

**To Worship**  
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Let's start with the dictionary. According to my 1991 Random House Webster's College Dictionary, the word "worship" means: 1] reverent honor and homage paid to God or a sacred personage, or to any object regarded as sacred; 2] formal or ceremonious rendering of such honor and homage; and 3] adoring reverence or regard. There are 7 more, but you get the basic drift. I checked that definition in several other sources, and they're similar, differing mostly in the emphasis they place on the object of worship being a deity or supernatural being. Most mention gods or divine entities, but it isn't an absolute necessity. The context is usually religious, although you'll also find, especially in English dictionaries like the Oxford, reference to people in particular positions of authority who might be addressed as "Your Worship."

I'll pause here for the collective shudder.

Details aside, the common thread seems clear to me: to worship is to regard someone or something with reverence, honor, and the highest possible respect, or to express those emotions in a structured way. When you look at the origins of the word, you'll find something interesting, at least to a language-lover like me: the word "worship" comes from two Old English words, *weorth*, meaning worth or value, and *scipe*, meaning shape. To shape worth, then, or to shape ourselves toward what has worth. Not a deity in sight, there.

Even so, the word gives many of us pause. "To worship," for some, means to bow down, to kneel before someone or something much more important and powerful, to obey without question, and to think of ourselves as worth...less. We feel, some of us, that the word can't be separated from its long association with supernatural notions of divinity, and that if we've left the supernatural behind, we ought to leave worship behind with it.

And yet. . . so much of our story as a religious movement over hundreds of years has been built on the conviction that when old customs, old structures, old definitions no longer work to enhance and enrich our spiritual lives, the thing to do is to change them to meet the need of the present.

We've been doing that explicitly with the word worship for a long time. Back in 1932, a Unitarian minister named John Dietrich, an atheist who was a founding figure of modern religious humanism, wrote in a pamphlet called "Do Humanists Worship?" that "worship is an attitude of mind, regardless of the object toward which that attitude may be expressed." And even further back, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century

former Unitarian minister named Ralph Waldo Emerson—yes, that guy—warned that worship wasn't really an option when he said, "a person will worship something—have no doubt about that." For Emerson, whatever "dominates our imagination and thoughts" is what we worship, and it has the power to "determine our lives, and character."

These 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century ancestors of ours argued that the notion of God as a harsh and demanding ruler was modeled after the monarchs and absolute rulers of human history. That image of God had distorted our sense of what worship meant, they thought, and reclaiming and redefining worship was every bit as important as leaving behind outmoded ideas about God. That's the project I'm sharing in today, and I invite you to share it with me. I believe that we *need* what worship has to offer, in its deep meaning rather than its exclusively deity-directed form. To worship is not to lower ourselves in the presence of something greater; it is to lift ourselves toward that presence.

I don't believe it is possible to navigate the world we're living in right now with the kind of resilient spirits we need, unless we are regularly and intentionally grounding ourselves in that which is worthy of the word "sacred," that which we hold in reverence and the highest possible respect. To shape worth, to shape ourselves toward that which has great worth—isn't that what we do together here? What could be more important, more essential for our project of living the best human life we're capable of living?

If Emerson is right about what dominates our thoughts determining our lives, then it seems clear that too many in our society worship money, or power, or whiteness, or their own personal security or pleasure above all else. The terrorists and would-be terrorists who assail the world have slipped all the way into the madness of worshipping death. How are we to resist such idols, how are we to create the just and compassionate world we know is possible, if we don't spend our own precious time together lifting up and connecting ourselves with something genuinely worthy of reverence?

A few years ago, a renowned preacher named James Forbes, former Senior Minister of the famous Riverside Church in New York City, spoke to a gathering of Unitarian Universalist ministers I was attending. He threw us a big challenge. "You have a special calling," he said. "You can offer the world something it desperately needs today, when the old ideas about God and religion are breaking down." He said, "You know you can worship what is unknown, unnamed, uncertain. Are you going to show that to the world? Are you going to offer it, or not?"

To worship what is unknown, unnamed, uncertain. Do we do that? *How* do we do that?

**Here's my hope, my intention, and my goal for the time we spend gathered here each week, when our heart is in this holy place. I'm indebted to the great UU theologian Henry Nelson Wieman for naming, in a 1929 book called *Methods of Private Religious Living*, the experience I'll describe here, although the language I'm using is my own.**

**The foundation of all worship is to make that unnamed, unknown, uncertain something that is worthy of our greatest trust, our highest reverence, as real and present for each and all of us as possible. The Source of life, the Source of everything we value is always real and present, of course; but in worship, we call that Presence to our attention together.**

**Here's where it gets interesting for Unitarian Universalists, because of course we don't all have the same Source, or rather, we acknowledge explicitly that we don't all name or experience that Source the same way. What is it? That's a question for each of you: What does *your* life depend on? What is *your* source of worth? Where do *you* find the foundation for *your* sense of meaning and purpose?**

**Some of us have no hesitation in naming God as our highest Source. For others the answer is more complicated, and yet we all have some answer, even if we haven't been able to express it yet. We might feel that our own highest or best self is the Source of meaning and purpose in life; we might think that Source is to be found in the gifts of human community. We might say that it's Life itself, or some of the qualities that enhance Life, like Love, or Joy, or Creativity. For some of us, it's human aspirations like Justice, Mercy, or Kinship that are worthy of reverence. For others, the natural world or the vastness of the Cosmos brings the sense of awe and wonder that are worship's markers. What is it for you? It's worth spending some time thinking and feeling your way toward the answer that touches you most deeply, whatever it may be.**

**As Nellie's Reflection suggested so well, the ways we each experience the presence of our Source of worth and meaning are just as varied as the names we give it. Perhaps singing does it for you, our voices raised together in beauty. Perhaps it's the sight and sound of each other's compassion and care as we name the truths of our lives in Joys and Sorrows. It might be the poetic words of prayers or readings, the explosive insight of a new idea, or the dawning of a perspective we haven't considered before. It might even happen that the images and events of a story suddenly open a connection for you—stories aren't just for children, after all.**

**I never know, myself, when on a Sunday morning I'm suddenly going to feel the deep, moving sense of connectedness and reverence that mark worship for me. I can't make it happen, for myself or for you; all I can do is open ways I hope will make it more possible.**

**That shared sense of Presence—the unnamed, unknown, uncertain, yet real Presence—is the heart of worship, no matter what the specific topic might be. Ideally, it’s in the light of that Presence that we consider whatever we’re exploring in any given service—a justice issue, a theological conundrum, a historic or present reality that’s worthy of our attention, a religious custom or practice—anything. Given the reality of our highest values, what is important about the topic of the day? What good does it offer, what risks does it represent? What are we called or invited to do, in order to bring the highest and best that we know to bear on the matter at hand? What might happen, in our lives and in our world, if we do?**

**Every week, in some form, that’s the project of worship: to make the ultimate source of worth real and present for us, to consider what it makes possible in the world and our lives and what might stand in the way of that, and to explore how we might bring that Presence back from this gathering into the everyday life that awaits us.**

**That’s one way of describing it. Let me offer another, more poetic vision. It’s a reading by the Rev. Jacob Trapp that appears in our hymnal:**

**“To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.**

**To worship is to be silent, receptive, before a tree astir with the wind, or the passing shadow of a cloud.**

**To worship is to work with dedication and with skill; it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music.**

**To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth; it is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.**

**Worship is a loneliness seeking communion; it is a thirsty land crying out for rain.**

**Worship is kindred fire within our hearts; it moves through deeds of kindness and through acts of love.**

**Worship is the mystery within reaching out to the mystery beyond.**

**It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak; it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.”**

**Do Unitarian Universalists worship? I believe we do; I believe we must. For it’s in this experience, this shared hour of the mystery within reaching out to the mystery beyond, that we will find the strength, the beauty, the wisdom, the courage, the serenity that will guide and encourage us, sustain and nurture us as we travel the paths of our days—caring for our loved ones, living into our many relationships,**

**taking up the tasks of everyday living, healing the wounds and realizing the possibilities of our world.**

**May we be the ones to make it so.**