

**The Seven Deadly Social Sins:  
#7 – Worship Without Sacrifice  
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley • August 29, 2010  
The Rev. Judy Welles©; Geneva Politzer, Worship Associate**

**Opening Words  
Geneva Politzer**

An old friend once told me that if someone who didn't know I'm a vegetarian took me to dinner at a steakhouse, I'd say, "That's right. I'll just eat the parsley." That was just--so--me. I really had the martyrdom bit down pat. To this day, my kids still sometimes say, "Mom, you're eating the parsley again."

In all fairness, I'm no stranger to sacrifice. I've raised three children, one of them multiply-handicapped. I've learned to accept sacrifice as a normal, even healthy, fact of life. When I signed on to assist Judy with this service, I thought, "Piece of cake." I knew she'd want suggestions for readings. I'd pull out a poem from my handy original collection, and, voila!

Only it turns out I haven't written a single poem about sacrifice. Me, the parsley queen.

So why is sacrifice a mere garnish on my life menu? How have my feelings about sacrifice evolved? Could it be that embracing deep gratitude for my life's blessings rather than focusing on its difficulties has changed my sense of deprivation to a sense of fullness?

Sacrifice means "to make sacred." It's a choice to put someone or something else first. The concept of sacrifice lies at the core of every major religion - at the core of human culture. The urge toward self-sacrifice might be seen as a defining human characteristic, which helps us overcome self-preservation in favor of the greater good. But there's a big difference between self-sacrifice - martyrdom - and healthy sacrifice.

I can think of nothing more sacred than holding a child in love, putting the well-being of that child before every selfish impulse. When that child is born with a life-threatening disease, there's simply no leeway for selfish impulses. I might argue that my life with Michael hasn't really been about sacrifice, because I really had no choice. Do or die. I did, or he died.

But there's always a choice. I could have walked away. Certainly, I've sometimes wished my life were different. I've wondered why my cup of parsley runneth over. The biggest sacrifice, for me, was putting Stephen and David on the back burner, because they could survive without me, while their brother could not.

Although Michael's care has grown more complex rather than less, requiring greater time and commitment, while other parents eventually stand aside as their children mature, I don't consider it a sacrifice. Michael has brought untold riches into my life, and into the life of this congregation. What could be more sacred than shaping our individual worth into a beloved community so much greater than its parts? Come, let us worth-shape together.

**First Reading**

“Sonnets to Orpheus, Part One, IV”  
*Rainer Maria Rilke*

You who let yourselves feel: enter the breathing  
that is more than your own.  
Let it brush your cheeks  
as it divides and rejoins beside you.

Blessed ones, whole ones,  
you where the heart begins:  
You are the bow that shoots the arrows  
and you are the target.

Fear not the pain. Let its weight fall back  
into the earth;  
for heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas.

The trees you planted in childhood have grown  
too heavy. You cannot bring them along.  
Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold.

**Second Reading**

“Worship Without Sacrifice”  
*Arun Gandhi*

One person's faith is another person's fantasy because religion has been reduced to meaningless rituals practiced mindlessly.

Temples, churches, synagogues, mosques and those entrusted with the duty of interpreting religion to lay people seek to control through fear of hell, damnation, and purgatory. In the name of God they have spawned more hate and violence than any government.

True religion is based on spirituality, love, compassion, understanding, and appreciation of each other whatever our beliefs may be — Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics or whatever.

Gandhi believed whatever labels we put on our faith, ultimately all of us worship Truth because Truth is God. Superficially we may be very devout believers and make a tremendous public show of our worship, but if that belief, understanding, compassion, love and appreciation is not translated into our lives, prayers will have no meaning.

True worship demands sacrifice not just in terms of the number of times a day we say our prayers but in how sincere we are in translating those prayers into life styles.

In the 1930's many Christian and Moslem clergy flocked into India to convert the millions who were oppressed as untouchables. The Christian clergy stood on street corners loudly denouncing Hinduism and proclaiming the virtues of Christianity. Months went by without a single convert accepting the offer. Frustrated, one priest asked Grandfather: After all the oppression and discrimination that the 'untouchables' suffer under Hinduism, why is it they do not accept our offer of a better life under Christianity? Grandfather replied: When you stop



described her rush to return home to the U.S. from her mother's home in Jordan in time for Ramadan.

“The best Ramadan I ever spend in my life is always in America because sometimes I feel like I am the only person fasting. It's more strenuous. I feel like every day is a *jihad* for me, a struggle to maintain my faith, maintain my fast despite the amazing food around me. Everyone is eating except myself and this brings me amazing strength... This experience is priceless.

“And that's why I did everything, I even paid extra money for my ticket to make sure I arrived before Ramadan starts. This is where I feel I am really fasting with a meaning and a purpose. [When I go to feed the homeless,] people say to me ‘Why don't you taste it?’ and I tell them I can't I'm fasting, and you can't imagine how blessed I feel that I am feeding homeless people and I am fasting and I can't touch the food. And that's the whole idea of Ramadan — not to be able to eat, to feel with the poor and the deprived, and I just love it.”<sup>2</sup>

I can't think of a more exquisite way to illustrate how an act of sacrifice can be experienced as something sacred and deeply meaningful than through the words of this young college professor in Florida.

Undergoing the hardships of the Ramadan fast is a far cry from the way most of us practice our faith. But we, too, if we are going to have a meaningful and authentic experience of worship, may realize that we have to give up some things. We may have to make some sacrifices if we truly want to be touched and moved and *changed* by the experience of worship.

Is that what you want when you come here on Sunday mornings? It's what I hope for — a transformative worship experience for all of us, where we experience *together* being lifted out of ourselves and taken some place higher, being emotionally moved, having things be *different* here (heart) and here (head) than they are during all the other hours of the week.

So what would it take to have that kind of experience of worship? What would we have to sacrifice?

We have to give up our fear. Anyone who has come here alone for the first time can identify with that fear, the wondering “What will it be like? Are they weird? Will they welcome me? Or will I be ignored and shunned?”

Whenever I meet a first-time visitor who is here alone, I want to say “Congratulations on your courage!” And my hope for them is that, as they return week after week, that self-consciousness will drift away and they won't be thinking any more about how people might react to them. Instead they will be thinking about what kind of communal experience we all will have together. That's my hope for all of us — that we will come here each week thinking less about ourselves and more about everyone else.

If someone is sitting back there in the last row of the annex feeling fearful and self-conscious, what kind of joyful, spirit-filled worship experience can they have? Give up your fear, and worship here with us.

We have to give up our mistrust. Some of us tend to be a bit suspicious, not at all sure that where the worship leader wants to take us is where we want to go. We have to relinquish some of our personal power and allow ourselves to be held for a while by someone else and by

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<sup>2</sup>Samar Jarrah on <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2010/ramadan/>

the whole worshipping community. We have to believe that what is going to happen here will be important or useful or valuable to us in some way. Give up your mistrust, and worship here with us.

We have to give up our pride, our sense that we're already fully aware of whatever the morning's message will be and we've got it covered. And while we're at it — and this is a big one — we have to give up that misbegotten idea that we come here all fine, which is another manifestation of pride: "I'm fine, everything's fine, everything in my life is working great."

Last week in his sermon, Duane talked about salvation as the thing that saves us from disease and restores health. That which salves the wounds of the spirit. He said, "We all need that. I need it. You need it." And if that kind of healing that we all need is going to happen, if our wounds are going to be salved and our restless spirits soothed through the worship experience, then we have to come in that door willing to acknowledge that there's something wrong, or that we're hurting, or needing forgiveness, or wounded. Each of us is flawed, each of us has things about ourselves that we're not proud of, each of us has a life that is some version of messy. Each of us needs forgiveness, and each of us is capable of forgiving. So give up your pride, and worship here with us.

We have to give up our strong sense of individualism and be willing to let down the self-imposed barriers between us so that everyone joins together in one experience, instead of each person sitting here and having our own personal experience that we're not willing to share with anyone else. I was touched when I found the words for the epigram on your bulletin and thought about everyone bringing God into worship to be shared. We share the experience and we don't lose anything — it gets bigger! Sharing God can also be reminding one another that the love God has for us overcomes all of our flaws and that we deserve God's love no matter what.

To paraphrase Duane a bit from last week's sermon: he suggested that "our fierce individualism is both partly responsible for our loneliness and a learned response to isolation. Our open theology and lack of a creedal test of faith encourage that rugged religious individualism. But it comes at a high price... We have a profound need for community, for relationship, and for connection. To the extent that our individualism marginalizes us and supports resistance to authority and convention, it tends to keep us outside the embrace of community."<sup>3</sup>

A few weeks ago during the Question Box service, David gave an eloquent response to one of the questions. He said that in church, as contrasted with the theater, there is no wall between the people up here and the people out there. All of us — worship leaders and congregation alike — are cooperating — each of us is working *together* — to create a communal experience of worship. In fact, the worship leaders will do anything they can to bridge the gap, to reach right into the hearts of the people sitting there facing them and say "Hi, I'm here too. We are doing this together; I'm not doing it 'to' you."

If one thinks about "worship without sacrifice," one of the things that must be sacrificed for worship truly to happen is the safe and comfortable barrier that a worshipper could erect between himself and the worship leaders. It's that personal wall that must come down in order that true worship can happen, for true worship is a shared experience — it's something that happens only in community.

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<sup>3</sup> Fickeisen, Duane, "The Good News of Unitarian Universalism," August 15, 2010.

And of course the worship leader must sacrifice as well, must relinquish the safety that the wall would allow her in keeping her distance from those she addresses. She must allow herself to be vulnerable and let the members of the congregation into her heart at the very moment that she is trying to get into theirs. So give up your isolated individualism, and join us.

So these are some sacrifices that we might make in order to worship authentically: fear, self-consciousness, mistrust, pride, and self-imposed isolation. I thought that Rilke expressed that so beautifully in the poem that Geneva read earlier:

You who let yourselves feel: enter the breathing  
that is more than your own.  
Let it brush your cheeks  
as it divides and rejoins beside you.

...Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold.

You might think of what I have described already as the sacrifices that we need to make as we come in the door at the start of worship. But there's more... There are also the sacrifices that we need to make as we go out, as the service concludes and we go back out into the work-week world.

This is the real challenge, even more challenging than relinquishing the attitudes and states of mind that I've described. After all, who really *wants* to hold onto fear and mistrust? That part is relatively easy.

But who really *wants* to change? That is what is being asked of us in worship, week after week, whether it's a Worship Associate inviting us to make moral decisions or to follow the 613 *Mitzvot*, or whether it's me saying "thank you for all you do for UUCV — now please do more" or Duane suggesting that we play at the boundaries and take the occasional risk. Every week, someone at this pulpit is asking you to change, exhorting you to make the sacrifice of personal comfort for the sake of a greater good.

Sometimes that greater good refers to your own life — to be more forgiving, to explore and develop your relationship to God, to be kinder to your spouse, or to hear one another into speech. Sometimes it refers to the greater life beyond your own — to honor our forebears and carry on their work in the world, or to stand on the side of love in the face of bullies.

According to his grandson, this is precisely what Gandhi was talking about when he said that worship without sacrifice is a social sin. "True worship," Arun Gandhi wrote, "demands sacrifice not just in terms of the number of times a day we say our prayers but in how sincere we are in translating those prayers into life styles."

Now I wouldn't exactly describe Unitarian Universalism as a life style. In fact, I don't even like it when we refer to ourselves as "a movement." We are a faith, we have a faith tradition, we are a religion, not merely "a religious movement."

But I understand what Arun Gandhi meant about translating our prayers into life styles. It's not easy to live right out of a deep and sincere and authentic belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, for example — *every* person. Don't ever let anyone tell you that it's easy to be a Unitarian Universalist because "you can believe anything you want to." It's not true. You can believe what you have learned from experience and from your mentors; you can believe what your intuition tells you, but you can't believe something just because you wish it

were so, and certainly not because someone else told said you had to believe it. You can't just believe what you want.

So there is a way of living as a Unitarian Universalist that has everything to do with what we experience here in worship together, if you are willing to give up what you want for the sake of what you get. What you want might be a nice hour of sitting with your friends and having someone up here say something interesting; what you get might be an inspiration or a twinge of conscience or a challenge to what you always thought was true.

If you allow yourself to be lifted up and taken someplace, then you just might come down where something new is being asked of you. And you know what? I really do think that this is why many of us come to church. We *want* to be challenged, we *want* to be inspired into action, we *want* to be shaken up a little bit. But maybe we've never thought about what would have to be sacrificed in order for that to be so.

So that's my challenge for you this morning: what do you have to sacrifice in order to bring yourself fully into worship here, and to fully take it with you out into the world? To paraphrase Gandhi, when we stop telling them how good Unitarian Universalism is and start living it, we will find more converts than we can cope with. And wouldn't *that* be a good thing!

### **Closing Words**

“A Time of Worship”

*Robert F. Kaufmann*

We have come together to share our deepest concerns, speaking and singing words of inspiration and hope. We have committed ourselves to do what we can to ease the burdens of those who suffer, to stand for decency and compassion. We have pledged to work for a more wholesome environment for us and for all the generations that will follow.

But these are just words. The hymns we sing are just songs. All our reflections are just idle thoughts. When we convert them all into loving and responsible action throughout the week, then and only then will this morning become what we want it to be -- a time of worship.