

Rev. Phares

Reflection: Turning Away from Worship

MVUU

8.28.16

READING

From *After Buddhism* by Stephen Batchelor. For this reading it will be helpful for you to know that a sangha is a congregation in the Buddhist context. In imagining a post-Buddhist, secular sangha, Batchelor writes, “A *secular* sangha is a community of like-minded, self-reliant, individuals united by friendship, who work to mutually support each other in their own flourishing. Such a community is an ongoing *practice*; it requires *commitment* and *action*. As a living community where all members regard themselves as works in progress it is an *unfinished* project.”

PART I

When I was a little kid, I *hated* shoes. I still don’t prefer to wear them. But, when I was little, putting shoes on would cause me to lose my mind. Defcon level “boom! I just blew up the defcon system” style tantrums.

As I got older, I was not so reactive. I learned that some shoes will *never* be comfortable. I’m not wearing those shoes. I learned that usually the best shoes are uncomfortable or just odd at first. You have to wear them. You have to adjust the tightness or maybe augment them with an insole or just break them in. After some time, you fit that shoe like a glove or... you know... like a really good shoe. Usually, those wind up being the best shoes.

What we do here on Sundays is like that. It’s like a shoe. In fact, in some ways, whole traditions and particular church communities in particular are like that. When we are patient enough to overcome moments of discomfort is when they become really, really good.

I say this by way of both instruction and warning. Today I have a new pair of shoes for you. I would like you to try them on. They may feel odd at first. They may feel just right.

These new pair of shoes have to do with what we call this time we spend together. Currently, we call it worship. We call this is a worship service.

You may recall that I have preached once in each of the last two years about my dissatisfaction with the word worship. Two years ago, in a reflection entitled *What is Worship?* I reflected on how worship comes from the Old English *worthskype*, which translates as “acknowledging things of worth.”

The one thing worship does well is to decentralize the self by placing the subject of worship in the center. That is important because without it, we can wind up worshipping ourselves, which is a

terrible mistake. That said, centralizing a subject can also result in the abdication of responsibility or easy pickings for the power hungry and manipulative.

(NEXT SLIDE)

Beyond that, I still, "...do not know that either its origin or common usage quite describes with real effectiveness what we do here or what the *future requires* for healthy, powerful, communal religious practice... I don't think what we *do* matches the *word* in all the nuances it has gathered to itself over the centuries."

This is all the more important as we consider the future. "As we move into the middle of the 21st century, there is a growing number of folks who have never participated in worship before coming through our doors... Meanwhile many of us have indeed worshipped in other faiths and found that worship unsatisfying in some fashion or other. And this leaves an impression. Like sunspots. So that everytime I say worship, you blink and see this old image overlaid on my (understanding of acknowledging worth)."

And that will not fly, jack! No!

Simply put, the word "Worship" does not cut the 21st century mustard. Even in it's most apologetic definition, *free* of the "bow, stoop, venerate" stranglehold, worship is... it's just not what we do... or not *only* what we do... which is good. And yet, the word persists in our tradition.

I have said many times that the cornerstone of Unitarian Universalism has always been evolution. If we are an evolving tradition then let us *evolve*! Let us be bold! Progressive!

The future demands our evolution. And the future, by the way, is multi and cross-cultural. I made mention of this those two years past. I pointed out that, "When we look, from a cross cultural perspective, at the event that would occupy the same religious space as what we refer to as worship... then the term worship becomes inadequate for our use."

And so I searched.

I came back to you last summer and in a reflection called *What About Worship?* I confessed that, "To this point, I can not find a word that carries the same weight (as *worship*)... that is also not goofy or superficial." I had not found a word that describes what we *do* together every Sunday.

And that is the key question, my friends... what *do* we do together? Finding a word that actively, powerfully, compellingly names *all* of what we do together is the word that will serve our purpose. That name will be our new pair of shoes. As it happens, I have been developing a theology of secular salvation with you all. Doing so began to reveal to me at last what we ought to more accurately name our time together.

I found it.

(SHOE BOX)

PART II

What *do* we do together? I have spent many Sundays wrestling with this angel, demanding its name. I want to remind you of a few reflections that will serve as a representative sampling.

In *What Is Worship?* I suggested that we gather to, “frame, inform and generate a religious path that is (1) grounded in integrity, (2) capable of transformation... and (3) (is)... fundamentally formative to... an attitude of (non-reactive) mindful(ness)...”

Earlier this year, in a reflection called *Fulfilling our Future*, I suggested that, “Here you are invited to practice being your best perspective - your deeply connected, non-reactive perspective.”

In *Beyond Use*, another reflection from earlier this year, I proposed that we we come together, “To find power in the practice of our faith. And to find, in our faith, a course for that power that is a gift to the world.”

Then last week, I proposed that, “We make a habit of our stories until they are second nature, until (they are) *sub*conscious and *pre*dictive. This takes practice. Lots of practice. And that... is exactly what we are doing every Sunday here at MVUU; practicing our (faith) story.”

So it appears that I have found a word that describes what I believe we, and indeed all religious communities do when gathered. We practice. All the better that, like worship, practice is both a noun and a verb. We practice. And we go to *a* practice.

Think of a dancer. When a dancer goes to a dance practice, they prepare themselves to perform. They might practice minute technical drills or a whole piece. In any case, when the lights go on, the dancer is *prepared* and the distinction between performance and practice is negligible.

What do we practice together on Sunday mornings? We practice our entire faith in component parts: in singing, relating together, praying, meditating, reflecting, stories, and living our values. These are the technical exercises, if you will. But most fundamentally, we practice making a habit of our faith until it is second nature, until it is *sub*conscious and *pre*dictive. That’s the performance; life.

This isn’t a description of some hazy ideal. This is in fact what we *already* do. This is an observation as much as it is a prescription. And all the more powerful and effective if we call it what it is rather than some misapplied lexical inheritance.

What would happen if we understood that on Sunday mornings we come together to *practice* our faith so that the intentionality of our practice supercedes our unpracticed, unintentional reactivity and thereby develops our freedom? What if we understood that we gathered to practice and

cultivate, for ourselves and others, this experience of secular salvation? What if that understanding was so central that it was the name of our time and activity together.

Do you recall the way I have described salvation? Given that I think we can confidently say that, regardless of theology or belief, all definitions of salvation, from nirvana to union with the godhead, carry the very strong implication that salvation means you are no longer afraid. So then, considering the origins of fear, I came up with the following litany....

Salvation is the experience of being free from the grip of fear. This does not mean fear is eliminated. It means you are not hooked by it. You do not live in its thrall.

This freedom manifests in our ability to respond rather than react.

Which means freedom is responsibility.

Cultivating response-ability (over reactivity) depends on our ability to habituate an awareness of our reactivity and to live our faith.

Being aware of reactivity enables us to be free of it.

Faith is a story of values and meaning that dispels the grip of fear and guides our ability to respond with intention rather than reactivity.

Thus we find freedom in faith.

Our faith claims that existence is interconnected and that each of us is bestowed with inherent worth and dignity. Which is to say that we are not the center but a beautiful part of an amazing whole and that each and every one of us is invited to live without fear and so find freedom.

Faith and awareness require practice. This is not easy. It is done best when done, at least in part, with others.

Now this theology draws heavily from the secular buddhist tradition, mindfulness psychology, neuroscience and consciousness studies, and our own tradition; in its evolving heritage, sources and principles. This theology of secular salvation also fits very snugly with naming our Sunday services Practice.

Of course, the word practice has historical religious precedent. It has roots and legitimacy. I think there is room here for the atheist and most other varieties spiritual understandings. I also think this applies to, and might *appeal* to those who claim to be spiritual but not religious.

This theology of secular salvation and the practice it points to is honest. It is, I think, accurate. It is bold, yes, and evolutionary. And which is more compelling, practicing values or acknowledging value? Which is more compelling, more formative?

This move is grounded by our heritage, reaching for our future, and rooted in that which we already do without naming it. Naming it empowers it. Naming its practice empowers you.

Is it perfect? If its perfection you want, you might try the Episcopalians. But it is at least a start. Will you try it with me for a year or so? We may need to adjust the laces or get an insole.

But for the immediate future, we can refer to our 9:00 gathering - centered on meditation, poetry, and chanting - as our Contemplative Practice. Our 10:30 gathering - centered on singing, sharing, and reflecting - will be referred to as our Traditional Practice, for there the format is traditional and the tradition is practiced. In both instances, our liturgy will remain largely familiar. But our frame and orientation will change to reflect our unitarian rigor and universalist theology.

I invite you to try on these shoes. They may feel weird at first. But we're already girding for the weird so consider it... I don't know... practice.