

Discussion Questions for

Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists
by Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz

Questions created by Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz

(includes **A Model for Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Worship**)

Introduction

1. What prompted you to pick up this book? We were motivated to write it by our dissatisfactions with our own creativity and vision as worship leaders. Can you identify the satisfactions and the dissatisfactions you have with the worship you are presently leading or experiencing?
2. Did you have any specific goals in mind as you began to read this book? What are you hoping to gain from reading the book?

Visions and Challenges

This section seeks to articulate a vision of Unitarian Universalist worship as a transformative element in the religious lives of our members, and seeks to identify the challenges we face to realizing that vision.

1. On page 6, we claim, “It is difficult to engage our congregations in owning a broad vision of why we worship.” Does the congregation where you serve or attend have such a broad vision? Where is that articulated? Is it visible and accessible to those who attend services?
2. On pages 10 and 11, a number of ministers respond to the questions “What is worship” and “Why do people come to worship?” What are your answers to these questions?
3. On page 13, Kathleen tells a story of her homiletics professor’s question to his class: “What’s the worst thing you can do in worship?” What’s your answer?
4. On Page 14, Wayne quotes his Zen Buddhist teacher’s summary of the purpose of a liturgy: “to make the invisible visible.” Does that mean anything to you? What are the invisible elements of a religious community that a worship service seeks to make visible every week?
5. On page 18, we quote Roy Philips’ five meanings around which we covenant when we gather in worship. The last of these is to “engage in the practices of a religious life.” How does your congregation encourage its members to “engage in the practices of a religious life” and what is the role that the worship service plays in that encouragement?

6. On page 21, while praising our first Source (“direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder”) as critical to the experience of worship, we state that “if we view our worship life primarily through the lens of the first Source, minimizing the influence of historic traditions and their liturgical expression, we risk treating worship as thinly disguised self-improvement.” How does your congregation’s worship reflect historic traditions in Unitarian Universalism and its Protestant roots? How has it innovated new practices that are unique to your congregation and the current time?

7. On page 23, we identify four dynamic forces that influence how a congregation worships. They include the founding culture of the congregation, the worship traditions the church embraces or respects, the musical baseline that the church accepts as normative for worship, and the size of the space available for worship. How does your congregation embody each of these four dynamic forces?

Qualities of Transformative Worship

1. On page 34, we try to define “transformative worship” in these phrases: “We were lifted up out of the ordinary into an extraordinary moment of worship . . . a moment in and out of time, when we felt the presence of something larger.” Has this ever happened to you in a formal worship setting?

2. We claim on page 36 that “each part of a worship service contains a transformational element that the service as a whole embodies”. The major elements of a worship service can also be understood as representing sources of spiritual practice for everyday life: for example, meditation or prayer, musical expression and appreciation, aesthetic beauty, and intellectual engagement. Reflect on how weekly worship experiences can inform or reinforce regular spiritual practice among members of a congregation.

3. How does the worship service you routinely attend or lead usually begin? Does the reflection on pages 36-39 prompt you to consider doing anything differently?

4. Does your worship service include a recitation of a covenant? How was the decision made to include that covenant in worship?

5. Identify the visible symbols present in the worship space or service you are usually a part of. Does your congregation have any history of conversation or controversy about how and whether symbols are a part of worship?

6. Is it up to worship leaders in your congregation to be conscious of any potential cultural misappropriation? Does your congregation have any stated policy around striving to be an anti-oppressive and multicultural institution? If so, how is that monitored? Is worship an appropriate part of congregational life to do this kind of monitoring?

7. On page 52, the authors describe two historically predominant models of worship involving children: a “story for all ages” time, when children are invited to come to the front of the sanctuary, are read a story, and then are sung off to their classes, and when children are invited

to attend worship with their parents although the service is primarily directed toward adults. Do you feel that worshiping as an intergenerational community is important? Why or why not? What form of multigenerational worship does your congregation currently use? To what extent does your current style of worship invite and include children?

8. On page 56, we write, “The questions to ask when choosing music include: Does it have the power to express the ineffable? Can it be done with excellence?” Write down five pieces of music that have been important in your life. Can you describe the qualities of that music? Are there any contexts within worship where it would be appropriate to use such music?

What are the hymns your congregation knows by heart? Consider your own experience of hymn singing. When did you feel swept up by the experience of singing with your congregation, and when have you struggled? How much time does your congregation spend learning new hymns?

9. Who has the authority to make announcements in your congregational setting and why? What criteria do you currently use to determine what should or should not be announced? Are those criteria known to the congregation? If your congregation has a mission statement, do you use the mission statement as a guide for structuring your announcements?

10. On page 70, we describe a variety of liturgical approaches to the offering. How do these match up with what happens in the congregation where you worship? Does the culture of your congregation treat the offering during the worship service as a necessary evil to be moved through as quickly as possible, or as an opportunity to hold up the value of generosity and its relationship to the mission of the church?

11. If your congregation has used such a ritual in recent years, have you experimented with any of the different models mentioned in this section? What values seem to underlay the outcome of this experimentation? Who decided what the outcome would be? How are pastoral concerns, milestones, and celebrations publicized in your congregation in written ways within the order of service or other church media?

12. On page 83, we encourage worship leaders to consider how prayer or meditation in the worship service might be used as an invitation gateway to members’ personal prayer or meditative life. How might this be done? Does your congregation offer a prayer circle or a meditation group? Are there any other worship services outside of Sunday morning where prayer is more strongly featured as a worship element? Is meditation or prayer used to begin or end meetings in your church?

13. Is your congregation’s liturgical year explicit? If not, have the leaders responsible for planning your worship ever considered looking at how you worship in these terms? Which services are repeated annually and are the markers of your year? Which rituals are so valued by your congregation’s members that they hold a special place in your sacred calendar? Does that sacred calendar include any rituals or holidays that are from world religious traditions that are not Christian or Jewish?

14. What's your personal preference for the balance in sermons between intellectual analysis and argument versus story and imagery that point to a moral? Are those emphases both present in the mix of sermons that are heard in your pulpit? What impact does the choice of readings that lead into the sermon have on how these elements will be addressed in the same sermon? Do you choose readings that reflect theological, ethnic, and cultural diversity?

15. On Page 91, we suggest that the last words of the worship service have one of two forms – a “blessing” that is non-thematic or “closing words” that resonate somehow with the theme content of the service. What do you experience most often in the service you attend? What’s the difference for you in how these two different approaches make you feel? When the service ends, do people talk and leave during the postlude music, or sit and listen? How do you feel about that?

Conclusion

1. We argue that lives transformed through participation in worship are a “grace.” Is *grace* a meaningful word in your religious vocabulary? What does it mean to you and how does your understanding compare with ours?

2. Although grace is not something that can be created on demand through skilled worship leadership, the authors argue that well-prepared worship services, experienced over time in an appreciative religious community, can remove the impediments to grace. It is then up to the individual to receive and engage the transformative moments that worship offers.
How do you experience “impediments to grace” in the worship you lead or attend? Has your experience of worship deepened over time? What would your life be like without participating in a worshiping community?

3. Look back at to question 2 for the Introduction. Assess whether that goal was achieved and why.

4. Look back at question 2 for Visions and Challenges. Has your answer changed as a result of your reading?

Appendix

In describing our experience at four different services representing different denominational worship traditions, we seek to illustrate that grace-filled worship occurs within many different forms. Nevertheless, many UUs who explore *Worship That Works* have noticed that many evangelical and main line Protestant churches are including a “contemporary” worship service among their offerings. What does contemporary worship look like in a UU setting? Here’s one model. What are the elements in it that are different from what you usually experience in worship, if any? If you wanted to bring this kind of worship to your congregation regularly, what would need to change?

A Model for Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Worship

Pre-Service – *Interactive engagement with those who are entering. Various subtle dramatic interactions and a PowerPoint presentation seeking to lead the congregation to answer in their minds, or with each other, the question, “What is your path?” (or some theme to be determined).*

9:25 **Song #1**--Upbeat with bass, guitar, piano, drums; instrumental with slides.

Song #2—Upbeat hymn, sung with words projected on screen with slides

Song #3—Upbeat, an easy hymn to sing with slides

Slide: Flickering chalice: While the third hymn is being sung, the chalice is lit. There are no words to accompany the chalice lighting

9:30 **Call to Worship** *By the minister from memory, with a lavalier, in front & center of chancel*

9:31 **Opening Song** *Led by a song leader or minister with microphone*

9:35 **Welcome Announcements** *Minister states the purpose of the church
Minimal, important for that day only*

9:40 **Greeting Each Other**

9: 43 **Our Purpose** *Answers the questions: Why are we here today? What is the point of all this—all that we do? Done by minister, lively, engaged with lavalier microphone down front. Builds a sense of expectancy and anticipation.*

9:46 **Unique Element** *Special ritual like a child dedication or a liturgical element appropriate to the season or the life of the church*

9: 52 **Choir or Ensemble** *Lively, up-tempo musical selection sung from up front, not from the balcony*

Transition Time *As the choir goes to take their seats, “traveling music” is playing and, on cue, they sit down. Traveling music then travels into the introduction to the prayer time.*

Continue to build a sense of expectancy and anticipation.

9:57 **Pastoral Prayer** *With music in the background, done from the chancel , either lectern or from the center with lavalier microphone*

10:00 **Song** *Meditative, but “rising” towards the end to uplift, with a powerpoint slide show behind*

10:03 **Reading** *With powerpoint images behind*

10:05 **Sermon** *Lively & engaging, reflects the theme of the service, and has a practical application*

(Rev. Andy Stanley suggests that the sermon should answer the following questions: Why is this topic important to me? How does this message apply to teenagers and college students? To singles? To newlyweds? To parents? To empty nesters, etc.? How are we different as a result of hearing this message and what is “the church” being asked to do? What could the world look like as a result of this message?)

10:20 **Offering & Offertory** *With upbeat music*

10:25 **Closing Song**

10:30 **Benediction** *Use the same one, memorized, every week*