

Worship, Worth-ship, What?
Rev. Diane Rollert
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“How did this word *worship* creep back into our vocabulary?” someone recently asked me. Ok, I admit it. It’s all my fault. Well, nearly all my fault. This congregation had already been in transition around questions of language when I arrived three and a half years ago. After all, Sunday service leaders had already been dubbed “liturgists,” and you had officially voted to name yourselves “The Unitarian *Church* of Montreal” (a name which, though problematic for some, is surely preferable to “The Church of the Messiah,” the legal though often hidden name of this congregation since the 1850s).

Funny how personal language can be. Funny in this province where the absolutely worst things you can say in French are all related to words of religion. Translate *Christ*, *tabernacle*, *chalice*, or *host* into French and we’d all be blushing right now. Say the same words in France and no one would blink an eye, unless you happened to be standing next to a tourist from Quebec.

I had to laugh at myself the other day, when someone told me that she could live with words like *church* and *liturgist*. “But *worship*?” she said. “*Worship* raises my hackles.” Coming from a secular Jewish background *worship* feels universal to me, while *church* and *liturgist* feel unfamiliarly Christian. They used to raise my hackles, but somehow, I’ve learned to live with them.

Language is personal, cultural, slippery as an eel, and oh, so inadequate.

It was a dark and stormy night, about three years ago, when I was sitting upstairs in the Thomas Room with the Sunday Services Committee. It was a different group then from the current group now. “What if we renamed ourselves the Worship Committee?” they asked. “Can we do that?”

“Why not?” I said. After all, every Unitarian congregation I had known used the word “worship”. The Unitarian Universalist Association had been using the word for years. The Canadian Unitarian Council had commissioned a workshop entitled “Weaving Our Worship” co-authored by Nicoline Guerrier, one of our very own members. And now we have the UU Worship Web, a fabulous online resource of readings, meditations, chalice lightings and anything else you might need for a service or a celebration. Browse the websites of many of our congregations in North America and if you are looking for something to do on a Sunday morning, you are bound to find it under the heading “Worship.”

Worship for me was defined by the words of Unitarian minister Kenneth Patton (which we read together at the beginning of the service):

*Let us worship not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears.
Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,*

*with the full outstretching of our spirits.
Let us worship and let us learn to love.*

Patton, a confirmed humanist, began his career in ministry at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin in 1942. His prose and poetry would establish him as the voice of the newly emerging philosophy of naturalistic humanism, which upheld human compassion, reason, and science, without the need for references to God, or the supernatural.

As one current Humanist group puts it quite beautifully:

Naturalistic Humanism, also known as Ethical, Democratic, or Scientific Humanism relishes “the challenge of living with the naturalistic and impersonal world-view created by science:

*There was a time when I was not, and a time will come when I will cease to be.
What will I do with the short interval that constitutes my entire existence?
I will write a life story that makes my interval a story of high purpose and significant meaning--a moment of grace, tolerance, exuberance, joy.
I am a child of the stars: the planet, my home; all life, my body; the entire human species, past, present, and future...in my awareness. (Humanist Community, 1992)*

This was Patton’s project, a project that he carried to Boston in 1949, as minister of the Charles Street Meeting House, a fascinating experiment in our history. Patton was called to the Meeting House by the Universalists of Massachusetts to redefine Universalism by bringing the arts of all religions and cultures into “a religion for one world.”

Imagine Patton painting a mural of the Andromeda Galaxy on the church walls (the meeting house had been originally built as a Baptist church in 1804). Imagine this happening in the early 1950s. He was a minister who refused to wear a robe, who gave addresses rather than preach sermons, who preferred the term meeting house to church sanctuary. But worship? Worship was a word that he wanted us to wholly and fully embrace with our eyes, ears and fingertips.

In the spirit of Kenneth Patton, worship gives room for the shaping of worth, of ourselves and each other, of considering things of ultimate worth, of valuing this time as a community as more than a program, service, or celebration – all words that could be too easily confused with more superficial things. In Patton’s mind, worship had nothing to do with the supernatural or the praise of a deity. It was all about the glory of what is present to us here and now. He rearranged the meeting house seating into a circle to enable all those gathered to face each other, to symbolize their unity. That’s why I had the seats rearranged today, so that we can face each other to open “the windows of our beings with the full outstretching of our spirits.”

So, on that fateful night, the Sunday Services Committee became the Worship Committee. It happened without any fanfare. It took some time to get the name into the church’s official

documents. Somehow, mysteriously, the name kept reverting back to "Sunday Services" in places like the church directory and the Board's minutes, but eventually it stuck.

Then one Sunday (in December of 2007), as an admitted experiment, I added the phrase "Let us deepen into worship," to the end of the Welcome and Announcements, as a way to mark the transition into the lighting of the chalice. No one said a word, and, well, it just stayed. I waited, I watched, I wondered, and for a long time there was silence.

[Song 34 – *Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire*]

This December, the Worship Committee decided that it would be nice to take some time to expand our vision. What if we had a casual get-together with anyone who was interested to talk about the present services and to brainstorm about the future? An e-mail went out, and a flurry of responses came back– mostly focused on the word worship.

The word worship originally comes from "worth-ship" meaning giving worth to something. I personally find this an acceptable definition. However, for many people worship has become strongly associated with Christianity. Wikipedia states worship is considered the central act of Christian identity, the purpose of which is to give honour or worth to God. Another less Christian definition states that worship is an act manifesting a state of religious devotion typically directed to one or more deities.

I really do not think that this is has anything to do with Unitarianism. Could you not come up with an appropriate name for the committee that describes what it really does and, at the same time does not upset people? I appreciate the fact you are a hard working well intentioned group and am sure you are certainly creative enough to resolve the committee name problem before it becomes a major issue.

Diana Kleins

If there are those of us who want to worship, I would rather not be among them, as I feel like a voyeur when this is happening. I would rather that worshipers and non-believers could have something that can be described as "acknowledging the grand mystery in which we live".

Denny Meyer

I suggest that "deepening into stillness" would suit me much better than worship. As someone who does not believe in God (non-militantly) I find "worship" "prayer" and "God" the most difficult to relate to.

As for the name of the committee I think Sunday services committee is just fine. So what if there's an occasional Wednesday or Thursday!

I think the theists in the congregation have been well served: notably the following list of common terms: church, minister, sermon, sanctuary, liturgist, faith .. I'm sure there are more evidences of our willingness to allow the faiths of others.

BUT you could throw us non-believers a bone now and then ... I'm OK with meditation, reflection, stillness ...

Yours in stillness,

Prue Rains

Anxiety started to run a bit high. "I think we had a tempest in a teapot this past week," Christine Rourke said to me, "but we like tea." A theologically (or perhaps you could say a philosophically) diverse group did gather to share ideas about vision for worship or Sunday services, and ideas and compassion flowed. We agreed that we needed to address the topic of "worship" as a wounded word.

[Sung Response, verse 1: *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*]

The longer I'm a member of the UCM and a confirmed Unitarian/Universalist, the more I find that actions are so much more important than words. It's what we do and how we are that is important and not whether we call ourselves a church and pray in silence during a worship or, a congregation that meditates during a service, or a society that reflects in silence during Sunday meetings.

The fact is, Unitarian Universalist is a religion. A theologically liberal religion characterized by its support for free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and consists mostly of people that are seeking a Spiritual Community that has no hang-ups about the more common religious expressions we like to use such as worship.

Denis Barsalo

I don't think it's fair that certain fundamentalist Christian groups get to be the exclusive arbiters of what some words mean, or have the exclusive right to use them. And I am really, really tired of explaining "no, not that kind of church... or that kind of worship..." when I tell people who I am. Still, I don't want a new word either: I am mistrusted when I use words with religious meaning, but at least that gives me a place to start. The blank incomprehension that meets neologisms doesn't even give that.

Worship, for me, ties to the first source- the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder. Worship is an opportunity to share that sense of wonder at the awesome-ness of the Universe. I don't think that feeling awe requires one to believe in a deity to praise as the source or creator of the wonders (though I personally do believe in something like that).

"Hey, look at that! Wow!" doesn't require knowing or understanding what "that" is (though for some, that heightens the experience), or even agreeing on what "that" is, it just takes a moment out of the headlong rush of the everyday to stop, look, and listen.

And... I like the idea that part of the reason we come together on Sunday morning and other times is to shape the worth of our own lives and each other's.

Kirstin McKeown

[Sung response, verse 2, *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*]

So what is this all about? There's a lot passion here as well as a lot of ambivalence. In the past year we've tackled words like *faith, God, spirituality, sin, salvation and truth*. They were hot topics that elicited a lot more response with many deeply personal stories told. The response to *worship* was more about the feeling that things are changing here.

Many here, who came of age in the 1940s and 50s, remember what it was like to have life prescribed by religion. They fled religious traditions, particularly Christian traditions, that they found suffocating and often personally injuring. They saw the harm that was done in the name of religion then. Today, they watch shifting trends towards fundamentalism in the world and it frightens them with good reason. So, anything that reminds them of the old time religion is hard to stomach.

Given Quebec's history, it's no surprise that the most powerful forbidden words are religious words. *Vénération* and *église* may not be on a list of unpublishable words, but they can still cause many to squirm here.

Yet, as I told you when I first began my wounded word series more than a year ago, we're seeing whole new generations who may have never grown up in religious communities, who crave something that is missing in their lives now. They want to liberate these words from their old definitions. They thirst for a living tradition that is connected to our past.

Trying to meld together our contrasting needs and gut reactions when we come from such wide-ranging experience is not easy. Having no litmus test for faith, no dogma or creed, means being open to many expressions and understandings of the mystery that brings us together. It means being open to hearing the language of others and making the effort to go beyond our own understandings and assumptions. And I'll say what I always say, if we can't do this here in our very own community, then what hope can we have for the world?

No too long ago, Prue wrote to Kirstin that "the acceptance and presence of non-believers is what makes the Unitarian church unique. We should be celebrating that difference," she said, "not camouflaging it with the language of other churches."

I absolutely agree that we would lose so much if we only had believers or non-believers here. The diversity we share is wonderfully inspiring and deepening, especially when we dare to listen and speak from our own truths. We all belong. We draw our inspiration from

many sources. That's what defines us as a community. If anyone tells you otherwise, they are just plain wrong.

I'm not proposing camouflage, but I do feel it is my role to push us all to be more open and flexible. I'll never forget the visitor who arrived one Sunday morning asking what time the mass began. The foyer was atwitter with concern that he had come to the wrong place. But when you live in a world where all religious words have been defined by the Catholic Church, services and celebrations are not necessarily part of your vocabulary. My hope is that we can welcome newcomers and give them time to find new language without excluding them because they haven't been initiated into ours.

It is very important for me to understand that when some of you hear the word *worship* it means bowing down to a deity and that troubles you. It is important for you to know that when I hear the word, I'm hearing Kenneth Patton proclaim the wonder of the universe.

Whatever we do, let us hope that we can learn to lighten up. I am grateful to Nancy Kleins, who wrote to tell me, that when she recently picked up a package of asparagus she saw that the producer's name was Altar. "From now on," she says, "I'm going to limit my worshipping to Worshipping at the Altar of Asparagus!" Hey, whatever works for you!

I want to close with an exercise that comes from a suggestion from Mickey Van Riel.

"Instead of resting on the past, why not look ahead and create something unique that fits us well, something entirely new for everybody, that represents our vision, why we are here together in this group of people," she writes. "I am sure there are many creative minds among us. Let us be trailblazers and create something fitting just for us, projecting to the outside world an invitation to those who are searching for depth in their lives, away from the former paradigms."

I'd like to invite you to write your own words for what it is we do here. Perhaps "worship" still works for you. If so, write that down. Perhaps there is something else that would be an invitation to greater depth in our lives. Write that down. We'll collect the cards and I'll share the results in the weeks to come.

Go now, and share with each other what you wrote. Be true to yourselves, but listen deeply.

[Sung response, verse 3 *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*]