

**WHAT IS WORSHIP?**  
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The topic of worship is always a hot one on the UU Ministers' chat lines on the internet.. Various definitions and understandings have been offered of what it's all about, and whether or not our services or programmes really are, or even should be, worship. The more rational and humanist folks in our movement, who are represented in the ministry as well as in congregations like this one, tend to shy away from a word which is associated with traditional churches and with liturgy and smells and bells and the things that some of us have been trying to get away from. The more mystically or spiritually inclined among us tend to embrace the word and feel that a Sunday service or programme has not been worth much unless it's been worshipful, although we have a hard time saying what we mean by that. This discussion is important, because it involves our sense of what we're trying to do in our services, and our intentions are necessarily going to have an effect on what we actually do.



Here's one understanding of worship offered by UU minister Brent Smith:

*The purpose of worship is the public expression and celebration of the vision of the church as a communal body seeking to embody a particular mission ..... in order to transform the lives of the participants in tangible and relevant ways. The "spiritual need" that it serves is the individual human need to have a larger meaning and purpose to one's life ..... .*

I like that definition, even though it's a little complex. "*Public expression and celebration of the vision of the church*" -- yes, that sounds like worship to me. And seeing the ultimate goal as transforming the lives of the participants -- that seems a worthy cause, certainly. And recognizing the human need to have an undergirding meaning and purpose in life and the role of worship in clarifying that -- oh yes, I find that very much worthwhile.

Did you notice, I wonder, that the words *worthy* and *worthwhile* cropped up there and are rather like the word *worship*? Much as I like Brent Smith's explanation of worship, I want to offer a simpler one, easier to carry in our minds perhaps, though it may well need fleshing out with more detail. What I offer is the understanding of worship which was first given to me long before I entered ministry, by a fellow-member in the Hamilton Unitarian church at that time, Adrian Mak. Adrian's a bit of a linguist, and he told me that the word *worship* is derived from

*worth-shape*. It can be a noun (the shape of our worth) or a verb (the act of shaping our worth).  
Worship, *worth-shape*.

It's so simple, and it has meant so much to me over the years to discover that explanation. No longer do I have the faint feeling which used to linger at the back of my mind, and perhaps lingers in yours, that worship has to do with bowing down before an omnipotent Being in abject obedience. Now I'm free to embrace worship as a vital activity, one which goes on in my life all the time, but very specially and intentionally when we meet for that specific purpose, to explore what is worthy of our allegiance and aspiration, to shape our worth, together.

That's the good news, for me at least. Now the bad news. It's not really quite so simple. And that's because WE'RE not so simple. We're all different, and even if we agree that we meet together for worth-shape, we won't all want to do it in the same way. One of my colleagues, sent me a paper once called "*Discover Your Spiritual Type*" which is a little like the Meyers Briggs personality type index, but specific to religious life. I'm going to take from it some of the questions about worship style for you to apply to yourselves -- and although I've been with you only once before, I know that there will be big variations in your responses to these questions. Ponder them to yourselves and perhaps they'll be part of our reflection-and-response time.

Let's consider first the **Order of Service**. Do you believe a carefully planned and orderly service is vital, do you like a service that allows for spontaneity and isn't too rigid, or do you feel that it's not the Sunday service but living our faith in action that matters most? On the **timing** of the service, is beginning and ending services on time important to you, or are you prepared to extend the meeting time when people feel moved to do so. Do you feel that **prayer or meditation** is important to express thoughts, feelings, and concerns, that words or silence or music evoke a sense of holiness or presence, or that your life and work are your prayer and meditation? Are **songs or hymns** important to express your emotions, beliefs, and values? Do you mainly feel that music brings us into deeper connection with one another or that songs inspire people to greater dedication and action?

For many of us, the **sermon** is a central part of worship. Do you feel that good sermons have the power to transform people and change lives, or that the sermon that matters is the one we live, speaking louder than anything we say? What's the **major purpose** of the service for you -- to express your faith, to experience oneness with each other, or to help us live our principles?

From your answers to questions such as those, you might find that you are closest to one of four suggested spiritual types -- the intellectual, the heart-centred, the mystic, or the visionary. None of these is better than the others, but which one you are will affect how you express what you mean by worship and which kinds of services you find most worshipful, most worthwhile. Just as finding our Meyers Briggs personality type has been a revelation to some of us who suddenly discovered that other people see things through completely different lenses than ourselves but **both ways of seeing are all right**, so finding our spiritual types can make a big difference to our worship life.

It can mean that when we find ourselves irritated by what seems like an over-emphasis on repetitive liturgy, we remember that there are mystics among us who find ritual not only comforting but a great help to their sense of belonging and of oneness with the rest of the those gathered in worship. It can mean that when, on the other hand, we become impatient or annoyed with the intellectuals who want a talk and discussion and don't much care about the rest, we remember that the life of the mind is the most treasured aspect of some people's being, and shaping that life, that worth, is their worship. It can mean that if Social Action seems to be taking over not only our midweek activities but our Sunday meetings, we'll recall that for some of us worship only has meaning if it affects the ways we act in the world. It can mean that we see worship as much greater than the particular format which expresses our own personality and that in fact too close a fit with our own style may even mean a rather narrow form of worship. These comfortable pews, even if they come in the shape of ordinary chairs, may lull us to sleep!

One of the major 20<sup>th</sup> century figures of Universalism, Angus MacLean, wrote a book called [The Wind in Both Ears](#), in which he talks about what worship can mean to a religious liberal. He tells there the story of how in 1928, fresh from graduate study, he attended his first convention of Universalists and was asked to speak on the educational values of the convention programme. Naively, he says, he included the convention's **worship services** in his analysis, asking why they had so many and what values underlay the services. *"They assumed I was against worship,"* he writes, *"because I suggested thinking about it. A [woman] rose with heaving bosom and declared, 'I am for worship.' [It] made me shy of ever mentioning the subject again. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that [understanding] worship ..... is of some real consequence to the individual and civilization alike."*

Before discussing what he thinks the consequence of our Sunday worship together can be, MacLean emphasizes his conviction, which I guess most of us would share, that worship isn't limited to Sundays. He writes,

*I don't say prayers except publicly in church ....., yet I think I worship a great deal. I even think I know what the old-time religionists meant by 'praying without ceasing'. I may be reading an article in the Saturday Review, or maybe a newspaper, or one of the Greek or Shakespearian tragedies, or even a 'whodunnit,' and I am suddenly arrested by a challenge to some of my unfounded assumptions, to my pet prejudices and certainties, or to my irresponsible vacillations, pretenses and self-deceptions, and I have to make corrections in thought and behaviour. It may be, too, that I am made aware of the deeply rooted destructiveness that is dormant within me. .... discovering my impatience with Hamlet because he did not at once dispatch the king when he was at his prayers is a deeply revealing experience. It may be, on the other hand, that my sense of dedication and convictions and values are confirmed and enhanced, and I feel very good indeed. It may be that I am so overwhelmed by the beauty with which a truth is stated or lived that I am speechless with wonder and gratitude. .... Just as much can happen, too, when I converse with persons, or work with them. The truth can [also] hit like lightning when I am mowing the lawn, or stirring the oatmeal in the morning.*

..... I am sure I have stirred some impatience by now, says MacLean. "You're talking about things everyone experiences, [but] what about **corporate** worship? Why do we need a church? Why do we have to come here and sing hymns with outlandish theology? Why not leave worship in life, if that's where it is?" *I have much sympathy with such inquiries* (he says). ..... *The job of worship which I have suggested calls for mental activity -- a feeling out for the truth, for dedication and beauty, [but] I think it also calls for a **communal** expression. It is no little matter that here we acknowledge by our presence that we share the hazards of life, and that life has to be taken seriously **in common as well as individually**. .... when we walk into a church to engage in worship, we may be doing the most significant thing human beings have ever done.*

At various times in ministry, I've led or been part of an Adult Education programme with which some of you may be familiar, called "*Building Your Own Theology*". Part of the course is about the many varieties of religious experience which human beings have reported through the millennia of our history, most of which could be called "*worshipful*" in the sense of shaping our worth, or being about what we consider most worthwhile. Ancient and modern readings are used to illustrate these experiences, ranging from the blinding light of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus to Albert Schweitzer's adoption of the phrase "*reverence for life*" to shape his work.

One of the experiences explored in that course, which I've found myself particularly drawn to, perhaps because it's at the same time somehow familiar to me and yet very different from my ordinary life, was described by the American philosophical nature writer Annie Dillard.

She tells of a young girl who had been blind but had surgery to restore her sight. When her doctor took the bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was **no longer blind** said that she saw a “*tree with lights in it.*” Annie Dillard was struck by the idea of an ordinary tree being seen as lit up in this extraordinary way and yearned to see that same thing for herself. She writes,

*It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all, and **I saw** the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame ..... It was less like seeing than like **being for the first time seen**, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but **I'm still spending the power**. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colours died, the cells **unflamed** and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until **at that moment I was lifted and struck**. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and **a new light roars in spate through the crack**, and the mountains slam.*

Well: move over, Moses! That's more vivid than the burning bush, isn't it? To those of us whose sacred symbol is a flaming chalice and whose first acknowledged source of faith is direct experience of mystery and wonder, that tree with lights in it is a powerful description of what calls to us in our most profound moments of worship, the **truth that hits like lightning**, as Angus MacLean said. Annie Dillard had been looking for it for years; she was **ready to see** that tree, and I believe that an openness and yearning like hers can make us more ready for the worship experience, too. I'm reminded of what Abraham Maslow wrote about peak experiences and his conviction that most people can have them if they want to. If they want to **and if they search**, like Dillard, “*through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years*” -- kind of like a Hound of Heaven in reverse. And when it happened to her, it was like that “**knowing and being known**” that St. Paul talks about; as she says, “*It was less like seeing than like being for the first time **seen**, knocked breathless by a powerful glance*”.

That effect of being knocked breathless brought about a re-shaping of Annie Dillard's sense of what was real and worthwhile. The 18<sup>th</sup> century poet William Blake was a great sceptic and questioner about religious matters, but he was also dead set against trying to confine the human spirit within the bounds of rationalism. He was thought to be more than a little strange by

most people who knew him, even insane, because his fantasy life was so much richer than is usually considered normal. Here's how he described what some people saw as craziness:

*"It will be questioned, When the sun rises, do you not see a round disk somewhat like a gold guinea? Oh, no, no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host, crying Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!"*

Can this kind of thing happen in our worship services? We may not see trees with lights in them, or burning bushes, or be knocked breathless, or feel struck like a bell, or hear the heavenly host singing -- at least not very often. But the essence of that, the sense of connection with the Whole or the Holy, the awareness of ourselves as a known and treasured part of the universe, the conviction that we can serve to make life more harmonious in the same way that a bell can be struck -- that can be the essence of all our worship, I believe. If you're an intellectual in worship, you'll be open to the spiritual high which can be experienced when something moves you to a moment of new understanding or when you read a passage that you perceive as true and transformative. If you're heart-centred, you'll find yourself able to experience the holy and sacred in the actualities of our time together, to be present fully in the moment or hour of worship and personally transformed by it. If you're a mystic, you'll pursue (and inspire others to pursue) the transformative "inner life" suggested to you by the music, the tone, the atmosphere of the service. If you're a visionary, you'll find in our worship together, and take back to your everyday life, ways of bringing about a transformed "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all".

As we now take some time to reflect on worship and perhaps respond with our own thoughts, I suggest that you may wish to frame your responses with the words, "***My sense of worship is .....***" recognizing that our styles may be very different, but that we have a common need to give shape to our worth and to what we hold worthwhile.

I invite your reflection and response now.