

# The Needs We Bring To Worship

November 14, 2004

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ROGER: For some worship connects us with the past.

VOICE ONE: I come to church Sunday because I need to feel my roots. When I was a child, my parents took me to church. Today when I sit in the congregation I remember my parents. This worship service is a visible reminder of my ties with former generations. It represents a liberal religious heritage. It stands for the deepest longings of human beings over the centuries. Worship recalls my links to human history, reminding me of my roots, giving me a foundation on which to stand. This is worship: a connection with the past.

ROGER: For others worship is a time for intellectual stimulation.

VOICE TWO: I need to explore the meaning of my life. I work as an engineer during the week. I enjoy the work, but I like to think about the big questions. Does God exist? Why am I here on this earth? What is evil? Do we respect the worth and dignity of everyone, even mass killers? Especially in the realm of theology and philosophy, the worship service has a critical role. Nowhere else in my life am I supported in asking such questions. Here I am encouraged to think about religion. This is worship: a time of intellectual stimulation.

ROGER: For others worship is a time to feel the warmth of friendship.

VOICE THREE: I need friends. At work we are always in competition with each other for promotions and raises, and when the economy is slow, we worry about getting laid off. Here for one hour a week I can sit with my friends and feel free to be myself. We sing together during the hymns, cry together, laugh together, and drink coffee together after the worship. I do not have to schedule, or plan, or organize to see my friends. They are here sitting in nearly the same place week after week, year after year. This is worship: a time to feel the warmth of friendship.

ROGER: For others worship is a tool of social change.

VOICE FOUR: I need to hear sermons about civil liberties, gay marriage, peace in Iraq, and health care for everyone. I need to sing hymns about justice, equality and freedom. I need to hear readings and music from Native-American, African, Asian and Latino traditions, as well as from European sources. What I need is a revolutionary worship service. I need worship to exhort the congregation to push forward, to press on in making the world a better place. This is worship: a tool for social change.

ROGER: For still others worship is a time of spiritual renewal.

VOICE FIVE: By Sunday morning I feel beaten down by life. Reporters fill the news with grim stories about all the problems in the world. My children seem to have many problems. I struggle with medical issues. I do not expect the worship service to fix my problems, but I need a service that will give me hope. I need help to feel more positive about things and encouragement to feel grateful that I am alive. I hope the service will uplift my spirits so that I have a reason to keep going another week. The music can make me feel better, can lift my soul. The readings and prayers, and especially the silence can help me feel at peace. A hopeful sermon with a positive message can inspire and renew me. This is worship: a time of spiritual renewal.

These are some of the major needs that people bring to worship. Worship is:

A connection with the past.

A time of intellectual stimulation.

A time to feel the warmth of friendship.

A tool for social change.

A time of spiritual renewal.

My ambition is to meet all these needs. Not all at once, of course. Still, I hope that if you attend here each week, over time you will experience tradition, intellectual stimulation, friendship, the challenge of social action, and the feeling of spiritual renewal.

Of course, you may like some parts of the worship service more than others. This hour Sunday morning can test our tolerance. If part of the service does not work for you, take a breath and remember—what does not work for you may be exactly what works for someone else.

Recently someone put a copy of a 1951 order of service from All Souls Unitarian Church in my mail box here at the church. It fascinated me, and I have enclosed a copy in this morning's order of service.

This congregation was founded in September of 1951 by All Souls. As you can see, at the bottom of the All Souls Order of Service it says "MONTGOMERY COUNTY UNITARIAN CENTER, The service today as on succeeding Sundays is transmitted in full over a special telephone line to the Woman's Club of Chevy Chase."

That was us. This congregation listened to the All Soul's service as it came out of a loudspeaker surrounded by flowers. So you have before you an example of one of our first orders of service. I was interested in the similarities and differences between it and our services today.

Look at the picture of All Souls Unitarian Church. It is a beautiful building with a steeple pointed toward heaven. Over the centuries many theologians have taught that the earth is only a temporary abode. Our true home is in heaven. The church steeple, pointing toward heaven, reflects this theology.

In contrast, the architecture of the building we are in is symbolic of the change in Unitarian Universalist theology that took place in the 1950s. This worship space, placed in a forest with its windows looking out on the trees says that nature is important to us. Our wonderful flower display also suggests the importance of the beauty of nature. Instead of worshipping a God up in the sky, our architecture says that we worship the mystery we find in beauty of the earth and the trees, the birds and the squirrels, the winds and the streams.

Like our service, the 1951 order of service asks people to be quiet before the service. One of you wrote to me this week saying:

“I personally would prefer personal silence, music, and meditation once people enter from the lobby as preparation for worship . . . I doubt most people can enter worship and instantly turn off the distractions of the day . . . which I sense impairs their ability to fully enter into worship . . .”

In keeping with this need, next week I invite you to be quite when you enter this space before the service.

The words of the 1951 Doxology use more traditional religious language than the words we sang today. Still, like the 1951 service, I like to start worship with a strong piece of music. The music says we are starting now and what we are doing here is important.

In 1951 Unitarian worship continued with the Lord’s Prayer. Today in place of the Lord’s Prayer we have the lighting of a chalice, a symbol that is now nearly universal in Unitarian Universalist congregations. In April of 1941 the Unitarian Service Committee had an office in Lisbon, dedicated to helping rescue Europe’s intellectual, academic and political leaders who were refugees from the Nazis. The Service Committee commissioned one refugee to create a symbol for the Committee. He painted a flaming chalice, which the Service Committee adopted as its emblem. In the 1970s the Unitarian Universalist Association embraced the flaming chalice as its symbol and in the late 1970s congregations started to light a chalice at the start of worship. We have done so for more than ten years.

Next All Souls had singing from the choir, what they called in 1951 an Anthem and what we today call “Call to Worship.” We follow a pattern of music and words and music. This is so that the music staff has a few seconds to find the music for the next piece, change the stops on the organ and take a deep breath. Sometimes the choir watches in amusement as Mary Darne, having let the congregation in song, races to the choir loft to direct the next piece before I finish a reading.

We next have the welcome, something absent from the 1951 service. I have mixed feelings about asking visitors to say where they are from. As a shy person, if I was visiting a church for the first time, I would never want to tell people where I am from. On the other hand, many people are extroverts. So I try to find ways of telling both shy and outgoing persons that they are welcome.

After the welcome my hope is that the next elements of the service will start to move us into a more reflective, peaceful, spiritual mood. So we sing a hymn, followed by a reading.

Fifty-three years ago All Souls had a scripture reading. Reformers created the modern protestant worship service during the reformation in Europe at

a time when few people could read and very few could afford a copy of a Bible. The reformers wanted people to have a direct experience of the scripture. Therefore each week they would read a passage to their congregations translated into the language the people could understand. As you can see, they were still following this practice at All Souls in 1951. Today our readings come from many sources, including the Bible, reflecting a theological shift.

Each week we take the offering, as they took it in 1951. We earn about 24,000 dollars a year from the offering, supporting our total operating budget of \$900,000.

In 1951 we had a prayer and a choral response. Today we have “Centering in Words” followed by centering in silence, singing Spirit of Life, a short prayer and the Anthem. Again my hope is that these elements of the service will continue to move us into a more reflective, peaceful, spiritual mood.

Carolyn McDade wrote *Spirit of Life*, in the late 1970s and published in our hymnal in 1993. We started singing it every Sunday in 1996. Today, like us, many congregations sing it each week. It is a prayer, with the words “spirit of life” replacing the more traditional word “God.” It is often the most powerful moment in our worship service. The Rev. Meg Riley tells the story of when her mother was in the hospital with a serious illness. Meg recalls that her mother said it was *Spirit of Life* that held her through those long lonely nights in the hospital. She would sing it softly to herself.

A short prayer, provides a transition to the Anthem. In 1951 it was a time for the congregation to sing. Here it is always a pleasure to listen to the choir. I have the best seat and I am always calmed and soothed by the music.

Next is the sermon. The modern sermon first appeared during the Reformation. The reformers read the scripture to the people in their own language, but this was not enough. People needed help understanding the old words of the Bible. So Martin Luther and other reformers introduced the modern sermon as a lecture about the Bible passage. They copied the university lecture, even replacing the multicolored vestments of the priests with the black robes of the university professors. In many denominations the sermon replaced the communion and the central focus of the Sunday worship. Only in the Catholic Church and the Episcopal service did the serving of communion remain the central event of the worship.

In recent years some congregations tried to build membership by de-emphasizing preaching. Poetry, dance and drama have been added. Some churches have installed large television screens and will show a short part of a movie or a television show to illustrate the sermon topic. A few churches have eliminated the minister and show sermons by famous preachers on televisions screens, a modern version of this congregation listening to the voice of A. Powell Davies preaching from All Souls in 1951.

Still, the live sermon remains popular. Many people still like to hear a sermon from a real live flesh and blood human being. Many people still like to shake the hand of the minister and to engage in conversation after the service.

When I entered the ministry, a colleague told me: “The primary element of the sermon, beyond its instructional value, is the element of personality. For the sermon is a public confession: at times merely a confession of dry academic interests; and at other times a highly personal confession of

doubt, weakness, fear, and at still other times a confession of faith in God, history, people. But it is always truth—at least truth strained through the living flesh and churning blood of a single human being.” (David Rankin)

When the sermon is over, we sing a closing hymn, say the closing words and the flame goes out. The minister walks to the back to shake the hands of the congregation as many head for coffee hour or to pick up their children.

This, then, is what we are about Sunday mornings. Gandhi said that we cannot have worship without sacrifice. Each Sunday we Unitarian Universalists sacrifice our time, our money, and our individuality. We let go of some of our individual preferences so we can be together in a community. If some of the words and music are not what you would have selected, take a breath and remember they may be just what others need to hear.

Worship at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist church is:

A connection with the past,  
A time of intellectual stimulation,  
A time to feel the warmth of friendship,  
A tool for social change,  
And a time of spiritual renewal.

May our Sunday mornings be a time of recollection, a time of reflection, a time of fellowship, a time of challenge, and a time to center into the mystery that moves and has its being in your life.