Lifting Up & Letting Go

Worship in a Unitarian Universalist Context

By
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Several years ago, while still living in Louisville, I had the opportunity to spend a day with a delegation of Muslims from Afghanistan. When it came time for their noontime prayers, I offered the use of our sanctuary at the Clifton Unitarian Church, very near to where we planned to have lunch. Although grateful, my offer also made them observably nervous and they quickly huddled to discuss the matter. Eventually the translator asked, "They want to know what goes on in your church?" I wasn't quite sure what they meant by the question, so I started describing our usual order of service, at which point the translator interrupted, "They want to know if there are any crosses or if you pray in it," which, apparently, would have made it unsuitable. "Oh no," I chuckled, "You won't find any crosses of praying going on in our church."

I then explained a little about Unitarian Universalism, how we are open to being inspired by all religions, including Islam, but are not bound by any. This seemed to satisfy their concerns. After they finished their prayers, which they did in private, they informed me that, according to their tradition, any place Muslims offer their ritual prayers becomes an official mosque. Since the word *mosque* simply means, "place of prostration," this made sense, though I hadn't considered that by offering our church for such a use I would become minister of the first Unitarian Universalist Mosque in the country.

In seriousness, while I recognize the value of humility, which shares the same root as the word, *human*, these images of what normally goes on in a place of worship, kneeling before crosses and praying to divinities, or ritually lowering ourselves to the ground before an all powerful being, can be troubling for those of us striving to uplift the worth and dignity of every person, and who recognize the pivotal role human agency must play in the work of making our world a more just place for all. This same aversion has made some of us sensitive to the use of traditional religious jargon in general. Many Unitarian Universalist groups refuse to even call themselves churches. They prefer words like, *fellowship*, *congregation*, and *community*. Some won't even describe theirs as a "religion," or say they are part of the Unitarian Universalist "faith."

I'm personally not troubled by any of these words for a few reasons. Firstly, I don't believe words have magical powers, so I don't accept that some should be considered taboo, that there are some things we should never say. Secondly, I greatly value freedom of expression and honest dialogue, and despise the practice of linguicide, whether it be imposed upon indigenous peoples by invading occupiers, or by social liberals through political correctness. I do not accept that people have a right to *not* hear what they disagree with, nor that the rest of us have an obligation *not* to say things others wouldn't like. Thirdly, if, as liberals we don't stay engaged in the religious debate and dialogue, then those seeking religious understanding will only have extremists to turn to when it comes to religious matters.

Promoting an alternative, more inclusive, and, I believe, more accurate religious orientation as Unitarian Universalists is our heritage, our right, and our obligation. But mostly, I'm not trouble by religious jargon because I love words. I love delving into their etymology to understand their original and, often, unconscious meanings.

The root of the word *religion*, itself, for example, is the same as in the word *ligament*, and refers to that which joins things together. So, religion is literally about creating ties between people who have been separated or segregated. It's about reconnecting the outcasts and oppressed with their social rights. It's about joining us all together. It's about solidarity. It's about making connections. Religion is that which enables us to sing the words of the 13th century Muslim poet, Rumi, "Come, come, whoever you are! Wonderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come!"

Last week a fellow at Rotary asked if what he heard is true, that I'm the minister of an atheist church. I explained there are atheists in my church and that I consider myself an atheist, but that ours is a Unitarian Universalist Church, not an atheist church, and there are people here who believe many things. "Good," he said, "because I don't see how you can call it a church if it's atheist."

I then explained there are 2.5 billion people in the world today who are part of nontheistic religions, meaning they are not defined by a belief in a god or gods. These include Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Religious Humanists, many Indigenous peoples around the world, as well as Unitarian Universalists. Some among these may include stories of gods or have members that believe in a god or gods, but none are defined as Buddhist, Hindu, Humanist, Unitarian Universalist, or what have you, because of their particular belief about God. They are all part of nontheistic religious traditions, meaning theology isn't what defines them.

Yet, in western-European culture, which has been dominated by Christianity, religion is almost exclusively defined by theology, by what one believes about God. As such, doctrinal differences have been an excuse to justify discrimination against, domination over, and segregation from others. Yet, according to my understanding of religion, I'd counter the idea, "You can't call it a church if it doesn't believe in God," with, "You can't call it a church if it discriminates against and condemns others." So I have no problem calling myself both an atheist and deeply religious.

When he appeared on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher* a couple years ago, Rev. Dr. William Barber, minister of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, told the show's host, a notorious atheist, "I, too, am an atheist." Barber is the minister who relaunched The Poor People's Campaign just this week, 50 years after Martin Luther King did so in 1968. In his book, *The Third Reconstruction*, Barber says, "Wearing my clerical collar, I realized I stood out among his guests. So I decided to announce to Bill that I, too, am an atheist. He seemed taken aback, so I explained that if we were talking about the God who hates poor people, immigrants, and gay folks, I don't believe in that God either."[1] So maybe he's not an atheist in the strictest sense of the term, but Barber understands his religion isn't about what he

[1] Barber, William J., *The Third Reconstruction*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2016, p. xv.

believes about God, but about demonstrating the principles religion is supposed to be about. "We cannot let narrow religious forces hijack our moral vocabulary," he says, "forces who speak loudly about things God says little about while saying so little about the issues that are at the heart of all our religious traditions: truth, justice, love, and mercy."[2] When it comes right down to it, Barber may believe in God, in a god who doesn't hate and discriminate, but that's not what makes his church a church any more than it's what makes our church a church. They are churches because in our religions *holy* means *whole*, and we believe in saving souls through solidarity, by bringing people together, working to make our entire society more inclusive by embracing the outcasts, the downtrodden, those discarded and disregarded by our unjust, discriminatory, segregated, broken systems.

So I have no problem using the word *church*, or calling myself deeply *religious*, or using all those other words that make some of us cringe, like, *faith*, *holy, salvation,* and the word I want to focus on now, *worship*. Again, for many of us, it may prompt images of superstitious people kneeling and cowering before an invisible, imaginary deity. But, just like those two potent words we've already discussed, *religion* and *God*, which have come, for many, to mean their very opposites, *segregation* and *hate*, instead of *wholeness* and *love*, the idea that worship has anything to do with lowering and humiliating ourselves, and considering ourselves unworthy and undeserving of goodness, is likewise the very opposite of what it means.

The root of *worship* is the same as the words, *worth* and *worthy*. So, whatever else it means, going to church shouldn't make us feel unworthy or worthless. In fact, I'd say going to church doesn't have much to do with worship to begin with. For to worship is the act of lifting up, of upholding, the things that are worth the most to us. It's not about sitting in pews, or singing songs, or hearing sermons. It's about demonstrating our values. It's not about groveling before an imaginary, angry deity, nor about how unworthy we are, nor admitting we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of Santa Claus, the great Silver Back in the Sky. Worship, again, is the very opposite of these things. It begins by uplifting ourselves, by recognizing we ourselves have value, that we matter, that we have the power to make a difference in the world and in the lives of others, that we are worth something, that we are worthy, and that the only way things are going to get better for any of us, no matter our theology, is through our own human agency.

If worship is about lifting up what we value, what's worth the most to us, then it must also be about lifting others up. It means countering the degrading message of fall and redemption by promoting human worth and dignity and agency. This is what Catholic theologian Matthew Fox did with his book, *Original Blessings*, countering the false doctrine of original sin, countering the notion that we have all fallen short of the glory of God, with the belief we are all born in the image and likeness of God, that each of us can be a powerful, loving force of goodness and kindness and creativity in this world. "To teach people, especially the young ones, that they are anything but images of God and heirs of divine creativity and responsibility is very dangerous," Fox says, "Compassion is diminished. Fear increases. Feelings of inferiority and inadequacy follow. One is set up for addictions: Not only addictions to alcohol and drugs and shopping and sex but addiction to Punitive Father

[2] Ibid.

religion and its representatives."[3] Fox, would agree with the Archbishop Oscar Romero, the late liberation theologian, gunned down in his San Salvador pulpit in 1980, while upholding the worth and dignity of his oppressed people. Romero said;

> God has sown goodness.
> No child is born evil.
> We are all called to holiness.
> The values that God has sown in the human heart
> And that present-day people esteem so highly
> Are not rare gems;
> They are things that appear continually…
>
> The original, pristine human vocation is goodness.
> We have all been born for goodness.
> No one is born with inclinations to kidnap,
> No one is born with inclinations to be a criminal,
> No one is born to be a torturer,
> No one is born to be a murder,
> We have all been born to be good,
> To love one another,
> To understand one another.[4]

As Romero proved through both his life and death, worship is about lifting people up, not only by countering degrading theological ideas, but by literally working to lift people out of poverty and despair. Worship means raising wages and the quality of living for everyone. There's an amazing story in the Christian gospel of a woman described as "bent over and unable to stand up straight"[5] for most her life. She bursts in on Jesus while he's "teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath,"[6] during what is supposed to be an exclusively male meeting. Instead of being angry with her, as the other men are, Jesus is overwhelmed by her strength and courage. She finally gets so "bent out of shape," as theologian Walter Wink puts it, that she breaks the glass ceiling to "stand erect in a male religious space,"[7] owning her own worth and dignity. In her society, the only people who counted were those who had the right to call themselves, "Sons of Abraham," but Jesus dares to call this woman, "Daughter of Abraham." But he makes no move to heal her affliction. Instead, he tells her, "Your faith has made you whole." She was healed the moment she stood up for herself, the moment she demanded equality, the moment she recognized her own worth. That's what worship can look like, like women's suffrage and the "Me Too," movement. It happens when we lift ourselves, and others, and our values up during our Sunday services, but it happens mostly when we're busing making justice, lifting people up, out of poverty, out of despair, out of prison, out of inequality, everywhere.

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[3] Fox, Matthew, *The New Reformation*, Wisdom University Press, Oakland, CA, 2005, p. 20.
[4] Romero, Oscar, *The Violence of Love*, fwd., Nouwen, Henri, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2007, p. 65.
[5] Luke 13:12.
[6] Luke 13:10.
[7] Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book, Random House, Inc., New York, NY, 1998., p. 71.

Certainly, our hymns and readings and sermons reflect our values, and our time together on Sunday mornings can rightly be called worship, because it is a time we gather to lift our spirits, uphold our dignity, and consider what's worth most to us, but it is neither the end nor the beginning of our worship. As a religion that promotes works more than faith, *pragma* more than *dogma*, we know what we do on Sundays is meaningless if we're not upholding our greatest values every day and moment of the week, wherever we are! We don't merely worship at church on Sundays, but by working every day to create Heaven on Earth by lifting up justice, equality, compassion, freedom, and peace everywhere we go.

For this reason, we know we are faithful worshippers if worshipping takes its toll on us. For our values are heavy. Continuously lifting them up is hard work. Genuine worship is so much harder than groveling and convincing ourselves we are powerless and can't make a difference even if we wanted to, and that we should just trust things will be better in Heaven. It's so much more than simply going to church. Lifting ourselves up by owning our own worth and agency means we must also own our responsibility to make a difference; and making a difference can sometime be almost unbearable. Worshipping means challenging the status quo; and challenging the status quo can make some powerful adversaries. It might mean losing a job, our friends, our family. Sometimes it means risking our freedom. Sometimes it means feeling afraid that we're vulnerable to those who might wish to harm us. Worship—genuine worship—takes its toll, sometimes on our hearts, minds, and bodies, but our souls cannot be satisfied without it, so we're willing to give up everything for it; we're willing to lift our voices, raise our questions, and uphold our principles no matter the cost.

When I left California at age 18, to go to college in Texas, I took everything I owned, which wasn't much, in the duffle bag my father used while in the Navy. Everything, that is, but my many religious books, which I'd packed in a bulging, beat up suitcase my Mother had given me. They were both so heavy that once I retrieved them at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport's baggage claim, I had to pick one up in each hand and lunge them forward as far as I could, just a few feet at a time, holding on so I could soften the blow as they landed. I couldn't afford to rent a luggage cart, so I did this for a long time, all the way to passenger pickup, where a ride awaited. It was hard and embarrassing, but it was worth it because those two bags held everything that was worth something to me at the time, everything that was worthy of being lifted up, difficult as they were to carry more than a few feet at a time.

This leads me to another point about worship, it also means letting go. You see, even after all that effort, even though those heavy books meant so much to me back then, I don't have one of them today. During my studies I began to let go of the conservative religious ideas within those books, along with the beliefs and ideas they'd once instilled in me. I let them go in exchange for other books, and other ideas, and I've been letting go of old ideas and ways ever since, always prepared to move on. Because worship is as much about setting our burdens down, about letting go of old habits and beliefs that no longer serve us well and just aren't worth much anymore. It's about getting rid of our baggage.

This notion represents a paradigm-shift because so many people go to church to be reassured their old ways and beliefs are still worth clinging to, so they can take it easy, so they don't have to take on the burden of lifting up new ways, better ways, more just and

loving ways. That's why today's religions have been with us for hundreds and thousands of years, because our ancestors' baggage has been passed on to us, and many can't wait to pass it on to their own children and grandchildren. But worship means knowing when it's time to let go. When we've gone as far as we can go in this life and must let others do the heavy lifting.

"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life," Dr. King once said, "Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now... I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"[8] As hard as he'd worked, heavy as his burden had been, Dr. King knew when to let go. The day after he'd spoken these words, he was killed standing on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Finally, it's important to know that worship is something we do together. Worship is public and communal. Hard as it is, it is not our burden alone. Dr. King, who was used to getting dozens of death threats a day, was awoken one night by a phone call that truly frightened him. "The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory," he later recounted, "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."[9] Moments later, he said, "I could hear an inner voice singing to me, 'Martin Luther stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth and lo I will be with you even to the end of the world!'" As a Baptist minister, Dr. King interpreted this as, "the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on... He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone, no never alone, no never alone, he promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone!"[10]

But, as Unitarian Universalists, whatever our theology, or lack thereof, we too know we are never alone, because we have each other. Worship is something we do together. It's an act of solidarity, inside and outside of church. It's not about settling ourselves down, but about raising each other up, raising unpopular questions, and, sometimes, raising Cain. Worship occurs whenever and wherever we uphold our most worthwhile principles and values. Worship is humanistic, not theological. Worship brings people together. It includes outcasts and the oppressed. Worship is practical. It doesn't happen the first day of the week, but every day of the week. And worship is done in solidarity. It doesn't happen alone. And that's why I don't mind calling what we do, *worship*, why I think we do it so well, and why I thank you for worshipping with me.

[8] Spoken at the end of his April 3rd, 1968 speech at the Mason Temple in Memphis, TN. King was assassinated the following day while standing on the motel balcony.
[9] King, Martin Luther, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1986, 1991, p. 509.
[10] Ibid.