

A Vision of Worship

*A Worship Service by the Rev. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
January 20, 2008*

HYMN 95, There Is More Love Somewhere

Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere; I'm the minister of this congregation. Let's begin our service with a spiritual. This is number 95 in your hymnal, "There Is More Love Somewhere." Number 95.

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

If you would like a **bulletin printed in a larger typeface**, please let the usher know. Our worship service will begin shortly, but first, here are a few announcements: **Our religious education program is led by** Jamie Sullivan and she could use your help. Please see Jamie or me and we'll tell you how you can make a difference. After the service today, please join us for a time of fellowship and conversation. **Fellowship events** are organized by Adam Couch and he could use your help afterwards to clean and straighten up the place.

After the service today, I hope you join us for a chili potluck. During the potluck, several members who attended the seminar on our culture of money will lead conversations at the tables. The topics will revolve around the five money types: the mindless, the entitled, the balanced, the worried and the obsessed. To find out which you are, listen up after the service for the explanation.

The choir rehearses Wednesday night and before that, Wednesday Night Out is at Royal Thai, on East Brainerd Road.

We understand that some people are downstairs when this brief summary of activities is announced. **A complete listing of announcements** is included with your program and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to receive weekly announcements via e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office. I invite you now to extend a hand of warmth to two or three people near you. And make a special effort to find someone you don't know and make that person feel welcome. So please rise now and greet your neighbors. *[Meet & Greet]*

[Chime] Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right; now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode;" childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and the arm chairs here in the Sanctuary are for those who need a little support when standing. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

In the world of popular music, a composer strives to write a "hook," a motif that is repeated a few times and which becomes the notes you remember. The hook is what really captures our ears. It's the song we remember and sing after we see *The Music Man* or *The Sound of Music*. It happens in classical music as well. Who could forget the opening four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? Da-da-da-daaaa. Our prelude today is like that, too. This is the "Meditation" from *Thaïs*, an opera by Jules Massenet.

PRELUDE: Meditation

KINDLING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

STORY: Spreading Fingers

In the early times, Jack Ba Yoo was a plantation overseer. He lived a dangerous life, for he had two girlfriends in town. Thassright. *Two* girlfriends. Lulu and Annabelle.

He would take rice and black-eyed peas and bacon from the plantation and bring them to his girlfriends in the city. And when he brought the food he told his girlfriends, “When you eat, you must spread your fingers.”

Now when he said this, Lulu did not understand what he meant. She just flat didn’t get it. He told Annabelle the same thing, and she understood that when he brought the food, that she should not eat it alone, but should share with others. And the reason for this is as old as human beings. You must eat with people, not eat alone, not keep all for yourself.

Now Lulu, cooked the bacon and beans and the rice and with a little onion and garlic, and you know what that makes? A very tasty dish called Hoppin’ John. And she ate it. Then she went outside, and spread her fingers, and said, “Jack Ba Yoo said when I eat I must spread my fingers.” And she spread her fingers like this.

When he went fishing, Jack Ba Yoo brought her catfish and collard greens, but she always ate it alone. But when Jack Ba Yoo brought these foods for Annabelle, she shared with other people.

Some years passed and Jack Ba Yoo died. And Lulu had no boyfriend and no food. No one brought anything to Lulu, who spread

her fingers in the air. She sat alone. Annabelle had no boyfriend either, but she had food. And friends. Many people brought things for Annabelle. One brought her a cow, one brought her sugar, one brought her coffee. And sometimes, people brought her bacon, rice and black-eyed peas.

Now, one day, Lulu walked across town to Annabelle’s house and she said, “Sister, ever since Jack Ba Yoo died, I have been hungry; no one brought me anything. But you have plenty. Look how many people have brought food for you!”

Annabelle said, “Well, when Jack Ba Yoo brought you food, what did you do?”

“I ate it.”

“When Jack Ba Yoo said, ‘You must spread your fingers when you eat,’ what did you do?”

“When I ate, I spread my fingers. Like this.”

Annabelle said, “Well, then, maybe the air will bring you food, because you spread your fingers for the air. For me, the same people to whom I gave food now bring me food in return. You did not understand that what Jack meant is to open your hand to others. Do not grasp for everything.”

And Annabelle invited Lulu to sit at her table and eat Hoppin’ John with her.

OFFERTORY: Coming Home

Now if I had a handful of black-eyed peas, like this, what would happen if I spread my fingers?

Some would fall, right. And some would remain in my hand.

And if I had a handful of rice, like this and I spread my fingers?

Some would fall, right. And some would remain in my hand.

And what if I had a handful of money, like this and I spread my fingers?

Some would fall, right. And some would remain in my hand.

And the ones that fell, you could have or you or you or someone else.

The lesson here is that when I have a handful of something, I have enough to share.

We'll collect the morning offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. As always, the Dolores Wood–Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items, and the collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Kate, please lead us in our hymn of thanksgiving. The words are in your program.

Oh, we give thanks for this precious day,
For those gathered here and those far away,

For this time we share with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Kate's mother, Charlotte Elmer, died Wednesday evening. Please remember her family in your thoughts and prayers.

[Reading from the cards]

Today our prayers go out to all in this room. May their joys increase for them and for us and may their sorrows be borne by everyone, for we are surely all in this together.

The president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. William Sinkford, has written a pastoral letter relative to the incidents in Kenya and Pakistan. He writes,

“I have been paying attention to the post-election violence in Kenya, as well as to the harrowing events occurring in Pakistan—preceding and following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. I am sure that your hearts and souls have been troubled. I am sure, because I have been troubled as well.

“Unitarians and Universalists in Kenya and Pakistan are among those who have suffered directly. We have received reports that the home of a Unitarian pastor in Kenya was burned and many Unitarian families are among the nearly 500,000 newly displaced people in Kenya. We understand that two members of the Unitarian Universalist Christians of Pakistan were among the 23 people killed during a suicide bombing in Lahore.

“Would you join me in a Prayer in a Time of Mourning:

“The deaths of our brothers and sisters—by virtue of both faith and humanity—have shaken us. The chaos of homes burned to ashes, of explosions that have killed innocents—has shaken us. Stories of these events have reached our ears and our hearts, though we are more than an ocean away. And we are left staggering.

“Yet shaken down with despair, we raise our eyes to the rock that is higher. And we find inspiration not only in our own communities of faith, but from the very places where these atrocities are occurring. Because we hear from the very same places that Freedom and Justice are still on the lips of our brothers and sisters there:

- That Hope remains alive,
- That Compassion is still at work,
- That the Dawn of a New Day is yet within sight.

“So, we will join our brothers and sisters in crying unto thee: “Lead us all to the rock that is higher.

“Spirit of Life, be with us and help us be healers in this hurting world. Inspire us to confront injustice with the power of love. And show us how to make the power of love real and tangible; we know this is the work that we are called to do. *Amen.*”

The prayer of the Rev. Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.* In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who rejoice today and all those who suffer today in this world.

We will hold you until you soften.
We will love you until you begin to melt.
We will sing to you until you remember peace.

READING

J. Frank Schulman was a Unitarian minister for 52 years. He was born in Nashville and served churches in Ohio, Massachusetts and Texas. He died in 2006. When he died, he was working on this book, and it was finished by a colleague of his. In this book is a good primer for what Unitarian worship was like during most of the 20th century. It’s a good way to learn where our culture of worship comes from. Where it’s going is up to us. This passage is from the first chapter of the book.

Worship recognizes that we are involved in a mystery, and that as we seek to understand that mystery, something good is added to our lives. Worship involves consideration of things of ultimate worth. In worship we ask what there is in human endeavor worth taking seriously. Worship is a break with our normal lives. We seek to encounter reality in greater depth; we want to understand reality, so we step aside briefly. We gain insight: reconsideration of our relation to the universe. We remind ourselves that there is a higher calling to which we are summoned.

People have always worshiped a higher power under different names and circumstances. Our worship provides historical continuity, and much in the service is designed to connect us with the past, through the hymns, familiar readings, and prayers. We also revere the methods and writings of other religions, and in that, we seek connection with the larger religious community. Thus many Unitarian Universalist churches commemorate the observances of Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam.

We may think of the experience in church as providing three dimensions for our concern:

The theological dimension, our relation to God or however we conceive the ultimate spirit.

The social dimension, our relation to our neighbor, the ethical and moral relation. If God is in me, God is also in my neighbor.

The personal dimension, as we come to understand ourselves better in the context of our relation to others and to that which is ultimate.

Thus in worship we see ourselves in relation to the divine as well as to the world about us, and we explore the inner world. Worship is an encounter with the spiritual reality.

Worship opens to us a world beyond what we sense in daily life, separated from supermarkets, computers, traffic congestion, bad movies, and television. It brings us close to eternity, to the infinite that is already in our midst. Worship reminds us of a dimension that our lives need and that easily gets lost in our distraction with the busy things of life.

The words of J. Frank Schulman.

HYMN 112, Do You Hear?

SERMON: A Vision of Worship

Last week, I spoke about the state of this church, an overview of what we are doing here, how well we're doing it and what we might do better. In that sermon, I postponed an examination of worship to this week. Today, I'll address what worship is, why it's part of our church culture and how it can meet the needs of the congregation.

And the first thing I want to say is thank you to Mary Hunter. Ever since I was called to this pulpit, Mary Hunter has been the worship service coordinator, finding speakers in my absence, decorating the chancel, arranging chairs, decorating the tree, passing out hymnals, preparing the space and singing in the choir. She received help from a few people now and then, but she has done the lion's share of the work herself. Thank you, Mary.

As for the culture of worship at this church, I am conflicted. What

we have done, and now are doing is adequate in my judgement. It's comforting and something I can readily create. It seems to attract a lot of visitors and meets the needs of most people. I am not satisfied with adequacy, however. I strive for excellence. Not perfection. Excellence. If worship is a worthy activity, then it's worthwhile to do it as well as we can.

It's hard to tell sometimes, if worship is good or bad, appropriate or not, because there is no scoring system. No absolute standard against which to measure the Sunday service. You don't hold up score cards like Olympic judges. Some people speak to me afterwards, most don't. I believe that those who speak to me represent each end of the spectrum: those who truly loved the service and those who thought it was abhorrent.

To thoroughly investigate worship and its place in our life, to provide support to Mary Hunter, to improve worship in this church and to prepare for my sabbatical, I have formed a worship working group. The group will meet later this week for the first time.

So what is worship, anyway? As a noun, the dictionary is not much help. It says that worship is the act of worshipping. As a verb, it gets closer to what we intuit the meaning is. "To love unquestioningly and uncritically or to excess; to venerate as an idol; to show devotion to (as a deity); and to attend religious services."

I think it's instructive to see where the words we use come from. If you spoke French or Spanish or Italian or Polish, to refer to a religious worship service, you'd use *culte or culto or cult*, which derive from the Latin word *cultus*. *Cultus* is the past participle of *colere*, meaning to cultivate. We get our word cult from the same root. If you spoke Portugese, you would say *adoração*, which comes from the Latin *adorare*, meaning prayer. But you are English speakers, and you would say worship, which has roots in the Old English word, *woerthscip*, meaning worthiness or giving shape to worth.

Now both the Latin *cultus* and Old English *woerthscip* have roots in a language spoken about 6500 years ago in central Asia, near the Black Sea. Tracing *cultus* and *woerthscip* back to their roots, we arrive at similar concepts, that is, to turn, to bend, to revolve or move around.

This is important to understand, because whatever your motivation for worshiping, at the core of the experience, there is some movement. Something in us is moved during a worship service, At least, in a good worship service, we would hope something or someone is moved.

For Catholics and for Eastern Orthodox Christians, worship is primarily a re-enactment of the Last Supper, a ritual. The priest breaks the bread again and drinks the wine again. The people mystically participate in the ritual through the sacrament of communion. There are readings from the Bible and often, a short homily from the priest. The worship service can be said to be representational, in that it represents something that is important in the life of the congregation.

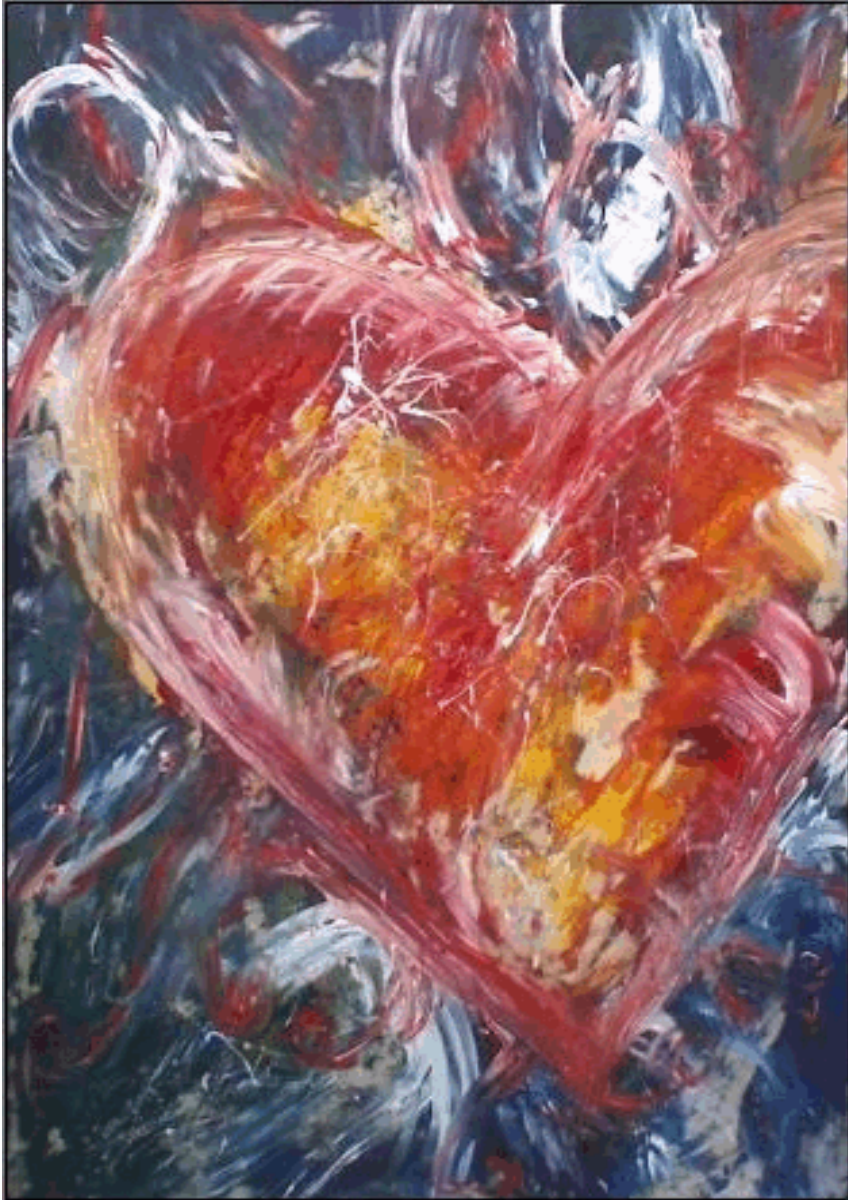
In recognition that Catholic worship is focused on God, the priest wears richly-colored and ancient vestments, sometimes incense is burned and in high churches, candles and stained glass windows refract colors and shapes on the floor. Before the Second Vatican Council in the 60's, Catholic worship services had a strong sense of secrecy and mysticism. Some of that remains today.

For Protestants, worship is more centered on the word than a ritual. Both the word of God and the word of human beings. Occasionally, Protestant worshipers will take communion, but the main emphasis is on readings and sermons and prayers designed to reveal the will of God as expressed in the Bible. This church, although not strictly Christian nor Protestant, comes out of that tradition. Protestant worship can be said to be presentational, in that the word is presented directly to the congregation.

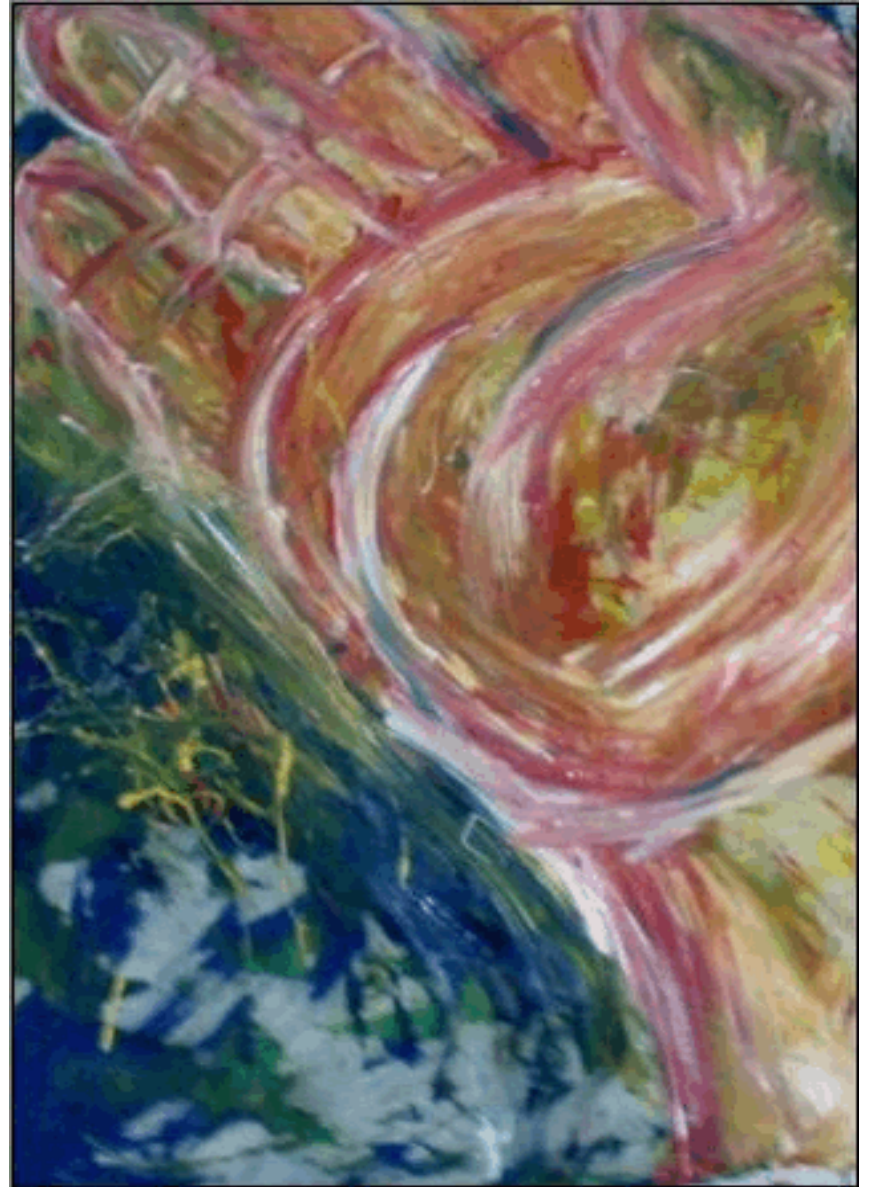
In my opinion, Unitarian Universalist worship services attend very closely to the concept expressed by that Old English word, *woerthscip*. There is a conscious effort to promote something of worth and give it shape through words, images and music. The service may hold up a worthy concept with readings, poetry, drama, responsive readings, a sermon, singing and music. The service concretizes, if you will, an intangible concept.

If the concept, the theme, of the service is world peace through mutual understanding, then singing Hymn 159, "This is My Song," will make the theme memorable to the congregation. If the theme is the futility and high cost of war, then responsive reading 583, "The Young Dead Soldiers," will fix the appropriate image in the minds of the worshipers.

We can also give shape to something worthwhile through static images, like posters, paintings and, in Catholic churches, statues. Today I put three images on the cover of the bulletin. I wish you could see them better, but the cost of color copies is prohibitive. But here are the three paintings.



This is *Passionate Worship*.



This is *Practical Worship*.



And this is *Thoughtful Worship*.

These paintings were created during one worship service at St. Paul's Collegiate Church in Storrs, Connecticut.

Everyone has different communication preferences and learning styles. Some people prefer to see. Others prefer to hear. Some people learn from thinking. Others learn from feeling. Worship must appeal to many modes of communication and understanding so that the message lands on as many people as possible.

It rarely happens, but it would be nice if we could address all the senses in worship—hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste. As it is, we tend to rely on two or three of those. Occasionally, worship appeals to your sense of motion, kinesthesia. But 90% of the time, it's sight and sound that transmit the message of worship.

In this church, as in many Unitarian Universalist churches, the appeal is primarily to the intellect. As a matter of fact, I think Unitarian Universalist churches, by and large, are overly-reliant on intellectual appeals during worship. I think this is a remnant of Unitarian culture and a close association with the academy. It's also a sort of ground rule in Unitarian Universalist culture that one must use one's noggin in religious matters. This is not a church where all the answers are available to you in a book. You must find your own answers and to do that, you gotta think about things.

One of the basic tenets of unitarian (lower-case u) thought is a denial of the Trinity because it's not a rational concept. So right away, as far back as Michael Servetus in the 16th century, unitarians have been thinking people.

I think thinking is not enough. I try, in subtle ways, to work against that culture, because I know that some people are not intellectually inclined. They're driven by emotions, perhaps. Or by music. Or by associating with their friends. The three paintings, I believe, are indicative of three arenas of operation, if I can say that, which are active during worship. Your heart, your hands and your head. The

Passionate, the Practical and the Thoughtful.

For too long, I believe, Unitarian Universalists have neglected their hearts and their hands and concentrated their worship in the arena of thought. That's why in the worship services I create, I emphasize music in various forms. I try to address emotions which are not reached by words alone. Some might say my services are light in tone, that there may be too much laughter. I try to dispense the heavy items gently, so that they land easy on the congregation. A ponderous tone throughout the service would be brutal and unbearable.

Worship has a form. The one most often used in Protestant services, and in this church, is derived from a model of literature and drama first expressed by Aristotle and later by Gustav Freytag. Aristotle thought that stories and dramas should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Freytag, a 19th century philosopher and author, laid out five divisions along a tall curve: the exposition, where the situation was laid out; rising action, in which a series of complications and conflicts heighten the suspense; the climax, or turning point; falling action, which happens as a direct result of the climax; and denouement, in which all the loose ends are tied up.

If we had to map all five sections over a worship service, the heart and emotional high point of the sermon would be the climax; the benediction, postlude and fellowship hour would be falling action and denouement; the invocation, story, reading and offertory would be exposition and rising action.

The reason this form is used so extensively is because it works very well. You see it in just about every form of literature and drama and presentation. You start with ancillary material and build up to the critical element and end it soon afterward. This is the form I prefer to use.

A colleague of mine believes this form to be masculine—if it has a

gender—because she says it fits better to a man's way of thinking. She calls it, "Climbing Up Mount Sermon."

There is another form, or my colleague says there is. To me, it just seems like another way to the top of Mount Sermon—riding the ski lift, perhaps. It's called the journey, and it may be that the form of this model is apparent only to those who are moved or changed. If the form of the Aristotelian model is like a tall curve of rising action, climax and falling action, the shape of the journey is a spiral. In the journey, the emphasis is on movement. We begin here and wind around through meditation, prayer and song and music and enlightenment, and we finally end up over there.

A worship service could be silent, as in a Quaker meeting. It could be a song fest or hymn sing. Strictly speaking, a worship service could be any activity that gives a shape to something worthy of our consideration. Using that as a guide, some would say that you could have a worship service during a stroll in the park walking your dog, or in the hour spent reading the Sunday paper or in painting a portrait or in the hours you spend carving a duck from a hunk of beech wood. I don't accept that, however. I believe that worship is a corporate act, something we do together. Those who say they worship on a hike in the forest belong to a church of one.

In the reading we heard from Frank Schulman, he pointed out that in a good worship service, one's attention ought to be directed up and down. That is, in traditional terms, one ought to be aware of the relation between oneself and God. If that doesn't cut the mustard for you, you could say that one ought to be aware of one's higher power or one's matters of ultimate importance or whatever phrase gets you through the night. There is a theological dimension to worship.

Your attention also should be directed left and right. That is, in a good worship service you ought to be aware of the relation you have with other people. There is a social dimension to worship.

And your attention ought to be directed in and out. You ought to be aware of the relation you have with yourself and how that affects your daily life. There is a personal dimension to worship.

Over time, several elements have come to be included in a worship service. There is usually some prelude and postlude of music, designed to set the mood for what is to come, be it the service or the fellowship hour. Because children have shorter attention spans and different interests, there is usually a story or some element aimed at their understanding of the world. I must say however, that my wife, your music director, tells me that she gets more out of the story than my preaching.

There is some sort of invocation, in which words are spoken with the same intent as the prelude, to direct the attention to the theme of the service. We usually collect an offering to support the church. We sing songs at various times in the service to underscore the point just made. Sometimes an author or poet or composer can say something better than your minister can. So we sometimes have readings from literature, scripture, poetry, drama and musical interludes.

Because we come out of the tradition of Protestant worship, where the emphasis is on the word, we usually have some sort of testimony, either from the minister in the form of a sermon or from the congregation in the form of personal stories and experiences. And sometimes, there is a benediction, which is a final statement of the theme or a blessing or a prayer for the coming days.

All these elements are arranged so that we don't sing all the hymns one after the other and all the talking doesn't happen all at once. As I said, I prefer the Aristotelian model for the form of the service. The elements are set where they are to make a shape, to build to a critical point and to create some breathing space and texture within the service. For instance, it just doesn't seem right to start with the benediction and then proceed to the offertory. It doesn't seem right to save the story for the end.

So in thinking about worship, we see that it can be representational or it can be presentational. We understand that three arenas of our bodies are involved: the head, the heart and the hands. We recognize an overall form. We measure worship with theological, social and personal dimensions. And we list several elements that comprise our worship services.

In my experience, Unitarian Universalist worship seems quite strong in the personal dimension, it has some social dimension, and not too much theological dimension. And the reason for this, I believe is contained in our theology and in our culture.

Open your hymnals to three pages before Hymn Number 1. That would be page X—that's Roman numeral ten if it were marked—and you can read on that page the seven Unitarian Universalist principles.

Looking at our seven principles, you will note the first one, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," is entirely personal and the last one, "the interdependent web of all existence," is entirely social. As you move from the first through the second and third, the principles become more social. As you move backwards from seven through six and five, they become more personal. Until you arrive at the balance principle, number four, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Nothing about people at all in that one. Nothing personal, nothing social.

If you look at these principles this way, you will understand that neither the first nor the last is more or less important than the other or what's between them. It's just the way they were composed. Think of this list not from top to bottom, not from the most to the least important, but laid out from side to side with number four being the fulcrum on a "seven principles teeter-totter." They are balanced, or can be balanced.

In my opinion, too many people get on the personal side of the teeter-totter and that unbalances these principles.

Now can you understand one reason that I say our worship services, by and large, have a lot of inward dimension, some social dimension and not too much theological dimension? Not too much theological dimension, because we don't all have a common higher power, something of ultimate importance or the Ground of all Being. We have different understandings of God. And so the theological dimension of our worship services is not great.

The social dimension is there, but could be increased. We have differing ideas on how to connect to others, how to build a better world, how to walk along the social dimension. I believe we would be a better and stronger church if we all got together and worked on one social justice project. In addition to the Interfaith Homeless Network.

The personal dimension is striking, and that is one reason we hear visitors say, "I never knew that church could be like this." or variants of that sentiment. Because in your average, run-of-the-mill Protestant church, the theological and social dimensions are emphasized and the personal dimension is slighted. When visitors worship with us, they often report being validated in their beliefs. And some reflect on the lack of theological oppression.

In my vision of worship, we ought to emphasize the theological dimension more. We ought to emphasize the social dimension more. We ought to leave the personal dimension as it is and increase the other dimensions to create a really strong and healthy church. How we do that—I don't know. But with the help of the worship working committee and a little experimentation, we'll figure it out.

This morning, I have explored the what and a little of the when, the how and the who of worship. Next week, I will spend a little time talking about *why* we worship, what makes us come here on Sunday morning and what we expect to find here. I encourage you to think about these things because you will have a chance to express your thoughts and feelings about worship and what it means to you.