships alone is enough.

They are fed by the reminder of community and care, and need that more than anything. But for others, the horizontal is not enough. They also need the vertical dimension, time that is inwardly and sometimes downwardly directed towards an exploration of their deepest selves, and upwardly directed, towards their highest values or towards the mysterious or even towards God. Where that vertical points is up to each individual.

The welcome begins to invite us to move horizontally into sacred space, but there is a time of transition. The announcements remind us that we are part of a community with activities. Yet while important, the announcements are not really part of the sacred space and so we place them at the start of this transition time.

The Prelude is an invitation to quiet the mind and the soul. It is not really meant as a time to catch up with your neighbours, nor is it really meant as a final chance to take your seats. The Prelude is usually carefully chosen to either support the service theme or to support the mood the service leader is seeking to create for the morning. The lighting of silent candles is also part of the horizontal, symbolizing that we each arrive with joys and concerns, with strengths and failings. As you know we have been experimenting with the candle ritual, shifting away from spoken candles. There are two views about this in our congregation. To put it in theoretical terms, some deeply value this horizontal plane of worship and its celebration of connection and neighbourliness. They are mourning the loss of spoken candles.

Others are not so much fed by that and want something that is more a part of the vertical dimension. They want primarily to be challenged deeply to their core by ideas

or even by feelings, and then lifted towards their highest values and ideals.

Finding a workable balance has not been easy, and favouring one over the other has consequences. The horizontal dimension that gives priority to the celebration of community is primarily a feature of smaller churches where people can know everyone else. The vertical dimension takes precedence in larger churches where the service is first about the inner self and values. The needs of the community are addressed in other ways.

Finally the Kindling of the Chalice brings the Approaching section to a close with a lighting of a flame rich with symbol and meaning.

Doxology (read together) Beth

Love is the spirit of this church, and service its law.

This is our great covenant:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another. James Vila Blake

Pulpit Editorial UU-UNO Sunday Marilyn Gaa

Singing the Children Out

Hymn #347 "Gather the Spirit" Beth

Brian: The second section in Wieman's theory of Worship is Visioning, a time for "calling to mind the possibilities for good in the world". The doxology or other shared reading usually describes a common purpose – or failure to reach some common purpose. It is NOT to be confused with a creed that describes a required belief. Rather it is a reminder of what the community stands for generally, or the expression of a possible direction for life or action.

The Pulpit Editorial is an occasional feature in this congregation recognizing that sometimes members have important things to say about specific topics. Marilyn's discussion of the UU-UNO certainly fit this idea of possibility for good action, and so rightly belongs in this section.

We then sang a hymn. Music has the power to lift the spirit. It also brings the physical action of having to stand and move air around in our lungs – always a good thing to do. Usually the first hymn is chosen as a song of praise or thanksgiving. It is hard to think of the possibilities until we first stop and recognize the gifts we have already received. The section comes to a close now as Beth introduces the Offering. Sharing our resources with the church and with the wider community is an action that supports vision. As former church Intern Minister Fran Dearman likes to say, "Money is a sincere form of affirmation."

Sharing Our Abundance Beth

Brian: The Meditation in song, words and music is the Reflection portion of the service. Wieman's model usually places the Reflection section after the sermon or message. In this church it moves around a bit. On days when the message is geared towards action, I will often place it before the sermon to encourage us to open

ourselves to the message to come. On days when the sermon is written to touch the heart and move the emotions, I will often place it after the sermon to give that reflection time as a chance to process and integrate what has been said.

We introduce the meditation usually with one of two spiritually focused hymns, Spirit of Life, which is uplifting, and Voice Still and Small, which is deeply and inwardly focused.

Meditation in Song #391 Voice Still and Small Bonnie
In Words #437 "Let Us Worship" Kenneth L. Patton Bonnie
In Silence
In Music
Sermon "Worship? What's That?" Rev. Brian J. Kiely

Brian You can all breathe a sigh of relief that after all my comments along the way, a full sermon is not coming your way.

Wieman calls the readings and sermon the Exploration and Illumination section described as "facing a particular problem". It is where the leader deals intellectually and sometimes emotionally as well with the day's topic.

Preachers, not surprisingly, are fascinated with preaching – mostly their own, of course. The late Rev. Peter Raible used to say that one definition of a minister was a person who would travel across the country to give a sermon, but wouldn't walk across the street to hear one.

Our church library could easily be filled with texts that preachers have written about the important value, styles and techniques of preaching and it could be filled many times over with published books of our deathless sermons.

But I won't talk about that today. I have just three brief points to make preaching:

Unitarianism and Universalism come out of the Protestant tradition which made one major change to Christian worship. It removed the idea of the Eucharist - the act by which bread and wine are made sacred and shared- they removed that from the central place in worship, and replaced it with the Word – the spoken sharing of the essential message of the faith.

The importance of the sermon is part of our Reformation history and heritage. That's point number one.

Point number two comes from colleague Joyce Smith. She refers to a study of UU values done many years ago:

"Robert Tapp reported that (UU's come)...to church with their values already formed. This study suggests that our people are not looking to religion to provide change. They are looking for clarification, enlargement and support of their current values. What our members are seeking is to maintain values and worldviews in the midst of competing values and world views. What they are seeking is to understand the dimensions of their faith, to weather those personal and social changes which are part of each person's life...and to do so with an increasing sense of centerdness." [1]

If you remember, I began this morning standing out there on the floor saying that you are co-creators of worship. Joyce is saying much the same thing. While I may be called to challenge your thinking now and then, the goal is to help- or provoke - you to

refine your values rather than have you adopt mine. During the sermon, I may be the only one speaking aloud, but I am not the only one talking.

Point three: It's very easy to see the sermon as an ego boosting exercise for the minister: "This is my show and I AM the star!!!"

But that's not really the way it works. The best sermons come when the minister sets her or his ego aside and is able to get out of the way of the message. In the best sermons the Spirit owns the pulpit, not the minister. Good preachers are simply channels for whatever moves or touches you.

In fact, we never know in advance which sermons will be the good ones and which the dogs. The sermon is completed and giving its significance by the listener, not the preacher.

It may be counter-intuitive, but the best preaching is ego-free.

Hymn #128 "For All That Is Our Life" Beth

Brian The final section in Wieman's model is Affirmation/ Dedication The final hymn, the closing words and the Singing of 'Carry the Flame' are all designed to return us to the horizontal mode of worship and to move us back out of sacred space.

I like "For All That Is Our Life" as a closing hymn sometimes because I think it sends us home on a positive note with both gratitude and purpose. The first part of each verse expresses something for which we are thankful, the second part, "to build the common good", "to come with praise and thanks", "to make our own days glad", reminds us to transform the vision into action for good purpose.

Closing Words Beth

Closing Song Beth

[1] Smith, Joyce H. "The Wizardry of Words" in "Transforming Words" (Wm. F. Schulz editor) (Skinner House, Boston, 1984) p. 52.