

Images and Metaphors

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“In the beginning was the Word” So begins the Gospel According to John, as the author creates an alternate name for Jesus. The phrase points backward to the first chapter of Genesis, in which God summons creation by nothing more than speaking. Both authors suggest that the “Word” had an existence even before the world was made, when there was nothing.

Today, few Unitarian Universalists view Biblical scripture as central to their spiritual path—and yet the Christian worship tradition is a main source that informs the way we Unitarian Universalists worship today: The sermon usually serves as the hearty “entrée” of worship, accompanied by a few small side dishes.

In a sermon he delivered in 2011, Rev. Bruce Marshall points out the degree to which our UU worship reflects the centuries-old worship practices of the New England Puritans:

For the New England Puritans, the purpose of their worship was to interpret—to seek to understand—the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures. The point in the service where that occurred was the sermon. For the New England Puritans, the sermon was the main event of worship. It was through the sermon that they sought insight into the ways of God and how God interacts with the world. . . . Whenever today’s UU congregations are surveyed as to what’s most important to them in worship, just about all will give top priority to the sermon. Lots of other things happen in worship that people value, but it’s the sermon that makes it or breaks it. . . . Like the Puritans of New England, we are people of the Word.

As Unitarian Universalists, our worship services (including sermons) tend to be word-heavy. Many of us expect meaty, thought-provoking services that will give us material to chew on, mentally, for the week ahead. Yet when we over-emphasize the Word, we risk falling short of worship’s potential to reach into people’s hearts and bodies, not just their minds. (Who reading this hasn’t heard—or, like me, written—at least one sermon so densely worded that it made us want to weep, and not in a good way?)

First, even practiced sermon-writers can fall into the trap of writing a sermon as though it is meant to be read rather than heard out loud.

Second, many sermons revolve around themes. Whether the theme applies to the morning on which the sermon is delivered or to an entire month of worship, these themes are often abstract, broad enough to encompass different interpretations (think justice and motherhood). However, weaving an abstract or vague theme through a sermon can also deprive listeners of the ability to hook their attention on a precise, clear message.

Finally, word-heavy, linguistically embellished sermons—even when they're elevated by poetic language—fail to acknowledge the diversity of learning styles in our congregations. Unitarian Universalists frequently—and admirably—voice their hope for greater diversity in our congregations. It goes without saying that we should never stop longing for racial and cultural diversity. Among the many ways to be “diverse,” there's already an invisible and often forgotten diversity present in our congregations every Sunday: the many different ways that people take in and process information to make sense of the sermon and of the world.

In her book *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You*, Marlene LeFever cites research conducted among sixth graders. Out of every ten learners, scientists have found, there are:

- 2 primarily auditory learners, who learn and make meaning by listening
- 4 primarily visual learners, who learn and make meaning by watching
- 4 primarily tactile kinesthetic learners, who learn and make meaning by moving their bodies.

Adult Unitarian Universalists may not reflect the same ratios as the sixth graders in this study. Nevertheless, not everyone takes in and processes information in exactly the same way. Why would we expect a word-rich sermon to feed everyone in the congregation—particularly when it's framed in broadly abstract terms?

In her groundbreaking approach to sensory-rich worship, United Methodist worship leader Marcia McFee encourages worship leaders to approach the central image or lesson in three ways: verbally, visually, and viscerally (feel it, participate in it). We know how to do verbal. The visceral approach can be complicated and nuanced. Weaving the visual into a sermon and the rest of the worship service, however, is a simple but powerful way to layer the senses and engage the worshipping community more effectively.

As you shape your sermon and the worship elements that will complement it, consider stepping away from abstract themes; instead, funnel the worship experience through a visual lens. What image or metaphor might subtly convey (or replace) its central theme? How might you convey the deeper meaning through the language of an image?

For example, one of the most beloved poems in the American canon is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," with its famous image of a hesitating narrator standing at a crossroads who admits that no matter which road he takes, he'll wonder about the unexplored route long after it's behind him.

The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

If you were to ask ten Unitarian Universalists to list the meanings behind a generic topic like choices or fate, their answers would vary widely—but if those same ten people were invited to think of an unforgettable place where "two roads diverged" in their lives, a doorway to common experience would open. Even as we encounter the appeal of freedom offered by choices, we're burdened with the knowledge that in order to keep moving, we must cut off possibility, with its allure of the Unknown. To look back and wonder about what might have been—

whether it's with a sigh, sadness, or satisfaction—is a universal part of the human journey.

The use of a powerful image or metaphor doesn't necessarily apply to the sermon alone; it can be even more important to use in the worship service as a whole. The back of *Singing the Living Tradition*, for example, distributes hundreds of our hymns into dozens of themes and categories. Few of those categories are as useful as we imagine them to be.

Consider a sermon about our faith-full anti-oppression work. Most worship leaders would pack a sermon with verbal material, and employ hymns that fall under the hymnal's Justice theme. There's nothing wrong with this approach per se, but it risks leaving the listener swimming in a slurry of words, words, words. The hook of a metaphor can provide meaning and anchor the worship service in people's memory. There's a reason that most of us refer to Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech as “The Mountaintop,” its metaphor.

To apply “The Crossroads” or “The Mountaintop” approach to an anti-oppression service, begin by combing through the sermon or an indispensable hymn for images. What speaks to you? What resonates inside your gut, your spirit, as capturing your message? Is it a cage? (If so, what kind? An ornate, gilded birdcage or the sturdy bars of a zoo?) Is it a billowing, shimmering silk canopy, under which all are welcome? Is it a banquet table filled with nourishing food at which all are welcome? Whatever you decide, there's a hymn for that!

Don't limit this brainstorming process to the private confines of your own imagination. Ask for help. Doodle. Talk out loud. Once you settle on a satisfying image or metaphor, search our hymnals for your image—either the word or its variations. If you use the image of a Welcome Table, for instance, you can find more hymns to use by searching for words like *banquet*, *feast*, *feed*, or *hunger*. Rely on people in your congregation who know the hymnal inside-out, or spend some time reading through hymns, scanning all verses for the metaphors (sometimes the third or fourth verse contains a dazzling, apt image). You might even explore the cyber-world, available at your finger-tips, to discover music and worship resources from other faith traditions.

Once you've settled on an image or metaphor with a strong visual component, brainstorm about how it can be made visceral (how to help people feel it, participate in it, taste it, smell it). Don't be afraid to try something that's never been done before. If you take risks reverently and responsibly, chances are you'll reach your congregation in new ways.

Some examples:

THEME	IMAGE/ METAPHOR	SAMPLE WORSHIP ELEMENT	ONE WAY TO MAKE IT VISCERAL
Immigration justice	water in the desert; thirsting for justice	“De Noche,” <i>Singing the Journey</i> #1034	Stack plastic water jugs on the chancel as reminders of how border-crossers stay alive in the desert.
Caring for the human family (or Guest at Your Table)	bread as sustenance; for a global emphasis, breads of the world	Guest at Your Table materials from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee	Program a bread machine or toaster oven to bake so that the smell of baking bread fills the sanctuary during worship.
covenant	our promises as a nautical chart or map	“Come and Go With Me,” <i>Singing the Journey</i> #1018, or “Take My Hand,” a hymn by Jen Hazel in <i>Story, Song and Spirit</i>	Pack a bag with things that we need to take a journey, anticipating the items we’ll want along the way. “Take My Hand,” a hymn by Jen Hazel, in <i>Story, Song and Spirit</i> .
making mistakes	“We all spill soup”	“We All Spill Soup” by Mark Nepo in <i>The Book of Awakening</i> (entry for June 7)	“Accidentally” spill a bowl of brightly colored beads, shells, or seaglass (in an area where people won’t need to walk during worship) and leave it messy for the rest of the service. (Appoint a post- worship clean-up helper in advance!)

A word of warning: Like pungent spices or chili peppers, metaphors are powerful. A little goes a long way. You don’t need to name or repeat your central image in every worship component; nor do you have to be explicit. If you lay a trail of breadcrumbs throughout the service, weaving your metaphor through the different senses, people will enjoy following you all the way to the trail’s end.

Finally, avoid puns. If metaphors are like chili peppers, puns are like anchovies: A few people really like them, but many people will groan and hold their noses at the first whiff.