

“How to Participate in a Church Service (Ostara’s 2 Cents Worth)”

Ostara Hollyoak, August 25, 2024

My topic today is... [exaggerate reading it]: “How to Participate in a Church Service.” ... Well ..., that takes some nerve!

I’m exercising a bit of the prerogative of the pulpit this morning, ... but all any of us can do is speak from our own experience– and that’s what I’ll be doing. (Just getting in my two cents worth.)

We’ll walk through a typical Sunday service, reflecting on the meaning and intent of each element, and I’ll sprinkle in a few personal thoughts; and, yes, even *opinions*. Those opinions are ... just mine. You can take them or leave them.

So ..., it’s Sunday morning; and you’ve chosen to come here.... *I’m glad* you’re here. Of all the things you could be doing on your weekend, and at the very beginning of the week, you’ve chosen to be here.

This always amazes me.

You see, when I was growing up in a Lutheran church– not terribly unlike this one– you went to church on Sunday morning to praise God, confess your sins to God and be forgiven, and generally offer yourself up in service to the One True Divinity. There was nothing more important in life, according to the teachings of the church of my childhood and youth. I’m sure this sounds familiar to many of you from your own upbringing. The point is, the reason for going to church on Sunday was *absolutely compelling*– a *necessary* part of being a good person; and, of course, going to Heaven someday.

The Unitarian Universalist faith doesn’t preach these kinds of reasons for butts in pews on Sunday morning. Yet, here you are! To me, it’s nothing short of wondrous that you’ve chosen to come *here* to re-align as you start your week.

So, it’s Sunday morning, and we’re ready for our weekly sacred re-set. How do we start?

We arrive here, at the door to this building, from the world of traffic, and all the myriad and disparate things in our lives. Opening the door, and crossing the threshold to the

narthex, we begin to make a shift. We re-join this community. The narthex is the space of welcoming. You greet those you know; put on your name tag for those who don't know your name; and introduce yourself to anyone you're meeting for the first time. *Notice* how this space *feels* when you come in.

Entering the sanctuary represents another level of shift into sacred space. Notice how *this* shift feels. At this point, you can continue to engage with others if you want, or begin to settle into sacred space, inner and outer.

This sanctuary is very large for our in-person size— both long and wide. Optionally, you're invited, upon entry, to move "up and in." While we do well to remember that Covid isn't entirely behind us, we're no longer in a pandemic with its requirements of distancing. But these pandemic era habits die hard. There are some good reasons to consider moving up and in, including enhancing the sense of community, feeling closer, and having the sanctuary not look and feel sparsely populated. (This sanctuary's capacity is supposed to be ... How many? 175?) And when we spread ourselves out the space not only *looks* sparsely populated— it *sounds* sparsely populated. It's harder to unite our voices in song when we're spread across a space this size.

On the other hand, you may have perfectly good reasons to sit apart, including things like immune concerns ... or just having a need or desire for a little cushion when you're here. And that's okay. So, know that you're *invited* to move up and in ... *and* do as the spirit— or some practical reality— moves you.

As you enter the sanctuary, the Prelude might already be playing, or it might begin after you're seated. This is not the formal beginning of the service, and you're free to still be milling; but it's a cue that we'll begin soon, and you'll want to be seated and ready soonish.

For some of us, the Prelude might mean it's time to begin moving inward, spiritually. This is where I was headed a number of weeks ago, as our Music Director and musician, Gabbi, brought her Prelude, rendered beautifully on the violin, to a close— and the room erupted into appreciative applause. I experienced this as an unexpected jolt.

Stemming from both my religious upbringing and my experience in certain kinds of pagan ritual, my personal sensibility holds a distinction between liturgical music and performance, and I've always been a little ill at ease with applauding liturgical music. There are many ways we can respond to musical energy, and its culmination, in sacred space. We can soak it in. We can join our personal and collective energy with that of the music via movement or some other way. We can even participate in sending the energy

off into the universe. (I won't elaborate on that.) To me, the space between the Prelude and the Gathering Music is a time to be carried, by the music that's ending, to a place of readiness for what's about to begin.

That said, I know that, for many who walk through our doors, bursting into applause is the proper way to show appreciation for the musician's performative gift bestowed on those of us in the pews.

So, yes, this is one of those opinions I mentioned. Again, it's my perspective. And I've belabored it enough. So, let's move on to....

The Gathering Music. We used to call it the Gathering Chant. *This* is the formal beginning of our service. It's a call to physically gather; a beckoning into the body of our gathered community; and a beckoning to inner sacred space. We've used different gathering chants over the years, and some of them place more emphasis on the call to physically gather; others place more emphasis on the call inward.

With the Gathering Music, those leading worship— usually the Minister and Worship Associate— process in. A sense of movement is evoked, along with a sense that something is about to begin. When I'm in the congregation I experience a sense of expectancy. Notice what changes in you, and how the energy around you shifts, during this procession, and as the service leaders take their places.

This chant is also the first time we get to join our voices together in song. It's our first act together as a congregation on Sunday morning. I encourage you to notice the feeling of our collective energy gathering; *and* to practice using your voice as a devotional act.

The service leader steps to the pulpit ... and delivers the Call to Worship. These are the first spoken liturgical words of our service. We're called in to this place, in this hour. And we invoke the sacred. We intend these words to be a call, and the congregation to respond inwardly to being called. *Listen!* Listen as a devotional act.

And *from* this receptive place of listening, we're invited to lift our voices in singing the Opening Hymn. For a second time we join our voices, this time perhaps with more gusto. We rise in body or spirit, actively lifting ourselves up, offering our energy. This hymn is often joyful; not always. Either way, it's another piece indicative of a new beginning, the start of a new cycle. If you're not a singer, sing anyway.... Or, alternatively, help raise up and hold the energy in your own way.

Next– the Chalice Lighting. This is the *final* beginning piece. You may have noticed that in the course of our liturgy, we traverse several layers of beginning. Think of *this* one as the *capstone* of the beginning.

A congregation person lights the chalice– a different person each week. Here one person performs a symbolic action and the rest of the congregation participates by observing, and holding this act in attention. This is a very powerful part of our service. I encourage you to specially train your attention as the candle is lit. *Look* as an act of devotion.

In words from the “worship theory” section of the UUA website, the flaming chalice is “the beacon of hope, the light of truth, the warmth of love, the container of community, and more.” (<https://www.uua.org/worship/theory/171038.shtml>)

Our Sunday services are not the only time we light a chalice. We often light a chalice at the start of meetings, discussion groups, and other gatherings. I encourage you also, in these settings, to treat a chalice lighting as a holy act, one where you’re called to reel your attention in from distractions and focus it on the sacred act of lighting, and on the glow of the flame. If you’re the person leading the chalice lighting for the meeting, I encourage you to pause for a moment to make sure everyone in the space is ready and that you have their attention before initiating the chalice lighting ritual.

Getting back to Sunday services, next in the flow of our liturgy, we respond to the Chalice Lighting; and, indeed, to all that went before. With this sung response, we’re joining our voices not just with the group gathered here, but, metaphorically, with “all that dwell below the skies.” We call for all life to join with us in celebrating existence, and to join us in hope, faith, and in calling for universal peace and goodwill.

Then we move to our Story for All Ages, or Time for All Ages. Usually it’s a story. In our services, we use a variety of kinds of stories. But, generally speaking, we don’t use the phrase “story for all ages” as a euphemism for “children’s story;” nor is it a “children’s sermon.”

What’s the difference? The story is not a simplified version of a sermon, nor simply a moral lesson. If a lesson is apparent, fine; but don’t exercise your thinking brain too hard. Let this narrative piece work in you as a story works in you ... - as a *whole*. Take in the story *as story*. We’re not divided into children and adults in how we integrate the story.

Like we do after the Chalice Lighting, we *sing* our response to the Story for All Ages. When we have, or have had, Children's and Youth Religious Education, this is the point where the children and youth would exit the sanctuary to go to their classes. For many years, we sang "Go, Now, in Peace." A little more than a year ago, we switched to "The More We Get Together." This particular song was Stephen's suggestion, and I'll admit I was a little skeptical before we tried it. But it's fun—light hearted—and true! "The more we get together the happier we'll be." I was easily sold.

And then things get distinctly quieter. It's time for our Prayer Hymn. At this point, we shift *definitively* in the direction of stillness. We mingle our voices again, this time moving into *ourselves, together*.

The prayer is the liturgy of the heart, *and* the heart of the service. It falls—more or less—at the midway point of our hour together. We hear the words of the spoken prayer, take them into our heart, respond with feeling, and send that out.

Then we fall into silence.

In their book, *Worship That Works*, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz write: "When a congregation enters a deeper silence together, the feeling in the room is palpable. The silence is rich and dense, as if all had just dived into a refreshingly clear lake on a hot summer day." (Arnason, Wayne & Kathleen Rolenz. *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*. (Skinner House, c2008) p. 111)

Does this sound like an experience that's familiar to you?

In the silence, we have an opportunity to listen to our own inner voice. We're also offered the opportunity to come forward and light a candle. This part of the service might especially touch those who crave a liturgy put into movement, engaging with a tangible symbol.

Now, let's get down to a practical nitty-gritty for a moment: Where do you plant your candle in the dish of sand? Or, another way of putting it is, how can you be helpful to the next person, in the placement of your candle? Our previous minister, Rev. Susan, advised placing the candles back to front, and I still subscribe to this. The reason is ensuring that others can easily situate their candles without risk of burning themselves. I offer this as my own perspective, and leave you to your choice. I'll concede that other placements might distribute the candles better and be more aesthetically pleasing. But, for myself, I put safety first in this instance.

The prayer and silent meditation are followed by the Invitation to Offering. I'm not going to say much about this, except to reminisce a little about something I miss. In the church I grew up in, the offering was taken with a quiet rhythm of passing the plates, while the piano played softly. The ushers proceeded down the aisle, handing the plate to the first person at every other row of pews. The plates were passed, person to person, all the way down one row; and the congregant at the far end passed the plate back to the person behind them, and the plate was passed, person-to-person, back to the middle where the usher received it and passed it to the next row.

I've accepted that there's probably no way of replicating the rhythmic movement of this ritual in our services. We're too spread out, and many among us don't make our donations by physically placing money in the plate each Sunday. But ... I miss it. On the other hand, we do get the soft music!

We then move on to the most verbal part of the service– the readings and the sermon– with a hymn in between.

This liturgy of the word begins with our readings for the day, which lead into the sermon.

Also, as a lead-in to the sermon, we sing another hymn. Here I'm going to take the opportunity to address that ever-important question which applies to all the hymns: What if you feel like you can't sing a particular hymn, or a line of a hymn, for theological reasons? ... No problem. Feel free to opt out of verbalization here. If you don't want to sing, but would like to participate in a supportive way, you can always hum, or simply help hold the space.

And we come to the sermon. As congregants, we engage in the practice of deep listening, open to the possibility that what we hear will change us.

The unwinding of our service begins with our Closing Hymn– the final time we join our voices together. And then we receive the Benediction. You don't need to know Latin to know what this is. What is the "bene-" portion of this word? "[Well," good.]" And what does "dict-" relate to? ["Speak.]" So, "benediction" means something like "speak well" or "good words." Another way of putting it might be to give a blessing– and/or it can be a charge. The Benediction is a final gift to us. Our job is to receive it.

In tandem with the Benediction, the chalice is extinguished. And, finally, the light from our chalice is carried out beyond the walls of our sanctuary. Here we enact our renewed readiness to go out into the world, carrying our light. We extinguish the flame we've kept for this immediate gathering; but this common light travels with us, as we go our separate ways. I encourage you to keep this in your heart and mind as you exit the sanctuary and as you leave the church— Maybe even call it to mind throughout the week.

And, finally, we come to the Postlude, or exiting music. This is our cue to exit, go down to coffee hour, and go forth into our week's activities.

May it be so.