

Our Six Sources: Mystery and Wonder

The Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Call to Worship

words of 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 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 loneliness seeking communion;
it is a thirsty land crying out for rain.

Worship is the 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.

*Let us, then, in this hour that we make sacred in our coming together,
worship.*

Reading

“Mormon Missionaries Pay Me a Visit” by Ken Hada

I'm sitting on my lawn
enjoying a nice blunt cigar
watching children ride scooters
up and down the street
twilight gently falling,
swallows circling,
Mississippi Kites high overhead,
tree frog, sounds of sweet shadows

Then I see them in the corner of my eye,
two bikes slow
they can not pass a lost soul –
I'm too conspicuous –
I don't want this feeling, I want them
to pass me by

Good evening sir they say
I'm Elder Hansen says the first
I'm Elder Olson the second chokes
and then they wait
but all I can think to say:
You're kind of young to be elders, aren't you?
They launch into their sales pitch
about Restoration and Heavenly Father
while I recoil in smoke, then interrupt
If I convert do I have to give up this cigar?
They are not sure
but soon get back on track
like a loose wheel wobbling
until they finally bid me good evening.
I watch them roll away
and wonder
what gives them the audacity to interrupt me
while I am at worship

"Mormon Missionaries Pay Me a Visit" by Ken Hada from *Spare Parts*.

Reading

“Among the Multitudes” by Wislawa Szymborska

I am who I am.
A coincidence no less unthinkable
than any other.

I could have different
ancestors, after all.
I could have fluttered
from another nest
or crawled bescaled
from under another tree.

Nature's wardrobe
holds a fair
supply of costumes:
Spider, seagull, field mouse.
each fits perfectly right off
and is dutifully worn
into shreds.

I didn't get a choice either,
but I can't complain.
I could have been someone
much less separate.
Someone from an anthill, shoal, or buzzing swarm,
an inch of landscape tousled by the wind.

Someone much less fortunate,
bred for my fur
or Christmas dinner,
something swimming under a square of glass.

A tree rooted to the ground
as the fire draws near.

A grass blade trampled by a stampede
of incomprehensible events.

A shady type whose darkness
dazzled some.

What if I'd prompted only fear,
loathing,
or pity?

If I'd been born
in the wrong tribe
with all roads closed before me?

Fate has been kind
to me thus far.

I might never have been given
the memory of happy moments.

My yen for comparison
might have been taken away.

I might have been myself minus amazement,
that is,
someone completely different.

From *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and
Clare Cavanagh.

Sermon: “Wonder and Awe”

There is an old, but telling joke about a Unitarian, at the end of life,
being given a choice between going to heaven
or going to a group discussion about heaven.

And, as you surely guessed, the Unitarian opts for the conversation.

Preaching about worship feels a bit like opting for the conversation.

Yet there are times when we need to pull back a bit
from what we do in any part of our lives
and examine what we're up to—
to hold some aspect of ourselves to the light,

to look at where it needs polishing,
and even gauge whether we're due for some changes.

So it is with our shared practice of worship.

We speak of Unitarian Universalism as a Living Tradition for a reason.

We have long-celebrated ours as a tradition that evolves,
that keeps up with the times, that is forever growing toward the future.

This afternoon we will engage in a congregational conversation
about the role of worship in our community.

We'll examine the enduring place worship holds in our hearts
and in the life of our congregation,
even as we speak of what more we might long for
and what future generations will and are asking of us.

It may not be the easiest of conversations to have,
and that's because so very much is at stake.

I don't know anyone who's ambivalent about worship.
Whether we name it or not, worship deals in deep emotions.

At its very best, worship gets at the core of who we are.

It points to the possibilities inherent in our being alive.
It nourishes our flagging spirits.
It challenges our failings and lays bare our pain.

It instills us with courage to heal what is broken—
within us, between us, and in the world around us.

And, it calls us to a renewal of the promise—the sacred covenant—
we hold with life itself.

James Luther Adams said that religion
is where the intimate and the ultimate meet—where they intersect.

And, I believe that is no more true than in these precious moments
we create together week after week when we gather for worship.

The word “worship” derives from the word “worth.”

Worship is our central practice, our longest tradition, our most blessed habit of coming together to weigh what is of greatest worth in our lives— what is worthy of our highest reverence and our deepest commitment.

Worship is an invitation to behold, at once,
the innermost matters of the heart
alongside the ultimate questions of our existence.

And, so worship, when truly felt,
holds the power to transform us like little else.

It’s no surprise, then, that such worshipful moments, when they arrive,
possess an intensity all their own.

But, if we’re honest, they can be few and far between.
And, that’s maybe not such a bad thing.

There’s only so much transformation any one of us can take, right?

That’s why I’ll gladly be the first to say
that such powerful moments are not necessarily to be found here,
or maybe anywhere, by everyone every week.

Any given service works better for some than others.
And, there are weeks when it’s just not your Sunday,
or for that matter, mine.

But there is a deeper truth here.

Most everything I’ve learned about spiritual discipline has taught me
that between the wildly transcendent moments
are to be found long stretches of the ordinary.

Or, as Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield puts it:
“after the ecstasy, [comes] the laundry.”¹

¹ Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*.

In his book by that title, he says that:

For almost everyone who practices, cycles of awakening and openness are followed by periods of fear and contraction.

Times of profound peace and newfound love are often overtaken by periods of loss, by closing up, fear, or the discovery of betrayal, only to be followed again by equanimity or joy.

In mysterious ways the heart reveals itself to be like a flower that opens and closes. . . .

The only surprising thing[, he writes,] is how unexpected this truth can be. It is as if deep down we all hope that some experience, some great realization, enough years of dedicated practice, might finally lift us beyond the touch of life, beyond the mundane struggles of the world.

We cling to some hope that in spiritual life we can rise above the wounds of our human pain, never to have to suffer them again.

We expect some experience to last.
But permanence is not true freedom. . .

Every wise voyager learns that we cannot hold on to the last port of call, no matter how beautiful.

And, so it is with the transcendent moments of worship.
Not every service can be life-changing for everyone.

Yet, I suspect that every one of us,
when we pull ourselves from bed and make our way here,
arrives with some stirring of hope, some silent prayer,
that there might just be something we'll find here,
some word of wisdom, some point of connection, some internal insight
that will help us to bend ourselves ever more in the direction of our dreams
and our lives' highest calling.

That can be a tall and tender order.
And, it means we each enter the doors of this place just a bit vulnerable—
wondering if we'll get our needs met,

if the sermon or the silence will speak to us,
if anyone will reach out beyond the veneer of city life
to see and know and genuinely cherish who we are.

The challenge is for us all to remain open to but not attached to the
possibility—to trust without expectation.

Now, I'm not saying you should brace yourself for weekly disappointment,
but to come with an openness that maybe there's more to be had here
than just a spiritual high.

My prayer, each week, is that the worship team and I will set the optimum
conditions for true moments of worship to happen.

That hymnals and candles have been set out.
The chalice filled with oil.
Words prepared and music polished.

But, the truth is that worship is something more,
because it ultimately springs from what we create in our coming together—
in the commitment we bring, the attitude we arrive with,
and our willingness to make meaningful worship
for ourselves and for each other.

It is a powerful thing when this room is overflowing with our shared life—
when our heartfelt joys and sorrows are named,
when we laugh at a wonderful and raucous story,
or weep for wonder at the bittersweet beauty of this life.

This room comes alive with love
when we dedicate our children, and when we grieve our dead.

When the choirs' voices soar above our own
and our chalice is ablaze with our unspoken prayers.

When we sing "Spirit of Life" as a prayer of deep affirmation,
and maybe especially when we sing with great vigour
the words of hymns we might not necessarily agree with—
because we know that someone, somewhere in this room does.

The spiritual path of being a Unitarian Universalist requires coming to regard and appreciate the perspectives of other people.

This is an important thing to remember anytime we engage in dialogue about our wants and needs.

Unitarian Universalist surveys are notorious for yielding some baffling results.

Several years ago, I took part in analyzing the results of survey about music in a congregation I served.

I will always remember the person who described herself as an atheist and who in very colourful language demanded we steer clear of any God language in worship.

What was striking, though, was a later question that asked people to indicate their favourite pieces of music.

The one that stuck out for me on this woman's questionnaire was the "Te Deum," which is about as godly as it gets.

Sometimes we hold such contradictions comfortably within ourselves.

Harder, though, is appreciating the wide range of opinions that come with a community such as ours.

There are people among us who wish my sermons were longer and some who probably feel they never seem to end.

There are folks who light a candle every week, and others who question why we practise this ritual at all.

There are some who long for more energetic songs and others who wish the "happy, clappy" music would go away.

Those who would like more drumming and dancing, and those who would be driven mad, if there were.

There are those who feel applause is an expression of deep gratitude after the choir sings something beautiful, and others who feel applause shatters the spirit of worship like nothing else.

Now, before moving on to the obvious summation that we are a people of many different preferences, I feel I should say a bit more about applause, if only because so many people have raised the issue with me.

There are times when I think applause is called for in worship. If the energy of what's just been shared is so high and joyful, sometimes an energetic show of gratitude is the only thing to do.

And, then there are times when something is so beautiful, so sublime that the only fitting response is to frame it with silence and awe.

And, for those times when we're not sure but just can't help ourselves, might I simply suggest a warm rustling of hands, like so?

As this and most every element of our service makes clear, we are a congregation of varied values when it comes to worship.

And the only thing that really seems to work is variety.

That's why some Sundays you'll hear jazz or hip-hop or Mozart, and why on others you'll hear Brahms or, like today, music from The Muppets.

Such variety points up the constant tension in our worship—
between the need for stability and flexibility,
between tradition and innovation,
between the familiar and the foreign.

My hope is that it can always be a creative tension.

Creative worship works best when there's something to build on, something to depend on.

Though we may think we're not particularly inclined toward ritual, it is the repetition of some aspects of our services which make it possible to push the edges elsewhere.

It is the reliable parts of our worship—
like lighting candles and sharing silence—
that can be a lifeline when we might feel our lives are falling apart and need something certain and sure to rely on.

Maybe most important of all,
having a foundation to build on
helps us to establish the shared sense of trust we need to change and grow.

I don't know what worship will look like in this congregation a generation from now.

If our history is any guide, it will be different.

There was a time, of course, in our tradition, when sermons lasted more than an hour and it was forbidden to sing anything other than psalms. . .

While the outward forms may change,
I am confident that the enduring thread will be
our human need to come together
to share in the mystery and wonders of this life.

To celebrate life's joys and suffer its sorrows with the totality of our being—
and, ultimately, with each other.

May it be ever so. Amen.

Closing Words

In our going forth, let us commit ourselves to this great task:
to engage one another and the wisdom of the world
to renew our faith with the dawning of each day
that it might speak with power to the times in which we live.