

RITUALS FOR LIFE PASSAGES

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Rituals for Coming of Age – Part I

What are we doing here? What are we doing here on Sunday mornings? What is meaningful in our worship service?

What is meaningful to you personally and to us as a corporate body?

Unitarian Universalism offers such freedom...and we love it for that...but what about shared meaning...what about ritual and sacrament, and tradition and symbol?

Our blessings are so very mixed. Everything is possible, and very little is clear. And we are not alone...other faiths from Catholicism to Judaism, to contemporary Christian...and beyond...in today's religiously pluralistic world...most faiths struggle to renew and remake and re-sacralize their worship and their congregational life.

Mega churches and large parishes...have three ministers and four or five or six weekly services for congregants to choose from.

They have services with orthodox ritual, and traditional sacred music. They have services with hand holding and dancing in the aisles. Services are geared for particular age groups, for specific needs, for differing theological sensibilities.

Here at UUCR, we have one minister, one part-time music director, many volunteers, and a beautiful large sanctuary that allows us to join in one Sunday morning service.

You have called me to serve as your minister, and invested in me the authority and responsibility to craft meaningful, inspiring, worship services. A lot goes into that process, as you might imagine.

There are many decisions to make ...and all of them matter. One significant area of discernment regards religious ritual and sacrament. These decisions are made with the past practices and current needs of the congregation and of a given season in mind. These decisions are made on a theological basis, and from a spiritual perspective.

Part of the call to congregational ministry is to bring one's own religious knowledge and spiritual heart to a listening for the heart and soul of the congregation. And so I attend meetings and gatherings, I read emails, I teach and listen and visit and ask questions. And I invite you to tell me what matters in your life, what fears and dreams are yours- I ask where you are on your spiritual journey, and how this congregation can serve your religious growth and transformation.

Out of all this listening...and along with other staff and church leaders, I try to figure out where we are theologically as a congregation. I try to figure out what is needed, what is meaningful, what is problematic, what is consoling, what is consistent with both who we are now and who we might become as a congregation.

This is where prayer and meditation is helpful to ministers. This is where good faith and good intention and good support is helpful. For the decisions we make about our worship life matter. How we meet our religious needs matter. How we live out our mission and our covenant matters.

You should know that many of the new generation of Unitarian Universalists...those in their 20's, 30's, and 40's are more comfortable with rituals than us older folks. The standard five stages of a lifetime are no longer sufficient for them.

Adulthood comes on more gradually, and many young people postpone marriage or ceremonies of union. There are additional stages sometimes marked by divorce, or care for aging parents, or moving far from extended family, or changing religion or joining a church for the first time.

Often, young adults not finding meaningful rites of passage available, create their own ceremonies...my daughter, while pregnant with her second child, did not want a traditional shower, but she wanted recognition and support from her friends...so she created a "mother blessing" with resources from the internet...and from her mom...she created a gathering of women and their mothers...and asked for gifts of blessing for her pregnancy...and for her strengthening and joy as a mother. It was a creative and happy occasion.

It was spirit filled, but it was not religious...although raised a UU, she did not find a ritual to meet her needs at a UU church. Does it matter?

Well, if we want to engage and include younger adults and families in our congregations, then we need to reach out and meet their needs...or assist them in crafting what they need. We need to do more than expect them to fit into old patterns, old and often little explained traditions.

We need to encourage formation of peer groups, and affirm and support rituals and explorations outside of the one hour of worship on Sunday morning. All rituals and rites of passage cannot occur in this one hour a week...and as we grow to a larger size, some of our current practices of recognition may well need to happen within children's worship or at a senior high dinner, or a Coming of Age father/son, mother/daughter retreat.

Essential to rites of passage for any age, is a guide, a guru, a mentor, a spiritual director. Our emphasis on religious freedom, sometimes leads us to believe and to act as if we can do everything ourselves...that we have no need of a rabbi, or a sacred source, or a blessing from the beloved community.

But if we are marking a transformation, a new sacred identity, a spiritual initiation...then we need a covenantal context...and for UU's that context that covenant is with the congregation. With the larger beloved congregation of our history. This covenant is a gift. As Rev. Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry, says: "we live within this communion of souls and receive the beauty given to us by their lives, so closely linked with ours."

Our rituals and symbols give form to our covenant... According to the UUA survey of the late 1990s called "Fulfilling the Promise", over 75% of us feel something is missing in Unitarian Universalism...and when asked to identify what is missing, we said, "spiritual discipline and depth." Here at UUCR we have voices echoing that call for spiritual discipline and depth.

And we have a responsibility to respond.

Our mission statement tells what we hope to do...our covenant...tells us who we are and how we intend to be with one another. I believe that the affirmation we speak on most Sundays is the best statement of our covenant to one another...our identity as a religious community...

Let us say it together now...

Love is the spirit of this church

And service is it's law

This is our great covenant

To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love and to help one another.

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Rituals for Loss and New Beginnings- Sermon Part II

The UUCR office regularly gets calls and requests for weddings and memorial services. Most often they are from people, families, who have never walked in the door of UUCR or of any other UU church. Most often they say they have never been church goers, or with couples often one was raised catholic and one Jewish and they heard that we can handle that.

Here in the Washington Metro area, they are often people who have lived for a long time far away from where they were raised...and they never attended church in this area.

Most people I encounter do not want a wedding with traditional language, or a memorial service out of a prayer book.

They want something spiritual and something that has meaning for them personally. They have heard that we can handle that.

They don't want too much religion, but they want a blessing and the presence of the holy. They want the minister to provide the holiness.

We do weddings and memorials well, because it is the one time when UU ministers bring our theology unapologetically. We wear robes, we process, we pray, we bless, we embody the divine spirit of love....and give it generously to those in need.

On too many Sundays, we ministers hold back on the holy. We are careful with the God talk. And we fail to consult the Bible. And yet here we are longing for something deeper.

Rebecca Parker reminds us of the broken covenants of our lives...of the disappointments and heartbreak of failures in our culture, failures in our former faiths...failures within UU congregations and the UUA. We long for deeper spirituality because we have experienced loss and disillusionment and grief.

But this too, is a spiritual path...the path of suffering and struggle, the path through the fire of brokenness. And this, she says is the path we must follow to find a new heart. To mend a soul.

In our time, she writes; "seekers wander from church to church asking, "Can you answer my despair?" I would add, can you make a place for my joy?

Perhaps we should assume that each visitor, each new member at UUCR is seeking to be healed from despair or seeking to share their joy.

Which doesn't mean that we can fix lives...or be miracle healers...but we do have the miracle of covenanted community to offer.

We do have rituals and yes, even sacraments.

Our child dedication this morning is a sacrament...a sign of grace and a bestowing of spiritual gifts. Through the sacrament of water and flower ...a spiritual gift is communicated...and the child is dedicated, initiated into this faith community.

We sometimes ring a chime or offer invocation words to mark the beginning, the setting aside of the sacred time of worship.

Within this sacred time we share the sacrament of joys and sorrows...the lighting of the candles within joys and sorrows is a sign of grace and divine love.

And the singing of Spirit of Life is a sign and structure that blesses us with acceptance and spiritual healing. Can't you feel it when you sing it...the healing.

And of course the lighting of the chalice is both a ritual and a sacrament...carrying the symbol of our faith and of the source of our fellowship.

Other sacraments of the our faith include:

Services of wedding and union ceremonies

Memorial services and funerals

And healing prayer circles

When Seekers wander into UUCR, they find much to nourish their spirit.

We are doing well in celebrating ritual with integrity...we have ritual for loss and for new beginnings.

Though the year, we have a kind of liturgical calendar that deepens and orients our worship life.

There is the Ingathering Water Ceremony in the fall.

The Stones of Forgiveness ritual during The Jewish New Year

The Bread Communion at Thanksgiving

Our Christmas Eve Candlelight services

Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

Earth Day and celebration of the solstice

Coming of Age Ceremony for 6th graders, the Senior High Service, and the Bridging Ceremony for high school graduates

And at the close of our church year, we have the Flower Communion.

I believe these rituals have clear shared meanings among us. Perhaps you are surprised to realize how comfortable we have become as a congregation with meaningful religious ritual.

Perhaps the UU rebellion against things spiritual and religious is waning...perhaps young parents want more ritual and a more clearly communicated theology.

Covenants are promises..promises which need renewal...

UU minister, Kim Beach, speaks of our covenant of spiritual freedom...the freedom to create the ritual, the meaning, the healing, we need consistent with our roots as a liberal faith and anchored in religious community.

I encourage each of us to reflect and engage more deeply around the symbols and rituals of our worship services and of our church year. Our integrity demands that our practices reflect our commitments and our theological center.

It is not just for me or a small group of church leaders to decide. It is said of UU's that we are individual over-achievers and institutional underachievers. I invite you to be fully engaged in creating a deep and satisfying religious institution.

For the covenanted congregation is the basic institution of liberal religion. When we live in covenanted communities of support and accountability, we live deeper, more authentic, more creative lives.

Theological diversity is not enough...despair will be healed and joy enlarged, only through holy promises made in community.

Amen/Blessed Be

FIRST READING: Rites of Passage: from the "Dictionary of World Religions"

These rituals are designed to enhance the significance and psychic safety of periods of change in one's lifetime.

Some traditional societies have observed up to forty such rites, but in general they are gathered around five periods of the lifetime:

Prenatal: rituals for affirmation of pregnancy, for determination of sex, for fetal growth and safe delivery

Infancy and childhood- naming rituals, affirmation of heritage and personhood, first solid food, etc.

Initiation and entrance into adulthood, adult baptism, confirmation, Bar Mitzvah

Marriage, including rituals for betrothal (and ceremonies of union)

Funeral and memorial services

Rites of passage are characterized by three stages of ritual:

Separation- liminality- incorporation

Each rite includes ritual acts and symbols which depict the separation from an earlier stage of existence, the passage itself, and the incorporation into each new situation.

SECOND READING: Recent sacramental theology- Issued by the Second Vatican Council

"The Church itself is in the nature of a sacrament, a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men."

Such an assertion sees the traditional sacraments less as gifts of grace mediated by the church to individual recipients and more as ritual structures in the life of the church, itself the first sacrament.

In such perspective baptism appears as the ritual process of initiation into the community.

Sacraments- effectual signs of grace, ritual acts which both express and bring about a spiritual reality...in the sacraments- spiritual gifts are communicated through tangible realities.

From: the "Dictionary of World Religions"