

THE POWER OF RITUAL & TRADITION
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *For Five Thousand Years, Or More* ~ Matthew Johnson

For five thousand years, or more, more than fifteen thousand generations,
human beings have been invoking spiritual power.
My predecessors, and yours, have gathered together
to make sense of their lives
and their place in the cosmos.

 And they have spoken aloud,
 and invited what they conceived as sacred and powerful to be with them.
They called upon the spirits of air and earth, fire and water.

They called the bear and deer.

They asked for the raven to protect them.

They pleaded for the heroes of old to slay the monsters of their fears.

They sang songs they learned from their grandparents, and moved in the appointed
ways, or in ways that were new, but felt like the right thing to do.

 And they imputed power to these spirits, and to the memories of those heroes.

 They called them gods.

 And they were invoked.

 Vishnu and Kali, Elohim, Odin, and a hundred million others.

 Every group of people, everywhere:

 they gathered to make sense of their lives and to make sense of their place in the
 cosmos, and they called these spirits to be present to them.

And so do we.

So do we. We gather this morning

to make sense of ourselves and this universe in which we live, as best we are able.

And we call ourselves to worship together, and we invoke the power and wonder of life
itself, that to which all those spirits of animals, and memories of heroes pointed the
way.

 We invoke that power,

 which is, we know, always around, always with us, but which we sometimes
 forget about.

 We forget that we are part of the whole of creation.

 We forget that we are stardust.

 We forget that we are capable of miracles, first among them, that we can love.

 We forget these things,

 so we invoke the power of existence

 so that we can remember.

 So we can lift our eyes and open our ears to the true and beautiful.

For five thousand years, or more, we have done this.

In many tongues, in many ways, we have done this.

And so we continue that ancient tradition, in our way and in our time, and so let us now worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Wonder Box

(The Wonder Box contained supplies to build an altar, including flying prayer paper. Together, the children created a ritual of sending their prayers out to the world.)

READING

Reflections from the Common Bowl

During this 'open mic' time, congregants were invited to share favorite family/holiday rituals or traditions.

MESSAGE

"Communion" is our theme for the month of December, and last week we explored the meaning of communion, both as an experience and as a ritual. We acknowledged that we most commonly associate the word communion with the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper. At the same time, we wondered together about how we might each experience communion in the broader sense in our daily lives, in our relationships, and here in our religious community.

In that exploration, I realized that I have a long-time-stifled desire for the experience of communion, and from talking with some of you during the last few weeks, it seems you may have a similar longing. It leaves me pondering if such an experience is really random and out of our control, or if there might be the possibility of creating a felt sense of communion.

And that brings us to today's focus...the power of ritual and tradition. The distinction between the two is subtle, and generally maybe not all that important, But since what I really want to talk about ritual, the distinction is foundational for this exploration.

Tradition refers to the passing down of customs or beliefs from generation to generation in a family, society or culture. These customs or beliefs generally have some significance, and might be passed down in the form of folklore, practices, or stories for future generations to remember. Traditions can help to weave a society together across the social spectrum.

We call our faith, Unitarian Universalism, a living tradition. In fact, our hymnal is titled, "Singing the Living Tradition," and a foundational document for us begins, "The living tradition which we share draws from many sources." Unitarian Universalism is a tradition, but we qualify it as a living tradition to indicate our desire to be open to change and growth. Ours is a thread that we expect to change colour and texture as it is passed along.

A ritual, as I told our children earlier, is a series of actions, often performed in a prescribed order, which have symbolic value...a deeper meaning extending beyond the activity itself. A ritual can be part of larger tradition...as the Eucharist is a ritual within the Christian tradition. Rituals are present in our families, our schools, our workplaces, our government, though often they are done without much attention to the meaning which they were created to uphold.

I stumbled upon a blog called "The Ritual Space" this week.¹ It is written by a young man who claims to have been exposed to rituals all of his life but who recently found himself yearning for more to mark life's changes and realities. So, he created a Ritual Salon where he and about

¹ <http://blog.spiritualityandpractice.com/blog/the-ritual-space>

ten friends could explore creating rituals, do one together, and discuss its impact over a potluck dinner. After the first one, during which they began by calling in the directions, he reflected, "calling in the directions and elements was the biggest 'stretch' for most of my friends; they had not heard of doing this and it seemed like one of those 'woo woo' kind of New Age practices to them."

If I were one of his friends, I might have had a similar reaction. Imagine it... gathering for a potluck dinner, but beginning by standing, facing the directions, lighting candles, taking breaths together... (Oh wait, you don't have to imagine it; you can be part of the Solstice service next week!)

Truth be told, ritual is not all that comfortable for me. I'm not entirely sure why. In preparing for today, I flashed on something from my youth that I haven't thought of in decades. At a teenage slumber party, we decided to create a ritual that would involve helping someone to levitate...where we got the idea, I don't know. But we solemnly lit candles, and gathered around one girl lying prone on the floor. We lightly placed our index fingers under her body, and said some words that were meant to mark it as a sacred moment. Then I said, with full-out pubescent gravity, "Feel yourself getting lighter."

Everyone burst into laughter; the spell was broken, and our ritual abandoned. For years, I was teased about those words...which for the life of me, then and now, seem perfectly reasonable. "Feel yourself getting lighter." How else would one levitate? Still, ritual is now associated with a bit of shame and embarrassment.

Joseph Campbell, in his acclaimed work, *The Power of Myth*, asserted that until relatively recently, ritual did not get much respect. He said it was, is, often ridiculed, particularly by academics.² Ritual gets us out of our heads, and into our bodies, something that is not comfortable for everyone. The meanings imbued in ritual are passed along in a mysterious, non-scientific way. Maybe there's even a bit of elitist disdain for ritual, seeing it as an activity that only the 'non-thinking' engage in.

But more recent research³ (we do need research to justify ritual, after all!) is showing that ritual is crucial for human development and even survival. In their book, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley claim that "human beings are not genetically programmed with the sophisticated array of survival instincts present in so many other species ...[so] at birth, human beings embark upon a long process of acquiring the skills and information that will help us survive."⁴ They believe that this process is greatly aided by rituals, which are the vehicle by which we define meaning in life and communicate that meaning to others.⁵

Social scientist Eric Erikson says that ritual is actually the way we access and enter the human story.⁶ Access and enter. We make rituals and rituals make us. We ascribe meaning to particular rituals, and sometimes they make their own new, and unintended meanings for us.

² As cited in "Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals", p. 21

³ See bibliography in "Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals"

⁴ p. 23

⁵ p. xiii

⁶ p. 27

Rituals help us, beginning in childhood, to acquire a sense of belonging and identity, both communal and personal.⁷ Rituals are powerful in that they can bring to light truths we would rather ignore, and can expose contradictions that we would rather not see.⁸

Rituals provide time and space to somehow make sense of the many stories and experiences that bombard and confuse us, so that we might shape our lives more intentionally.⁹ How do they do all of this? Rituals, as I said, bring us into our bodies, and in so doing, access our body's intelligence. Somehow, mysteriously, our bodies have as much, maybe more, ability as our minds to access and create meaning.

It's true, we already have rituals within this community...the lighting of a chalice, opening and closing readings, sharing of joys and sorrows, holding hands at the end of each service...and surely we could become more explicit about the meaning to be found in them.

Ron Phares, in a sermon called *Disembodied Dreams*¹⁰ wrote, "...ritual embodiment creates space. It also articulates faith. After all, what is Islam without Mecca-facing prayers in prostration? What is Christianity without the Eucharist? What is Buddhism without meditation? What is Unitarian Universalism without... um... We claim these traditions as sources [of wisdom, and] There is wisdom in the fact that they ALL ritualize their bodies in order to reinforce and articulate interpretations of the world."

How do we ritualize our bodies in order to reinforce and articulate our Unitarian interpretation of the world?

Take communion. Communion, as expressed through our Unitarian Universalist lens, language and values, is an experience of 'being one with'...it's about oneness, interconnection, inter-being. It is that visceral, if fleeting, feeling that we are part of everything, and that 'all that is' is part of us. If we were to capture communion in a ritual, as an experience, it would reinforce a sense of inherent worth, and a grounding in our interconnection, which in turn would be a call to both responsibility and action.

Phares proposed a kind of communion ritual; I am going to be bold and share it with you today.¹¹ It's a ritual that would reinforce our values, and I've adapted it to focus on communion.

It begins with us all moving a bit. Please indulge me and give this a try...I'm not going to try to levitate you...it's just an experiment. As you are able, shift in your pews toward the aisles, so that you are seated right up close next to each other. The idea is to make as long a chain as possible, so if there are just a few people in your pew, slide in one direction so you're all together. Cozy up to one another.

Now if you would, hold out both of your hands, palm up. This is a gesture of openness, of asking and receiving. Feel that openness.

⁷ p. 23

⁸ p. 24

⁹ p. 27

¹⁰ Phares, Ron, "Disembodied Dreams" <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/129659.shtml>

¹¹ Phares, Ron, "Disembodied Dreams" <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/129659.shtml>

This next gesture might make you uncomfortable, and that's okay. Ritual, as already acknowledged, can take us out of our comfort zone.

If you would, keep your left hand open. And with your right hand, place two or more fingers on the wrist of the person to your right. If you're at the end of a row, or by yourself, place the fingers of your right hand on your own neck. Now, try to find a pulse, over on the side and under the thumb. Whether or not you can feel it, it is enough to know that it is there. This, this touching, is a gesture of connection. Feel the connection.

You may close your eyes or not. Breathe in and exhale slowly, as if you were meditating. And keeping that breath intentional, consider how this touch affirms the inherent worth and dignity of each person, everyone you touch, including yourself.

Keep breathing. Consider how touch embodies acceptance of one another and is a necessary step towards feeling compassion for others and for ourselves, that we can better immerse ourselves in communion.

Consider that through your fingertips, you can feel the pulse of your neighbour... that as one being, you touch the life force of all that is.

Continue to breathe, and increase your awareness of your neighbour's life force. See if you can sync your breathing with the rhythm of their heart. Then let that synchronization expand to include the rhythms of everyone here. Continue outward so that your thoughts turn at last to the interdependent web of all existence. Feel that the sum is greater than all these parts.

Listen...to breath and blood and life. Here at one time, together, be grounded, be here, as one.

Now, bring your hands back to center, and offer a silent gratitude to one another.

There ends our ritual of communion. You can return to a comfortable seating position.

I haven't read this book, only its précis, but in *Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in Transition*, Simon Bronner apparently makes the case that ritual action is key to the maintenance of identity and to the expression of a world-view. In other words, doing ritual, as a supplement to all the 'words' we love so much, may be a central strategy for both teaching and coming to better embody the principles and values that we espouse and treasure.

In this beautiful, living tradition, we need rituals, rituals that will create a sense of continuity in our lives by linking the past to the present and the present to the future; rituals that will support us in making meaning of our lives in a perennially imperfect world; rituals that are both honest in their confrontation of the world that is and sincere in their vision of the world that could be.

We need rituals in order to create gatherings that speak to a greater diversity of people, particularly young adults, who want to spend less time in their heads and more time in authentic community. We need rituals in order to touch inner springs...both in ourselves and in others...springs that speak a language of the senses.

We need rituals in order to be more fully human. In fact, rituals are one of the most important things that humans do. May we be open. Amen.

READING ~ *Robert Fulghum*

These brief words from Robert Fulghum sum up much of what we've considered today: Rituals are timed by beats of the heart, not ticks of the clock.

... Heart time is not clock time -- rituals should never be rushed. Rituals are frames around the mirrors of the moment. Rituals are the coin by which attention is paid to the moment. Nobody lives without rituals. Rituals do not live without somebody. The function of ritual is paradoxical: to both anchor us to high places on the steep slopes of this world on which we are always losing our footing and to free us from the despair of being stuck in the world's mud. Ritual behavior softens the phases of life when we are reminded how hard it is to be human. Ritual behavior enriches the phases of life when we are reminded how fine it is to be human.

CLOSING WORDS *We Come to Love a Church (adapted) ~ Andrew C. Kennedy*

We come to love a congregation,
the traditions, the history,
and especially the people associated with it.
And through these people,
young and old,
known and unknown,
we reach out –
Both backward into history
and forward into the future –
To link together the generations
in this imperfect, but blessed community
of memory and hope.

Go forth to participate in the rituals and traditions of life with care and joy! The blessings of Yule be with you.

Amen.