

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place
January 2, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No.
389 “Gathered Here”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

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Next week our guest speaker will be our own Dr. Marcus Gillespie, associate professor of geography at Sam Houston. The title of his talk will be, “The Wonder of the Universe.” Please come, I assure you it will be wonder-ful.

On Saturday, January 15th, we will host our next coffeehouse. James Lee Stanley will be performing and we are such a large presence now in Huntsville that he will need an opening act – Pat Hanna. Please join us. It will be great fun.

Also on the 15th is our Service Auction and donations are still needed.

On Sunday the 16th, our own Beth Williamson will be in the pulpit speaking on Joseph Priestley: Scientist and Unitarian Minister. Without a doubt, it will be very interesting and informative.

Today after the service we will be eating at El Chico. Please join us if you can.

Our special offering this month will be for _____.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

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Opening Words

John Pepper

We have come together today, not because we expect to find answers here, but rather because we expect to be encouraged in our questioning.

We have come together today, not because we expect to find perfect people here, but rather because we hope to find authentic people here.

We have come together today, not because we are certain of our own righteousness, but because we are continually searching for the right, the good, the uplifting.

We have come together today, not because we seek absolution for our sins and failures, but rather because we acknowledge our imperfections and seek the courage to make amends for those failures to ourselves and others.

We have come together today, not because we need to be told what to believe and how to act, but rather because we need each other's encouragement to act according to our own best beliefs.

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We have come together today, not because we are hoping to find God in a scripture or a ritual, but rather because we are hoping to discover the divinity within our own hearts and within the hearts of others.

We have come together today, not because we believe that holiness exists within these walls alone, but rather to have our hearts and minds directed to the holiness in the world.

For all of these reasons, we have come together today.

Rejoice Together, 8, Suzanne Meyer

Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 311 “We Laugh, We Cry.”

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Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Natasha Satterfield

Story for All Ages – *Wishes for You* by Tobi Tobias

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Reading – “Everything Matters” by Robert R. Walsh

I knew a man; his name was Jim, who had printed on his stationery this proverb: “Nothing is settled. Everything matters.” It established a certain ambience for reading his letters, as if to say: what you are about to read is to be taken seriously, but is not final.

I remember him and his proverb sometimes, especially when it seems impossible to change the world or myself in any significant way. Times like the beginnings of new years.

“Sorry, Jim,” I say. “It’s not true that nothing is settled. In the past year choices have been made, losses have been suffered, there has been growth and decay, there have been commitments and betrayals. None of that can be undone. A year ago no one knew whether during this year one person would become pregnant another would get cancer, another would take a new job, another would have an accident, but now it is all settled.

“One day this year I was present just when someone needed me; another day I was busy doing something else when I was needed. One day I said something to a friend that injured our relationship; another day I said something that enabled a person to see life in a new way.

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The best and the worst of those days are now written. All my tears, of joy and sorrow, cannot erase it.”

If I stay with my meditation long enough, the reply comes.

“Robbie,” says Jim, “You have misunderstood the proverb. It is true that you cannot escape the consequences of your actions or the chances of the world. But what is not settled is how the story turns out. What is not settled is what the meaning of your life will be.”

The meaning of a life is not contained within one act, or one day, or one year. As long as you are alive the story of your life is still being told, and the meaning is still open. As long as there is life in the world, the story of the world is still being told. What is done is done, but *nothing is settled*.

And if nothing is settled, then *everything matters*. Every choice, every act in the new year matters. Every word, every deed is making the meaning of your life and telling the story of the world. Everything matters in the year coming, and, more important, everything matters today.

Rejoice Together, 106, Robert R. Walsh

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Responsive Reading – No. 544 “New Year’s Day”

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms,

With or without our calendars to name a certain day as the day of new beginning, separating the old from the new.

So it is: everything is the same, bound into its history as we ourselves are bound.

Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands:

What shall we do with this great gift of Time, this year?

Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year,

We are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of all the best visions of our people.

The new year can be new ground for the seeds of our dreams.

Let us take the step forward together, onto new ground,

Planting our dreams well, faithfully, and in joy.

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Prayer

John Pepper

Please join me now in a time of quiet meditation. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause)

I envision and prepare for new beginnings.

As winter makes its arrival, I notice changes on display in nature – leaves gone from the trees, birds flying south and the temperature turning cold. As we leave one season of our lives and transition to another, we may feel a sense of loss. Yet just as the trees use winter to prepare internally for eventual springtime, I know that a quiet time of reflection allows me to envision and prepare for new beginnings in my life.

I cannot hold on to the life that was, but I can fully live the life that is, right now. By embracing the present moment, I find peace in the midst of change. I find hope remembering that in due time, in the right season, my own spring – my rebirth – will burst forth.

The Daily Word, December 21, 2010

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Sermon – *A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place*

Recently my family came to town to attend the memorial service of a dear relative. Ann was the wife of a cousin of my Mother's and she was a very special woman. Her memorial service was beautiful, filled with music and memories all reminiscent of Ann and her life of over 75 years.

For most of her life, Ann loved and doted on her family and many friends. That same love and devotion was reflected in the memorial service by the full church and the eulogies shared during the service. The love people felt for Ann was indeed present that day and although nothing can truly take the place of a loved one who is suddenly gone, the outpouring of love surely made a difference.

As my mother once told me, memorial services are for the ones left behind. They are rituals performed at one of the most difficult times of life to help the living begin to cope with death primarily through an outpouring of love.

Many rituals are simply outward displays of affection which attempt to show support during some of the significant or difficult times of life.

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Religious communities in particular provide the perfect venue to stage these rituals, complete with a community of people who simply care about one another. We are one of those communities and rituals of joy, care, and concern are a part of our religious life.

Generally rituals designate some specific transition in life and they may be for an individual, the community, or a combination of both. The transition can be painful or joyous and it can be difficult or easy to cross.

Some people need the ritual to help with a difficult transition, while others do not. And some deny the need for the ritual when it could be beneficial and cathartic.

Rituals are for people and just as people are infinitely different, different people react to the rituals in infinitely different ways. Rituals can help us deal with life and although we don't believe they are magical, there is one component that is almost magical.

The demonstration of support, the joy of accomplishment, the outpouring of love, all of these actions and more, provide something we human beings need from time to time, simple recognition, an awareness that we are alive and that we are here and that we are special. If a ritual can do that, then it is magical.

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One ritual I love is our Joys and Concerns candle lighting ceremony at the beginning of most worship services. It reminds us that we don't have to wait for some major event like a death to show our care and concern. We can show our affection and concern for others in the community throughout life, but we have to know about them and this ritual opens the door to awareness.

It gives us the opportunity to express some of our best qualities as a community by allowing us to give our attention and compassion to one of our own who has something to share.

It also gives us all an opportunity to experience an aspect of the diversity we often champion especially when the joys and concerns catch us off guard or surprise us and opens a window into the soul of the person who has just shared. Respecting and honoring that diversity and those things that are important to each of us is who we choose to be as a part of this religious community.

But rituals aren't just part of a religious life, they are a routine part of our everyday life. Religious historian and author Huston Smith says, "... with all its arbitrariness and seeming waste, ritual plays a part in life that nothing else can fill, a part that is by no means confined to religion. For one thing, it eases us through tense situations and time of anxiety.

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Sometimes the anxiety is mild – during introductions, for example. I am introduced to a stranger. Not knowing how he or she will respond, I don't know how to proceed. What should I say? What should I do? Ritual covers my uncertainty and awkwardness. It tells me to extend my hand and say “How do you do?” or “I'm pleased to meet you.” And in so doing it brings form out of chaos. It provides the moment I need to get my bearings. The awkwardness is over. I have recovered my balance and am ready to explore freer behavior.

If we need ritual to help us through situations as inconsequential as a casual introduction, how much more when we find ourselves really at a loss. Death is the glaring example. Stunned by tragic bereavement, we would founder completely if we were thrown on our own and had to think our way through the ordeal. This is why death, with its funerals and memorial services, its wakes and sitting *shiva*, is the most ritualized rite of passage. Ritual, with its prepared score to orchestrate the occasion, channels our actions and feelings at a time when solitude would be unbearable. And in the process it softens the blow. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” – the words don't say whose ashes, for this is everybody; all of us. ...

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From the triviality of an introduction to the trauma of death, ritual smoothes life's transitions as perhaps nothing else can. But it also serves another function. In times of happiness it can intensify experience and raise joy to celebration. Here the examples are birthdays, weddings, and most simply a family's evening meal. Here, in this best meal of the day, when perhaps for the first time the family is relaxed and together, a blessing can be something more than the starting line for a food race. It can hallow the occasion. The opposite of dead weight, it consecrates a daily pleasure."¹

But today I am mainly focusing on rituals in a religious context, as such, the Judeo-Christian traditions, from which we came, are rich with rituals. Within Judaism, it is less about orthodoxy (right thought) and more about orthopraxy (right action). The Jewish people are more united by what they do than what they think and that is possibly why they have no creed. For the Jewish people, rituals such as circumcision, are decisive, they have a definite purpose.²

In general, Judaism attempts to make holy all aspects of life. Once again Huston Smith says,

¹ *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith, 300-1.

² *Ibid.*

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“To speak of the hallowing of life in Judaism is to refer to its conviction that all life down to its smallest element can, if rightly approached, be seen as a reflection of the infinite source of holiness, which is God. The name for this right approach to life and the world is piety, carefully distinguished from piosity, its counterfeit. ...

The secret of piety consists in seeing the entire world as belonging to God and reflecting God’s glory. To rise in the morning on seeing the light of a new day, to eat a simple meal, to see a stream running between mossy stones, to watch the day slowly turn into evening – even small things like these can mirror God’s majesty. ...

We should enjoy life’s goodness, and at the same time we should augment this joy by sharing it with God, just as any joy we feel is augmented when shared with friends. Jewish law sanctions all the good things of life – eating, marriage, children, and nature, while elevating them all to holiness. It teaches that people should eat, that they should prepare their tables in the presence of the Lord. It teaches that people should drink, that they should use wine to consecrate the Sabbath.

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It teaches that people should be merry, that they should dance around the Torah.”³

Yes, the Jewish people consecrate these beliefs through their traditions and rituals. For me, their consecration of every aspect of life is simply the ritualization of our own UU principle which claims, “To respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”.

It is one thing to claim that statement and quite another to acknowledge it frequently throughout most aspects of life and some who practice the Jewish faith, do just that.

The Christian side of our family tree also believes in rituals and the Catholic Church has defined seven holy rituals which are central to their religious life. Of these seven, most UU churches and certainly the larger UU churches, actively promote five of them.

Granted, we don't attach quite the significance to all of our five that Catholics do, but we obviously recognize their value as part of our own religious community and we have made appropriate changes so that they are truly our own.

³ Ibid., 301-2.

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The first of the seven Catholic Rituals is Baptism which we have changed into the Dedication of a child. There is nothing more beautiful than a child and the formal dedication simply reminds us that every life is precious and that we are all responsible for their growth and support. It does “Take a Village.”

The second ritual is Confirmation and we have changed that into our Coming of Age ceremony. There is a point when the child becomes an adult and we honor that very special occasion.

The third ritual is Holy Matrimony and this ritual is holy for us as well. We truly make this ritual our own as each ceremony within a UU church is unique, designed especially for the couple being joined together.

The fourth ritual is known as Holy Orders, where one dedicates his or her life to God. We have something similar and we call it Ordination. This ritual was very special to me because you chose to conduct it and because we did it together as a part of this religious community.

The fifth ritual is the Sacrament of the Sick held when someone is dying.

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While we have no similar ritual, we recognize the gravity of the situation and as a community we are there for the family supporting them in whatever way we can. This too is a primary purpose of a religious community.

The sixth Catholic ritual is called Reconciliation, also known as confession. We definitely do not enact any similar ritual, but the UUA and all credentialed seminaries require that all ministers take several pastoral counseling courses so that we can aid congregants when they have a need to open up and share troubling or difficult aspects of their lives.

The seventh and final Catholic ritual is the Mass or Holy Communion. Their worship service is a prelude to the central component of the service, which is their Mass. We too have a weekly worship service which is a ritual but we do not create a service in anticipation of the Mass.

On the other hand, we have recognized the value of communion and have created our own flower and water communions, which celebrate our diversity and our coming together as a body of people, a religious community, a church.

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Rituals are part of our religious lives. They are not magical or mystical, but they are deeply important because we choose to do them together and we enact them at very special times in our own individual lives and in the life of the church.

Rituals are a part of who we are.

(Pause)

Now here we are at the beginning of a New Year and I'd like to introduce a new ritual for the New Year. We often participate in what we call New Year's Resolutions where we seek to change things about ourselves that we would like to improve. This new ritual is very similar.

With the Burning Bowl we symbolically let go of the bad or negative things in our lives, things that may have dominated our lives in the past year. They could be angers or hurts that really serve no purpose. They could be bad habits. What you let go of is strictly up to you and it is private, only you need know what it is, but we participate in the ritual together.

I've given each of you a piece of paper to write down what you want to let go of. If you can't think of anything, that's okay.

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I encourage you to go ahead and participate in the ritual anyway and if something comes to mind later simply imagine that it was on the paper and you can still remember it going up in smoke.

As the year progresses and as you find you are still holding on to what you symbolically let go of, simply stop, collect your thoughts and mentally reenact the Burning Bowl ceremony again, and then move on again. Perfection is not the goal. Moving on and letting go of the past is the goal.

As you think about what you want to put on your paper, here is a poem by an anonymous author that might prompt you in some small way and it is titled “Letting Go.”

To let go doesn't mean to stop caring; it means I can't do it for someone else.

To let go is not to cut myself off... It's the realization that I can't control another...

To let go is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.

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To let go is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To let go is not to try and change or blame another, I can only change myself.

To let go is not to care for, but to care about.

To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To let go is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes, but to allow others to affect their own outcomes.

To let go is not to be protective, it is to permit another to face reality.

To let go is not to deny, but to accept.

To let go is not to nag, scold, or argue, but to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.

To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires, but to take each day as it comes and cherish the moment.

To let go is not to criticize and regulate anyone, but to try to become what I dream I can be.

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To let go is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future.

To let go is to fear less and love more.

Burning Bowl Ceremony

Please take a few minutes, collect your thoughts and write on the piece of paper I provided to you whatever it is you choose to let go of.

(Pause)

Now please form a line to my left and we invite you to come to the Burning Bowl and consign them to the flame. And please use the “sacred tongs” so you don’t burn your fingers.

(Music)

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May what you have released here be forever gone from your spirit and cease to trouble you. May you be relieved and renewed, ever mindful that love is always more powerful than fear, and that compassion is the key to freedom from resentment.

Victoria Weinstein

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 212 “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” and remain standing for our Benediction.

Benediction – No. 702

John Pepper

Where hate rules, let us bring love; where sorrow, joy.

Let us strive more to comfort others than to be comforted, to understand others, than to be understood, to love others more than to be loved.

For it is in giving that we receive, and in pardoning that we are pardoned.

Amen, Namaste, and Go in Peace!

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude