

The Meaning of Worship

A great Rabbi spent years in solitude meditating on the mystery of the divine in all things. When he finally returned to live among men and women his eyes shone with the beauty of what he discovered. Many seekers came to him to ask for his truth, yet he was always reluctant to answer them, to put it into words. Pressed for years he finally relented and with eloquent words gave a feeble approximation of what he had discovered.

The seekers took those words with them everywhere. They spoke them, wrote them, created sacred texts about them, and religious societies were formed of those who repeated them, until no one remembered that the words were really about an experience. As his words spread, the rabbi became disheartened. "I had hoped to help but perhaps I should not have spoken at all."ⁱ

Such is the fate of most religions in human hands. Bob Dylan in his song *Tears of Rage* sang, "We pointed you the way to go and scratched your name in the sand, but most of you thought it was nothing more than a place for you to stand. Tears of Rage, tears of grief..."

I believe that the great religious leaders of humankind pointed us the way to go. I believe they never meant for their words to become holy. They knew their words, like those of the rabbi in the story, were but approximations of what they had discovered.

Their words pointed to their experience of the holy. But instead of continuing the journey they had begun, we stopped and made a shrine out of their description of the journey.

Religion at its best is our experience of the holy, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the miraculous in the mundane, the infinite in the finite. It can't be captured. It can't be contained.

To see the world in a grain of sand is a religious experience.

I want to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary. I want to see the world in a grain of sand.

Most of the time we only look at the world as something to be acted upon. It's almost as if we put on blinders, the type one sees sometimes on a horse pulling a carriage in a city street, so it won't be distracted or frightened by the traffic. So, too, do we restrict the scope of our vision.

Most of the time this is appropriate. But not all of the time. That is why it is so important for us to set aside time for worship. We need to make the time to take off our shoes. We need to take off the blinders. We need to open our eyes on the chance that we might indeed see infinity in the palm of our hand.

This is the true basis of all religions. Fredrich Schleiermacher, the great 19th century theologian of the Romantic movement, wrote that religion comes from those moments when it feels as if one's "whole soul is dissolved in the immediate feeling of the Infinite and Eternal."

Most of the time the world is an object that we act upon. We seek to bend it to our will and purpose. But sometimes, when we allow ourselves to recognize it, we recognize that the world acts upon us far more than we act upon it. We emerged from the universe, the universe didn't emerge from us.

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It is to feel as if life has been swept into being by a great wave of becoming which we but dimly understand. It is to recognize that we are borne along in accordance with its nature, its laws.

Religion grows out of this intuition.

Schleiermacher wrote “The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one.”

The one that he refers to doesn't come from me. It's beyond my control or understanding, but, nonetheless, I've learned that I can count on it, just like I count on the sun to rise and the grass to grow and love to come.

To feel that all that moves us in feeling is one, is to sense that there is an inner unity to the web of life in which we have our being. It is to sense that I am more the moved than the mover.

This is not to deny the great human achievements based on science and reason. This notion of religion has no quarrel with reason or science or knowledge. It is not anti-intellectual or supernatural. It finds the miraculous, not in the supernatural, but in the natural. What could be more wondrous than the emergence of life and its evolution? What could be more awe inspiring than black holes and supernova and the infinities of space and time?

In the age of the Enlightenment, that great flowering of human reason, freedom, and scientific achievement, some, particularly the French philosophes such as Voltaire, maintained that religion could be distilled down to its essential elements—leaving behind what they saw as the unnecessary artifacts of any particular religion. But religion can't be reduced to a formula, no matter how carefully constituted. Religion isn't something that can be applied. It isn't something to be used in order to do something.

Religion is also more than morality. Morality is something we do, actions we decide to take. Religious experience, by contrast, is something that happens to us.

But, some would reduce religion to morality, to good works alone as did Thomas Paine when he wrote, “...my religion is to do good to humankind.”

I believe that doing good to others is a necessary part of religion. A faith that concerns itself only with spiritual concerns is at best a partial faith. But a faith that concerns itself only with good works is also a partial faith. A complete faith needs both.

The Romantic movement arose in reaction to the excesses of the Enlightenment. A generation later, in this country, a similar dynamic occurred when Emerson railed against the “corpse-cold” of Unitarianism of his day.

Schleiermacher's theology is acknowledged as the most forceful statement of the Romantic and liberal understanding of the Christian religion. We are still living in a later phase of the Romantic movement that Schleiermacher initiated. The Transcendentalism we associate with Emerson is but the American expression of the Romantic movement that began in Europe.

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A useful metaphor is to imagine religion as having two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical. In this metaphor the component of good works, social action and justice, would be the horizontal dimension, a reaching out, so to speak, to others. On the other hand, the spiritual component, the experience of the holy, could be imagined to be the vertical dimension, the dimension of depth. It is what grounds us. To fully express religion requires both dimensions. Worship is the experience of depth, the vertical dimension of being alive. It is the song of the soul. The Rev. A. Powell Davies wrote, "Life is just a chance to grow a soul."

It is good that we are, as the children recite every Sunday during the family service, the church of the helping hand.. I rejoice at all the good works we accomplish, collectively and individually. I just heard about a bold new initiative by Bill Schulz, the current Executive Director of Amnesty International and former president of the UUA. He has managed to get the Sierra Club and Amnesty International to work together to protect environmental activists from persecution and murder. The Jefferson Freedom Café raises thousands of dollars for community service organization. Eastside Ministries helps hundreds of local families and individuals with food, clothing, and other forms of assistance. Allied Communities of Tarrant is striving to affect the outcome of state legislation in Austin in the name of justice and compassion.

Little by little, people of good faith are transforming the world with random acts of kindness. We are reforming and improving our institutions: our schools, our workplaces, and our government. But if we are to continue the work of transforming the world, we must set aside a time and a place where we may be transformed.

Gathering together in common worship provides us with that opportunity for transformation. During our worship we raise important issues, from individual concerns about relationships and self-help to communal concerns about whether we should as a nation engage in war or how we as a community should respond to discrimination and prejudice. By raising these issues, we hope to create a dialogue that will continue after the service and beyond these walls.

Worship is derived from the old English work, weorthscipe or worthship, meaning to hold in view that which is of worth. But our circle of worth is wider than most faiths. We find the holy everywhere: not just in scriptures or in sanctuaries but in the ordinary details of daily life: the beauty of a sunset, the holiness of a child's smile, and scriptures from a wide range of traditions. We find it in poetry and prose. We find it in music and laughter. We find it when we gather to mark the end of life and the beginning of life.

When I explain what Unitarian Universalism is I delight in noting that every Sunday morning in our church, there are atheists and Christians, pagans and Buddhists, worshipping peaceably side by side. This often intrigues people but it just as often confuses them. How can you worship, they ask, without a common creed? What can you worship, with such a wide range of beliefs?

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I tell them we worship life itself, in all its mystery and yearning. We worship birth and death and all the stages of growth and decline in between. We celebrate the intricate web of life in all its dimensions. We celebrate the power of reason and tolerance to dispel the clouds of superstition, fear, and loathing. We celebrate our human capacity to come together for the common good, to create families and schools and other institutions that help us make the world a kinder and gentler place. By gathering together in worship, each of us is reminded that we are not alone, but connected in mystery and miracle to the universe and to one another.

It is wonderful to be alive. Life is a gift and we are grateful. We gather together in worship to celebrate that gift, to build upon it and extend it for life is always reaching out ahead of itself, lured by the promise of what might be, of what could be. Worship helps us keep our eyes on that prize.

Worship keeps us connected. I know when I don't attend worship for a while, I begin to feel like I'm missing something. It isn't the sermon or the music or the prayer or any particular thing. I think I just miss gathering together with others to pay attention to that which is of worth. It comforts and assures me. It helps me remember that I don't have to do it all myself, that I don't have to do it alone, that I am not alone.

In my busy life, I relish my alone time. I always have things I could do on Sunday or even should do on Sunday. But I find that it always helps me if I take the time to worship on Sunday.

I can't do it alone. I can't worship by myself. I need to be with others. I need to be part of a community where people know me, where they can appreciate where I am today because they know where I was yesterday and the day before that.

So I implore you, come to church. Better yet, come to church and bring a friend with you. Come to church and raise your voice in concert with others in hymns of hope and praise. I don't care if you daydream through my sermon, or even fall asleep, so long as you don't snore. {pause}. All I care about is if you are here, helping us form that beloved community of memory and hope we call church. All I care about is that we gather together in worship.

May it be so.

ⁱ Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart. Edited by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield. Harper San Francisco. 1991 Page 255.