

What Is Worship and What Is Spirituality?

By: Lynn Steele June 14, 2009

Since I became a Unitarian Universalist I have had some questions about how terms are used by UUs in ways different from my liberal Christian background. In particular I have been intrigued by the use of the word worship. We have a worship service and a worship committee. But when I have been asked by friends how UU services are conducted I have always said that we do not worship anything. I could hear my maternal grandma Kear who raised me saying “now don’t be cute” which really meant “don’t be ugly”. But after this last year at First UU church I have to say that I WAS WRONG. To explain let me first share an official definition of worship.

Broad Definition: 1) Reverent honor and homage paid to God, or a sacred personage or to any object regarded as sacred 2) Formal or ceremonious rendering of such honor and homage 3) adoring reverence or regard. ...So worship can be used in a much more general way.

Next I turned to a sermon by Rev. Ricky. Rev. Ricky Hoyt was the pastor who was here for our celebration of becoming a Welcoming Congregation. And while he was here in October, he and I talked about some of my questions and I bought his book called *Good Thinking* which is a collection of his past sermons. The one that talked about worship is called “What We Worship”. He bases all of his sermons on a quote by Emerson; this one was based on our opening words today which I will repeat: “A person will worship something—have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts—but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

In this sermon, Rev Ricky first states what worship is not. This is based on what the later Old Testament Prophets in the bible say about worship, particularly what Micah and Amos preached. Rev Ricky quotes Amos as saying: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer your burnt offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs: I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” That last line is the one written on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, AL. Then Rev Ricky goes on to say: “It’s not ‘worship’ God wants from us. God wants not our dependence, but our independence, not our fawning submission, but our work, our skill, our justice. God needs us to be the tools by which God’s aims of justice, peace and love are actualized in the world. God wants concrete religious action focused on Earth and each other, not abstract religious action directed toward God or the imagined heavens.”

So what we usually associate with church worship of God is quite the opposite of what Amos thinks God wants us to do. And to say it even more strongly, it is not what the UU tradition would have us do either. So we should give up “worship” in the old sense? Well, remember what Emerson said in our opening words... “a person will worship something... make NO doubt about that”

What is it that we worship (public or private; even deceiving ourselves sometimes)? It could be good things like health, family, a lover, social justice, education, enlightenment. Or it could be potentially unhealthy objects like fame, power over others, money, pleasure, prestige, having the “correct” ideas, etc.

What we worship (in this broad sense) is what we will sacrifice most everything else to. It is put first and we hold it most dear. You may try to keep it a secret and even try not to acknowledge it to yourself, but it will come out over time because it will affect how you live your life.

So: the moral is “To thine own self be true” and if you do not like what you see, work to change it because there are two dangers in worshipping unhealthy things in an unhealthy manner:

#1 Losing ourselves to something that makes us less than the best we could be

#2 Putting our spiritual trust in something which cannot sustain us through a crisis

And Paul Tillich the great 20th Century theologian and philosopher sees the latter danger as idolatry.

This year, then, I came to understand that as a church, we at First UU do know what we worship and we do it in many ways, not just at Sunday service. It became clearer to me as we went through the Search for the Future process last fall. We have stated what we worship in our Vision and Mission statements and we live it out in our community contacts and commitments. Those statements are on the back of your bulletin and along with our principles make up a good list of our priorities and therefore what we worship here at First UU every week and every day.

But I was still left with another quandary I have tried to answer since being here at First UU. If to worship is to develop healthy priorities and devotions in life, then where is the spiritual drive to commit to this focus of energy, time and money? When Larry Wheeler who started our process of Search for the Future last fall was asked about reaching out to those families headed by persons in their 20s, 30s and 40s he said he said that they are less worried than non-boomers about culture wars and spirituality. That age group is less negative about spirituality and do not automatically connect it with conservative religion. So that made me want to be clearer about what the word “spiritual” means in liberal religion. This thought also is stated in the 3rd UU Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

So I was on a “toot” (again to use Grandma Kear’s word) about trying to make sense of what I see and experience as spiritual but does not fit well with either my Christian upbringing, or with my new commitment to UUism. So I asked around what we mean as UUs when we say “spirituality”. But fellow members here at First UU were not that helpful, not because they are lost for words, but many of them had the exact same question I did and no easy answer.

So again, I turned to Rev. Ricky’s sermons and found one called “Spiritual is More than Beautiful”. He bases this sermon on another quote from Emerson which we will repeat as closing words:

“Beauty, in the largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good.”

Rev. Ricky says that he felt that he had a full spiritual life “before being involved in a church”.

- a) He read books (for intellectual stimulation)
- b) He talked to friends in bull sessions about spiritual issues like miracles, channeling, reincarnation and the like
- c) And he had experiences of joy when at a concert or on nature walks.

And he admits that even today, some of those experiences can be more moving at the moment than a given Sunday service (even when he does the service).

In his view spirituality is more complex than these experiences he has outside of church.

Spirituality has three elements:

- a) That feeling of being connected to the universe and each other with love and compassion and have that stirring to act upon that love of life. (his words: (connection, care and call)
- b) Translating that feeling into meanings, values and purposes
- c) Describing the true nature of reality

An aesthetic experience of beauty can lead to the first stage, the spiritual feeling, but it does not take the next steps for a fully developed spirituality. That initial spiritual sense makes us aware that we are part of an interdependent web (our 7th Principle) and that where we live can be a caring place of sustenance and beauty. Also it calls us to help achieve universal humanist goals. This feeling, which Rev. Ricky calls the “feeling of connection, care and call” sums up the experience of mystics. But this feeling alone does not then clarify the true nature of reality or give us guidance to the abstract ideas of meaning, values and purpose. As an example, this is one of the reasons that temples, mosques and cathedrals were built and decorated in such a grand fashion. The buildings were meant to bring on that feeling and then set the stage for the congregants to move onto the next phases of spirituality as directed by the church service itself.

There is a danger of mistaking the spiritual feeling for all of what spirituality is. After that feeling we need to ask the questions and seek the answers of meaning, values and purpose and discern a description of reality. Rev. Ricky now realizes that his experiences at concerts and on nature walks combined with idle chats with friends and reading spiritual ideas did not result in a consistent world view. He finally found that focus and growth when he started attending a UU church. It was within a congregation and the activities, discussions and programs at a church that he finally developed a mature and fulfilling spiritual life as he understands it. That is what we are about here at Lubbock First UU Church. Spirituality as understood by UUs leads all of us to the 4th UU principle which is: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We are free-thinkers and trust the process that each of us can live our life based on our shared core values within our personal understanding of the true nature of reality which in turn defines our purpose as individuals. Then we can gather as a congregation and share that which we have learned as we have lived and learned from our life experiences. And from that sharing we can continue our search for truth and meaning. Let me quote Rev Ricky and his conclusion to his sermon: “We should enjoy the beauty around us, natural and human made. We should let the aesthetic bliss of great art inspire us and move us where it will. And we should also find time in our lives to ask the spiritual questions art can point us toward but doesn’t ask directly. And we should keep asking until we find answers that create a faith life, strong and sure.”

So as I finish, I hope we can have a series of worship services presented periodically during the next church year on this subject of spirituality and worship in relation to liberal religion. If any of you want to develop a summary of materials you have read on this subject, if you wish to share some thoughts with the congregation, or have suggestions on how we can work “spirituality” as we UUs use that term into our services you can talk to anyone on the worship committee. Our congregation is always looking for new ideas for our services. And if you want to do a service, I am sure they can work on a schedule with you. The activities at this church have helped me develop a mature spirituality as I have come to understand that term as a Unitarian Universalist And it has helped me understand the 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations and how it relates to the 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And I hope it has been helpful for all of you as well.