

‘WORSHIP: TRANSITIVE OR INTRANSITIVE?’

What is it that we do most as Unitarians? Within our denomination different congregations have different concerns, different emphases, different programmes and activities.

Some congregations, particularly in the USA, provide sanctuary for political refugees who are technically classed as illegal immigrants from areas rent by rebellion, counter-insurgency, civil war. Some congregations are involved in helping to run soup kitchens and/or refuges for the homeless/unemployed/ destitute. Some congregations are active in political affairs: lobbying members of parliament, holding public meetings, writing letters to newspapers, organising petitions and collecting signatures, providing free office space to worthwhile voluntary or charitable organisations such as Amnesty International or the United Nations Association. Some congregations sponsor or produce radio programmes which offer comment on political or social concerns, as well as liberal religious material.

Some congregations run - or support - day-care centres, playgroups or kindergartens, so that parents - particularly single mothers, or couples who do not have the support of extended families - can have somewhere suitable to leave their children while they (the parents) are at work. Some congregations organize or sponsor various weekday activities and classes: senior citizens' social clubs; series of lectures, concerts, discussion groups, classes on current affairs or comparative religion.

As a denomination like many other denominations, we do a lot of things.

Whatever may be the particular emphasis/activity/concerns - political, social, educational, cultural - of each individual congregation, there is one activity which unites all of our congregations. There is one activity which is common.

That activity is *worship*.

Week after week, year after year, usually at set times and in the same place, a congregation gathers together in a shared act of worship.

Because of our heritage of - and our insistence on - the right of each individual to think for him/herself in religious and other matters, some of our members make what seems to be to be a mistake.

"I don't need to go to church," they say. "I can worship (God) perfectly well in the fields, or in my own garden, or walking along the beach." Or "I don't need to sing hymns, or listen to a sermon."

Worship may, of course, include and mean times of solitude, of silence, of meditation or reflection by an individual. Our inclusion of a period of silence within our services is both an acknowledgement of that reality and an attempt to provide an opportunity for it.

And that, I suggest, is the key to what seems to be the common mistake: the key is the word "opportunity".

It may indeed be true: the people who use that excuse for not coming to church may indeed be **able** to worship (God) perfectly well in the fields, or in their own gardens, or walking along the beach.

But how many of them ever actually make - or use - the opportunity to do so? How many of them ever actually set aside just one hour per week, and use that hour, consciously and deliberately, to worship? To give praise and/or thanks to God? To wonder at the complex majesty of creation, and the mystery of life? To express their hopes and aspirations? To unburden themselves of fears or doubts and to seek strength and guidance? To try to understand, accept, and come to terms with the unanswered and unanswerable questions about the meaning of life, the joy and wonder of birth and growth, the pain of illness, disease, physical and mental handicaps and disabilities, the reality of death and the sorrow of bereavement?

How many people - potting plants in their garden, or strolling along the beach, or out on a walk - ever actually stop, consciously and deliberately, to engage themselves in worship? NOT VERY MANY! They may be **close** to nature, but they don't get to the **heart** of nature.

It strikes me as rather like the minister who has a member of the congregation seriously ill in hospital, and who makes a pastoral visit by sitting in the waiting room. The minister may get close to the patient, but won't touch the patient's heart.

Would you be satisfied if you were in hospital and I knew you were there, but didn't visit you? Would you be satisfied if, when you asked me later, I told you that I had sat for a while in the waiting room, or had thought "So-and-so is in there" as I drove past the hospital - and then I used that as an excuse for not coming to see you, to talk with you, to listen to you, hold your hand, pray with you? Would you **really** be satisfied?

By all means, spend time alone. Do the gardening, go for a walk. But don't use those times when you are alone, but doing something else, as an excuse for not coming to church, **unless** you are in fact using those times to do what you would otherwise do in church: unless you are in fact using those times regularly, consciously and deliberately to meditate, to reflect, to contemplate, to speak and listen to God, to worship.

I believe that people are more likely to engage in worship when they do it in the company of others who also are engaged in worship.

So, whatever other activities or political or social or educational or cultural concerns may attract the attention, interest and energy of members of a congregation, central to the life of the congregation as a church or as a fellowship (as a religious community and not simply a secular association) will be the regular acts of shared worship.

The common worship - the shared affirmations and inspirations - will be central to the congregation's existence and to its identity.

The religious gatherings of the people express the primary and essential values of the religious community.

American Unitarian Universalist minister Alice Blair Wesley has suggested that our worship as Unitarians should be seen more as an intransitive verb than as a transitive verb. That is, we gather together as a congregation in order to worship. The emphasis ought to be seen as being on the people who are there, and what it is that they are doing. Breathing, sleeping and walking are intransitive verbs - they have a subject, but not an object. **We** simply **do** them. In the same way, she says, we (the people, the congregation, the subject) should simply worship. We should just **do** it.

Worship as a transitive verb requires an object. That object may be God, or it may be something which some people would regard as an aspect of what they call God: truth, love, nature, beauty, majesty, mystery.

If we use worship as a transitive verb, the object is likely to become the essential element: what is worshipped is likely to become more important than the people who are doing the worshipping.

For those who use worship as a transitive verb - who think in terms of the object of worship - the act of worship is likely to involve an experience (or a recalling of an experience) of the Divine Mystery, Presence, Being, Reality. They will give praise or thanks to it; they will ask it for guidance, inspiration, strength, courage; they will turn to it for the answers to their questions, for comfort in their sorrow, for hope in their despair. They will ascribe to it all the qualities which manifest themselves in our human existence and which transcend anything and everything we know about our existence and our universe. They may even blame it for the evils, problems, sadnesses and seeming injustices of our human existence.

Some are uncomfortable with this kind of theological interpretation of worship. Whether we use worship as an intransitive or as a transitive verb - whether we are more concerned with the people who are worshipping, as the subject of the verb, or with what they are worshipping, as the object of the verb - doesn't really matter.

Even to draw the distinction is to run the risk of setting up a mutually exclusive dichotomy, when in fact both interpretations are equally valid and as much integral parts of the whole as the two sides of a coin, though different, are integral and inseparable parts of the whole coin.

The two interpretations of worship - the intransitive verb or the transitive verb - the emphasis on subject or on object - are co-existent, inseparable parts of what we do in common, when we gather together at our appointed times and places. When we worship as Unitarians, we gather together, we pause, we meditate/pray/reflect, we share. We worship **together** as members of a religious community.

The regularity of time and place suggests that worship itself is consciously regular. It is a time of ordering or shaping. This concept of ordering or shaping is important.

The word "worship" comes from "worth-ship", which comes from the Anglo-Saxon "weorth-scipe". Most of us are familiar with the old meaning of "worth-ship" as: affirming what is of worth; or ascribing worth (or value or importance) to something or someone, such as a mayor or magistrate.

It means more. The "scipe" means to **shape**, as in "scoop" and "shovel", with connotations of piling up together. Hence, worship involves shaping - giving shape to - piling up together - what which is already known to be of worth. We shape our values, we shape our ideals, we shape our beliefs.

By extension, it may mean not only **shaping** - giving shape to - what is known to be of worth, but also **being shaped by** what is known to be of worth. We are shaped by our values, we are shaped by our ideals, we are shaped by our beliefs.

When we Unitarians gather together to worship, we are shaping/formulating/expressing/organising/ordering our faith, ourselves, and perhaps other people. At the same time, consciously and in community with others, we are allowing ourselves, our lives, to be shaped by our faith, and by the faith of others.

In celebrating the wonder and mystery of life, let us gather together as a community to worship, and then, when we are gathered together, in community, let us indeed worship.

Geoffrey R Usher

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I DO NOT HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
by Patrick Murfin

I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.
I've lost his phone number; he never answers
his mail.

We did not, as young men,
hang out on Wednesday nights,
cigarettes dripping from our lips, at
pool halls.

He is not there like an old neighbor to
fix my broken lawn mower and
hand me a soda
on a blazing hot day.

When I rip my shin on a jutting shelf and
cry out his name,
he does not rush to me
with Band-Aids and peroxide.

He does not, at times of vexation,
when my world lies shattered,
my relationships ruptured, my
children insolent,
my finances hopeless,
come with soothing counsel to my side.

He does not take my requests
like a long-distance dedication
on America's Top Forty,
or deliver within five business days
or my money back
on my catalogue order -
my business is not important to him.

I do not have a Personal Relationship with God.

But in quiet moments -
in the familiar whistle
of a red-winged blackbird on a cattail, or
in spider webs glinting with dew in the
grass of a clear sunrise,
or the passing attention of an old cat -
He/She/It/Whatever does not
speak
or do
or answer
but admits me to fleeting union
with the Creator.