



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Eternal Draw of Rituals”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on April 26, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Let us do it the way it is usually done so that we may have the usual result. Yoruba Proverb

To whatever degree [we] may have desacralized the world, [those who choose] a profane life never succeed in completely doing away with religious behavior. Mercea Eliade

We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. Elizabeth Gilbert

Sermon

Rituals. Unitarian Universalists have experimented with getting rid of them, but they keep coming back.

Here this morning you already listened to a bell ring, calling us to mindfulness, calling our attention to this place, this moment in time.

Many of you came forward to drop a pebble in water to express a memory or hope, intention or prayer.

You witnessed the lighting of our chalice, this month a crystal vase. You recited a unison reading. We vary the reading sometimes, but it always strives to communicate who we are and what we value.

You sang hymns that joined us in a communal act affirming what matters to us, such as the joy in greeting another day.

You welcomed newcomers into our Fellowship, a rite of passage that notes a new self-identity.

Soon, you'll make a communal sacrifice, not with blood or flesh, but with coin and paper as an offering to further our work making our lives and lives everywhere better.

Later, you'll sit in silence, communing with your interior being or perhaps some concept of the divine. Then we'll share the challenges and joys of our lives as we acknowledge what it means to be human.

Finally we'll sing again and be sent back out into the world, perhaps with spirits refreshed, commitments renewed, lives re-supported, and even assumptions reconsidered.

And then we will wait six days before we return to this sanctuary to do it all over again.

Besides weekly rituals, we have annual ones. We hold child dedications, new member ceremonies, coming of age recognitions, weddings, and memorials, for example. Several are unique to Unitarian Universalism – the flower ceremony at Easter, water ceremony at Ingathering in late summer, bulb planting at the time of Samhain and All Souls Day, bread sharing before Thanksgiving, and more. I believe some of you were sad we didn't hold a New Year's burning bowl ceremony that you'd come to expect.

These rituals are not unlike those you may practice at home. Perhaps you have a bedtime ritual with a child, or when you were a child. After my kids brushed their teeth and were in their pajamas, we read a book, sometimes for the thousandth time, gave a kiss goodnight, then turned off the light. If this nightly ritual was neglected, the day felt incomplete. This time was an important opportunity for us to reconnect after the stress of the day. Through these actions we expressed our love for one another and strengthened family bonds.

Something in our bodies, minds, and spirits finds rituals valuable. We humans desire moments in our lives to take notice of our lives. When rituals are performed with others, they reestablish our connections. Rituals bind us to each other, to the mystery of life, and to the wonder of being alive. They create extraordinary moments out of ordinary time. They may simply be a silent pause, or they may include proscribed words, gestures, music, chants, smells, sounds, songs, dance, food, drink, and more.

Rituals resemble traditions, customs, and habits. A habit is something done without thinking. I have the habit of brushing my teeth twice a day, but I pay little attention to the meaning of that act. I know it will promote dental health and it makes me feel good, but it's not a ritual. It could be for some, but it's not for me, and it isn't particularly spiritual.

Traditions and cultural customs can include rituals, depending on how they're practiced. My family has a tradition of making cookies at Christmas, but that's not a ritual. But the fact that we only say grace before the Thanksgiving meal, that rises to ritual status because it's intentional. After cleaning the house and making elaborate preparations with the exact same foods every year, including both jelly and berry cranberry sauce, and with as many family members as possible, we pause to give thanks for the blessings in our lives. That's a ritual.

Archaeological evidence shows rituals have been a part of human life even before civilizations or organized religion. A recently discovered amphitheater in Jordan was dated to about 12,000 BCE, a time before settled agricultural communities were known to exist. The amphitheater may have served as a community center where dispersed people came together for some shared purpose. Only later do we have evidence of Neolithic peoples living in communities. It amazes me that a stone amphitheater was built, requiring many hours of labor and organization, before people thought to live together. Stonehenge proves this, too. Some experts believe civilization may have started, not for farming, but for rituals. The driving force of rituals likely encouraged people to settle in one place.

Our Puritan and Congregational religious ancestors discarded showy rituals from worship practices in their effort to purify their Christianity. These dour folk rejected in their worship any practice or ceremony that wasn't in the Bible. They turned away from anything that signified Roman Catholicism, such as the brightly-colored clerical attire worn by bishops, cardinals, and popes, as well as ostentatious crosses, rings, and crown-like headgear. The use of incense, bells,

candles, icons, and other sensory items were removed from worship, too. My black robe is a descendant of Protestant and Puritan practice. My colorful stole, a mark of ordination, may hark back to more catholic tradition, but our modern UU practice makes most stoles unique to the individual who wears it, in keeping with our more individual tradition. My stole decorates my plain black robe, though some UU ministers reject both the robe and the stole. It's not our habit to be consistent.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian minister, he continued the Emerson family tradition. But three years later he resigned his post at Boston's Second Church. He left for a variety of reasons. Although he loved speaking before a crowd, and continued preaching and lecturing after he left the church, he disliked other ministerial duties. Particularly onerous was visiting parishioners. His excuse for leaving was the congregation's insistence that he celebrate the Lord's Supper, the sharing of wine and bread in a ritual act of communion and remembrance. Emerson felt the ritual set up a barrier that blocked individuals from connecting directly to the divine, and he felt the divine was naturally present everywhere, including inside each person. Emerson thought the symbolic sharing of the body and blood of Jesus focused too much on the person of Jesus, rather than the teachings of Jesus. Though unheard of prior to Emerson, the absence of this ritual is the norm in our churches today. Few Unitarian Universalist congregations in North America celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Our history includes many who rejected common religious rituals. A few weeks ago at Easter, I told you about the origin of our flower ceremony. Norbert Capek's Unitarian congregation in Czechoslovakia rejected the prevailing Catholic rituals, so he created his own. The flower, symbolizing something unique and individual, comes together to make a beautiful bouquet of community. We continue this ritual because it has meaning for us. It reminds us of Capek's martyrdom, for he died in a Nazi concentration camp, and because we value its dual symbolism of religious freedom and gathered community. I know some of you consider Easter Sunday your favorite because of this ritual.

This morning we welcomed new members with ceremony and symbols. Although we don't say it in the ceremony, the open flower is symbolic of the flowering of one's spirituality and new sense of belonging. The pin is a symbol of UU identity. By signing the membership book, you place your name into the stream of others who have come before you and those who will come after. It marks a significant passage. It literally places your name, the most significant symbol of self-identity we have, into this book as you physically enter into this community.

Despite evidence of rituals throughout the ages, more modern Unitarian Universalists also tried to rid them from our worship. To some, rituals seemed too tied to supernatural beliefs and defied rational thinking. Mention of the divine, natural or supernatural, also was nearly stopped. By the mid 20th century, UU worship was as bare as the Puritans'. But it didn't last. The need for ritual was still present in our very human hearts and spirits.

To be fully human we must recognize and embrace that we are more than our minds. We have hearts and emotions, spirits and feelings of awe, wonder, and connections that defy logical explanation. We need moments to recognize and appreciate the events and transitions in our lives. Rituals serve this need well.

But rituals can be empty of meaning if we repeat them without intentionality. Simply reciting a unison reading at the start or end of our service is meaningless if we don't pay attention

to what the words express. Just because it's a ritual, doesn't make it meaningful. We have to bring something of ourselves to it. And when we do, it can be transformative.

But even when they aren't, UU Reverend Rod Richards says, "A ritual is not empty / simply because one doesn't feel its power every time; ritual is meant to carry us across those times when we are *not* feeling it, holding us in the loving arms of community and tradition. Collectively, we carry that tradition from week to week for one another." ["Empty Rituals," San Luis Obispo, Dec. 2, 2012] Richards reminds us that each week the rituals await us, allowing us to be surprised by something new we may not have noticed before. Every experience and every act is an opportunity to unfold in new ways with new insights. I hope at least occasionally they are meaningful to you.

If there is a moment in your life that you yearn to note with a ritual, such as getting divorced, moving into a new house or adopting a pet, for example, please let me know. I'll be happy to suggest ideas or assist you.

I know not every ritual will speak equally to every person. But know that the person sitting next to you who sings out loudly, gets up to drop a pebble in water, or relishes a moment of silence, does find them meaningful. Does find the pause in our lives that rituals offer valuable.

May our congregation's rituals and traditions be big enough for all of us to find something of value. May our faith tradition and our community connections continue to inspire, bind, comfort, give meaning, and guide us throughout all our days together. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Have rituals, such as a graduation, wedding, or memorial, been meaningful to you? Share.
2. What ritual acts do you perform regularly that hold meaning beyond their practical function?
3. What family rituals or traditions have you continued in your own family or adult life? Why?

