

## **Cresting from the Ocean: Creating Profound Worship**

### **Elisabeth Frauzel Bailey**

We Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on being at the forefront in social justice. We are ordaining transgender individuals at a time when many churches are just starting to open themselves to the idea that it might be okay to be gay. We support ecological practices, quality education, and prisoner's rights. Our congregations encompass many spiritual belief--and even more questions. Our congregants and clergy tend so far towards the liberal that mainstream America looks at us, scratches its head, and says, "That's church?" While we proudly respond, "yup!"

And yet within our communities there is doubt about what it is, exactly, that makes us a church. A community? Sure. But a church? Some UU congregations do not consider themselves to be churches at all, but fellowships. And some congregants are loath to become official members of any institution that calls itself church. Yet even our most skittish of fellowships follow the practice that does, in fact, make us a church. Unlike any non-profit group or lecture series or club, we come together... to worship.

Worship is the heartbeat in the life of the church. It is the crown jewel. But in nearly all of our congregations we worship in a model that is a poor fit for our character and values. The typical order of service in a UU congregation is based on a historical Christian model, a model in which the minister has a corner on specialized knowledge--as given by God and seminary--and bequeaths it to his (mostly silent) parishioners as they sit and face him. If we wish (as many of

us do) to grow as a vibrant movement, both in commitment and in numbers, we must start change there. Minister-dominated, boring worship drains the energy from a congregation. We cannot expect the spiritual practices of religious education, social justice, or church mission to grow and flourish if they are not included in the worshipful heart.

The search for innovative and participatory worship within the UU tradition invariably leads to the Soulful Sundown booklet and concept, as developed by Marlin Lavanhar specifically for the young adult movement. It is a great place to begin conversation about different ways to do worship. But the Soulful Sundown worship model is not the end-all be-all of new worship experiences—and limiting exciting new play in worship to the young adult arena is hardly adequate for the bulk of our congregations. We all need worship that is interesting, active, and consonant with our beliefs. Experimentation with form is rife in churches of conservative theologies. So why aren't we doing the same?

I believe that part of the answer to this question lies, ironically, in our non-creedalism. In a culture of religions that ostensibly define themselves by belief, UUs tend to cling a little obsessively to certain aspects of the religious tradition that ground them and help us be defined as the church. Famous historical figures such as the transcendentalists serve this purpose well—especially since a UU can say, “you know... Emerson and *Thoreau*,” and be generally understood. But I think that worship form also serves this legitimizing function. Because if on Sunday morning we have a prelude and a postlude and sing hymns and sit down facing a minister who's behind a pulpit and might even have

a robe on... well, that's definitely a church, then! (The coffee afterwards helps, too.)

And yet this form clashes terribly with the beliefs that are represented in the pews. I know many adults who would be incensed to hear that their children's RE classes were taught in a largely lecture style, yet will themselves sit in worship, reflecting individually on their spirituality while pretending that they are listening and/or know how to read music. In the meantime, a sacred opportunity for profound connection is lost.

Identity is a complex question for Unitarian Universalists. I think that in order to open up to new worship forms, we will first have to establish a stronger sense of self in our congregations. I do not think that we should do this in terms of theologies, however, or even our shared sense of liberal belief. This is not to say that we should put belief on the back burner; on the contrary I think we need to discuss our specific beliefs in much greater detail than we do. But I propose that ours is a religion in which the *central defining element* is not belief, but *practice*. We are who we are because of the things we choose to do together in community. And this means that constructing worship in which every member participates is the most fundamental way that we as a people can grow. As Matthew Fox points out, part of "... the meaning of community, from the Latin *cum-munio*, is to share a common task." Fox 1996 p 36.

So what does a worship based on common practice look like? Well, let me build you a model based in my theology. In order to do that, I must first backtrack to give you a picture of how my beliefs relate to our shared endeavor.

If you wish to skip the theological bit and go straight to the practical examples, [click here](#).

The core principle of my theology is relationship. I believe that all humans are interconnected, along with all other forms of life and even the universe itself. We already exist in relation, and my (our) spiritual journeys consist of discovering and grounding ourselves in these relations. To me, evil is the failure to recognize or participate in the relationships of which we are inevitably a part. Choosing instead to flow fully into the potential of a relationship is what UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman describes as creative interchange. “Creativity occurs when individuals engage in a kind of interchange with one another ... what he thus acquires from others is not only knowledge; it is also all the values characterizing the individuality of the other so far as these are understood appreciatively and so far as they can be modified to develop the individuality of him who has attained this appreciative understanding of the other person. ... Right valuing is those which do not obstruct creative transformation.” p 4. Or in Wiccan terms, “Harm none, do what ye will.” I tend to think of god in Wieman’s terms, as action; as that which occurs when true relationship takes place. Although I respect deist theologies, I personally find that the concept of a deity invariably strikes me as a mediator between me and the divinity in the world that I would rather experience completely directly. Certainly many people in our culture choose to use god in that way. I have lots of company in my position; “While Hayward claims that ‘god’ is the source of our relational power, I argue that the divine *is* that relational power, and that it is

neither necessary nor liberating to posit a substance or ground that exists outside of relational power.” Welch 2000 p 173.

A person is an individual and part of a community fully at the same time. We are both wave and ocean, born from ocean and passing back into ocean, timeless in substance but time-bound in form. The wave is the now and the ocean is the deep. We are always in relationship. An “individual” exists, but always as part of a system.

In order to be embodied in our worship, we need to address the conventional forms of talking about the self. One of the major conclusions I have come to is that the divisions between mind, body, and spirit are false and socially constructed in the same way that race categories are constructed. Another good example of socially constructed categories are “nature” and “nurture”. Human nature is both fully human and fully nature. We are animals, and all of our behaviors are rooted in our animal nature, just as they are rooted in our humanity. Our feelings and motivations are influenced by instincts, brain chemistry, physical events that take place within our bodies, and our physical environments. Some people are terrified by the concept that their animal natures “rule” them. My perspective is that emotions or hormones or adrenaline do not “rule” me any more that logic does—unless I am ignorant of them or fail to recognize that they do not factor in my decisions. Choosing not to be fully in my body is a denial of relationship as real as any offense against another person. Reason, emotion, instinct... these are all sources of valuable information for us. I tend to think of them as a decision-making body that works synergistically, rather

than as competing forces. My experience has been that the better I understand myself as an animal, the less dissonance I experience between reason and emotion. When I do experience such dissonance, it's usually a sign that I am framing the situation poorly, and need to re-evaluate the nature of the problem. Reason and emotion thus serve as a supportive check upon one another, rather than competing factors. To recognize that we have a multitude of physical, animal factors that define us is to empower ourselves to make decisions based upon accurate information. The experience is both similar to Buddhist non-attachment and an inverse to it; while I use the same technique to avoid being bogged down by the jealousy, for instance, it is because I am so *thoroughly* a part of the world that I wish to open myself up to the experience that lies past the jealousy.

To use more traditional theological language, emotions, instincts, and complex chemical events happening in our bodies can all be effectively translated as erotic knowledge. "Erotic knowledge" is a term coined by Audre Lorde to describe a range of non-rational ways of knowing that are key to experiencing creative interchange. "The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is" Lourde. p 56. My experience has been that tacit recognition of erotic knowledge is fundamental in fully experiencing creative interchange.

One of the frustrating elements of erotic knowledge is that it is difficult to describe and define as neatly as “rational” knowledge. I, of course, see this as a positive aspect, for it reminds us that there usually isn’t one “right” answer in any given situation. As I have continued to develop my thinking about ethics I have started thinking of most answers as falling into ranges of acceptability, rather than being “right”. Wendy Doniger tells us that myths are flexible in their meaning; rather than having one right interpretation, there are several. Meanings can be stretched, but not infinitely. In these cases, discovering the edges of a range of defensible interpretations is more informative than pinpointing the center of them. I believe that the same is true of morals—the punchlines of our modern myths. This sense of relativity is reminiscent of Aristotelian thinking about morality—that we ought to discover the right way by allowing ourselves to err too widely on either side of it, and then refine our balance.

The search for truth is a vital part of Unitarian Universalism. We tend towards the very-well educated and sophisticated, and in my opinion tend also towards hubris. And yet the more science continues to evolve and our understanding of the universe that is our home deepens, the more we realize how tiny our knowledge base really is. The more we know, the more we realize how little we understand. Humility, realizing that we don’t know what it is... that we don’t know, and a commitment to living with uncertainty and complexity are key to a vibrant worship life. And how, after all, could we base our religious identity on belief when the things we believe are based on such incomplete knowledge? So we must continue to practice. Specifically, we must practice

experiencing creative interchange through worship. As Matthew Fox says, “...compassion means, as the mystics have always known and as contemporary science is finding out, that “all things are interdependent,” in Eckhart’s words, and “all things are penetrated with connectedness,” as Hildegard of Bingen said. *Compassion is the working out of our interconnectedness; it is the praxis of interconnectedness.*” Fox 1991 p 35.

A note on language: our word choices frame our thoughts, both intentionally and unintentionally. I’m a nut about examining constructed categories! Those famous men I mentioned in the beginning of the paper, the Transcendentalists, are the venerated ancestors of my theology. And yet as much as I take from them, I find myself less and less comfortable with the language used to frame them. I believe that in modern UU theologies, the term “transpersonal” hits the mark better than “transcendental” for most people. For we are not going above and beyond. We are not leaving the world behind. Rather, we are rooting ourselves more deeply in the world, in our own bodies, and in sacred meaning. As Georg Feuerstein says, “...beneath our hunt for fun or fleeting pleasure there lies buried a deep desire to realize our ecstatic potential. But to realize ecstasy means to transcend ordinariness. In fact, it means to transcend all experiences conditioned by space-time—hence *transpersonal*, which means “beyond the personal”, or beyond the ordinary limited sense of identity.” (emphasis Feuerstein). p 23. This is the experience of creative interactionism that needs to be called into existence through worship.

## *A Model for Worship*

So what does this all look like on the ground, or in the sanctuary? How do these ideas about language and body and active, liminal, communally created worship actually happen?

My model for a UU spiritual practice is based in the place where my own theology intersects with Matthew Fox's creation spirituality. As a self-described postmodern, postdenominational priest, Matthew Fox sees the future of religious belief converging at the level of creation spirituality.

Here is the amended version of Fox's work that I propose as a foundation for creative worship:

### **Ten Principles of Creative Embodied Worship**

1. Everyone is a mystic (i.e., born full of wonder and capable of recovering it at any age—of not taking the awe and wonder of existence for granted).
2. Everyone is a prophet, that is, a “mystic in action” who is called to interfere with what interrupts authentic life.
3. Experiencing life is fundamentally good. The presence of life in the universe is an unquantifiable good.
4. Human beings have to work to deepen their understanding of themselves and their connections with the universe, to expand their sense of unquantifiable value. If we do not, we live superficially out of fear. Our ability to move past this fear is part of what makes us human.
5. The journey that marks that deepening can be named as a fourfold journey, each of which corresponds to a season.

- a. Via Positiva: delight, awe, wonder, revelry (Summer Way)
  - b. Via Negativa: darkness, silence, suffering, letting go (Winter Way)
  - c. Via Creativa: birthing, creativity (Spring Way)
  - d. Via Transformativa: compassion, justice, healing, celebration. (Fall Way)
6. Everyone is an artist in some way, and art as meditation is a primary form of prayer for releasing our images and empowering us and our communities.
  7. We can and do relate to the universe as a whole since we are microcosm of that macrocosm, and this relationship sustains us in joy.
  8. We are fully natural and fully animal while being fully human at the same time—rather than competing to define us, these identities enhance one another and enrich our joy and appreciation of the sacred.
  9. The sacred is as much negative space as positive space, as much the search as the answer (and vice versa!) as much the mystery as the known.
  10. We experience the sacred in all things and all things are sacred, and this erotic knowledge is a better basis for our practice of worship than any theology or group of theologies.

When we consider an embodied worship practice, we need to remember that our bodies are the manifestation of the universe that make us *us*. When we choose to honor our union with the universe by co-mingling separate bodies, we create an opportunity to welcome the sacred. This happens when we immerse ourselves in the world. When we eat. When we make love. When we *breathe*.

As Fox says, “All our great cosmological mystics—Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart—said that the soul is not in the body; the body is in the soul. The body is an instrument of our passions, of what we really care about, of our grief, of our wonder. Exploring the inner house means listening to the deep self. I would propose that this exploring of the inner house is not just your personal inner house but the inner house of our communities, the inner house of our nations, the inner house of our gender, the inner house of our *species*.” (Emphasis mine.) 1995. p 33.

Producing a high quality service is an investment in the future of the congregation. It keeps new visitors and draws others. Just as the light of the full moon is nine times as strong as the light of a half moon, I believe that an excellent service is exponentially more effective in solidifying and expanding the congregant base of a church than a “just okay” service.

In Oakland, Matthew Fox conducts TechnoRaveMasses using visuals of planets being born on the ceiling combined with ecstatic dance, so that his congregants may dance the ecstasy of the continual co-creation of the universe in which we are currently participating. He pays careful attention to the whole person, and to changing states of consciousness in worship. I consider him an inspiration for the type of service I suggest. Take the following scenario:

At Community UU, a visitor enters the sanctuary for the first time. She is greeted by a man who explains a little bit about what is going to happen and promises to be available to her after the service to answer any questions. He helps her choose a seat in one of the four sections of tiered seating that form a

round (most of the time; they are movable). These four sections are used to represent the four elements of the human journey as outlined in the principles of creation spirituality. They also stand for the four seasons and four directions at different times.

There is no order of service. The greeter explains to our guest that the worship leaders have covenanted to keep their eyes on the clock and to end the worship on time. Materials from the service are frequently available to take home afterwards, but for the next hour, events will unfold in ways that are sometimes meant to surprise, and always to keep the congregants rooted in the moment. As the visitor sits down, music swells out of the surround-sound stereo system, seeming to softly envelop her. There are several instruments in the sanctuary and good live music is frequently played, but a wide polyversity of contemporary and traditional musical recordings is used as well.

The worship leader comes into the circle. She marks the beginning of the liminal time by lighting the chalice, a large bowl set low in the center of the circle. As the service unfolds, the visitor notices several things. Many of the congregants seem to have pre-arranged roles in the worship service. The children remain present; those who are uninterested in the service are looking at books or using some of the art materials found in the oversized containers of worship materials at each seat. They may not be interested in everything that is said just yet, but they absorb the atmosphere of the service. They are a part of the church community, and since this is the time for the entire worship community to come together in worship, their presence is essential. The

atmosphere is a little noisier than at some churches. It also feels more alive and engaged. The visitor is a bit startled to hear people clapping at various points, but the worship leader addresses this by encouraging the clapping as a way of participating in the service. It is a way of expressing appreciation for one another, of using our bodies to be in relationship. While many things are new to the visitor, she is relieved to recognize many familiar elements from other UU services she has attended—congregational singing (although many of the songs are different, including a round that a small group interested in music worship had written that week); joys and concerns, which begin with the personal lives of the congregants and then moves to ecological and political witness conscience; there is even a sermon, although it is a bit briefer than many she has heard and does not seem to be the apex of the service. What *does* seem to be the apex of the service is a type of communion. The worship leader explains that the slices of various kinds of produce are from the church's own organic garden. The communion also includes a small taste from one of the areas of the world in crisis that was mentioned during joys and concerns, and the communion service pays attention to the relationship between this taste and the local produce. The visitor tastes her apple. It is crisp, sweet, nourishing, and delicious. (For an example of such a communion, see Appendix A.) After they take the communion, one of the people seated next to the visitor leans over to tell her that the apple tree had been fed with water from their annual water communion during a special summer service and that sometimes they do weather communions, too; either going

outside to experience elements of the seasons or finding ways to bring them into the circle.

There are also several other elements that are new to the visitor, such as an art meditation, a television clip that underscore a point from the service played simultaneously on screens above each of the seating sections, and projected graphics on the ceiling that illustrate the theme of the service. Youth and young adults take roles in the service, using the best of what they have to offer from the contemporary edge of culture. Our visitor marvels at how each element of the service connects in some way or another—some quite surprising—to the mission identity of the congregation. Community UU self-identifies as a “peace church”, and this identity serves as the liturgical, educational, and social justice base. (As a contrasting example, the UU congregation in a neighboring town identifies as a “neighborhood church” and shape their liturgies based on the many meanings of that concept.) At the end of the service, part of the congregation convenes in the circular space for a spiral dance around the chalice. As the dancers leave the space, the chalice gutters low and flickers out. The worship leader closes the service as the congregants transition to the meeting house next door—today they are sharing a community lunch before an afternoon of play, small group class and worship activities. Not everyone can stay for the afternoon, but our visitor decides to stick around and discuss the service with her greeter, who brings her a cup of the organic, fair-trade, sustainable agriculture coffee for their chat. She was excited and interested by the events of the service. She was relieved to find that, although she had been presented with several opportunities to participate

actively in the service, none had been mandatory or even coercive (a big relief to someone who hates to sing or dance in public!) Most importantly, she felt as if she connected with something deep and vital. She was provoked to expand her horizons. She's interested in the social justice work of the church that focuses on the area of the world in crisis that was discussed both in joys and concerns and embodied in the communion. She wants to see the exhibit of local political artists coming up that was mentioned in the service. She'll be back.

This service illustrates the type of thing I believe ought to happen in the Sunday morning corporate worship. I hardly believe, however, that worship should be limited to Sunday morning. Instead I propose that a large number of events take place at the church throughout the week. Most of these events could be framed as either religious education or worship. I strongly favor framing them in a worshipful context whenever feasible. Here are some of the possibilities:

1. Professional spirituality groups that meet to discuss workplace ethics and decisions. "...denominations are far less important for spirituality today than are our *professions*. It is at work more than at church that the real moral—and immoral—decisions are being rendered about the health of our planet, our bodies, our children, our very souls. **Work is the adult arena for spiritual decision making...**" (first emphasis Fox, second mine.) Fox 1996. p 254-255.
2. These groups could organize as topical small group worship teams.
3. Art as spiritual practice and meditation. Matthew Fox has taken religious education classes to catacombs, given each student a stone found there,

asked them to meditate with it for a few minutes, and then create a piece of art based on their meditation. Fox 1996 p 100. This object-meditation-creation technique by itself has versatile applications for all ages and for intergenerational gatherings. There are numerous other ways to spiritually create art in groups for us to explore.

4. Unifying embodiment practices. I would like to see churches that sponsor spiritual embodiment practices as worship. This might include such things as yoga, tai chi, breathing meditation, and cooking. Each of these can be framed as Unitarian Universalist worship.
5. Permaculture practices. I believe that UU churches cannot be fully embodied in their spiritualities without bringing this practice to their actual surroundings. This worship body would include, among other things, organic gardening to provide for communions and community meals (and also to share with neighbors!); bioregion appropriate, low resource landscaping, and eco-conscious structures. For more information on this school of thought see [www.permacultureactivist.net](http://www.permacultureactivist.net).
6. Establish a scholarship fund available in the church for laypeople to take a class that relates to worship, such as voice, public speaking, or even technical applications like Powerpoint and stage lighting. (A scholarship fund like this is a good income-generator—it's a highly visible, "cool" program that everyone enjoys and benefits from. It encourages people to give money to the church, hopefully so much that the scholarship program ends up serving to fund less sexy financial needs.)

7. Social justice work as worship. Some concrete examples: rituals honoring relationship as you plant the tree or feed the hungry. Frame it as spiritual practice; connect it on many levels with what takes place in the weekly corporate worship. We can use social justice projects as ways to connect spiritually with our communities and our world. There are certainly less controversial techniques, but I'm a big fan of ad-jamming as spiritual reclaiming of corporate occupied public space. "Reverend Calvin O. Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem took his parishioners on billboard-busting blitzes during which they would paint over the cigarette and alcohol advertisements around their church. Other preachers took up the fight in Chicago, Detroit and Dallas." Klein 2000. p 290. The values of our congregations are by and large overwhelmingly counter-cultural. Our social justice should follow suit.
8. Install a media room at the church with a good screening facility. Show popular television shows that people would be watching at home by themselves anyway and invite them to watch in a group at church. Facilitators can lead discussion and cultural critique during commercial breaks. Explore how our entertainment choices relate to our whole lives! Do the same thing with popular movies on video; include several monthly showing of films with interesting themes and artistic integrity. These might be particularly good events to open to the public and introduce them to the church.
9. "Workshop worship". Have improv workshops (with a hired professional leader) for two hours prior to a service; Use the creative material for a large

part of the worship service. Extroverted children, youth, and young adults will particularly love this.

10. “Our world, our town, our bioregion!” I have noticed that earth-centered congregants tend to use the wiccan calendar of the year—which works great in England, okay in Nova Scotia, and not really very well most places in the US. Interested groups could keep logs noting what happens when in the natural world around them and meet weekly or monthly to discuss it. At the end of the year they could sponsor a worship service to present their findings. What is unique about the cycle of light where you live? When do things bloom? What dates mark your rainy season? What is the amplitude from year to year? Done well, this spiritual exercise could generate a deepened sense of delight and belonging for the entire congregation. It would also generate site-specific rituals, such as a monsoon-welcoming service in southern Arizona, or a first frost worship in a colder clime. Successive years could explore questions such as “What are the differences within our bioregion/congregational catchment area?”

These suggestions are only a beginning point for structuring a high-commitment, high-enthusiasm, growth-oriented atmosphere in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Having been called to the UU ministry, I consider it my spiritual responsibility to create opportunities for creative interaction for all of our congregants, and to open our doors wide to the communities in which we live and worship. We come together in worship to have experiences that changes

our perspectives and our lives. To fall short of this mark is to fail to fulfill the potential relationships we have with each other. Changing and improving worship is scary, controversial, and energy intensive. It is also well, well worth any effort we put into it. Let newcomers scratch their heads in wonderment. And then invite them to experience what we have to offer. Amen.

## Appendix A

This is taken from a communion service I led at the UU congregation in Halifax, Nova Scotia on March 14, 2004. The theme of the service was defining “grace” through creative interaction.

### Communion Preface

In keeping with the theology of the sermon, I have prepared a communion that takes advantage of the pleasures of food. These biscuits contain two ingredients from southern climes that I wanted to share. They seemed like a good counterbalance to the freezing rain this week. The first ingredient is mesquite meal, which comes from southern Arizona (like me)! Cooks use it like flour, but it’s actually the ground seedpod of the mesquite tree. It’s naturally sweet and has a stabilizing effect on blood sugar, so it’s good for diabetics. It’s also high in calcium and iron. The second ingredient is roasted cocoa nibs. Nibs are the interior part of the cocoa bean. These ones grew under the sun of the Caribbean. This is chocolate in its original manifestation. In addition to those two ingredients the biscuits have organic white and whole wheat flours, evaporated cane juice, sugar, and baking soda. If you can’t or don’t want to eat these, I have also brought dried apricots. If you can’t have either of these for dietary reasons, please accept my apologies and feel free to give me suggestions after the service.

This is actually going to be more of a meditation with food, so please hold on to yours until we begin.

## Communion

I invite you now to gradually enter the spirit of meditation. Take a few moments to pay attention to your posture. Arrange yourself so that you are relaxed and comfortable. If you are at ease closing your eyes, do so.

Now begin to pay attention to your breathing. Take deep, regular breaths. Do not suck the air in, but allow it to flow naturally into your lungs. If you wish to do so, you may put mild force into your exhalations—this will help your body slow down. Feel yourself relax and sink into the chair. Continue to breathe.

We participate in communion today to rejoice in our belonging within the universe. As body created from the flesh of stars we connect with the varied and polyverse flesh that sustains us. Breathe in, and intermingle the cells of the outside universe with your own. Breathe out, and know that your presence spreads over the world. Breathe, and know that you are at home. Center yourself in the feeling of comfort and belonging. When you feel ready, take the food in your hand, the sustaining flesh of the universe, and eat. Savor the taste. Savor life. Experience Grace.

A person is an individual and part of a community fully at the same time. We are both wave and ocean, born from ocean and passing back into ocean, timeless in substance but time-bound in form. The wave is the now and the ocean is all time. The wave is you and the ocean is the universe. As you eat you touch the source of life and death. You join once again in our continual co-creation. This is communion. Open your eyes and take in the sights and sounds

of one another. This is grace. As we move out of our meditation, let us celebrate our shared presence in song.

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