



“I’m sure if the good Lord thinks the market needs to be stabilized, he’ll stabilize it.”

Another View of Worship

*A Worship Service by the Rev. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
January 27, 2008*

HYMN 188, Come, Come, Whoever You Are

JEFF. 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 Hymn 188, “Come Come, Whoever You Are.” The words in this hymn come from the 13th century Persian poet and theologian, Mawlana Jalal-ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, known simply as Rumi to the Western World. He lived most of his life in Anatolia, which had been part of the Roman Empire, hence his name, Rumi.

The former minister of the Second Unitarian Universalist Church in Chicago, the Rev. Lynn Ungar wrote the music. I’ve never met Lynn Ungar, but I stayed in her apartment one weekend about 11 years ago

when I interviewed at Meadville Lombard Theological School when I was just beginning to pursue ministry as a way of life. And that made a profound impression on me—that a total stranger would leave the key for me so that I would have a comfortable place to stay in Chicago. No. 188.

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

Daidee. Our worship service will begin shortly, but first, here are a few announcements: Our religious education program is led by Jamie Sullivan. Please see Jamie or me and we’ll tell you how you can help 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.

The men’s group meets tomorrow night, the choir rehearses Wednesday night and Wednesday Night Out is at Sitar on Lee Highway. The first Wednesday of February is Wednesday Night In at the church, and the sign-up list for that is in the fellowship area. You can check with Leslie Walters for more information.

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.

We are very pleased to welcome Scott Sullivan and Joe Ridolfo again to our sanctuary. The music they bring us is a fusion of styles revolving around the sound of the classical Indian pairing of sitar and tabla. Today they bring Annie Sherrell with them and they will lead us in a call and response type of music. I'll let Scott tell you about it.

PRELUDE

KINDLING THE CHALICE

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

STORY: Paying Attention

Once, long ages ago, the Buddha was born as a friendly little parrot. He lived happily in the forest and delighted in flying among the tangled branches of the huge forest trees. Wherever he went, he greeted other creatures with joy. He was a happy bird, glad to be alive and glad to have been given the gift of flight.

One day the skies over his forest home darkened and, without warning, a terrible storm appeared, flashing and roaring among the ancient trees. The wind howled, lightning crackled, and one old tree burst into flames. Soon the whole forest began to blaze as sparks blew everywhere. Terrified animals ran wildly in every direction, seeking safety from the burning flames and choking, acrid smoke.

When the little parrot smelled the smoke, he flung himself out into the fury of the storm, crying out loudly as he flew; "Fire! Fire! Run to the river!" But though the animals heard his voice and many did make it to the safety of the river, what could the others do, trapped as they were by the flames and smoke? So, rather than flying off to safety himself, he continued circling over the raging fire, seeking some means of helping those who were trapped below.

A desperate idea came to him. Darting down to the river that flowed at the forest's edge, he dipped his body and wings into the dark water and then flew back to the fire, which was now raging like an inferno. Unmindful of the leaping flames, he dropped down low and rapidly shook his wings, releasing the few precious drops of water which still clung to his feathers. They tumbled down like little jewels into the heart of the blaze.

Again he flew to the river and dipped in body and wings and again he flew back over the flames. Again and again he flew between the river and the forest, many, many times. His feathers grew greasy and ragged and black and his eyes burned red as coals. His lungs ached and his mind danced dizzily with the spinning sparks, but still the brave little parrot flew on.

"What, after all, can a bird do in times like these," he said to himself, "but fly? So fly I shall. And I won't stop if there's even a chance I can save a single life."

Now the eagles relaxing in their nests far up on the mountain side, saw the little parrot below them as he flew among the leaping flames. Between mouthfuls of sweet foods, they pointed him out. And some of them began to laugh. "What a foolish little bird!" they said. "Trying to put out a raging fire with just a few sprinkles of water from his wings. Who ever heard of such a thing. Why, it's absurd!"

But one of the eagles found himself strangely moved by what he saw. He flew down into the parrot's path. The little parrot was just nearing

the flames again when suddenly a huge eagle appeared at his side.

“Go back parrot! Your task is hopeless!” said the eagle in a solemn and majestic voice. “What can a few drops of water do against a blaze like this? Turn around and save yourself before it is too late!”

But the little parrot would not listen. He only continued to fly on through the flames. He could hear the great eagle flying above him now as the heat grew fiercer still calling out, “You foolish parrot! Save yourself!”

The parrot slowed down and landed on a branch. The eagle landed beside him. And the parrot said, “You know, I don’t need a great big shining eagle to give me advice like that! My own mother could have told me such things long ago. Advice! I don’t need advice! I just need someone to pitch in and help!” And the parrot took off again to try and put out the fire.

And the great eagle, seeing the little parrot flying so steadily on through the flames, thought with shame of his own privilege. He could see the carefree eagles looking down from above as if life was just a game for others to live. He could hear their laughter still echoing while many creatures cried out in fear and pain from the flames just below. All at once he no longer wanted to be a big eagle or anything else. He simply wanted to help.

“I will help you!” he called after the parrot.

And flushed with these new feelings he began to cry—for the animals, for the parrot and for himself. Streams and streams of sparkling tears poured from his eyes and washed down in waves like cooling rain upon the fire, upon the forest, upon the animals and upon the little parrot himself.

Deluged with the eagle’s shimmering tears the flames died down and the smoke began to clear. The little parrot himself washed himself

and he said, “Now that’s more like it!”

Tears dripped quietly from all the burned branches and scorched buds which began to send forth green shoots and stems and leaves. Teardrops sparkled on the parrot’s wings too and dropped down like petals upon the burned and blackened ground. Green grass began to push up from among the still glowing cinders.

Then all the animals looked at one another in amazement. All were whole and well. Up in the clear blue sky they could see the little parrot looping and soaring and flying happily on and on. The eagle returned to his mountain home, and when he looked down from his perch on the forest below, he saw things differently.

And that’s what I’d like you to do. Look at things a little differently.

OFFERTORY

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.

[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.

This week, as a soldier comes home with a flag as a blanket, we are more aware than ever of the human toll of the war in Iraq. We may not have a son or daughter serving overseas; we may not even have a son or daughter. But we can feel, if only obliquely, the pain and suffering of the relatives of Lance Corporal James Michael Gluff, of Dalton, Georgia.

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

This is a good book. It's called *Worship That Works*, and it's written by a couple of Unitarian Universalist ministers, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz. When they went on sabbatical a couple years ago,

they visited a lot of churches to better understand what works and what does not. Daidee prepared this passage from the introduction.

In 2005, we attended services or interviewed worship leaders at 32 congregations of diverse sizes and traditions, about equally divided between Unitarian Universalism and other faiths. We also reviewed and studied the current literature about Protestant worship, including recent trends.

As we traveled, we discovered something about our Unitarian Universalism movement as a whole: There is a gap between what our congregations offer in worship and what is rapidly becoming standard in the larger Protestant culture. We worry about what this gap will mean for us as the 21st century unfolds. Worship is not the only engine that drives the health of a church, but without compelling worship that moves people towards lives of wholeness, service, and joy, a church community is at best self-sustaining and ingrown, and at worst a slowly dying artifact of a passing era.

We came away from our visits convinced that a renewal of engagement with worship in congregations of all sizes is critical if Unitarian Universalism is to survive and thrive in the 21st century. Lacking strong traditions of spiritual practice and outflanked in our ability to engage with innovative worship possibilities, Unitarian Universalism could be on the edge of a decline into irrelevance.

Our worries have been balanced by many signs of hope. In 2002, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, William Sinkford, called for an association-wide conversation about how we use the language of reverence. That same year "Liturgy and Ritual" was taken up as a theme by the Prairie Group, a bellwether study group of UU clergy devoted to quality scholarship and honest debate. Many midsized and large congregations have been experiencing exciting innovations in their worship life under the leadership of a new generation of UU clergy. In 2004, the UUA General Assembly in Long Beach initiated a "seeker service," using popular music,

drama, projection screens, and original songs and hymns. The 2005 General Assembly worship was enlivened by the leadership of younger music directors and the introduction of the hymnal supplement *Singing the Journey*, which brought us 74 new songs from a variety of cultures, traditions, and styles of music.

Unitarian Universalists want to create and experience worship that works. We could be poised to renew and revitalize our congregational worship life.

Unitarians and Universalists abandoned an exclusively Christian identity in the early part of the 20th century, but our worship life was slow to reflect that important decision. We have published little that offers a comprehensive theory of Unitarian Universalist worship culture or describes the diversity of its best practices. Our current extremes of worship practice are, at one end, idiosyncratic services that reflect only the religious ideology and creativity of the worship leader, and at the other, services that are firmly embedded in only one of our theological identities. In the middle, we find most of our congregations offering worship that at best creatively engages our theological diversity and at worst speaks to the lowest common denominator theology within a particular congregation.

Worship is a hot topic these days, and it should be. It is time for Unitarian Universalists to regain the place we once held on the cutting edge of congregational worship. It is time to ask ourselves what transformative worship means in our lives, and how we will create it for upcoming generations.

HYMN 301, Touch the Earth! Reach the Sky!

SERMON: Another Vision of Worship

Last week, I spoke about what worship is, some of the elements in a worship service and the culture of worship in the Unitarian

Universalist world and in this church. We considered the what and the who and the how and the when of worship.

Today I'd like to explore the *why*. Why worship? Why do we worship?

If this were the Brainerd Baptist Church, or Temple Adath Yeshuran or Mount Zion Holiness Tabernacle, or the Al-Shaeed Mosque, I'd have a ready answer for that question. We worship because God told us to. It's a commandment. At the center of Christianity, Judaism and Islam is a duty, a commandment to attend worship services at the church, synagogue or mosque. These religions are dogmatic, characterized by doctrine that every member supports. Every good member. There's backsliders everywhere.

So, for Unitarian Universalists, let's ask the question, "Why do we worship?" in another way: "Why do we come here on Sunday morning? I put the question another way because in the Worship Working Group, which met for the first time last Wednesday evening, I discovered that some people have a problem with the word *worship*. They don't come here to worship, nor to attend worship, nor to be worshipful. For them, coming to church on Sunday morning is all about something else.

This is not unlike the issue some people have with the words, *God, religion, prayer, blessing or grace*. It didn't happen to me, but I know that others have been wounded in other churches. And so in coming here, where there is no dogma, no coercion, and freedom of belief, I think they seek to remove all associations with their prior religious experiences. Which is understandable.

In completely erasing any vestige of religion, however, there is a danger in completely cutting oneself off from the spiritual aspect of life and the transformative power of a community that worships together. And that's why I come here to worship; to be transformed. I cannot prove it, but I believe that when worship works, something

in this room changes. When we gather together on Sunday morning, and all the elements of the service click, and everyone is focused, I believe that something or someone is transformed.

I think it goes back to the Indo-European root of the word *worship*, which means to bend or to turn. When worship works, we walk in the door straight as an arrow and walk out a little bent. We walk in the door as unchangeable as a stone and walk out moved. That's not to say that other reasons for coming here are invalid. Reasons are reasons and they are as varied as the people owning them.

But reasons or no, people do come to church on Sunday morning and that underscores the importance of worship in the life of the church. Something that is widely held by people who study church life is that worship is the central binding element in the life of the congregation. Every other activity is related to worship, but worship sets the tone.

This week, my colleagues were discussing a group of people—not members—at one Texas church who sit on the patio surfing the internet during the worship service. The minister was a little peeved about it and decided to shut down the wireless connection on the patio between 11 and 12 on Sunday mornings. Well, there was an uproar, and the surfers and the minister are now getting to know each other.

In the discussion about this, there was an obvious division of opinions: Several thought the surfers were thumbing their noses at the church and those in the worship service and they ought to go to Starbucks to indulge their Sunday morning surfing habits. Others were non-plussed and thought that the more people in and around the church on Sunday morning, the better.

I sorta fell in to the latter camp, because I know that there are several people who come here on Sunday morning precisely not to attend worship. One person arrives early and leaves before the service starts. When I first discovered this phenomenon, I was peeved that

someone would not sit with the rest of the congregation for an hour in worship. My ego got involved at that point and was piqued that someone would actually not prefer to hear my sonorous voice and heavenly speech.

I got over it. I stuffed my over-active ego back into my pocket, because I realized that worship is not about me nor about what I say or do or think. Worship is about us and what happens when we attend to something bigger than our measly little egos. And that's why I depart from the line of thinking that says we can worship alone.

For sure, we can do *something* alone. We can meditate alone. We can cogitate alone. We can remember, reminisce and recall alone. And we can call that solitary experience worship if we please. Unitarian Universalists are famous for re-defining words to suit their needs. *God*, for me, does not refer to an old codger sitting on a cloud throwing lightning bolts at those who displease him. We can re-define God and all those other problem words, like *religion*, *prayer*, *blessing* and *grace*. So why not re-define *worship*?

Well, because the word still works for the experience I have in church. When I use the word worship, I mean a corporate activity, something we do together. Worship, for me, happens in a community. I know that Unitarian Universalism is not dogmatic and not doctrine-centered. I think it's relation-centered, so maybe we all come to be part of a community—each in different ways— but all part of something larger than ourselves. Even the folks on the patio surfing the internet are part of the Sunday morning community at that Texas church. As are the folks who don't enter this sanctuary, but who still come to this church on Sunday morning. I'd be pleased if more people joined us in here, but I know that what transpires in a worship service does not appeal to everyone.

I think we like to be on the journey together. A colleague of mine says that Unitarian Universalists are not sheep, blindly following a shepherd. He says they more closely resemble goats: frisky, nimble,

curious, aggressive, highly independent, natural escape artists, and willing to chew on just about anything.

But even goats gather themselves together in a herd. They are not like bears, living solitary lives. Even though we are highly individualistic, we like company, the presence of other people and the chance to communicate. Communicate and community both come from the Latin, and guess what? They both have the same ultimate Indo-European root: yet another word meaning to change.

I want to say something about Candles of Community. If you read the newsletter, you will already know something of my thoughts about Candles of Community, which is also known as Joys and Sorrows or Joys and Concerns. I stopped including that element in the worship service, because it had become a distraction and was not practiced in a worshipful manner. Part of that is due to the minister not informing the congregation how this element should be practiced. I tried to set the right tone in my introduction of candles, but I feel that my words were not heard. I could have been more pro-active in my approach and that is a mistake I will not repeat again.

Another thing I will not do again is to tamper with the order of service for this congregation on my own volition. Any major changes henceforth will involve the Worship Working Group. I made a big mistake in not involving other people before I uni-laterally deep-sixed Candles of Community.

Although I believe my impetuous actions will make for a better worship experience for more people, I understand now the benefit of corporate administration of a corporate activity. I'm a young and impetuous minister, what can I say? I'm sorry. I lost my mind.

Personally, Jeff Briere speaking here, I have no issue with this element of the service. I kinda like it. But Jeff Briere is the kinda guy who also has no problem getting up in front of people and shooting his mouth off. So that I like candles is not a surprise. Also

makes it easier for me to create a worship service, in that I don't have to plan for about 5 to 9 minutes, on average. As minister, however, I believe Joys and Sorrows is better practiced in small group settings and not in large group worship.

Many UU congregations have moved away from this ritual. The setting for worship is intimidating for people uncomfortable with public speaking. The invitation to speak about one's life through a microphone is more attractive to extroverts, and extremely hard to resist for people with boundary issues who enjoy an audience. So Joys and Sorrows can routinely be dominated by a small number of voices. Further, the unpredictability of Joys and Sorrows can affect the message, timing, and emotional content of the service for visitors and members alike.

The purpose of a Joys and Sorrows ritual is to relate an experience in a way that the emotions and events described become transpersonal. Everyone in the congregation should feel some connection, even if the experience is one they have never had, because the way the joy or concern is expressed ought to be clear, brief, and universal. And that wasn't happening here.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

In Christian communities, the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep and is used for minister and congregation. With the Bible as a guide, the minister can safely lead the flock to the Promised Land. Interesting metaphor, but it doesn't apply to Unitarian Universalist ministers and their goats. A nautical metaphor may be more appropriate.

I am not some great visionary, but I do feel what I think Christopher Columbus felt when he sailed west to get to the east. I don't really know what's out there. But I'm sure that we gotta sail in this direction. And I for sure cannot do this alone, so I am glad for the Worship Working Group and the prospect of increased congre-

gational participation in the worship service. Whether we land in the New World or in the Spice Islands, I believe we will get there safely and knit together even more closely for having journeyed together.

WOYAYA

READING No. 456

We extinguish this flame but not
the light of truth,
the warmth of community,
or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until
we are together again.

POSTLUDE