

"Respectful Relationship as Worship"
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When I was a ministerial student, we often talked about seeing things with a "sermonic eye." "Oh, now that's something you can preach on" we would say to one another. One day at lunch someone described an experience she had had. I responded, "sounds like a sermon to me." Professor Krister Stendahl captured me in his gaze (and you'd have to know him to understand why I say "captured") and said, "the problem with looking at life through the sermonic eye is that you miss half of life."

"The problem with looking at life through the sermonic eye is that you miss half of life." I got the message, although it took a few years. I no longer view life primarily as sermon fodder.

But, as one who devotes a lot of time to worship preparation, I can tell you that everything I experience impacts what we do here on Sunday. In fact, I would suggest that everything you experience impacts what we do here on Sunday as well.

Like most of you, I take in lots of information in the course of a week. The information stimulates thought and becomes part of our life experience. It is our collective life experience that creates whatever happens during our worship service.

There is something at work here that is beyond our control. Not that there isn't intention behind what we do. The elements of the service are intended to create a framework out of which worship can occur.

A Worship Associate with whom I used to work identified some key elements of worship: humility, joy, and listening from the heart. He says:

If I'm only listening to my own feelings, I may not notice the other's feelings. If I'm only operating intellectually, I am no longer worshipping with them – I am simply worshipping my intellect. Intellect likes to be in control... when we worship...we are humbling ourselves to acknowledge that what we worship is something much bigger than anything we can comprehend.

(Norman Jentner's reflections on worship, April 17, 2005)

The word "worship" derives from the Old English – weorthscipe – which means "to ascribe worth to something, to shape things of worth." In a Unitarian Universalist service we shape something of worth that is greater than our individual selves. In worship we connect with the whole. Our services affirm right relations and justice within and beyond our

congregational life. We bring compassion and an acceptance of one another. Creativity and self-esteem are “things of worth” that shape the worship experience many congregations call a “celebration of life.”

A good starting point for considering worship might be the question: “who are we?” Who are we as humans interacting with other human beings? Who are we as a congregation that worships together?

“Who are we?” is what we call a “question of ultimacy.” What is my purpose for being? How do I relate to that which I don’t understand? And how can I connect with someone if don’t understand them?

These are questions many of us bring with us when we gather here on Sunday morning. I operate from what some would call “a fundamental truth of unity.” I believe that you and I are one. We may have different thought processes, and different feelings about things, but ultimately we are united in one great mystery. When we worship together each Sunday, we are shaping something of worth that transcends our individual personalities.

Japanese scientist, Masuru Emoto, was an observer of human behavior. He began asking questions about the chaos and discord he witnessed in the world. He realized that what was “pushing the world away from harmony and towards discord” was the “inevitable phenomenon” of people who live and think in different ways.

...to make matters worse, [he thought] most people have difficulty accepting things that are unlike the things around them. The result is a never-ending process of troubles and suffering.

(Masaru Emoto, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, p. xiv-xv)

Dr. Emoto knew that the average human body is 70 percent water, and that “throughout our lives we exist mostly as water.” Once he realized this, he began to see the world from a different perspective. He asked: “how can people live happy and healthy lives? The answer is to purify the water that makes up 70 percent” of their bodies. (Emoto, p. xvi) He noted a difference between water in a river, for example, and water that is kept from circulating. “The water – or blood – in the bodies of the sick is usually stagnant,” he said. He turned to modern research for the answer. He learned that the condition of the mind has a direct impact on the condition of the body.

When you are living a full and enjoyable life, [he writes] you feel better physically, and when your life is filled with struggles and sorrow, your body knows it. So when your emotions flow throughout your body, you feel a sense of joy and you move towards physical health. Moving, changing, flowing – this is what life is all about [he concluded]. (Emoto, p. xvi)

He believes that “to understand water is to understand the cosmos, the marvels of nature, and life itself.” (p. xix)

Dr. Emoto studied water for many years. For more than two decades, he took photographs of frozen ice crystals. His research focused on the measurement of wave fluctuations in water. He exposed some water to music – everything from classical to heavy metal. On other samples, he wrote words “like ‘Thank you’ and ‘Fool’ on pieces of paper, and wrapped the paper around the bottles of water with the words facing in. It didn’t seem logical for water to ‘read’ the writing, understand the meaning,

and change its form..." (p. xxiv) But -- he discovered that molecules of water are affected by our thoughts, words, and feelings.

Water exposed to "Thank you" formed beautiful hexagonal crystals, but water exposed to the word "Fool" produced crystals similar to the water exposed to heavy-metal music, malformed and fragmented. (p. xxv)

Dr. Emoto writes:

I learned that these photographs of crystals are filled with much wisdom for us... There are... fascinating differences generated in the crystals when the water is shown different words, such as "gratitude" or "stupid." These crystals are filled with lessons concerning how we should – and must – live our lives.

(Masaru Emoto, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, p. ix)

Since humans and the earth are composed mostly of water, Dr. Emoto asks: "If thoughts can do that to water, imagine what

thoughts can do to us?" Even more, imagine what spoken words and actions can do to us.

Dr. Emoto's research is questionable in some scientific circles. But it may help us to understand how our individual thoughts contribute to the worship we experience here.

Whatever has occurred in our lives is brought to bear on this life we share together. We may also have to acknowledge that ours is not the final word in reality.

When we gather in worship each week, we are being "called out" of our daily routines for a sacred purpose. Through this Congregation, we embody, what UU minister Tom Owen-Towle calls, "our holy quest." He suggests that healthy congregations are "holy." By that he means

we create an environment where minds are stimulated, hearts fortified, souls plumbed, consciences goaded, bodies embraced, and spirits restored. It means that we seek to serve whole human beings...

(Tom Owen-Towle, Growing a Beloved Community)

If we seek to serve “whole human beings,” then our worship must reflect the whole of our human experience. The challenge to us is to be aware that there are different realities happening here at the same time. We’ve been conditioned to believe that what is outside us is reality. When we enter this place, we are reminded that our reality is created by what is inside us, and what is around us.

For us to worship together – serving “whole human beings” – we must let go of our particular – external – perception of life – or at least suspend it during this time. As the movie, What the Bleep Do we (k)now!? (Captured Light & Lord of the Wind Film)

pointed out, "the real trick to life is not to be in the know, but to be in the mystery."

The film asks the questions:

Have you ever seen yourself through the eyes of someone else
that you have become?

And looked at yourself through the eyes of the ultimate observer?

The questions themselves suggest that there are multiple realities existing simultaneously. How can we possibly see ourselves "through the eyes of someone else" that we have become? That presumes that we can be in more than one place at a time, embodied in more than one being at a time. It doesn't make sense. Unless we recognize that life is a possibility, and that it is im-possible for us to apprehend it at any one level. If we perceive life as a possibility, then we are challenged to live

with the reality that life is a mystery. This mystery includes past, present and future. And, that is how we can see ourselves through the eyes of someone else we have become.

Have you looked at yourself through the eyes of the ultimate observer? This question suggests that there may be an “ultimate observer.” I believe that the ultimate observer is within each of us. We are witness to our own lives, even as we are participating in them. We are at once detached from, and connected to, our experience with ourselves and other people. We are invited – no – we are “called” – to be present in the mystery. For us to function out of only our intellect, or only our feelings, or only through the lives of our children or spouses, is to renege on our promise to be full human beings.

There is a sequence in the movie What the Bleep Do we (k)now!? that features a young boy with a basketball. He invites

the protagonist to play. She is an adult woman who is moving through life with blinders to the potential reality all around her. Her past wounds and life experience prevent her from seeing life as it could be. She tosses the ball back to the boy, as if to say, "it's your ball. You play with it." He persists. He asks her:

"When was the last time you took a shot?"

She shrugs and looks away. Then a memory of herself as a young girl in a basketball uniform flashes before her eyes. She is startled into awareness.

He tosses the basketball to her again. This time she aims for the basket – while standing in the street.

"No, no," the boy says. "You've got to be on the court to be in play. The court of unending possibilities." She had to take a step into the unknown – into the reality of another – she had to

get on the playing court -- in order to see new possibilities for her own life.

Congregations, like life, are about possibilities. When we worship together, we proclaim:

Welcome to this place of possibility!
This is love's hearth, the home of hope,
a refuge for minds in search of truth unfolding,
ever beautiful, ever strange.
(Marianne Hachten Cotter)

Like the "court of unending possibilities," this Congregation – and our worship together – invites us to see – no – it calls us to experience -- the unseen – to enter into the mystery. We have only to open our hearts and our minds to these possibilities. We may begin by asking: "When was the last time you took a shot at life?"

Here, [may] compassion be our shelter,
[and] freedom our protection from the
storms of bigotry and hate.

In this place, may we find comfort and courage.
... may our sight become vision to see the unseen,
[that we may] glimpse the good that is yet to be.
(Marianne Hachten Cotter)