

***A Sanctuary for the Spirit***  
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**A sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu, January 30, 2011**

*(Opening: A reading on the village of Le Chambon from A House for Hope by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker)*

**The Joy of Being Here**

Nearly 15 years ago, I walked into this sanctuary, new to this congregation, and practically new to Unitarian Universalism. I found a seat in the back, and no one hassled me, which for me was a good sign. I felt the breeze and watched the play of leaves and light through the windows. I don't remember anything specific about the sermon, and I don't expect you to remember much of this sermon either, but something about the totality of the experience was transformative, because I came back, and here I am again, this time as a candidate for Unitarian Universalist ministry.

Fifteen years ago I went looking for a religious home, and found one here. I have to admit, what I found was not a pre-fab palace meeting all my dreams. Back then, it seemed like I was twenty years younger than most people in the congregation and my hair would have been darker than most even if we had been in the same age group. But I did find a foundation that felt solid enough, and with time and deeper engagement, I also found adequate shelter, some timber, a few plans, and even a few folk who seemed willing to build a house for hope with room enough for all of us.

This assembly here, is the best model I know, for a house for hope for all of us.

**Why do we come to worship?**

Each of us came with a variety hopes, even some expectations. Some of us have been coming here for 50 years and some for the first time. There are hearts heavy with grief, and bursting with joys. We want intellectual stimulation, and we want something deep inside us to be stirred to say yes to life. Some want to connect with the divine.

I come here, because, I need to know, that my hope for a just, compassionate and sane world is not unreasonable.

What an impossible task we ask for an hour and fifteen minutes on a Sunday morning to meet our diverse needs!

This religious community isn't just a Sunday morning worship service, but this weekly gathering is the one spiritual practice that unites us as a whole community.

So I want to explore this question with you - what is the core purpose of Sunday morning worship? Why is this - people gathering on a Sunday morning to light a chalice, sing songs, recite some words, and listen to a sermon - almost the only universal ritual practice in this particular religious heritage?

**The Coordination Problem**

Sociologists have an answer - public gatherings are one of the most effective ways to create the kind of common knowledge that helps people coordinate their behavior. Rituals like this are a rational way to help us move as a collective body to do something that we wouldn't otherwise do alone or inherently requires that we do together.

flossing/party

We gather together as a community to confirm our shared values and make a commit to one another to live by them.

### **Can we coordinate behavior if we don't know what behavior?**

But our shared values don't necessarily have a one to one mapping to particular behaviors or courses of action. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations - who among us really knows what that looks like on an person to person level, community level, a global level?

A dear one once told me about a heated conversation where one person insisted that they were anti-war not pro-peace, and the other insisted that they were pro-peace, not anti-war.

We could all laugh if the the difference between these two stances really were just words. But the reality is that we know war in a way that we don't know peace. We know war as an overwhelming and voracious machine that tears the bodies of people, communities and the Earth apart. We know peace in fleeting moments of deep breathing, the company of loved ones, and in the absence of an immediate threat of violence.

Same core values, different courses of action depending on what lens we pick to view the world.

So part of the task of our gathering is to take up different lenses, to open ourselves up to a kaleidoscope of perception.

Opening ourselves to possibility.  
Opening ourselves to reality.  
Embodying peace in a world at war.

What a crazy and improbable task!

### **Not all religions prioritize gatherings of the whole community - if shared values and community can assumed**

It helps to know that not all religions prioritize assemblies of the whole community such as this. This is particularly true of indigenous religions in which the boundary between religion and the general culture are not clear. In such societies, the religions reenforce values that are held broadly in the larger culture, and their are other social structures that re-enforce the coherence of the community. Nationalism is an interesting example of such a religion.

North American Unitarian Universalism inherits this particular form of worship, a gathering of the whole community centered around words, in a two thousand year long telephone game of direct

person to person transmission from the early Jesus followers.

### **Emphasis on the gathered community inherited from early Jesus followers**

The early Jesus followers were a counter cultural movement struggling for survival in the Roman Empire. Their values were not shared by the larger society, and for 300 years they could be tortured and killed for being who they are. In this context, they had an urgent need to see one another and affirm shared values, to know in their bones that they were on in this together.

Materials left from the time show their rituals involved words but also all the senses in a way that re-enforced the reality of what they believed so its reality was as strong as the real possibility of an excruciatingly humiliating and painful death.

I do get a sense that excruciatingly painful deaths were quite common in the days of the Roman Empire, so why not risk a meaningful life?

We can still experience something of their rituals and what was so precious to them through early Christian art. Around the Mediterranean, we can still visit remains of sanctuaries adorned with scenes of green pastures, flowing rivers, majestic trees, flowers, puffy sheep, deep blue night skies scattered with stars, images of paradise, the Kingdom of God, as they called it, made real on Earth, here and now.

### **Transmission via Puritans**

The line of transmission from the early Jesus followers, to contemporary Unitarian Universalism, came through the Puritans. The Puritans tried to purify their own religious inheritance to what they thought was its pure essence. They were 16th and 17th century Christians who had dropped the Pope, dropped most Church tradition, and tried to rely on the Bible alone as a source of religious authority. For those who landed on the shores of North America, their most central ritual was to come together to read the Bible and argue about it. You can get a lively account of them from the book *The Wordy Shipmates* by Sarah Vowell. Unfortunately, they also dropped, most of the art, much of the music, all of the dancing, and along with it much of the heart.

Unitarians and Universalists rejected their parents' theologies, but this ritual form has stayed. Even as the Bible, Jesus, and even God became optional, community remained.

### **Returning to fullness of who we are today**

Having stripped our ritual inheritance to its bare roots, let's come back to the fullness of who we are today. We are not just the rebellious heretical descendants of Puritans, but we are also descendants of a variety of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu, Hawaiian, Humanist, Atheist, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Ifa, -- you name it -- peoples, and the diversity grows by the day. How do we honor all that we have been given and all that we are? And is what we have precious? Do we know how we want to move? What shall be the shape of our souls?

Questions, questions, questions, and answers yet to come.

We will wrestle with one another and with the mysteries of life known by many names and unnamable.

But here and now, is not the place or time for wrestling match, not even with God.

### **I come to worship to stop**

I come to worship to stop - to stop and smell the roses.

Had I known this African American hymn, fifteen years ago when I first came to this sanctuary, I would have been singing “there is more love some where...”

I come to worship to stop singing that song. To rest from all the searching and striving, to stop and pay attention to what is available to us now.

I come to worship to say.

There is more love  
There is more hope  
There is more peace  
There is more joy

Worship is a time to make tangible the proverbial rose, to know in our bodies that that sweet scent of something beautiful, marvelous, awesome, much beyond our limited atomic selves, has a real source.

### **(reading from Rebecca and John)**

After all, “the great surmise,” as one of our friends puts it, that is both hidden and revealed in Creation’s beauty, is that we creatures were and are loved—more than we can say or sing. Yet before we can truly begin to love others, much less practice the love that embodies itself as sanctuary and as justice, we must remember and reimagine that love.