

TOWSON UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

January 31, 2010

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

Worship Is....

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church. We are the church of the open minds, the loving hearts, and the helping hands. And whether you entered on little feet, or walked in briskly, or ambled or rolled in, you are welcome here. And whether you enter bearing sorrows or joys or both we are glad you chose this congregation as your place of worship today.

You are invited to form two lines down the center aisle to come forward to light a candle of care or concern at one of our two candle lighting stations before returning up a side aisle. Let this be a house of peace as we join in singing Hymn #1054.

PRELUDE

Let This Be a House of Peace

OPENING WORDS

Our opening words are from *Teaching A Stone To Talk* by Annie Dillard. Specifically, they are from her chapter entitled *An Expedition to the Pole*. Annie Dillard wrote:

Why do we people in worship seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C. Presumably someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting weather reports radioed in from shore. No one would dream of asking the tourists to do these things.

Except Unitarian Universalists.

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and men's sport's visors to worship. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our chairs. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense; or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. If we ever actually unleashed the powers we claim to call on, we'd need them. Or if we ever actually confronted the reality of life and death, we'd need them.

Annie Dillard on what worship is.

CHALICE LIGHTING

(read responsively)

adapted from *For The Traveler* by John O'Donohue

Every time you leave home,
Another road takes you
Into a world you were never in.

WHEN YOU TRAVEL A NEW SILENCE
GOES WITH YOU,
AND IF YOU LISTEN, YOU WILL HEAR
WHAT YOUR HEART WOULD LOVE TO SAY.

A journey can become a sacred thing:

MAKE SURE, BEFORE YOU GO,
TO TAKE THE TIME TO BLESS YOUR GOING FORTH,

To free your heart of ballast So that the compass of your soul
Might direct you toward the territories of spirit
Where you will discover more of your hidden life,
And the urgencies that deserve to claim you.

MAY YOU TRAVEL IN AN AWAKENED WAY,
GATHERED WISELY INTO YOUR INNER GROUND;
THAT YOU MAY NOT WASTE THE INVITATIONS
WHICH WAIT ALONG THE WAY TO TRANSFORM YOU.

May you travel safely, arrive refreshed,
And live your time away to its fullest:

RETURN HOME MORE ENRICHED AND FREE,
HAVING CREATED A CRYSTAL OF INSIGHT
YOU COULD NOT HAVE KNOWN YOU NEEDED
TO ILLUMINATE YOUR WAY.

We light our chalice to illuminate our way.

HYMN #1010

We Give Thanks

Giving thanks illuminates our lives. Let us join in singing Hymn #1010. We'll sing this song through twice, in the style of call and response. The Choir will lead us. As we begin the song for the second time, students and teachers are invited to come forward to gather with their Sunday School classes. Visitors with children are invited to come forward, too, to find their children's class and meet their teachers.

READING

In their recent book on *Worship That Works*, my two colleagues, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, ask why we why we Unitarian Universalists gather on Sunday mornings. They write:

One day when we were standing on a street corner waiting for a traffic light to change, an elderly woman began a casual, pleasant conversation with us. Then she handed us a brochure about her church, the “foursquare gospel” something or other. She had been so non-threatening and pleasant that we took the brochure. Thanking her for the brochure, we were impressed with her enthusiasm, but thought she had no clue who she was talking to... two UU ministers who lead services almost every Sunday.

She whispered to us, like it was a great secret, ... ”It’s the worship. You go to worship at my church and you come out feeling like a changed person.” She didn’t say anything about “who” was being worshipped at her church, although we jumped to the conclusion that our salvation was her intent. But she didn’t talk about that. What she offered us was an opportunity to experience a vibrant energy that she assumed we were as hungry for as anyone else.

New folks come here looking for that kind of energy, to be in the presence of that which will make a difference in their lives... I wonder if we don’t ALL hope for that! Are we really concerned about who we worship? Or do we hope: This will be the place where we can experience a vibrant energy that will change our lives?

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Brethren, We Have Met to Worship
from *The Columbian Harmony*, 1825

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with an adaptation of David Whyte’s poem, *The Faces at Braga*, which will be followed by a time of meditation and silence.

*In monastery darkness by the light of one flashlight the old shrine room waits in silence
We light the butter lamps and bow, eyes blinking in the pungent smoke, look up without a
word, see faces in meditation, a hundred faces carved above, eye lines wrinkled in the hand
held light.*

*Such love in solid wood! Taken from the hillsides and carved in silence they have the vibrant
stillness of those who made them. Carved in devotion their eyes have softened through age
and their mouths curve through delight of the carver’s hand.*

*If only our own faces would allow the invisible carver's hand to bring the deep grain of love to
the surface. If only we knew as the carver knew, how the flaws in the wood led his searching
chisel to the very core, we would smile, too and not need faces immobilized by fear and the
weight of things undone.*

The lines in our faces would be the trace lines of rivers feeding the sea where voices meet, praising the features of the mountain and the cloud and the sky. Our faces would fall away until we, growing younger toward death every day, would gather all our flaws in celebration to merge with them perfectly, impossibly, wedded to our essence, full of silence from the carver's hands.

It is through the imperfect designs of this world that perfection is glimpsed, it is through the company of finite persons that the infinite mercies of love and hope come to us.

Let us call to mind those who need our strength and support: those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit, those weary of the world or battered by it. Let us silently name them now.

Let us call to mind those who have given us strength in times past, and those who continue to support us by their love and caring. Let us silently name them now.

We know the world awaits before us full of problems and yet it is also full of new possibilities for greater life. We know that we need one another and that we must keep faith with one another if we are to keep faith with the world. In moments of quiet, let us open ourselves to the depths.

May we find the spirit of life within us – surging and glowing, guiding and sustaining so that the strength we need and the compassion the world needs come to us and shine like a beacon in the night. Amen.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Wunderbarer Konig from Alpha und Omega, 1680

READING

Our second reading is from Dan Wakefield's spiritual autobiography, *Returning*, in which he describes his journey for spiritual understanding which led him to King's Chapel, in Boston, a Unitarian congregation.

As the usual trials of life continued, I went to King's Chapel not only for inspiration but for solace, a respite from the all too common afflictions of the human condition, from broken furnaces to broken hearts, from bad dreams to flu and taxes. I began to appreciate what was meant by the Church as "sanctuary." The word itself took on new resonance for me; when I later heard of the "Sanctuary" movement of churches offering shelter to Central American political refugees, I thought of the kind of private refuge that fortunate citizens like myself find in church from the daily assaults of pressures and worries, the psychic guerrilla warfare of everyday life.

I joined the church in May of 1982; I wanted the immediate sense of safety and refuge implied in belonging, being a member – perhaps like getting a passport and fleeing to a powerful embassy in the midst of some chaotic revolution.

Going to church, even belonging to it, did not solve life's problems – but it gave me a sense of living in a larger context, of being part of something greater than what I could see through the tunnel vision of my personal concerns.

The age-old religious rituals marking the turning of the year deepened and gave a fuller meaning to the cycle of the seasons and my own relation to them. The year was not only divided now into winter, spring, summer, and fall but was marked by the expectation of Advent, leading up to the fulfillment of Christmas, followed by Lent, the solemn prelude to the coming of the dark anguish of Good Friday that is transformed in the glory of Easter. Birth and death and resurrection, beginnings and endings and renewals, were observed and celebrated in ceremonies whose experience made me feel I belonged to a larger order of things, a universal sequence of life and death and rebirth. I began to look at my life from a different angle when I returned to church.

The minister offered a course in “religious autobiography.” One evening each of us went off alone and drew a “road map” of his or her life, showing the personal mountains climbed and deserts crossed, the pits into which we fell and the forests through which we passed. Then we paired off and exchanged “guided tours” of the mazes, detours, and unexpected routes that brought us to where we were that moment – in the parish house of King’s Chapel, sharing our religious pilgrimages with others engaged in the same quest.

Dan Wakefield on returning to church.

OFFERTORY

The mission of this congregation is to be a beacon of free-thinking religion fostering spiritual and intellectual growth for all ages while promoting an active commitment to the wider world. With this in mind, our morning offering will be given and received in grateful appreciation for our shared hopes and values. 15% of undedicated gifts will be returned to the community to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to heal the addicted, to promote a love of literacy, and to advocate on issues of moral importance.

SERMON

Worship Is...

A recent conversation with a TUUC member ended with this exchange:

TUUC Member: See you in church on Sunday.

ME: Yes! Hope to see you in worship!

Member: We don’t call it a worship service, do we?

ME: We don’t? Why not?

Member: Well what are we worshipping? Not a particular deity. Some of us don’t think there is a deity. So how can it be worship?

ME: Worship, at its root, is from the Old English, *weorscippen*, which literally means “worth-ship.” So worship means to assign worth to something, to consider those things of ultimate worth. We do THAT at TUUC.

Member: Oh, OK. See you in church on Sunday.

The recent TUUC survey revealed that this member is not alone in confusion over the worship of a free religious congregation. According to the survey, what 64.4% of us value most, is “a community with shared values.” But what ARE those shared values? “What makes us different from a social club, a hospital wing, a political action center, or an environmental group?” What makes us a Unitarian Universalist congregation?

I believe the answer is: we gather to worship. That's our mission: To be a beacon of free-thinking religion. So what is worship for a free-thinking congregation?

According to my colleague, The Reverend Alice Blair Wesley, "The worship...of a free congregation is best understood as the deliberate return of a faithful and loyal community of people who come together again and again to be receptive to all that is worthy of renewed love. We come to worship to be reminded of, stirred up to recall, and brought to feel again the charm of all that we love and cherish most."

So...what do we love and cherish most when it comes to worship? One person writes, "I enjoy the services with a spiritual, moral, or philosophical theme." Another writes, "There is too much 'spiritual' language, insufficient 'food for thought,' intelligence, new perspectives on issues." One person writes, "I prefer introspective, 'better selves' sermons vs. political ones." Another writes, "Too many 'feel good' type services. Would prefer more intellectual, hard-hitting sermons and more controversial subject matter."

So I would like you to know how I have always gone about choosing themes for worship. I think about the three functions of ministry: the priestly, the pastoral, and the prophetic. The priestly function is to ask "big" questions like our place in the cosmos, what it means to live a meaningful life, and from whence cometh our hope?

The pastoral function is to ask how we confront the simple truth that life is hard. We experience necessary and unnecessary losses. The good that we would, we do not, but the harm which we would not, that we do. Human relationships are complex. Last week, we heard personal stories of family dynamics that moved us to both laugh and cry in recognition of their universality.

Finally, the prophetic function of ministry is to see and name right and wrong, oppression and unfairness, and join with others committed to bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice.

Since I'm in the pulpit three times a month, I choose themes corresponding to the priestly, pastoral, and prophetic functions of ministry. And, more often than not, a conversation with one of you or a book or article loaned by one of you is on my mind when I plan a month of Sundays. I'm open to hearing what you have found to be most worthy of your faithful love.

The survey revealed that one thing worthy of our faithful love hearing about pastoral concerns. Several people lamented that we no longer include spoken cares and concerns in worship. Now, we light candles as a multigenerational community to symbolize the joys and sorrows we bring to our meeting, and to give our children a sense of ritual, a communal act they can count on, week after week. As Dan Wakefield observed, such rituals "assure us that we belong to a larger order of things, a universal sequence of life and death and rebirth.

But so, too, does learning from someone that they are going through a difficult time – journeying with them through time and watching how they grow into a better place. This is why the sharing of spoken joys and sorrows is included at the beginning of each Chalice Circle session.

When it comes to worship, I have struggled with how to address pastoral concerns without violating HIPPA laws. Some people do not want their health challenges, or divorces, or job loss broadcast from the pulpit. And their privacy needs to be respected. Others, want and need our support. For

example, many of us saw the Schaeffer family, who flew in from Kansas for our 50th anniversary three weeks ago. Skylar, who grew up in our Sunday School, has since lost the use of her legs and has been moved to a hospital in Kansas City for further testing. Her 20th birthday is this Wednesday. She will be in the hospital. David has requested that those of us who know Skylar, please send her cards. Her address is in the church office.

I learned that the Unitarian Universalist Church of Norfolk, Virginia, has a book called, "The Tree Of Life." Members are invited, as they enter worship, to write in the book, a personal care or concern. Twice a month, these entries are shared from the pulpit by the minister, during the prayer/meditation. When Mona Scott, our Church Administrator, heard this, she said "We used to have such a book." When we looked at it, the last entry was from 2005! Mona went right out and got a brand new blue notebook which will be under the bells in the foyer. Significant joys or sorrows are of concern to us all. Such a book offers us the opportunity to learn of them in both worship services. I hope you will add yours to our "TUUC Tree of Life" in the weeks to come.

One common community concern about worship reflected in the TUUC survey was the choice of hymns. One person wrote, "I wish we could sing with joy and vigor." Another wrote, "Please, less singing by the congregation." A third wrote, "What happened to the hymn-of-the-month? I liked learning the hymns!" Rest assured that I am committed to working with Joe to find singable hymns that correspond to the theme of worship!

For I want us all to have the experience Alice Blair Wesley describes. She writes,

More readily than at any other time, when we sing a familiar hymn, the poetry of the text and the blend of our voices join to make me freshly aware of blessings, so that I inwardly exclaim, "Thanks be, O God!"

Alice goes on to observe,

That's not an explanation, but an exclamation. Neither concepts nor denials of God strike me as any sort of explanation of the strange and wonderful ways of love. What I care about is how often love and gratitude bring us to exclaim, "Thanks be!"

Alice concludes,

For when I am full of love and gratitude, how many picayune concerns, how much pettiness, how much useless worry just slides to the periphery, where it belongs. When my attention is focused on what I love — for which I am grateful — I begin to feel I am more truly myself, the person I was meant to be.

Our music ministry is greatly appreciated for moving, lifting, bringing us to that which is most worthy of our faithful love. So, too, is a minute of silence. One person wrote that they wished we could sit together in silence longer. I remember a Washington Post article in which a woman shared that the minute of silence, in weekly worship, was the only time of silence she could count on in her week. Silence leads us to contemplation. And contemplation leads us to conscience. And conscience leads us to becoming the people we long to be.

So it's perhaps no surprise that the greatest number of comments on the TUUC survey were around the question To applaud? Or not to applaud? One person wrote, "I don't get a feeling of dignity and mystery during the 'service' and I miss that. Applause to me is totally disruptive..."

Another wrote, "I believe that if the spirit moves one to show appreciation for a performance, what someone has offered in that way, it is perfectly acceptable." And other wrote, "I'm on the fence about applause."

For me, the question is not about applause. It's about what worship is... Is worship entertainment? A colleague writes, "Back in my pre-UU days, it was explained to me this way: People mistakenly think of worship as performance: God as director, minister, worship leaders, Music Director, musicians, and vocalists as performers, and the congregation as audience. Worship is really: minister and worship leaders as director, congregation as performers, and God as audience."

If you think back to the most meaningful worship experiences you've had, they may or may not involve God language. But were you a spectator or a participant? Were you a tourist on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Or were you lead to an understanding of your own spiritual journey – the personal mountains climbed and deserts crossed, the pits into which you fell and the forests through which you passed. Were you in a movie theater watching Avatar or on a trip to Disneyland? Or was the vibrant energy that changed your life related to people to whom you belonged, moving through time together, seeking and finding and acting on what is most worthy of their faithful love?

I ask this tongue in cheek. I learned, from the Berry Lecture, two summers ago, that theme park designers know that people come for more than "just fun." They all know that people are seeking "heart" and "meaningfulness." Theme parks provide "heart and meaningfulness" through all kinds of special effects.

As my colleague, Christine Robinson went on to write,

My Special Effects Budget is otherwise known as "Flowers and Candles." I can't produce 2 g's in my sanctuary by any means. There are no seatbelts in my seats and no need of them; because the biggest physical thrills I can offer are singing, laughter, and the sound of pure silence.

Christine went on to advise us:

People come to church to quench a thirst, find meaningfulness, to have an authentic experience, or in a more traditional religious language, to connect with mystery, to see themselves, sub species eterni tatis, to deepen their souls. We ministers then would be the Imagineers of "Soul", Sorcerer's Apprentices in the art of quenching thirst, filling voids, opening the doors of meaning.

I've thought a lot about what Christine said over the past two years. I was asked to give a theme talk, in July, at the Southern Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute about why I became a UU minister. And I chose to focus on three Unitarian Universalist children's worship services I remembered from my youth. With only candles and "big questions" and music and lots of art supplies I'd discovered in worship my place in the cosmos, what it means to be human, and to whom I belong. I never saw the faces at Braga. Our sanctuary had windows, not wood carvings. I never heard about an invisible carver's hand. What brought the deep grain of love to the surface for me was the deliberate return of a faithful and loyal community of people coming together again and again to be receptive to all that is worthy of renewed love, to be brought to feel again the charm of all that we love and cherish most...in worship.

And it was when I returned to worship with this community as a college student, as a seminary student, as a Minister, that I saw these faces again. And it was when I returned to that sanctuary

when those worship leaders, teachers, and mentors died, to honor their lives, that I understood how “the lines in our faces are the trace lines of rivers feeding the sea where voices meet, praising the features of the mountain and the cloud and the sky.”

I was formed by THEIR hands and hearts through worship week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade. I was reminded of these encounters with these Imagineers of the soul while engaging in my own spiritual practice of starting the day with a poem sent by a listserve to nurture the spirit.

Recently, I received *Encounter* by Czeslaw Milosz. He wrote:

*We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.
And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.*

*That was long ago.
Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.*

*O my love, where are they, where are they going?
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.*

What I have learned, over the past decade of worship with you, is that the real questions are not more or less spiritual themes, more or less hymn singing, or more or less applause. The real question is whether or not we gather to worship expecting to encounter such wonder – to see ourselves and others as precious and unrepeatable; to see the world and this life, even when hard, as the gift that it is; and to ask ourselves how we are becoming the people we have always longed to be – as individuals and as a religious community.

For me, worship IS “lifting up that which is worthy of our devoted love so that we can see it in our imagination, feel the charm of its appeal, recognize what it asks of us, and resolve faithfully to act accordingly.”

In affirmation of what is most worthy of our faithful love, let us join in singing Hymn # 1008 – a former hymn of the month!

HYMN #1008

When Our Heart Is In A Holy Place

CLOSING WORDS

Worship need not cease. It can echo in our lives, in our words, in our deeds, in our moods, in our dreams. Carry worship with you wherever you may go. Be a blessing in your going out and your coming in.

GO NOW IN PEACE
