

## **EVEN ATHEISTS NEED RITUALS – Richard J. Grzywinski, Lay Speaker**

**October 7, 2007**

Thank you all for allowing me to speak today.

The title of my presentation is “Even Atheists Need Rituals”. That’s because it is my intention to examine what it is about our religious services that, at least in general, make a participant, any participant, theist or non-theist, gain emotional satisfaction – or at least a feeling of well-being, through our UU ritual.

As Unitarian Universalists, we thrive on rational thought and the use of reason in our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” We characterize ourselves as free-thinkers, unconstrained by absolutism or dogma. Yet in our Sunday morning services, we incorporate many of the stylized customs, symbols, and repetitive acts reminiscent of dogmatic faiths.

Are these rituals important to our “faith”, or are they mere artifacts of our Judeo-Christian origins. How and why do they affect us so deeply? Can we improve our spiritual enrichment through a greater understanding of our ritualized practices and the mechanisms through which they engender positive feelings?

I think it is fair to say that we, in this of all congregations, would not be returning each week for fear of divine retribution, the fires of hell, some prescription from the UUA, or fear of excommunication. We are here because there is something in our practice which yields rewards and makes us feel better about ourselves.

As I proceeded with my research, I began looking within myself to try to understand the effect of rituals. So, in a sense, this is an as yet uncompleted journey. Let me say at the outset that this practice not only confirmed my commitment to secular humanism, but also offered me an improved understanding of religion in general.

And yes, I consider both atheism and secular humanism religions as they are belief systems that do in fact provide meaning to our perception of the universe.

So let me begin with this phrase

“Ad deum qui laetificat juventum meam.”

Translation: “to God, who gives joy to my youth.” These latin words were part of the beginning of my personal trip through Roman Catholicism. As an altar boy, at age 8, through elementary school and high school, I was able to recite most of my prayers, and most of the responses of

the ritual Catholic mass, in Latin, Polish, and English. Ave Maria, Zdrowasz Maria, Hail Mary. Or Pater Noster, Ojcze Nasz, Our Father. Most of the time, nearly all of the time, the words had little or no relevance, because I could understand little, and what English words I could understand I recited with almost no real understanding of their meaning. Phrases such as “hallowed be thy name”, “blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus,” Extreme Unction” were so obscure as to be meaningless.

With that blind obedience to nuns, priests, and parents, I began my introduction into the rituals of Catholicism. The Catholic mass, which I attended 6 out of seven days up to the age of 13, and weekly thereafter, was the predominant ritual, interspersed with various sacraments, and other special services (holy days, baptisms, confirmations, funerals, weddings, etc.)

In time, I was guided not so much by obedience than by irrational fear – of hell, purgatory, limbo, devils, and eternal damnation. Eventually, as I matured and reason prevailed, I happily unburdened myself of the fear- and guilt-laden dogma of Catholicism, and along with them the rituals, and entered a period of agnosticism, ignosticism, and now secular humanism. I find my new god within all of us.

But what else did I leave behind? Why do I still find a sense of reverence when I have occasion to enter into a house of worship of any faith? Not long ago, on having the occasion to spend some time in a Lutheran chapel, I found myself sitting in silence, alone, in front of an elaborate crucifix, surrounded by the symbols of Christianity, and enjoying a feeling of peace. I didn’t want to leave. Subsequently I attended a Lutheran service and, with only a little discomfort with some of the dogmatic elements, I found myself comfortably singing along with the choir, and even inspired by the sermon.

When I first came to this congregation only a few years ago, I was immediately attracted by the ritual services. I found both the old comforting spirituality that I then realized I had missed, along with the reason and rationality, the lack of which drove me away from Catholicism. I came to love this congregation and looked forward every Sunday to the ceremony, the singing, the intellectual stimulation, and the feeling of satisfaction I derive from our Sunday ritual. I began to recover an important part of myself that I left behind a few decades ago, that sense of spirituality – of being in the right place with the right people.

So, in true UU fashion, this phenomenon was something I needed to explore and understand and thus began my search for truth. When the opportunity arose to be a lay speaker, I jumped at the occasion with the hope that in trying to explain my feelings, I would come to understand them better.

But isn’t that the most wonderful thing about our UU faith?

What I concluded from my research and introspection is that rituals, when performed without fully understanding their purpose, or their metaphorical, mythical, or even dogmatic underpinnings, are irrational. Rather than liberate our minds, they imprison us. But if we engage in religious rituals with a positive and clear understanding of their purpose, without dogmatic conflict or ambiguity, they can provide us with an enriching and, dare I say it, spiritual experience.

I quote from Karen Armstrong, "A History of God", pg. 91 "religion was a matter of cult and ritual rather than ideas; it was based on emotion, not on ideology or consciously adopted theory. This is not an unfamiliar attitude today: many of the people who attend religious services in our own society are not interested in theology, want nothing too exotic and dislike the idea of change. They find that the established rule provide them with a link with tradition and gives them a sense of security. They do not expect brilliant ideas from the sermon and are disturbed by changes in the liturgy. The old rituals gave them a sense of identity, celebrated local traditions, and seemed an assurance that things would continue as they were."

"...human beings are spiritual animals....they started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human.. (and) religion always seems to have been an essential component of the human experience ...

"our current human secularism is an entirely new experiment, unprecedented in human history. ... humanism is a religion without god. Our ethical secular ideal has its own disciplines of mind and heart and gives people the means of finding faith in the ultimate meaning of human life that were once provided by the more conventional religions."

Ah, vindication!

But note her use of the words: religion, god, mind, heart. I'll come back to these.

It then seemed to me that what I found in Unitarian Universalism was a way to combine the comforting spirituality of old religions (including the use of rituals, customs, and symbols) with an intellectually satisfying rationality in which I could find the motivation to seek, explore and, finally, understand.

But, like any good UU, I needed more. Why was what I term the "spirituality" necessary? Why couldn't I just attend weekly meetings at something like the American Philosophical Society or devote an hour per week to some blog site engaging in debate on the human experience, the existence of god, or how many angels could you balance on the head of a pin.

I needed to understand and find spirituality, and I was convinced that I could not find it in a sterile environment which operates solely on reason. I needed something between the cold rationality of Mr. Spock and the emotions and intuitive feelings of Captain Kirk.

What I quickly learned is that feeling is a higher state of the brain, born out of emotion but linked to our primitive past. To understand feeling, I first needed to come understand emotions. I learned soon that they were more separate and different than I thought, but both important to our psychological well-being (fulfillment) as a human. And what I was embarking on, whether I wanted to or not, was that same mind/body question. Was emotion simply a homeopathic response, and was feeling more representative of who I am? Was feeling actually my mind or soul in action? Was this sense of completeness and satisfaction I was drawing out of my UU faith, felt most strongly during our Sunday rituals, something more than some cold robotic response.

In “Consciousness Explained”, by Daniel C. Dennett, one of the ten best books of the year in 1991 and still cited frequently in the literature, Dennett tries to derive a plausible scientific explanation for feeling, that is, the sense of being alive and self-aware. It’s a difficult 500-page treatise that must be read and re-read to comprehend, at least for me, but it convinced me, that in the context of our moral and ethical behavior, there is nothing but the brain, that this brain is not infused with a great gob of ghostly protoplasm that can be judged a soul or a mind. As fellow congregant and Lay Speaker Mike Cluff pointed out a month ago, there is “no ghost in the machine.”

I don’t think Dennett ever really explains consciousness despite the brazen title. The most remarkable insight I brought out of that document is the ability to imagine man as simply human, organic and whole. Not a half-mythical being but an amazingly complex organic thinking machine that exists for its own survival and that of its group. And in pursuing its survival, it has developed a brain that perceives positive experiences, stores them for future reference, learns, adapts, and has evolved (and is still evolving) by continuing to learn and adapt, and to pass this knowledge down to our descendants through genes, cultures, and traditions.

This secular humanism is unfortunately, counterintuitive. Indeed this godless, secular humanist position places one on a very slippery slope:

*Movie: “Terminator 2, Judgement Day”*

*Scene: the terminator is explaining to Sarah the events leading up to machine uprising, the computer system called Skynet.*

*Terminator: "the Skynet funding bill is passed. The system goes on-line August 4th, 1997. Human decisions are removed from strategic defense. Skynet begins to learn, at a geometric rate. It becomes self-aware at 2:14 a.m. Eastern time, August 29. In a panic, they try to pull the plug"*

Are we nothing more than Skynet computers? I've always viewed that scene as a metaphor for man's evolution from animal to human. That with our self—awareness we are bent on destroying everything that is around us, perhaps not so precipitously as the Skynet computer, and more out of ignorance than purpose.

I am also reminded of Kurt Vonnegut's robots in "Breakfast of Champions." Are we in control of our own behaviors or are abhorrent behaviors the result of chemical imbalances or "faulty wiring."

In a book called the "Happiness Hypotheses", Dr. Jonathan Haidt investigated why people feel something is wrong or right, moral or immoral, without going through a rigorous and rational evaluation. How do they react when having to rely on quick decisions and gut feel. He suggests something he calls "moral intuition" that is, based not upon instruction from a god, or even learned responses, but derived from the evolutionary process, evolving even before the development of language, passed forward in our genes, and available to us for split-second decision-making.

For example, "many people say it is morally acceptable to pull a switch that directs a train from a track where five people would be killed to another track where only one person will be killed. But if those same persons were asked that if they could save those five people by throwing one person on the track, they would say that the action is wrong. This may be evidence of an ancient subconscious morality that deters people from causing direct personal harm. An equally strong moral sanction has not yet evolved for harming someone indirectly."

He suggests five moral systems intrinsic in man. One dealing in self-protection, one with reciprocity and fairness, and the remaining three focused on group-strengthening – loyalty, respect for authority and hierarchy, and a sense of purity and sanctity. Morality and sacredness have been so intertwined through the evolutionary process.

He also claims that religion has played a strong role in grouping human beings, and has reinforced this group morality. Those united through a religion have more often survived, and those who have not were thrown out of the gene pool.

But what about that state between consciousness and self-awareness, and feelings, i.e., emotions.

According to Antonio Damasio in “Looking for Spinoza”, a feeling is a mental representation of the state of our body. Feelings are integrated with other biological processes in the body aimed at sustaining life. A feeling is a lasting memory of an emotion and prolongs the effects. This is not a conscious feeling as normally described. It is not like joy or sadness, but a deeper sensation that affects at a higher level than emotion. When we begin our service, there may be a sense of fulfillment, an expectation of goodness, something that tells us we’re doing the right thing or making a right choice.

According to Damasio “the spiritual is a special feeling state that can be traced to particular operations of several brain and body regions. We might say that the spiritual is the ultimate state of well-being – there is maximal ease, harmony, and balance of organism functions. Spiritual states are most conducive to survival.”

Emotions are the conscious component of feelings and are a reaction to a stimulus, and are the foundations for feelings.

Feeling is “the continuous musical line of our minds, the unstoppable humming of the most universal of melodies that dies down only when we go to sleep, a humming that turns into all-out singing when we are occupied by joy, or a mournful requiem when sorrow takes over.”

So where does all of this take us? Like any engineer, I have to put things in lists or in some sort of order, so here goes:

1. The brain created the mind. There is no evidence whatsoever for any force acting on our thinking process other than inherited or learned behaviors.
2. Emotions are necessary for our psychological well being and enhance our survival.
3. Feelings are the shadow of emotions and keep emotions in check through memory.
4. Feeling is important for our sense of what is positive and whether we are achieving our purpose.
5. Activities which positively affect our feelings are “good”, those which are not are “bad.”
6. Religion is a sort of group consciousness. It reinforces the value of community in the process of long term survival.
7. Religious rituals enable or enhance feeling by welcoming them into our subconscious.
8. Religious feeling is what we term “spirituality”

So there we have it, and agree or disagree, it seems we have come full circle in recognizing that religion, morality and human survival are intertwined, and that our consciousness, emotions and feelings are connected in one continuous line in our brain and have evolutionary origins. But what of rituals?

I’d like to propose a definition of my own making:

*Ritual is an art form, like music, dance, poetry, or painting. As such, it overcomes the inherent limitations of the human expression, being more able to objectively express complex feelings in a consistent and readily identifiable manner. Ritual is the distillation and the essence of what we feel and believe.*

So how can we improve the ritual and enhance the benefits to us? Another list:

1. So what's your hurry? Savor the silence, seek opportunities for reflection, thoughtful consideration and meditation to enhance the ritualistic experience.
2. Our ritual doesn't end or begin with a bell and candle. The informal part begins when we set our sights on participation, perhaps when we awake on Sunday morning, and it ends when we divert our attention to other matters. I, for one, see value in trying to maintain the spirituality as long as possible, through the service and beyond.
3. Don't fear words. Semantics - words are just tools. Even if you're not a carpenter, you can still call it a hammer. God, spirit, worship, sacred, blessed, holy, and soul, are just convenient expressive mechanisms and should not divert us from the spiritual experience despite our dogmatic differences.
4. Actively seek spirituality. Allow yourself to be freely overtaken and enveloped by what you feel is good and best in our ritual.
5. At the offering collection, give until it doesn't hurt anymore. Commit to success of your religious community.
6. Keep our meeting place holy and sacred. Make it a special place.
7. Sing like your hair is on fire. Know it is important to you and a means to enhance the positive value of feelings. For Jung (1921), feeling was the function of consciousness which tells one "how and to what extent a thing is important or unimportant for us", and Jung maintains that "music expresses, in some way, the movement of the feelings (or emotional values) that cling to the unconscious processes"
8. Adopt your own symbols and customs (clothes, seating, someone special, or something special) to expand your ritual and make it more pleasing to you.
9. And most importantly, commune with others sharing the service with you, envision and contemplate other congregations throughout the UU world, and maybe even consider all others who are likewise seeking answers through their own personal rituals or religions.

Wandering in a vast forest at night, I have only a faint light to guide me. A stranger appears and says to me: "my friend, you should blow out your candle in order to find your way more clearly." This stranger is a theologian.

-- Denis Diderot, French Philosopher