

# Worship in Unitarian Universalist Congregations

*by Mark Belletini*

Unitarian Universalists worship in a variety of settings—from a Gothic nave to a large living room, from a nineteenth-century meeting house to a rented school auditorium.

It stands to reason then that no one style of worship has universal appeal among us. Some worship services are formal, with a sense of decorum and a devotional atmosphere. Other services are marked by applause, a pulpit-pew dialogue, and familiar banter.

Local culture, a particular minister or lay worship team, inherited traditions—even geography—contribute to the style of Unitarian Universalist worship.

Whatever the style, Unitarian Universalist services are rooted in our living tradition, which invites the individual to worship within the community. The community remains the locus of the Holy. In the Hebrew scriptures, Moses and Miriam do not come out of captivity alone, but with the whole assembly of Israel. In the Buddhist tradition, Gautama (who became the Buddha) is not content to sit alone under the pipal tree but gathers companions in Deer Park. And in the Christian scriptures, Jesus does not dine alone, but blesses bread for all of his followers. Although we recognize the power in personal devotion and solitary walks in the garden, we choose to worship together for the strength of many hearts beating in the spirit of shared wisdom.

Sunday service, program, morning celebration, and morning prayer are terms we use to refer to our communal worship. Invocations, music, and opening words begin a service with a tone of praise and presence. Many of us light a flaming chalice or candle. Others prefer visual simplicity and make do without candles or elaborate props. In a few of our churches you'll notice a simple cross. In others you'll find a full range of symbols—including the Cross, Star of David, Buddhist wheel, Tao circle, and Sufic winged heart.

Some of our congregations use traditional prayer books. Others have put together special anthologies of contemporary writings. Most use a simple order of service with responsive readings and benedictions taken from Unitarian Universalist worship resource materials.

Choirs with robes are featured in some of our congregations. In others the congregants sing all the hymns. Pipe organs are heard in some of our churches and spinets in others. Guitars, harpsichords, and autoharps contribute a different feel to our Sunday mornings. In some of our congregations, liturgical dance troupes or congregational circle dancing are a regular part of the service.

Silence, prayer, and meditation root us in the Whole, the Holy—whether we address God by name or find deeper devotion in namelessness. We locate ourselves in a spiritual context which both transcends and transforms our daily concerns. These devotions help

open our fists and heal our wounds. We are called to a deeper sense of our complicities and compassion. Even silence enables us to know ourselves as physical beings, our breath and pulse no longer drowned out by the clamor of everyday life.

Announcements share the joys and concerns of individual members with the entire congregation. This sharing promotes a very real sense of community, which shapes the best of our worship celebrations.

Worship services may include scripture, poetry, proverbs, and other readings chosen as touchstones of the rich heritage of spirituality expressed in human cultures. Whether it's the story of Esther or the transforming insight of poet Audre Lorde, readings situate our common worship in a larger world. Readings teach us, amuse us, prod us, and ground us in our living tradition.

Sermons may be carefully prepared texts or improvised reflections. While a play, a film, or a long poem is occasionally offered, the sermon endures as a central element in Unitarian Universalist worship. Topics of a mystical, political, ethical, or historical nature may be addressed within the sermon. Often a minister's personal testimony will help members of the congregation reflect honestly on their own lives.

Occasionally a sacramental expression-such as the Flower Communion, a child's dedication, or the breaking of bread-deepens the worship experience. These special ceremonies serve to bind us to traditions, to the generations, and to holy ideals.

Most of our congregations take offerings, although some groups forgo this custom and encourage parishioners to contribute to the church community in other ways.

Finally, closing words, benedictions, and blessings send us into our lives with renewed purpose.

Worship invites us to focus on the transcendental, the intimate, and the worthy. Worship helps us to regain our grip on the fragmented, the obsessive, and the divisive. Worship reminds us that we-empowered by the love we receive and give-may challenge any idol of greed or violence which pollutes the human condition. We ask that you bring to worship something of what you receive: a capacity to heal, to think both critically and poetically, and to experience a growing sense of belonging, rootedness, and blessing.

Worship helps us regain a sense of ourselves. The slow dance of our bodily movements in daily life, the timbre of our voices when we sing together, the glint of joy in another's eye, the smell of musk roses on the table, the taste of fresh bread-these return us to our senses in a world that often seems devoid of sensual inspiration. For in worship, the sensual is one with the spiritual, the intellectual, and the emotional. "Come, taste and see...."

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