

**UU Worship**  
**What is it, Who does it, When does it Happen,**  
**Where does it Happen, And, Why?**

By  
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof  
July 10, 2011

One of the things you'll find about me is that no matter how progressive I become, I still like using traditional religious jargon. This is so for a couple of reasons. Firstly, if the only folks out there using words like, *God, religion, faith, church, good* and *evil* are fundamentalists, then theirs will become the default position when it comes to understanding what these things mean. If as liberals we don't stay engaged in the religious debate and dialogue, then those seeking religious understanding will have only the extremists to turn to. Promoting an alternative, more inclusive, and, I believe, more accurate religious orientation is our heritage, our right, and our obligation.

The other reason I like using such language is that in light of the etymology of such terms, our use of traditional religious language is often more literally precise. In other words, liberals tend to use terms like *God, religion, faith, church, good* and *evil*, as they are actually meant to be. The root of the word *religion*, itself, for example, is the same as in the word *ligament*, and refers to that which joins things together. So religion is literally about creating bonds between people who have been separated or segregated. It's about reconnecting the outcasts and oppressed with their social rights. Religion is, literally, almost synonymous with solidarity! Real religion is that which is able to sing, "Come, come, whoever you are! Wonderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come!"

Yet how often has it been used, instead, to justify excluding and segregating others from the full benefits of society? Religion has been a primary excuse for discriminating against minorities, women, gays and lesbians, nonbelievers, and many others. So there is little wonder why religious language tends to get stuck in our socially progressive craws. Throughout our history we have fought and struggled to make sure the least among us, no matter their income, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, enjoy the same rights as everyone else. Yet it is precisely our Unitarian and Universalist approach, expressed, respectively, through our commitment to solidarity and equality, that we have been most engaged in the practice of religion. For religion, again, is literally about bringing people together. Unitarian Universalism *is*, thus, religion in the purest sense of the term.

But the word I want to focus on mostly this morning is, of course, *worship*. *Worship* is another traditional religious term that tends to provoke a lot of negative feelings and connotations. This is so because it is also often used in ways that actually contradict its literal meaning. Its root word is "worth." So worship, once again, is literally about promoting those principles and practices that are *worth* most to us. Worship is about lifting ourselves up, yet it has too often been misused

to shame us and put us down. When we think of worship in the traditional sense, it provokes images of mindless devotees bowing down in subservience to some higher authority. In this sense, worship seems to be more about worthlessness than worthiness. Taken literally, however, worship isn't about subservience or shame, but about being uplifted and lifting others up. This is precisely what the great liberation theologian and martyr, Father Oscar Romero meant to encourage in his Catholic parish when he said;

God has sown goodness.  
No child is born evil.  
We are all called to holiness.  
The values that God has sown in the human heart  
And that present-day people esteem so highly  
Are not rare gems;  
They are things that appear continually...

The original, pristine human vocation is goodness.  
We have all been born for goodness.  
No one is born with inclinations to kidnap,  
No one is born with inclinations to be a criminal,  
No one is born to be a torturer,  
No one is born to be a murderer,  
We have all been born to be good,  
To love one another,  
To understand one another.<sup>1</sup>

So when we gather together on Sunday mornings, Unitarian Universalists more literally worship because in our services we truly are about lifting up ourselves, others, and all those values and principles worthy of our attention. Our worship does not deny and denigrate our humanity, but lifts up the worth and dignity of every person. So we don't come together to bow down in shame before some imaginary supreme being, but to lift each other up, uphold our highest principles, and raise our deepest questions. We come together to literally *worship* together.

But our precious, dare I say, sacred, time together on Sundays, is neither the beginning nor end of our worship. As Unitarian Universalists, we understand that what we do on Sunday's is but a brief manifestation of what we aspire to do and be in every place and moment of our lives. As a religion that promotes works more than faith, *pragma* more than *dogma*, we know that what we do on Sundays is meaningless if we're not worshipping by upholding our greatest principles every day and moment of the week, wherever we are! At their best, our Sunday worship services remind us of our greater purpose, of the big picture, of our reason for being,

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<sup>1</sup> Romero, Oscar, *The Violence of Love*, fwd., Nouwen, Henri, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2007, p. 65.

precisely because they continually raise our highest principles before us. But our deepest calling is Life's call to participate and recognize the sacredness of the here and now, wherever and whenever we are. We do not merely worship by gathering in church on Sundays to experience an hour of heavenly life, but in working hard everyday to create Heaven on Earth by lifting up justice, equality, compassion, freedom, and peace everywhere we go. For we know that true worship means always rising to our highest aspirations!

So the third reason I like referring to what we do as *worship* is because we can! The privilege of freely expressing ourselves and openly promoting our liberal values cannot be taken for granted, has been a painful and hard won right, and remains an all too rare opportunity, even in our increasingly globalized world. As one who has recently moved, I'm well aware of the toll lifting things up can take, and of the strength and endurance it requires. My back is still aching from the burden of lifting all I felt was worthy of bringing with me. I'm just glad I don't live on Jupiter where the gravitational pull is two-and-a-half times greater than it is here on Earth. I could never have brought the twenty boxes of books now sitting in my office if that were the case! Likewise, in our society, lifting things up may be burdensome and take a toll, but at least it's still possible. We are grateful for this because we know there are places, even in this world, where people are not so fortunate, where it's much more difficult, if not impossible, to lift their voices, raise their questions, and uphold their highest principles.

Believe it or not, I've been lifting weights, to some extent, ever since I was a teenager. And after years of doing so, I've actually come to see it as my spiritual discipline. There's something about engaging with the forces of gravity on a regular basis that's incredibly grounding and humbling. Every time I attempt to push my heavy burden away, up into the air, the gravity of the situation literally pulls me back down to Earth. It reminds me that I cannot escape the gravity of life; that, as young Prince Siddhartha learned on his way to becoming the Buddha—seeing old age, sickness, and death after finally escaping the delusion of his father's triple-walled palace—life is heavy!

There is gravity to life, and because UU worship and living is ultimately the same thing, our brand of worship can also be heavy. UU worship can take a toll on us. It can be costly, because it's so real. It's difficult, burdensome, and sometimes even dangerous for us to worship, for us to lift up and uphold our most sacred values in the real world beyond these sanctuary walls. Though he may have been a UU only in spirit, Archbishop Oscar Romero, whom I quoted a moment ago, experienced just how heavy such worship can be when he was gunned down in his own pulpit for standing up and lifting up the downtrodden people of El Salvador.

I experienced the burden of living worship myself when I was fired from my secular job in January 2005, shortly after taking a public stand in favor of marriage equality. Upholding my values and lifting up equality has taken a toll on me. It cost me. It made the burden of paying my bills and feeding my family much heavier. But

everything my family and I have gone through, including engaging in a costly lawsuit that lasted seven years, has been worth it! It has been *worship*.

Finally, there is another aspect of Unitarian Universalist worship that makes it not only bearable, but uplifting. Perhaps no social prophet in history ever carried more of a burden than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, his religion gave him the strength to carry on. In a speech given shortly before his death, entitled, *Unfulfilled Dreams*, this American Mahatma said he could endure anything because, in his words:

It will be dark sometimes, and it will be dismal and trying, and tribulations will come. But if you have faith in the God that I'm talking about this morning, it doesn't matter. For you can stand up amid the storms. And I say it to you out of experience this morning, yes, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I've felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus, saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me. Never to leave me alone.

Dr. King is a great inspiration to Unitarian Universalists, not because we share his faith in God, but because we share the faith he had in the principles of justice and equality. We may not believe in the God of his Baptist faith, but our religion also gives us the strength to carry on. No matter what our individual thoughts about God, ours is a humanitarian religion, and we know it is really up to us to transform our world. I say it's up to "us," not *me* and not *you*. Just as I could not have unloaded our densely packed moving truck without the help many of you gave us this week, none among us is able to singlehandedly lift our weighty UU principles and values without the help of others. *Worship*, again, is an act of solidarity. Thus, it is because of all the people here today, whether sitting with you within the comfort of these sanctuary walls, or standing with you outside your comfort zone, that you are never alone. So whether or not we believe in God, we can believe in each other, and sing as resoundingly as Dr. King did, "I am never alone. No never alone. They have promised never to leave me. Never to leave me alone."

Worship is something we can only do together. It is an act of solidarity, inside and outside of church. Worship isn't about settling us down, but about raising each other up, raising unpopular questions, and, sometimes, raising Cain. Worship occurs whenever and wherever we uphold our most worthwhile principles and values. Worship is humanistic, not theological. Worship brings people together. It includes outcasts and the oppressed. Worship is practical. It doesn't happen the first day of the week, but everyday of the week. And that's why I like to call what we do *worship*, and why I think we do it better than most.