

REFLECTIONS ON UU WORSHIP by Bill Graves

As chair of our Worship Committee I propose to share with you some of my ideas and ideals relating to Worship in a UU congregation. After the service I will proceed to the rear of this room and invite any discussion anyone wishes to engage in.

THE SABBATH: Over three thousand years ago a practice became hollowed which I think still has merit. That is the Sabbath day, every 7th day. It is a practice of taking a regular, structured time to rest, to be with loved ones, and for the inner life of careful critical thinking, considering the meaning of our existence before it is over, meditation, and, yes, prayer. Traditionally is a time to reflect upon our work gone on before, just as Yahweh did on the 7th day.

PERSONAL HABIT. For over 30 years I have been a fairly regular participant in UU services and its been an essential element in my life. I have found love of community, a kind of recharging of my batteries, a time of peace. After negotiating courts, clients, and employees all week I was able to make it a regular practice to devote just a little, treasured time to experience the beauty of music, a provocative thought and, review what was really most important in life—and what wasn't.

MEANING OF "WORSHIP". So far I've touched on the values of observing the Sabbath in a faith community. That may get you to the front door but it doesn't address what should go on inside. What we do inside I prefer to call "Worship". I'm fully aware that some UU's are not altogether comfortable with that word. But, I think we are stronger and more attractive when we preserve the few verbal symbols with a religious connection we have left. They remind us of our religious heritage. More, I actually think

the term “worship” wonderfully captures and reminds us of what we do or should be doing inside these doors. Our minister, Kit Ketchum likes to recall, the word is derived from the old English words “werth scipe” which means “worth shaping.”

To me as a 21st Century UU, “worship” no longer congers up any images of bowing down to, or asking forgiveness by a 1st Century, deceased male human being. That’s why I’m a UU! But it does imply a subject-object relationship, a humbling ourselves to something. All the major religions teach that the essence of human reality includes a dimension greater than the self; something bigger and perhaps more important than me. Realizing this sometimes causes people to reach for more than self-gratification. If we don’t acknowledge there is something outside and greater than ourselves I doubt we qualify as a religious body; we are a Kiwanis Club.

When we worship in this place, hopefully we do remind ourselves and honor that dimension outside our ego-driven existences. Someone said: “Tell me your God and I’ll tell you who you are.” Is it affluence, appearance, consumption, security, or compassion, justice, truth? I recall Jamal, our Muslim friend preaching from this pulpit: “Be careful who you care about for you will be its slave.”

AWE. Humility in the presence of the transcendent is one aspect of worship. Others include senses of awe and reverence and gratitude, for example, for the flowers we will share later in this service, or a chord hit just right when I sing in the choir. Atoms formed in the centers of stars millions of years ago somehow got grouped together to form us. That’s very remote. But a much more immediate form of creation happened when I got up this morning. The day was created with me in it and given to me freely. A

metaphor some use for God, by the way, is “cosmic generosity”. In any event, I am comforted and grateful to reflect upon the miracle of creation and think of that as worship.

CRITERIA FOR A WORSHIP SERVICE. Let me move now to a topic, which is only slightly less ethereal. What criteria does the Worship Committee use or, do I think should use, in designing a Worship Service. I think a good worship service should do two things: First, it should be about a subject that is related to our common religion. Secondly, the subject should be presented in a manner that somehow moves us in our hearts, in other words, is “inspirational.”

ON SUBJECT MATTER. When looking at any idea for a Sunday service I want to ask: Is it a lecture typical of what you would hear at the Kiwanis Club, or adult ed. program, or is it appropriate for celebrating our common religion together. For an intellectual or informative lecture of a secular nature there are a myriad of options all week long available in our larger community. We can't compete. Rather, our services should support and reflect our claim to be a distinctive religious institution. I generally think our services probably should be focused on an aspect of our Seven UU Principals and/or on issues commonly dealt with by theology in a way compatible with those Principles. What is theology? That subject is frequently divided into five levels of inquiry: Who am I? Where did I come from? How do I know what I know? What is my purpose? What is the meaning of my death? The fields of study corresponding to each of these five questions, are in the same order: Ontology, cosmology or anthropology, epistemology, soteriology, and eschatology. Our UU principles are listed on the reverse of your orders of service. Under those principles clearly an appropriate subject, is a call to social action. We claim to derive our faith at

least in part from our Judeo-Christian heritage and the prophets from that heritage repeatedly proclaimed justice for society's most vulnerable members as true worship, a testimony of one's love for God and neighbor.

ON INSPIRATIONAL: I end with what is most difficult; trying to speak to my second criteria for successful worship: That it be inspirational. This gets us into the "spiritual". It would be a fools errand for me to try to nail down for you what that includes. We UU's tend to want to reify every idea, to make a thing out of it which we can measure or put a meter on, and distrust if we can't. Yet much of spirituality is relational like love or justice; it's not material or quantifiable. Paul Tillich, described the spiritual world as "The Eternal Now: Moments that are more than the finite moment of the present." Such moments can have great power and energy. Consider the experience of sunrise on a clear mountain morning, or your holding your own child for the first time. My main point is that the only way we can linguistically get to the spiritual dimension is by metaphor, symbol, analogy, poetry, and sometimes by music. I think most all the traditional words of reverence are symbolic or metaphorical, words like God, grace, redemption, salvation, and, yes, worship.

Everyone in this room barring any unknown, utter couch potatoes, knows when something is inspirational and when it isn't. To return to where I started in this talk, something is usually inspirational when it calls us to values outside of and greater than ourselves. It helps too if we are offered hope and not just guilt, and if the speaker is able to put words together in a somewhat poetic manner.

I want to close with an example of something I call inspirational, a poem by Jacob Trapp about the subject of Worship: (No. 441 in Hymnal).