

**First Unitarian Church of St. Louis
October 7, 2018 Worship Service
Norma Vogelweid**

THE AGONY & ECSTASY OF WORSHIP

FIRST READING

The first reading is "Aimless Love" by Billy Collins, an American poet. He is famous for conversational, witty poems. His words welcome readers with humor but often slip into quirky, tender or profound observation on the everyday.

AIMLESS LOVE

This morning as I walked along the lakeshore,
I fell in love with a wren
and later in the day with a mouse
the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening,
I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window,
and later for a bowl of broth,
steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought,
without recompense, without gifts,
or unkind words, without suspicion,
or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut,
the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel.

No lust, no slam of the door –
the love of the miniature orange tree,
the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower,
the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor –
just a twinge every now and then

for the wren who had built her nest
on a low branch overhanging the water
and for the dead mouse,

still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up
in a field on its tripod,
ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail
to a pile of leaves in the woods,
I found myself standing at the bathroom sink
gazing down affectionately at the soap,

so patient, so soluble
so at home in its pale green soap dish.
I could feel myself falling again
as I felt its turning in my wet hands
and caught the scent of lavender and stone

SECOND READING

In my summer worship service, I talked about koans. Koan being a Japanese word that when used in English is usually taken to refer to some sort of riddle or odd question. A koan has its origin in sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life. Today's second reading is the Zen koan "The Woman at the Inn." Hakuin, in the tale, is the local Zen teacher, known to be eccentric.

THE WOMAN IN THE INN

There was a woman who kept the pilgrims' inn at Hara under Mount Fuji. Her name is unknown, and it is not known when she was born or died.

She went to hear a talk by Hakuin who said, "They say there's a pure land where everything is only mind, and that there's a Buddha of light in your own body.

Once that Buddha of light appears, mountains, rivers, earth, grass, trees, and forests suddenly glow with a great light. To see this, you have to look inside your own heart. Then what should you be looking out for? When you are looking for something that is only mind, what kind of special features would it have? When you are looking for the Buddha of infinite light in your own body, how would you recognize it?"

When she heard this the woman said, “This isn’t so hard.” Back at home she meditated day and night, holding the question while she was awake and during her sleep. One day, as she was washing a pot, she had a sudden breakthrough. She threw the pot aside, and rushed to see Hakuin.

She said, “I’ve met Buddha in my own body, and everything on earth is shining with a great light! It’s wonderful!” She danced for joy.

“Is that so?” said Hakuin, “but what about a pit of shit, does it also shine with a great light?”

The woman ran up and slapped him. She said, “You still don’t get it, you old fart!”

Hakuin roared with laughter.

SERMON SCRIPT

“I’ve met Buddha in my own body, and everything on earth is shining with a great light!” exclaims the woman innkeeper. “Is that so?” replies the Zen teacher. “But what about a pit of shit, does it also shine with a great light?” Seeing things, all things, even a pit of shit, glowing with light was the particular feature of this woman’s change of heart. And it happened in her own kitchen with sudsy hands and endless piles of pots.

The poet Billy Collins awakens to a sublime love emanating from a dead mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table. He is seduced in his bathroom by the soap in its pale green dish on the sink, succumbing to love as he fondles the soap.

If rapture can happen in these circumstances, I ask myself, “Why come to church regularly on Sundays?” The flash-card answer for UUs is that our religion is founded on covenant, not on creeds. While individuals may have private devotional practices, these are not necessarily worship. Worship is a communal event. As we bravely forge a spiritual journey of our own, Sunday service gives us our turn to raise an invisible hand in our souls and silently proclaim: “Here I belong.” Alleluia. Praise be.

All nice, but ...?

Last spring, I joined the Worship Committee. Why? I was curious about the depth of inspiration and breadth of work behind our Sunday worship services. At the August Committee meeting to seed our minds, Rev. Gary talked about a book entitled *Why We*

Worship. The book is co-authored by two UU ministers (Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz). I checked it out of the church library. Thankfully it turned out to be a thin book. These ministers believe in the human longing for a transformational dimension in worship services. Transformational in the sense that the experience moves UUs towards a life of wholeness, service and joy. I believe in that human longing, too. In the book, HOWEVER, the ministers make the following two claims. Claims that disappointed me.

The first:

“The paradox for non-creedal UU churches is offering services that are inviting and acceptable to UUs of all theological stripes. Inviting and acceptable without reducing worship to the least common denominator. Which probably leaves no one in attendance offended but perhaps leaves most everyone also unfulfilled.”.

The second:

“When a congregation experiences conflict over traditions or innovations in worship, it is because they are conflicted about who they are or who they want to become.

These two statements disappointed not because I strongly disagree. Rather, to me, both jump over the stream without going under the water.

So come back with me to the Readings.

The koan *Woman in the Inn*. The Zen teacher asks, “When you are looking for the Buddha of infinite light in your own body, how would you recognize it?”

The poem *Aimless Love*. The poet says, “My heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.”

Now wave the wand of wisdom in this koan and in this poem, wave it over the two quotes from the UU book, combining and transfiguring them into this:

When a service leaves congregants unoffended yet unfulfilled ... when a congregation experiences conflict over traditions or innovations in worship, it is because they are not asking themselves:

*How would I recognize worshiping when I am looking for it in my own spirit and body?
Is my heart, my soul, propped up in the pew on its tripod, ready for the next arrow of
transformative worship in church?”*

Let me repeat that:

When a service leaves congregants unoffended yet unfulfilled ... when a congregation experiences conflict over traditions or innovations in worship, it is because they are not asking themselves:

How would I recognize worshiping when I am looking for it in my own spirit and body? Is my heart, my soul, propped up in the pew on its tripod, ready for the next arrow of transformative worship in church?"

John Tarrant, suggesting how to work with the koan, shares the story that when Buddha had his first intimations of his own enlightenment, a strange question arose in his mind: "Are you afraid of this happiness?" "Are you afraid of this happiness?" Tarrant posits that happiness requires a certain surrender. You have to give up your idea of happiness in order to discover what happiness is. Unhappiness can be threaded through your idea of you. Are you willing to be a different you? Are you willing to be not you? Whoa.... these questions airlifted me into a rugged back territory, not only personally ... also as a member of the Worship Committee.

Strange questions came to my mind:

When I cross the threshold of church on Sundays, am I skeptical of the service that's going to start?

Do I have to give up my idea of worship in order to discover what worship is?

My idea is laced with personal preferences for theological language, readings, style of the minister, manner of the worship assistant, music? (By the way, today's music was chosen to be a bit of a mishmash.)

Do I have to give up my idea of worship in order to discover what worship is?

Both the koan and the poem teach that happiness might be right under my nose at this minute. If it is not here, then it is not anywhere. Happiness doesn't require my familiar plotlines in life.

Ah, familiar plotlines. This is a year of contemplating beliefs about a new minister, and by extension worship, and sharing our feelings with the Search Committee. Beliefs build their own world, a fictional one.

What I hope is that the voices of today's service – from the organ, Carole's, the Choir's, Claire's, and mine – that the whole of today's experience might give our imaginations the upper hand instead of our familiar plotlines when visualizing a minister. If so, perhaps you'll fantasize what might our congregation and worship look like on any given Sunday if you loved them as they are, just as they are?

Then, perhaps, we'll find greater elasticity in our willingness to let this free religious community change. AND perhaps we'll find more wiggle room in our comfort zones to still allow ourselves to raise an invisible hand and silently proclaim, "Here I belong."

The UU ministers who wrote *Worship That Works* point out that Unitarian Universalism has always claimed – as a defining characteristic – always claimed a freedom that invites experimentation and adaption of traditional forms. This characteristic has been one of our attractions to seekers who call themselves spiritual but not religious.

Next Sunday, when I am sitting in the pew, I will try to cultivate the awareness that worship that moves me towards wholeness, service, and joy is right under my nose. If it is not, then it is now anywhere.

Intuitively I already know this.

BENEDICTION

For Benediction I offer words from a beloved sage to carry with us as we leave church: "Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open." Spoken by Professor Albus Dumbledore. [Postlude on organ: Theme from "Harry Potter," Jeremy Soule]