

Why Do We Do That
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reading The Woodcarver by Thomas Merton

Sermon

There's a widespread - possibly apocryphal - story¹ about a child who notices their mother cutting off the ends of a pot roast before putting it in the oven, and asks why? Their mother says "I don't know why I cut the ends off - it's what my mom always did."

So the child asks their grandmother why she cuts the ends off the pot roast before cooking it. And the grandmother replies, "I don't know. That's just the way my mom always cooked it."

Undeterred, this persistent child asks their great grandmother the same question. "Why did you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it?"

And the great grandmother answers "because back then I only had a small pan, and I had to cut the ends off the roast to make it fit."

"Why do we do that" is a question that sometimes reveals interesting history. For – however much we may think we are operating in the present, the roots of why we do what we do are always historical. This question can also show us behaviors that no longer make sense, opening the possibility of new ways of living.

It can also be an unsettling question – challenging the status quo or even our sense of identity. We might ask: Why do I prioritize this relationship over that one, why do I spend my time that way or react that way - why do I do these things that I do?

The answer can cut deeper than our pot roast revelation. Asking "why do we do that" can take some spiritual fortitude.

But spiritual fortitude is what we're here for. Whether we ask "why" about ourselves, our communities or – as we're doing today - this service.

So let's ask our religious ancestors – we'll start with the Puritans. The people who gave us our congregational polity, our fierce independence and our unease with authority. It turns out they also gave us a lot of this service.

The 17th century Puritans would find what we do here familiar. Not zoom, and parts of our theology would shock them. They would be surprised by women in leadership roles. And they would find this sermon to be inexcusably short. But even so, they would recognize this service. All the elements have a purpose for us – many are also here because the Puritans did it that way.

They, too, began with a call to worship. Soon after, they would sing (typically a psalm from the Bible) and there would be one or more readings (also biblical). There would be a pastoral prayer, and that super-long sermon would be the highlight, and then they would sing again, followed by the minister's benediction.² The whole "sermon sandwich" structure (as it has been called) comes to us from the Puritans.

¹ found in various places online without attribution

² <https://www.apuritansmind.com/puritan-worship/john-calvins-order-of-worship-1542/>

And they didn't just make it up - they took the pre-reformation Christian worship services and adjusted them to suit their reformed theology. They made the services simpler, rooted them in biblical text and in praise of God; they removed the parts that seemed to place priests as intermediaries between human and divine, as they sought to help people apply the bible of their understanding to their life.

A little later, their Unitarian descendants shifted the theology, and over time expanded the pool of music and readings and participants. But otherwise, they did what the Puritans did. And with a couple of modern adjustments (like our chalice lighting) we kind of do what they did. There's a lot of our protestant heritage, embedded in most Unitarian Universalist services.

Each set of ancestors saw the worship they inherited as the right piece of wood, holding great beauty, promise, and revelations about what makes a good life. And each carefully and thoughtfully carved and shaped the that tradition to reveal the truth and beauty that they saw at its core.

These live encounters with an imperfect heritage continue in Unitarian Universalism and in this congregation and in this service.

The small experiments we've done – and are doing - here arose because worship leaders asked the question – why do we do that? And then, is there another way that might work better? In our lives, and in all that we do here, those are good questions to ask, and keep asking.

So far, we've just been considering the specific elements of the service – where they come from. But our religious ancestors also gave us the overall feel of the service - the expectation of order, quiet, and intellectual stimulation (from the pulpit); and also a discomfort with emotional or embodied practices –like movement, vocal responses, lamentation, or ecstatic experiences.

There's some ongoing carving and shaping here, too. But still, order and an intellectual focus, with some emotional distance – that's kind of the default. In my ministerial searches, the question of whether I preach intellectual sermons came up many times. As far as I know, no one ever asked whether my worship services offer an embodied experience of the holy.

Why do we do that? Part of the answer is that – generation after generation - people expect it. Unitarian Universalist worship continues to attract people who have been harmed by other religious experiences, and who seek a sanctuary from potentially triggering spirituality. It also just appeals to those of us who are most comfortable in our heads. I appreciate knowing that my introverted and not super-coordinated self can sit still and I'll fit right in. You may find this style of worship to be familiar or comfortable, or safe.

But if we take this “why” question a little deeper, we find other reasons - rooted in class, privilege, and old theological divisions.

Our early Unitarian ancestors (in this country) were - by and large - wealthy, educated and politically powerful. Theologically, they were liberal Christians, who - influenced by the Enlightenment - believed that religious truth could be found through reason. Rationality was prized. Unitarians also tended to believe in the inherent goodness of humans, and the inevitability of human progress – two stances that are easier to maintain when one is politically powerful and financially well off.

So their worship services reflected rationality, human goodness and optimism, without overt emotional experiences. This fit with their upper class culture and their theology.

What it didn't fit so well was the lived experiences of people who were not well-off, powerful and white. Those folks often turned instead to churches where people praised and lamented together and from the heart, where worship was designed to connect emotionally as well as intellectually, and the theology was not so relentlessly optimistic. Their preachers offered - in the words of theologian Rebecca Parker - "an ecstatic transformation that rejected the cold, economically powerful, educated elite, and their mildly rational, spiritless clergy."³ And so, for the Unitarians, disorder or emotion in worship became linked to suspect theology, lower class people, and threats to the orderly hierarchy that sustained their privilege.

Avoiding emotional connection with the pain and beauty of the world, has a down side. Ralph Waldo Emerson saw it, and called for reinvigorated worship services of "passion and inspiration."⁴ Another transcendentalist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker went further. Toward the end of his life, he believed that the Unitarian religion lacked the emotion needed to survive. In his words:

[L]iberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling; ... their prayers felt cold ...⁵

Parker went on to call this Unitarianism's "dismal fault" - and he predicted the demise of the religion.

Prematurely, as it turned out. But Emerson and Parker were on to something, and in the wake of World War II, a belief in universal human goodness and theological optimism grew harder to maintain. And in this time of grief for the planet that should have been, anxiety about the future of this country, and the ongoing trauma and exhaustion of 400 years of white supremacy, all topped off by a daily deluge of calamities, it is increasingly apparent that we need practices - including worship - that offer deep emotional and spiritual connection to life in this world, as it really is. And not just in our heads - we humans have a need ... to experience hope and love and connection and courage - and sorrow - in deep embodied ways.

Today, many younger people (and some not so young) are looking to be moved by the spirit when they come here, at least as much as intellectually engaged. They can find an unemotional centuries-old worship format bland, shallow, uninspiring.

This is where asking why we do what we do can become challenging and unsettling, as it inspires more questions. Is there something we're doing today - perhaps rooted in classism and white supremacy - that is obscuring our gifts, that should be carved away? How do we make space for people with different worship needs - how do we continue to be a spiritual refuge for those who need it, while also offering greater emotional and spiritual depth? Do we even want to try?

Throughout the denomination, the carving and shaping continues. The practice of bringing multiple voices into worship is expanding. So is our use of music to offer some of that depth - you might notice some experiments here this year. Sermons are getting even shorter. We're finding room for people whose primary spiritual connection to worship is singing or moving, or

³ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 368.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address" (1838), <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/addresses/divinity-school-address/> (accessed December 16, 2019).

⁵ Theodore Parker, "Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister" (1859) in McKanan *Documentary History Volume I*, 372-3.

lighting a candle, or praying, or just being silent. We're learning to welcome the disorder of children. And the youth and young adults in this denomination continue to explore worship that is participatory, embodied, even spontaneous. The carving and shaping of the wood of our heritage will continue in ways I can't foresee.

But here's what I know: whatever our worship is becoming, it will never be exactly what any one person wants. Not only is that impossible in community, it is also not Unitarian Universalist. Our worship, at its best, will offer something for each person – each will be fed in some way. And each will be invited to participate whole-heartedly in parts of the service that feel less meaningful, because those parts are what someone else needs. It will all be imperfect. It will not be as orderly as our ancestors might like. It will never suit you or me completely.

And that is how it should be. May we rejoice and be glad, because in this community, we will know exactly why we do that.

May it be so.

Amen