

"WORSHIP, WORLD AND WONDER"

An address given by Rev. Geoff Usher

Some words by Jacob Trapp:

"Put Off Thy Shoes"

So it was said to Moses at the burning bush.

"Put off the shoes of the habitual," said an Hasidic rabbi. Let your bare feet touch the ground. Experience things afresh.

"He who can no longer stand rapt in wonder and awe," said Einstein, "is as good as dead. His eyes are closed."

"If the doors of perception are opened," said William Blake, "then everything will appear as it is, infinite."

"From the touch of my feet to the grass," said Walt Whitman, "spring a hundred affections."

Those words express what, ideally, worship ought to be, or, more precisely, what worship ought to inspire. Jopie Boeke a true story, told by a professor who taught at the seminary she attended.

A four-year--old girl was invited to a wedding. She had never been taken to church before. When she walked in the door, she beheld for the first time in her life the stained glass windows, the rich dark wood of the pews, the flowers decorating the altar, the red carpet, the high-beamed ceiling. She stopped dead in her tracks, her little mouth formed a perfect circle, and she whispered, "Wow."

It is this sort of "Wow" that all religious communities want to inspire, whether we have grand cathedrals or simple chapels and meeting houses. It is the "wow!!" of knowing that there is something mysterious, beautiful, awe-full, happening.

Yet wonder seems to be missing from most of our Unitarian worship services. Perhaps this is because we have been taught to emphasise the reasonable, the provable, the rational, the functional. We are easily embarrassed by too much of a display of emotion. We want our rituals simple and contained. Of course, it is not realistic to expect a "wow" every Sunday in church.

Jopie's husband Richard was interviewed by a church committee for a possible ministry with them. One man said: "We are a demanding congregation. We expect every service to be an inspirational experience; and I don't want to be bored more than one Sunday a year." Needless to say, Richard withdrew his application.

Winnie the Pooh sits and waits until a "hum" comes to him. Hums are not, he suggests, things that you can go and get, but things that get you. In life, in nature, in worship: there are insights to be had, but they cannot always be had by trying to go and get them; sometimes they come from quiet waiting. And part of waiting is silence. Generally speaking, our services tend to be full of words. Meister Eckhart is said to have observed that nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness.

The great African American mystic and preacher, Howard Thurman, spoke several times at the Boekes' Church in Berkeley, California. Jopie says that "He always stood silently before the congregation and gathered the spirit, before he spoke. We could all feel it, and when he spoke, his words inspired wonder. The silence was part of the power of the words he spoke."

There are many ways to enhance our experience of worship, to help create an atmosphere where we may encounter a sense of wonder: the use of visual imagery; colour; flowers; the chalice. Sound is another important way: music. But we have a problem in many of our churches: We still sing the old familiar hymns, which some of our members love. But if we want to reach out to new communities, we must use new music. This is not to advocate doing away with the familiar hymns altogether, but it is to advocate introducing some new sounds into the worship experience. Our task is not to resist the new, but to search for newer and different modes of communication.

Dare one speak of the other senses: smell, taste, and, God forbid, touch? There is not time to go into detail, but let me ask: When was the last time you stopped to smell this place? What feelings and memories were evoked when you smelled a live Christmas tree; when you tasted home-cooked food at a harvest lunch?

Just as we have lost our focus on smell and taste, so have we lost our focus on touch. Again, this is not to advocate that we have a Kiss of Peace. But it is important to consider the power of touch, and ways in which we might include it in worship and in the life of the congregation. So: we have sight, sound, smell, taste and touch -- five senses to enliven our worship.

Let me share with you the words of a song by Shelley Jackson Denham. It's all right: I'll read them, not sing. The song is called:

"We Laugh, We Cry".

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die;

we dance, we sing our song.

We need to feel there's something here to which we can belong.

We need to feel the freedom just to have some time alone.

But most of all we need close friends we can call our very own.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love;

And we have found a need to be together.

We have our hearts to give, we have our thoughts to receive;

And we believe that sharing is an answer.

A child is born among us and we feel a special glow.

We see time's endless journey as we watch the baby grow.

We thrill to hear imagination freely running wild.

We dedicate our minds and hearts to the spirit of this child.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love;

And we have found a time to be together.

And with the grace of age, we share the wonder of youth,

And we believe that growing is an answer.

Our lives are full of wonder and our time is very brief.

The death of one among us fills us all with pain and grief.

But as we live, so shall we die, and when our lives are done

The memories we shared with friends, they will linger on and on.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love;

And we have found a place to be together.

We have the right to grow, we have the gift to believe

That peace within our living is an answer.

We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life.
We seek to put an end to all the waste of human strife.
We search for truth, equality, and blessed peace of mind.
And then, we come together here, to make sense of what we find.
And we believe in life, and in the strength of love;
And we have found a joy being together.
And in our search for peace, maybe we'll finally see:
Even to question, truly is an answer.
When we gather for worship, what are we doing?

Worship begins with a gathered community. It is essential that the church be a community, and not just a gathering of individuals. It is also important that we welcome strangers. We are indeed a gathered community, and I hope we welcome strangers.

In a true worship service we enact and proclaim a different set of values, a different understanding of what life means. At its best, it is where people -- whatever their colour, sex, politics, income, sexual orientation -- are valued, appreciated, respected, loved, and helped to become the best person they can be.

Helped to become the best person they can be.

It is where giving and receiving love and justice are at the heart of our way of living and being. But worship and wonder are not just tools for simply removing us from the world. It is not meant to be a withdrawal from the real world, a retreat, a cave to get away. The world, as we all know, is full of pain, injustice, war, hunger, and misery. Church is not an escape from this world of pain and misery, but a place to be reminded of the quality of life, to be given the strength with which to make the world a better place. This is not just the task of the minister. It takes the strength of community, that might enable us to be hopeful in the midst of pain. And this community then sends us forth into the world, filled with strength and joy to face the struggles that lie ahead.

If we are to be a worshipping community, we must pay attention to the world, as well as stand in wonder before the mystery of life.

The spirit moves in mysterious ways. Before this awesome mystery we can but walk humbly, hope to do justice and love mercy, and retain a sense of the wonder of it all.

One of my favourite passages in Upperchapel's Unitarian Orders of Worship is Robert T Weston's meditation in Service Ten, "Out of The Stars". I want to finish by reading now another meditation by him, entitled "The Wonder of Humanity"

This is the wonder of humanity:
A million, a million million of us have minds
That smoulder with beauty and wonder;
Though many be smothered into drabness
There is always at least one who will burst into flame.
The make-believe of the child
Becomes Les Miserables under the pen of the man.
It is the way of humanity to dream and to explore;
It is the way of humanity to see and follow a beckoning finger
Into the mists of the unknown.
Look not to authority for the voice of God;
Look to the flame of beauty in the heart, and the insistent question,

The creating that tries, fails, and tries again.
This it is to be human, and in some sense to be God:
To love; to imagine; to experiment; to try; to create;
To stumble; to get up and go on in anguish and faith
That it can be done.
This is humanity, that in the heart and eyes has wonder;
That can look upon the barren tree and see beauty;
See mighty engines in the formless ore;
Atom-smashers in the flash of lightning,
And truth on the other side of doubt fearlessly explored.
This is the way of the future, whatever future there be;
This is the way of humanity.