

**Rev. Phares**

**Reflection: Turning Away from Worship - Long Version**

**MVUU**

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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 flip out. Defcon level "boom! I just blew up the defcon system" level 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. Some shoes will be comfortable right away. But usually the best shoes are not. 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. And then 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 hear 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.

As I continue this reflection I should warn you that I will be quoting myself at length today. I do not do this because I am admiring myself. I do this to demonstrate that what I bring to you today is not impetuous or impulsive, but is an evolving understanding that is consistent with what I have been preaching for years now.

With that said, 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 Norse *worthskype*, which translates as "acknowledging things of worth."

In fact, I love "acknowledging worth", recognizing meaning. I did not and still do not have emotional heat around the word. It's not a trigger word for me or anything. But it is from this

reflective point of view, that, at the time I confessed, “that I don’t know that the definition quite captures the word. And I 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.

Part of this is that 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).”

Moreover, frankly, I’m just not *impressed* by a persons ability to *acknowledge worth*.

Our principles “affirm and promote” various values. And I share in those who criticise *affirmation* and *promotion* as rather *lukewarm* religious verbs. But next to *acknowledging*, *affirming* and *promoting* are downright energetic.

Acknowledgement makes no claim on a body. To me, it seems to invite hypocrisy because I can acknowledge a value without embodying a value. I can acknowledge that sacrifice is a worthy value without feeling called to sacrifice myself. I can praise the magnificence of *the best god ever!* without pursuing magnificence in my actions, in my home, or in the world. Forgiveness is great! In principle. As a set piece.

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, clear of the bow, stoop, and venerate stranglehold, worship is... its just not what we do... which is good. Because it’s not what we ought to do either.

I have said many times that the cornerstone of Unitarian Universalism has always been evolution. We are an *evolving* faith. But just as writers are not writers unless they are writing, so to must we live into our heritage. 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.”

“I look at the Buddhist sitting zazen. I look at the sweat lodges, circle dances, ritual piercing, vision questing practices of those first immigrants to this continent. I look at the phenomenon of Burning Man and its derivatives. I look the vestiges of the deadheads and rave culture. I look at the clarifying moments of people in nature and in mourning. I look yogic practices and midrashic practices, none of which look like what we might commonly call worship, but all of which occupy similar cultural, spiritual, and emotional spaces as worship.

I also look to Islamic prayers and practices, Hindu veneration, rabbinic wisdom offerings, Christian praise, prayer, singing, and sermonizing and other iterations of the religious life that look quite familiarly like what we think of when we use the word worship.”

The word I sought would somehow take into account all or most of that.

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*)... I have not found a word that is accurate that is also not goofy or superficial.”

As obscured by its baggage as it is, I relegated myself and you with me, to the use of the word worship. This, though even when etymologically rooted, it appears to be open to corruption. It was frustrating because worship is simply not accurate concerning what we do and what we need to do together.

And that is the key question, my friends... what *do* we do together? Especially as I began to develop a secular spiritual theology, asking what do we do together would reveal to me at last what we ought to more accurately name our time together. Finding a word that actively, powerfully, compellingly named what we do together is the word that will serve our purpose. That name will be our new pair of shoes.

I found it.

PART II

What *do* we do together? I reflect on that a good deal. 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.

From *What Is Worship?* “Worship, or whatever it is... must not be merely entertainment. But I believe it should also move beyond intellectual engagement... (to)... frame, inform and generate a religious path that is (1)grounded in integrity, (2)capable of transformation, inspiration, ecstasy and deeply felt peace through justice, and (3) be fundamentally formative to... an attitude of (non-reactive) mindful(ness)...”

*From What About Worship?*

*“I hope we are changing lives and sustaining lives and even saving lives. I hope we are bringing meaning to those lives in the forms of novel and also tried and true perspectives that challenge, invite, embrace and ultimately welcome, care for, and inspire us.”*

*From The Virtue of Sin*

*“With our practice of acceptance, the observation that we all have personal, perpetual sin invites us into sympathy, not judgmentalism.”*

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 - so that you can then take that non-reactive, deeply connected perspective back into “the world.””

In *Beyond Use*, another reflection from earlier this year, I proposed that we we come together, “To practice living and thinking counter to the consumerist mindset that insinuates our days... 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 it is subconscious and predictive. This takes practice. Lots of practice. And that, by the way, is exactly what we are doing every Sunday here at MVUU; practicing our (faith) story.”

*Which circles back to the Character vs. Soul reflection I offered last spring, where I proposed that, “Character points to practice... to the stories we tell in order to turn them into practice and habit.”*

*And just last week* I then proposed that the key to life was, “faith and faithfulness or, in other words, habituating our story through intentional practice.”

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 dance practice. They practice to prepare. They might practice minute technical drills or a whole piece. Likewise, we sometimes practice a component of a whole or just a skill. Sometimes we practice by doing the whole thing that we are practicing to do. 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, living our values. We practice many things in part or taken as a whole. But most fundamentally, we practice making a habit of our faith until it is second nature, until it is *sub*conscious and *pre*dictive.

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?

What if we understood that we gathered to practice and cultivate, for ourselves and others, the experience of secular spiritual salvation?

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 do not have to be 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 the 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, 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 does fit very snugly with naming our Sunday services Practice.

Of course, the word practice has historical religious precedent. I didn't just make it up. It is, for instance what Buddhist meditators do. In fact, from the perspective of anthropology, worship might be categorized under religious practice.

That being said, I think this applies as much to a Christian as it does to an atheist as it does to a pagan as it does to a Muslim. There may be some chiropracty needed for the bit about what our faith claims. 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 it is grounded by our heritage and reaching for our future and rooted in that which we already do without naming it. It is rooted in practice. Naming it empowers it. Naming is 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 centering 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. Be we're already girding for the weird so consider it... I don't know... practice.