

Feb. 24, 2008

The Work of the People:
This Fellowship's Liturgy

Our first reading is from the King James Bible, Psalm 23:

A Psalm of David.

The LORD [is] my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death,

I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Our second reading is the last sentence from Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*:

"Perhaps it's done already,

perhaps they have said me already,

perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story,

before the door that opens on my story,

that would surprise me,

if it opens,

it will be I,

it will be the silence,

where I am,

I don't know,

I'll never know,

in the silence you don't know,

you must go on,

I can't go on,

I'll go on."

The Work of the People

What do we do on Sunday morning, and why do we do it?

First, we have to name it. We have a service.

Is it a Sunday service or a worship service? That depends on who you ask.

We can ask whoever is in charge: the service leader, eh? But -- if this is a minister-led service, why wouldn't the minister be in charge?

Supposing this were a worship service, what would we be worshipping? Samuel Beckett might say, *The Unnamable*. Others, God. In Christian churches, maybe Jesus. In other faith traditions, other gods. Or it could be the universe, fate, the Great Spirit, Mother Earth. In 12-Step groups, they call it a Higher Power. They say it can be anything you want to be – except yourself. We are Unitarian Universalists. We worship what we choose.

What is worship? UU Minister Paul Beedle says, "The verb 'worship' means 'to shape worth.' The meanings of 'worth' suggest the purpose of worshipping: . . . to turn toward, the highest or best values. To worship is to give useful, instructive shape to those often abstract values, to symbolize or articulate them in memorable and helpful ways."

Is worship necessary?

Ralph Waldo Emerson thought it was inevitable. "A person will worship something [he said] – 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."

This morning we will look, more or less reverently, at our liturgy, from beginning to end. (Except for sermons, which we'll save for another day.)

We'll examine what makes a worship service work;

the formal elements of liturgy;

discuss how worship services end in much the same way as they begin (which is not necessarily a good thing); and finally,

consider an unusual take on the purpose of liturgy.

That's our roadmap. Along the way, we'll take note of several working principles of good liturgy.

When we are done, there will be a quiz. But it won't happen till next year, when all of Sunday morning will be yours. In the meantime, after coffee hour today, we'll have a talkaround, on liturgy.

Incidentally, the word liturgy derives from two words in Ancient Greek that mean "work" and "people." Liturgy is the work of the people. It's what we do on Sunday morning – as spelled out in the order of service.

Did you ever notice how many beginnings our Sunday morning has? The chimes are rung, the call to worship given, the flaming chalice is lit -- each in its own way a beginning. Some people mark the true beginning of the service when the music starts playing, or the congregation is welcomed, especially the newcomers.

Some scholars say that the service begins the first time everybody sings together. That makes some sense. Others say the adult service doesn't really begin till the children are sung out to their classes.

Pete Seeger once said, "No one can prove a damn thing, but I think that singing together gives people some kind of a holy feeling. And it can happen whether they're atheists, or whoever. You feel like, 'Gee, we're all together.'"

Of course, all right-thinking people know that no worship service really begins -- until the sermon.

Why begin, and begin again, and keep on beginning, sometimes until we're over?

Multiple beginnings may reflect how people arrive in church, and when. If you have small children, making church on Sunday morning can be a tough clock to punch. Or if you like to party hearty on Saturday night, or just enjoy dawdling with the Sunday paper in bed, with a cup of coffee. For a minister it can be humbling to

realize how tiny are the things that can keep congregants from coming to church.

Or maybe multiple beginnings reflect simple human orneriness: people saying, no clock is gonna tell me when church begins. The unspoken subtext is -- church begins when I get there. It takes time for a congregation to grow spiritually, from me to we.

In these multiple beginnings, notice the variety of media we employ—
sound (the chimes);
words (the call to worship, and the welcome);
symbolic movement (the flaming chalice); and
music.

This variety of media reflects an important working principle of worship: different people experience things in different ways. It's like multiple intelligences in education – some students are primarily visual learners, with their eyes, or auditory learners, with their ears, or verbal learners, using words. Tactile or kinesthetic learners use touch or movement. Some learn mathematically, others through music.

Good worship gathers as it goes, leaving no one out, inviting everyone in, offering something for everyone. "In my father's house there are many mansions." John 14:2. On different Sunday mornings, you may find yourself moved by the music, a candle of joy or concern, the way a newcomer introduces herself, the benediction, or just the presence of the stranger sitting next to you, weeping.

This gathering process means that a worship service must be open to all the possibilities, and the service leader ego-free. The other day someone said to me, That service you did not so long ago, gee, it sure was great. I started to murmur something becomingly modest, when they added, I don't quite remember what the service was about – but oh, that music that Dianne Potts composed, and had us all hum, oh, that was just fabulous!

If that wonderful music meant the service worked for you, great. Whatever floats your boat, however it gets floated.

That was a service that cooked, in part because of the way it ended.

What makes a worship service cook? Three things, I think.

First, rhythm. Words should not follow words, music should not follow music, and silence follows silence, only after death. This means linkages between the elements are vital, but awkward pauses can break the rhythm. Claude Debussy said, "Music is the space between the notes." Rhythm calls for energy, organization, seamlessness.

My first year in the ministry, April 1, April Fools' Day, fell on a Sunday. We decided to do the service backwards, beginning with the benediction and ending with the words of welcome.

It would have been a great idea -- so long as it remained just an idea. In practice, it was incredibly hard to do. That Sunday morning, people took one look at the order of service, and broke into a smile. But again and again, during the service, we would finish one thing and -- instinctively turn toward the next thing, which -- oops! -- was the wrong thing that morning. There was a lot of laughter, not all of it the kind you like to hear. But still it worked out fine. In worship, a working principle is: anything that is done in a certain spirit will automatically work out fine. The experience sure taught me not to overlook the linkages.

In addition to rhythm, a service also works on mood. Setting a mood happens right from the start. Opening words may give a précis of the morning's topic, or set a tone for the service. A worship leader needs to notice the tone throughout the service, to develop and stretch and deepen it, as the service goes forward. In planning, it is worth asking, What mood do you want to leave the congregation in? Where are you pointing them? What's the spiritual takeaway? The range of possibilities is almost infinite, everything from joy, to gratitude, to quiet serenity, to "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take it anymore."

Mood is tender, fragile, easily destroyed. When a carefully created mood is destroyed, the effort that has gone into crafting and creating it feels wasted, and something is lost that may be hard to retrieve.

In addition to rhythm and mood, a service also works on balance. Balance of all sorts – people standing up and sitting down, speaking and listening, adagio with allegro, light and dark, zippy and deep, professional

voices, and lay voices. In a successful service, there will be a variety of activities, levels of participation, directions, kinds of movement -- all of it, in balance with one another. Maybe "harmony" is a better word for it.

Rhythm, mood, and harmony suggest the formal elements of a worship service. There are four. First, words. The best words for worship are simple words -- the fewer the better.

The LORD [is] my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters . . .

A committee wrote that, four hundred years ago. No one has improved on it since.

Beyond words, music. There are often too many words in a service, but there is never enough music. As I was leaving University Unitarian Church in Seattle, they invited me to lead a summer service while repairs were being made in the chancel.

So about 100 of us gathered, on a little hill by the shores of Lake Washington, with blankets and picnic lunches and lots of kids, and a boom box that someone had thoughtfully programmed. The farewell service consisted of 15 old-time hymns and spirituals and folk songs. We called it "Give Me That Old-Time Religion (Hold the Theology)."

"O sinner man, where you gonna run to, all on that day?"

You know Andy's song: "An-dy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own . . ." But did you know that it's a waltz?

In addition to words and music, there is the powerful, neglected element of silence. The talkier the congregation, the more valuable the silence. Some entire liturgies are built around silence -- everything beforehand leads up to it, everything afterward leads away.

Silence calms you down. Sometimes with children you can ring a gong and invite them to keep listening to the echo, till they can't hear it any more. Works every time.

Silence shelters private thoughts and feelings.

President Bill Clinton was delivering a speech when an aide handed him a note saying that Nancy Reagan had just announced that former President Ronald Reagan had Alzheimer's disease. Clinton read the note out loud and asked for a moment of silence for the Reagan family. The silence was more moving than anything he could have said.

Silence invites us inward. It bids us to reflect, go stiller, reach deeper.

Emerson, who served as a Unitarian minister for a couple of years, was a fan of silence. He wrote: "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching."

Some Sunday mornings, a minister wonders -- did I improve on the silence?

Churches and fellowships can have the luxury of silence before the service, only if they have one room for social gathering, and another room for the service. This fellowship is not so lucky. Yet.

Silence can take us out of our heads, and move us into our whole bodies, and sometimes even beyond, to places deep in the valley, where we realize our deepest terrors, and walk through them.

"[I]t will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*.

Beyond words, music, and silence, worship has movement. Movement is also under-used, and tricky. New worship leaders quickly learn not to take movement for granted. What the theatre calls "blocking" is vital, especially in a chancel like this, full of cords and quirks, where movement is difficult and cramped.

Someone once complimented Spencer Tracy on his acting. He said it wasn't hard. "Learn your lines, and don't bump into the furniture." Here -- bumping into the furniture goes with the territory.

Movement in worship is much more pervasive than we acknowledge. It happens in visiting before

church. Some clergy process beforehand and recess afterward, though here processing is discouraged by the informal atmosphere, and also by the architecture.

A worship leader wants the congregation rising up and sitting down – just enough to keep the blood flowing, not too often. We have inserted asterisks in our order of service to suggest when to stand and when to sit, especially for those who are visiting for the first time.

Candles of joy and concern are complex movement. So is story time with our children.

Even the offering involves movement -- reaching for your wallet, writing a check, passing the basket -- often quite rapidly, I've noticed. Jim Bishop has suggested that we turn and greet our neighbours. The challenge there, of course, is getting you all back afterwards. How ya gonna keep 'em, down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?

Which suggests another working principle of worship: when you take your people someplace, be sure to bring them back. If a minister plays his flute as he leads the children through the story, deep into the dark, dark forest – he better not leave them there! I told my colleague afterwards, Man, you forgot to bring the children back. When he realized what he'd done, he was horrified too.

The presentation of the offering also involves movement. Even bowing our heads in meditation or prayer, if that happens to be our style. (I bow my head out of the deepest of piety, and also so I can better read the text.)

I won't say too much about sermons this morning. I've been asked to offer a workshop on how to preach, sometime later this spring, to help you get ready for next year. I'll save what I have to say on sermons for then.

You have probably noticed that, like virtually all UU congregations, we do not end our services here particularly gracefully.

It certainly isn't for lack of trying. We close with the closing hymn, then with the closing words, extinguishing the flame, closing music, applause for the guest musician, the announcements, the invitation to coffee, and even this morning a talkaround. It's the conversation that never ends.

Do you know what is the hardest thing to properly locate in a service? The announcements. In a course on worship at Starr King School for the Ministry, the teachers said, We don't have final exams, but if we did, we might ask, Where do you locate the announcements in the liturgy, and why? Since no one has ever discovered a good place for the announcements, in order to discuss the question, you'd have to talk about every other aspect of the worship service.

Does that mean you can leave the announcements out? Only if you want that fact inscribed on your tombstone.

From time to time I ask congregants, What keeps you coming back Sunday after Sunday? Once, to my amazement, a man said, I come for the announcements -- because they demonstrate our values, at work in the larger world. Amen, brother.

At the beginning of this sermon I quoted a UU minister on the purpose of worship -- a turning toward the highest values.

Beyond that, what is the purpose of a liturgy?

The German theologian Romano Guardini suggests a curious answer. He's Roman Catholic, so you may have to do some translating, and it's a long quote, but bear with me:

"The liturgy . . . unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God.

That which formerly existed in the world of unreality only, and was rendered in art as the expression of mature human life, has here become reality.

These forms are the vital expression of real and frankly supernatural life.

But this [form, liturgy,] has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art — it has no purpose, but -- is full of profound meaning.

It is not work, but play.

To be at play, or to fashion a work of art . . . — such is the essence of the liturgy.

From this is derived its sublime mingling of profound earnestness and divine joyfulness.

The fact that the liturgy gives a thousand strict and careful directions on the quality of the language, gestures, colors, garments and instruments which it employs can only be understood by those who are able to take art and play seriously.

Have you ever noticed how gravely children draw up the rules of their games — on the form of the melody, the position of the hands, the meaning of this stick and that tree?

It is for the sake of the silly people who may not grasp their meaning and who will persist in seeing the justification of an action or object only in its obvious purpose.

Have you ever read of, or even experienced, the deadly earnestness with which artists . . . labor for art, their lord; of their sufferings on the score of language; or of what an overweening mistress form is?

All this for something that has no aim or purpose . . .

No, art does not bother about aims.

Does anyone honestly believe that the artist would take upon himself or herself the thousand anxieties and feverish perplexities incident to creation if they intended to do nothing with their work but to teach the spectator a lesson, which they could just as well express in a couple of facile phrases, or one or two historical examples or a few well-taken photographs? . . .

[Guardini concludes] Being an artist [as a liturgist is an artist] means wrestling

with the expression of the hidden life of human beings
in order that it may be given existence;
nothing more.”

Nothing more, indeed!

Amen.

Sermon: 2,947 words
Saturday afternoon
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