

In the Holy Quiet of this Hour



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Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula
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Richard Gilbert, a Unitarian Universalist minister and Professor at our seminary in Chicago, Meadville-Lombard, has described Sunday morning worship as “the holy quiet of this hour.” Thus the title of this sermon. It is a holy quiet, an hour we set apart from the ordinary days and ways of our lives, a time when, if we allow it and the conditions are right, we find refuge and renewal.

To this holy hour, we are invited to come – not as worker, not as parent or child, not as teacher or friend or lover, not as leader or follower, not as young or old, or gay or straight, or male or female. We are invited to come, not in special attire or with necessary gestures or words, not on our best behavior or even with our finest thinking. Instead, we are invited to come with that most ancient and beautiful of beckoning, to come as we are.

This means that each of us comes regardless of the condition of our heart, regardless of the state of our minds, regardless of the quality of our spirits and souls. Joyful or troubled, contemplative or driven by curiosity, prayerful or empty, we come. Think about this. It does not matter who we are Monday – Friday. It does not matter what has gone on in our homes or our lives, in our most difficult or our most fulfilling relationships. It does not matter what we have done, or failed to do; who we have held up and who we

have let down. We come as we are. And we are a part of all that takes place here.

That, then, is the beginning of what it means to worship. To be willing to come when we are afraid, when we are lost, when we are stressed or busy or just tired out by the trials of the world. To worship is to give ourselves *as we are* to the holy quiet of this hour.

There is nothing new in this theology. The word most often used in the New Testament for church is from the Greek: *ecclesia*, which means literally "those who are called out from the world." Called out from the ways and desires and woes of the world. Called out from the family, the social milieu, from the geography and the day. Called out to mark a new time, a different time, a marked time. Called out alone, but called to be together. Called out to be emptied. Called out to be renewed. Called out to be transformed.

This morning I come to you as your minister, as I am – full of joy for the ritual of membership which we have celebrated today. I come to you in the hopes that this ritual is the first of many which we will celebrate together, as we make room in our church family for others who would choose to find a home among us.

But I come also in sorrow, for the loss of my father, who died early this last Wednesday morning. This too is part of that most beautiful of beckonings – to “come as you are” – to come authentically, to come not leaving reality at the door but bringing it to the altar of this place and time, to the fellowship of this people, offering it gently but completely into the sacred container of this hour.

There is so much to say about worship, and there will be time for that, another day, many other days. But as a beginning, I invite you this morning, and every Sunday morning of worship, to respond to that call of *ecclesia* in a way that is genuine – to come as you are. This may mean without agenda, without self-expectation, and without guessing at or seeking to influence the outcome. It may mean approaching this hour with an honesty that is different from your daily experience. From this time forward I invite you to enter worship – from the first ringing of the bell to the benediction and the postlude – as fully and wholly as you are able.

At Meadville Lombard, my professor and one of our long time ministers, Rev. David Bumbaugh, defined worship as “the public response to the sacred or the holy, a public ritual response to that which has the power to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves.” He said “Worship is the

shared response to that which casts us up, sustains us, receives us into being, and, when life has used us up it sets us free.”

Those of us who have spent time in worship know something of this. We do. We’ve known it when a song, a reading, a story or a sermon has moved us beyond our doubt or our pain for a moment, to a purging relief, to a greater sense of clarity, to a fresh hope or a renewed resolve. We all have had those moments. Let us sit in silence for a moment to recall them.

We’ve known those moments when we’ve watched our babies and our children dedicated and held in the loving embrace of a congregation. We’ve known it as we’ve witnessed these children come of age, or unite in marriage or holy union. We’ve known it when we’ve watched our new ministers go through the rites of ordination, or at district events and at general assembly when we gather hundreds, and thousands strong, to proclaim our common faith. We’ve known it when we speak truth to power. And I think we never know it more than when we come to church to remember a loved one who has died, and to mourn together this loss, even as we cherish and affirm the ongoing presence of life in us and among us.

Worship can be our refuge and our strength. Here, as in many of our UU congregations, we bring this into being through our time of “Joys & Sorrows” that we do each week. Out of this ritual we come to know one

another deeply and intimately, for it is a communion of the very stuff of our lives. When we speak our joys, we tell not only of the lived experience, but of those places in us where we are, if but for a moment, whole; of those times when life has blessed us. And when we share our sorrows we allow others a chance to know us for who we are, for the reality of our inconstant and imperfect lives. When we do this we are acting on the underlying truth that when we acknowledge our sorrow, we also acknowledge our common humanity. And by so speaking we begin to heal, to move toward that place where even in the midst of pain and loss and uncertainty we can know peace.

In the holy quiet of this hour, where it is safe to bring our broken selves, and safe to rejoice for those times when we are whole, we till the very ground of our being, and we cultivate the spirit of life and love in us and all around us. If we are to truly know one another, we must share *both* the joy and the sorrow. There is no other way.

The time of prayer and meditation also is important in our common worship. First, it offers us the gift of silence and stillness in a world that is often far too loud and too busy. In this silence, as longtime UU minister Mark Belletini tells us, we are given

“room to mesh our common, structured experience of worship with the memory of our unstructured, personal experience. We are invited to consider the whole of our lives, our losses as well as our joys, our

desire to grow deeper as well as our desire to be affirmed, just as we are. In these times, many discern Spirit, named or unnamed.¹”

Prayer and meditation invite us into the mystery, into a way of being when in the absence of sound and structure we enter the pureness of silence and solitude. We open our minds and hearts to the place of quiet, to the silent prayer for the healing of pain, and of the soft, gentle coming of love.

Music and song underscore everything about our worship, our prayers, our call to prophecy, our rejoicing and our mourning. Timeless and powerful, music stirs our emotions and awakens our passion, doing for us what at times nothing else can achieve, what no deed of our own can bring about. Music can take us deep into ourselves, granting us the grace to be open to this time and place, to the pain and the possibility, to the doorway of the eternal.

As Unitarian Universalists we value the use of reason in religion, but we are also devoted to preserving the primacy of the sacred, that power that exists in the universe that is beyond what we can reasonably explain, that source that some call God, others Truth, or the Spirit of Life. Worship is a time and a place where, more than most, it is possible to touch this power, to feel its everlasting strength touch and move in us.

¹ Mark Belletini, *Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, (Boston: UUA, 1993), 34.

I believe that worship is the single most important thing we do together as a congregation. More than anything else, it says who we are, why we are here, and what matters to us. Beginning with that bell, and carrying through to the benediction and postlude, worship gives form to our faith, and substance to our lives. It reminds us of, and can take us to, our best selves, to a higher way of being in the world. Worship can change us. It can change us for a minute, a day, or even a lifetime. It can help us to see as we have never seen before, and to grow in ways that we could not do on our own.

Often, Unitarian Universalist worship points us in the end beyond ourselves and our individual lives. We come to a point of understanding that the great poet of Islam Saadi described, when he said:

To worship is nothing other than to serve the people.
It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.
All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence.
If fate brings suffering to one member,
The others cannot stay at rest.²

Worship is a calling out from the world. It is a time of refuge and renewal. But in the end it calls us back to the world, to do the work that needs to be done there, to build better lives for ourselves, those we care for, and those we would help in this world.

² Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 609.

We come as we are, and at our best, we give ourselves fully and truly to worship. We open ourselves to the spirit of life and love. We find there refuge and are restored by peace. We gain the courage and strength we need for the tasks that are yet to come, for the work of the world that waits, always. With that ancient and beautiful blessing, we are beckoned to come as we are and to give ourselves completely to the holy quiet of the hour. And when we do this, and we do it from our deepest, truest, places, we do not go back the same. We do not go back the same.