

Worship? To Whom? For What?
The Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
February 20, 2011

FIRST READING

“Ode to Joy” - English translation (from Beethoven’s 9th Symphony)

Oh friends, not these tones!

Rather, let us raise our voices in more pleasing

And more joyful sounds!

Joy! (Joy!)

Joy! (Joy!)

Joy, beautiful spark of divinity, daughter of Elysium,
 We enter, drunk with fire, into your sanctuary, heavenly (daughter)!
 Your magic reunites what custom strictly divided.
 All men become brothers where your gentle wing rests.
 Whoever has had the great fortune to be a friend's friend,
 Whoever has won a devoted wife, join in our jubilation!
 Indeed, whoever can call even one soul his own on this earth!
 And whoever was never able to, must creep
 Tearfully away from this band!
 Joy all creatures drink at the breasts of nature;
 All good, all bad, follow her trail of roses.
 Kisses she gave us, and wine, a friend, proved in death;
 Pleasure was given to the worm, and the cherub stands before God.
Before God!
 Glad, as His suns fly through the Heaven's glorious design,
 Run, brothers, your path, joyful, as a hero to victory.
 Be embraced, millions!
 This kiss for the whole world!
 Brothers, above the starry canopy must a loving Father dwell.
 Do you bow down, millions?
 Do you sense the Creator, world?
 Seek Him beyond the starry canopy!
 Beyond the stars must He dwell.

SECOND READING

“Let Us Worship” (reading #437 in hymnal)

Kenneth Patton

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;

Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old,
the wistfulness of people in all times of life.

We seek to understand the shyness behind the arrogance, the fear behind the pride,
the tenderness behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

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.

Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding,

with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body,
to those who have fallen in love with life.

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

SERMON

Worship? To Whom? For What? **The Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

In the summer of 1989 I worked as a summer stock carpenter, building sets for the Idaho Shakespeare Festival. When my job ended in July, my girlfriend, Janet, and I hopped on my Honda 750 V45 Magna motorcycle, loaded up the saddlebags with clothes and equipment, took a bungee cord and strapped a tent to the front forks, and headed south into the brown and dusty Idaho desert. We were headed back to my parent’s home in Davenport, Iowa, by way of a slight detour through Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri. After three days of riding and camping, through Wells and Ely, Nevada, and through Bryce Canyon, Utah, we arrived at the little turn-off to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Off that road, we took the even smaller Cape Royal Road, which extends down a rolling, forested high plateau to the Cape Royal overlook, like the last joint on a long, crooked finger pointing south into the Grand Canyon.

Finally, after a long day in the saddle, we parked the bike in the nearly vacant tourist parking lot, slowly swung our legs over and off the motorcycle like a couple of trail-wearied cowboys, creaking in our brown leather jackets, and walked bowlegged to the nearby trail. It was nearing sunset, and after seeing the tall pine trees on the 8000-foot high forest and the long evening shadows, I was disappointed that we had used up the last of our film earlier in the day.

But even without a camera – and maybe especially because we could no longer take anymore pictures – I remember that evening in vivid detail. The thin, dry forest on that warm July night was quiet. After a day on the motorcycle with the thrum of the motor and thumping air on our helmets, the quiet was almost deafening. There was no wind. The branches of the trees and blades of grass stood still. We walked toward the unseen rim of the canyon as little clouds of dust from the trail puffed out from beneath our hiking boots and slowly settled back down. It felt good to feel the muscles in my legs move again beneath my blue jeans. The trail moved us out of the trees and through the pungent scent of scattered sagebrush clumps. We heard voices and saw a few people sitting on some rocks off the trail off to our right. Sidestepping our way through the shrubs, we emerged on the very edge of the plateau, as the world dropped away five-thousand feet down in front of us to the distant Colorado River.

15 or 20 people sat around on scattered boulders. One man sat with his legs dangling into empty space. A few people turned and smiled when we appeared, but most people just quietly whispered to a partner, or silently watched the sun. We were the last to arrive for the show. A lone hawk soaring high above ground glided gracefully, wings outstretched, suspended on air, far below our feet. Far to the south, across the expansive chasm, dark banks of silent thunderclouds rose thousands of feet into the atmosphere, compressing a thin ribbon of rain-streaked orange sky between the clouds and the earth. In front of us, to the clear and cloudless west, the brilliant disc of the sun made its way slowly down to the edge of the earth. For 20 minutes – half an hour – 45 minutes – who knows how long – this entire congregation of gathered strangers sat spellbound, in silence, together, faces turned westward, to the light, in unison. We sat on the precipice, clinging to the edge of the known world, yet connected to and entranced by all that was revealed before us – the vast unknown closeness between us and the opposite rocky rim echoing the vast unknown closeness between us and our nearest star and the vast unknown closeness between one human heart and another, all of which existed before we existed, and will continue to exist long after we are gone, and which we had no hand in creating.

For a timeless moment, no one said a word. No one moved. No one got up to leave until long after the last edge of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, and the empty stomach of the world filled with the nourishing darkness below.

* * *

The seeds of this sermon on worship were planted a year or so ago, in the North Room there on the other side of those sliding doors. During one of our monthly meetings with the Worship Arts Ministry – the group that discusses, plans and implements with me our Sunday morning worship services – Barb Corbusier spoke up. Barb is a long time member of this congregation who now coordinates our ushers. If you know anything about her, you know she tends to, ah, tell you exactly, and immediately, what she is thinking! And she also tends to have a pretty good sense of humor (I also asked her if I could share this with you!). Finally at one meeting, Barb spoke up and said something like, “I don’t get this ‘worship’ thing. Why do we call it ‘worship’? What are we worshipping?” Recently she said when she hears the word “worship,” that it makes her “scratch,” because that’s the word her mom used when something made her uncomfortable!

Now, I have to admit, as a minister, my first reaction when I hear someone question the use of religious language in *church*...is always a reaction of surprise. If we are an organization called a “religion” wherein our nonlinear connective awareness is called “spirituality” or “enlightenment,” and we meet every Sunday in a place we call a “church” and listen to a person called a “minister” giving a thing called a “sermon,” then from my perspective, it is only natural that what flows from this context is our use of concepts and music and words like “spirit,” “blessing,” “prayer,” “worship,” and “God.” I mean, in a church setting, what *else* would we use as our primary form of communication and expression?

Yet, I also know Barb’s question is not frivolous – nor are the occasional other similar comments and questions, expressed in annoyance or in genuine curiosity as they may be. I take Barb’s question as sincere and honest. So why do we call this Sunday event, in this building, “worship”? And who or what are we “worshipping”? And why did this congregation, before I arrived, name the group that plans and implements these services the *Worship Arts Ministry*? I don’t know why you chose to use that “w” word before I arrived, but I will attempt to articulate why I use the word.

To begin with, it is important to locate myself, to be as clear and transparent as I can. For the first few years of my life, I was raised in a liberal American Baptist family, and began attending Unitarian Universalist churches when I was about ten. My dad was an American Baptist minister, but by the time I was 14, my dad had become the minister of UU fellowship in Florida. By the end of his life, he called himself not a secular Humanist, but a religious Humanist. I resonate deeply with most Humanist teachings, especially from the *religious* Humanists who wrote the original 1933 Humanist Manifesto, with statements like: “Religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values, and inseparable feature of human life,” and, “Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.”

I recently rediscovered a piece of writing from my dad. At the age of 47, my dad was diagnosed with a terminal liver disease. After being forced to retire at age 49, he struggled with his disease and purpose, but by that time, not much with his beliefs. He was no foxhole theist. A few years after his diagnosis, in the depths of a depression, he wrote what he titled, “The Religious Humanist’s 23rd Psalm.”

[See next page]

THE RELIGIOUS HUMANIST'S 23RD PSALM

The Reverend Charles D. Saleska
(April 1935 – February 1991)

Life itself is my guide

I shall not be denied its sustaining power.

The green earth provides me with lavish nourishment;

Cool still pools of water refresh my spirit.

A deep intuition leads me along a path that is true
for the sake of existence itself.

Even though I walk through a valley where dark shadows
prevent me from knowing where life

finally leads in death,

ultimately I will not fear,

For the energy of the universe is within me.

The tools by which I am kept from wandering
off into despair,

They are a comfort to me.

Even in the face of threats to my well-being
and my very life,

The spirit of life nourishes me,

honors me with its presence,

and reminds me that I really

have more than I need.

Surely goodness and kindness

radiate upon me constantly,

and I shall dwell within this universe

with its transforming processes, forever.

This beautifully re-written psalm not only provided consolation for him, but for people in congregations wherever he preached, who were yearning to hear a humanist vocabulary of reverence in a way that spoke to their experience.

* * *

My single concern with Humanism, though, and where I diverge from its teachings, is in its primary focus on humans. The beliefs of Humanism, though viewed in a different frame, are much the same as any major Western religion: that we humans are the pinnacle of existence, we have dominion, and all remaining facets of existence are here for our use or discovery as tools for our personal and social growth. In 1933, the Manifesto did state that, "Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process," yet the entire focus of the original and each revision of the Manifesto, through 2003, describe grand purposes related to the fulfillment of *human* life.

I cannot, in good conscience, accept this. First, a quality of arrogance exists in this focus on human importance. Second, if I am a part of nature, and if I am an emerging being that is part of a continuous process, then it follows that everything around me from the dandelion on my lawn to the black bear roaming through the North Woods to the furthest galactic nebulae are companions with me in this continuous process – which means that human beings, then, are only one miniscule ingredient in a vast universal soup. Finally, it follows that if we humans are part of a continuous process, then in this continuous creation, we are *not* the end product. I believe we need to cultivate a sense of humility about that reality.

As a result, I locate myself most often as a “mystic naturalist.” By this I mean to evolve humanism to its logical next step by including all of creation, all of nature. I include the word “mystic” too, as an indicator of humility and reverence; as an awareness that we did not make this place and yet we are an essential part of it; as a kind of an existential post-it note, as a reminder that this vast chasm on whose crumbling walls we perch is so fractally intricate, and so constantly in the process of organic motion and creation that our primary religious task is merely to gain a small amount of awareness of how we intersect with it all, and to periodically rest in a place of awe and wonder at its magnificence.

Being in a place of awe and wonder is part of what I’m talking about when I advocate for cultivating a quality of humility. This quality of humility is where I *begin* when I imagine what I will create or channel on a Sunday morning.

Regarding the question of “whom” we may worship, it may be necessary for me to make explicit what I assumed was implicit in every service I conduct: I have no concept of prostrating ourselves before an angry, or even benign, humanoid male or female entity. I do not believe any God in *this* universe is constrained or defined by human genitalia. Perhaps it was because I was an English major in college and always appreciated poetry and stories and plays, but I have found it relatively easy to move through the world of religion and faith because I find easy and powerfully meaningful to move through the world of metaphor.

I believe religions – all religions – were created by humans in an eons-long attempt to give a name to that feeling and that sense of sitting beside the Grand Canyon to watch the sun set on a warm and still July night, that sense of being both separate and connected simultaneously. So, because it is impossible to speak the entirety of an emotion in the few syllables of a word, all religions rely on metaphor: God is like a potter crafting sacred vessels, or is like a mother hen protecting her chicks under her wing; prayer is like tossing a net into an uncharted ocean; Jesus is like a shepherd; profound fear and sadness is like walking through a valley of the shadow of death. Yet, like poetry that strives to identify the feeling of love, all attempts to name the unnamable ultimately fail. All metaphors ultimately break down. So humanity continues to write poetry, and continues to attempt to name the unnamable as we attempt to communicate our feeling. From out of our singular lives we continue to gather to remind ourselves of the feeling, and the reality, of being connected. We continue to gather together in worship.

The word “worship” – at least in the way we use it today – is over 1000 years old. The original meaning comes from two Middle English words that mean “worth-ship” – or most simply, giving worth to something. So ideally, we gather together each Sunday to rest in awe and wonder as we give worth to that which we value. As a pluralist religious faith, we do not come together around a single theology, but around common values and beliefs. We spend one hour in unison each week to give worth to our values of interdependence, inherent worth, compassion and love.

Our hymnal is chock-full of Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist ministers, theologians, and poets, who all write about “worship.” These are members of our own religion – our *own* people! – offering their attempts to name the unnamable. We read #441 from Jacob Trapp for our Call to Worship, and #437 from the Reverend Kenneth Patton for one of our readings. Another one is #563 from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who writes:

“A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

So the question for me is not about what to call this activity we do together on Sunday mornings. Rather, the questions I continually engage are: How will we offer hospitality to the guests who walk through our doors for the first time? How will we make a space for newcomers and longtime members to join together in a common experience that moves us in a common direction? How can we regularly and intentionally place our values in front of us so *that* is what dominates our imaginations so *that* is what we become?

In worship, we come here as a group to mimic those feelings I know so many of you have had, of canoeing across a pristine lake, of cultivating a garden, of dancing at a rock concert, of listening to Thelonious Monk or Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” of sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon, of being filled with the holy spirit. By nature, our weekly gathering here is contrived, and ultimately this contrivance often fails because it is only an approximation of some other experience. Yet we come back again and again because we know, either consciously or unconsciously, that even though our weekly practice is a metaphor, it is also an honest and sincere weekly attempt to channel awe and wonder as we attempt to name the unnamable.

Each week we sit on a precipice, clinging to the edge of the known world, yet connected and entranced by all that is revealed before us – the vast unknown closeness between one human heart and another, echoing the vast unknown closeness between us and our nearest star, all of which existed long before we existed, and will continue to exist long after we are gone, and which we had no hand in creating.