

“The Value of Ritual”  
OCTOBER 2, 2016

Whenever I think about ritual, I think of Rabbi Jerome Molino of Danbury, CT. I’ve mentioned Rabbi Molino before. I met him in 1983, but his connection to our UU movement goes back much further: to 1935, when he was called as the first Rabbi at the Reform synagogue in Danbury. As I mentioned two weeks ago, the Minister at the First Universalist Church at the time—the Reverend Harry Adams Hersey—was the only cleric in town to reach out to the young rabbi and offer to switch pulpits. Rabbi Molino retired and became Emeritus Rabbi in 1981, but he remained active in interfaith efforts until he died fourteen years ago; He remained, too, a friend of every UU minister who was lucky enough to serve with him in the same town, as I was in the mid-1980. “You Universalist Unitarians (as he always called us) are a lot like us Reform Jews,” he once said to me; “Same theology, same polity—you just don’t have rituals.”

There’s a lot of truth to that. But in fact ritual is any activity that a society establishes to celebrate and renew commonly held perceptions. As the liberal Congregationalist Charles Hambrick-Stowe has written: “Even seemingly anti-ritualists cannot live without ritual, and iconoclasts cannot live without images that give meaning to their lives.”

This is true for Universalist Unitarians, too. And indeed, our regular Sunday services have their ritual dimensions:

Hymns, Chalice, Joys & Sorrows, Music  
Needs to include:     Some continuity     /     Some originality  
Some left lobe stimulation:     sermon, readings  
Some right lobe stimulation:     music, candles, periods of silence, image on the cover of the Sunday Bulletin/Order of Service

(Just try to drop one of these!)

And don’t forget **the Social Hour** or **Coffee Hour** immediately afterwards (Try to drop that!)

*Plus*, almost all UU groups have some **intentionally designed** and **collectively enacted rituals**. Here at PUC... (the “Affirmation of Gratitude” and the particular way of ending services and the familiar litany of “Closing Words”)

Most of our congregations have variations of a flower communion / a water communion / an annual bread or apple or other kind of communion service/ A Christmas pageant / In June: A Teacher Appreciation & Bridging Ceremony.

As today’s Order of Service makes clear, I have tried to add a little *shape* to our services by suggesting what the form, what the arc of the service is aiming at. Notice the six stages I’ve outlined in the Order of Service to help make clear what I’m trying to achieve each Sunday: *Gathering, Centering, Affirming Community, Introspection, Exploration, and Returning to the Service of Life*. One of the reasons I like having Announcements at the beginning of services is to support and not work against the flow I’m trying to help people experience.

We talk about the Flower Communion, the Water Communion. This despite the fact that the word “communion” is emotionally packed for some of Unitarians—as it was for Ralph Waldo Emerson—because of its connection to the Eucharist of Christianity. This is why the Unitarian **Norbert Capek**, sought new rituals unencumbered by emotional baggage carried over from the traditions his members had left behind, and so created the Flower Communion.

The first *water* communion ritual was held at the November 1980 Women and Religion Continental Convocation of Unitarian Universalists in East Lansing, Michigan. It was created by activist/hymnist Carolyn McDade and celebrated UU lay leader Lucile Schuck Longview "as a way for women who lived far apart to connect the work each was doing locally to the whole." The water communion has come to be used as an ingathering/homecoming ritual for a majority of our UU congregations.

But communion is not only a proper noun; it's also a **common noun**, meaning intimacy or connection. Eating and drinking are parts of a universal experience; to exalt this common experience into a unifying ritual can be healing and restorative.

- *Especially* during a transitional period like the one in you're in the midst of...
- *Especially* when some PUC members may have felt bruised or wounded by congregational events or by the words of others during a bumpy period...
- *Especially* at such times sharing a ritual meal, bouquet, or water ceremony can bring a community together, pointing the way to renewal and reconciliation.

Feelings of dislocation aren't confined, by the way, to faith communities in the midst of transition. We are in the midst of tough times all across the country, at least for many. I've only been here two months, but it's clear we've all felt pain and anxiety as various members have lit candles for themselves or for their family members who are struggling. Likewise, many have lamented the agony we read about every day across the globe. Virtually every Unitarian I know is fretting the upcoming presidential election.

Communion—as a common noun: *intimacy* and *connection*—is more a *state of mind* (or state of *heart*) than a rite. Something we *share* when, recognizing that there's violence everywhere—including our own hearts—people agree to try and be a loving community anyway; communion *happens* whenever we agree individually to leave shame and blame behind—or at least keep it at bay—that we might soar *collectively*. Covenants—like the HYMNS you sing and the AFFIRMATION OF GRATITUDE you repeat every Sunday—can help in that process. Good worship including familiar rituals can also help.

This makes me think of Rabbi Jerome Malino again. “We Jews have never abandoned ritual,” he told me, “because it helps us remember the meaning of the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm ‘Be still and know that I am God.’” In other words, rituals help us meditate; help us turn off our never-ending thoughts and inner chatter that we might, instead, experience our inner life. “Be still and know that I am God,” Rabbi Malino went on, was one of his two favorite verses in the Torah. I still recall a meditation he led on that verse at our church, and I'll share with you now. [“Be still and know that I am God.” “Be still and know.” “Be still.” “Be.”]

Rituals help us by effectively preoccupying—and thereby magically quieting—our scheming, critical consciousness in such a way that the intuitive and imaginative parts of our mind can bubble up and come into play. Unlike Rabbi Malino (and most religious professionals), I didn't come to this realization through any liturgical tradition, but through theater.

I always liked theater; my family had season tickets to the Cleveland Playhouse and I also acted in several plays as a youth. Then during and immediately after my seminary years I was part of an experimental theater company in Palo Alto and later Berkeley.

In the summer of 1977 our theater company was putting up Euripides' *Bacchae*, and I remember reading Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Miss Harrison (as the poet Charles Olson always referred to her) applied then-contemporary archaeological discoveries to an interpretation of Greek religion in ways that are now standard.

Jane Ellen Harrison described Greek tragedy as the universalization of what had been, in earlier times, cultic ritual. In other words, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles essentially took the ancient rites of their forebears and put them on the stage. Moreover, she explained, the archeological evidence was clear.

Proscenium = the stage

*Underneath the stage* = an ancient campfire surrounded by a circle.

Add to this our knowledge that the word “religion” comes from the Latin *re-ligio*, meaning “re-link,” as in “circling around a campfire,” and I suddenly understood Greek drama as a means, in ancient times *and still today*, of bringing the ancient stories—i.e., Greek myths and metaphors—to life. That's the magic of theater: once you memorize your lines and your blocking, you enter a realm of extraordinary freedom: a liminal experience that's hard to explain in words, but that's somehow inspired and puts the actors and the audience on an imaginative, even redemptive, threshold—if only for a while.

Ritual is much the same: a means of calming participants' hyperactive “monkey minds” that we might bring celebrated myths or metaphors to life. In UU congregations, the metaphor we most often celebrate is the web of life—recognizing its horror but also its power to heal and to restore us.

“All life,” wrote the mythologist Joseph Campbell “is monstrous, as it forever feeds on itself.” And it's true: all life feeds off life, the Great Chain of Being. As life comes to fruition (i.e., to fulfillment as *fruit*) it is sacrificed to feed and sustain the up & coming generation of life right behind it. Poet and farmer Wendell Berry laments that our culture has forgotten this principle on which it's actually based: the law of usufruct = use of the fruit. People can forget this, but it is still always true. We are tied to the earth and to one another, often violently. “To live,” writes Berry, “we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, and reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.”

Services like the water communion that Claire Moss and I put together four weeks ago help us bond and reconcile with each other; help us remember that we're part of something bigger and more sublime than our individual egos; and help keep us from scapegoating one another. The Flower Communion has the same effect. Indeed, all worship, well conceived and well ordered, works in the same way: to turn off our constantly chattering "monkey minds" and connect us to patterns more basic, inner rhythms that restore and renew.

In conclusion: the adjustments I have made to the Order of Service here, I assure you, are well considered. I will continue to tweak things as we go along. Allow yourselves to see how it feels. Give it a try. Nothing is etched in stone. We're fluid here—or let us hope so, and let us dare to make it so. In that spirit, let us go forward together. Forward together in the spirit of love and discovery and uplift.

May it be so. Amen. Namaste.