



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“We Gather Together – Hallelujah!”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God,
and this is the gate of heaven. Genesis 28*

Wonder is the basis of worship. Thomas Carlyle

*I don't think God wants to be worshiped. I think the only pure worship of God
is by loving one another, and I think all other forms of worship became a substitute
for the love that we should show one another. Charles M. Schulz*

The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate. Oprah Winfrey

Sermon [*This sermon followed a choral singing of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah'.*]

Thank you, choir, for that musical blessing.

Leonard Cohen's song achingly expresses the bafflement of life. Life includes times we feel broken and cry, as well as times we feel whole and shout for joy. But, in the face of such contrasts, in the face of the mystery that is life, Cohen sings, “Hallelujah.” It may be “a cold and broken hallelujah, a holy and broken hallelujah,” but it is still “Hallelujah.” Cohen wrote, and our choir sang:

And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.
Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

On many a Sunday morning, I greet you with a “Hallelujah.” Maybe not with that particular word, but with that sentiment. I may ask “How it is with your spirit?” or, “Are you glad

to be alive, to face a new day, no matter what the new day brings?” You mostly respond, “Yes!” because you are grateful to have awakened to a new day, possibly a day to start over, to get nearer to that person you are becoming. If all is well with your spirit, say ‘Hallelujah!’”

Hallelujah. It makes me smile just to say the word – hallelujah. A compound Hebrew word, *hallelu* is a plural imperative meaning ‘to praise’, and *jah* is a short form of Yahweh meaning “I am who I am,” the response Moses received when he asked God’s name. In English, the Hebrew *hallelujah* and the Greek *alleluia* translate into ‘praise the Lord’ or ‘praise God’.

In Cohen’s song, hallelujah affirms that despite all the struggles, all the brokenness, life is worth living. In Alan Light’s book about Cohen and this song, titled *The Holy or the Broken*, Cohen says,

This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled, but there are moments when we can transcend the dualistic system and reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that’s what I mean by ‘Hallelujah.’ The only moment that you can live here comfortably in these absolutely irreconcilable conflicts is in this moment when you embrace it all and you say, ‘Look, I don’t understand a [f---ing] thing at all – Hallelujah!’ That’s the only moment that we live here fully as human beings.

Life is a mystery none of us can fully understand. I can’t understand Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner’s death in New York, or Trayvon Martin’s death in Florida, or so many other places where unarmed black men die. I can’t understand the desire for power that drives political and religious extremists to commit mass murder. I can’t understand the desire for wealth that hurts the poor. So much about life remains a mystery, especially the often ugly, broken core of humankind. But yet, like Cohen, in the face of it all I must embrace it all and say, “Hallelujah.” The alternative is untenable.

When we say, “Hallelujah,” I believe we perform a simple act of worship because this word offers thanks and praise to something beyond the person speaking. Worship (of anything other than ourselves) acknowledges that something greater than ourselves exists to whom or to which we humble ourselves before.

I am humble before my high ideals, my values and my desire to serve the common good. I am humble knowing I am not in complete control of my life. I am humble knowing I am not perfect and make mistakes. I am humble knowing there is something beyond me that I strive to be in alignment with.

Don’t misunderstand me. I am not a theist, but I worship. You or I can be a theist, a pantheist, a humanist, or any other ‘ist’ and still worship. Atheists worship, too, just not a divine source.

The word ‘worship’ comes from two Old English words. The first part of the word means worth or honor, and the second means a quality one has. In merry old England, one might address a judge as “Your worship.” In jolly Athens, we say “Your honor.” When people worship, they show honor or worth to the object of their worship. We ascribe worth in the act of worshipping.

Nothing in this definition requires a deity. We can worship the almighty dollar, we can worship trees, we can worship ourselves, we can worship a god or gods, and we can worship whatever we hold in highest honor. In this Unitarian Universalist congregation, I aim to offer you the space to worship what your conscience and experience require of you, be it God, the human capacity for goodness, the stars that shine above, or something else. But also when we gather in one strong body on Sunday morning, I lift up for our worship that which we hold in common – our shared values as generally expressed in the UU Seven Principles.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said we have to be careful what we worship, for we become what we worship. If you worship love and compassion, then you become caring and compassionate. If you worship money, then you become consumed by its accumulation. If you think you worship nothing, ‘no thing,’ no value, no ideal outside yourself, then you must worship yourself as that which is of highest worth to you. If you worship only yourself, life becomes consumed by selfish satisfactions.

You may not agree, but I don’t believe it is possible to worship nothing. We all give allegiance to something, even if we don’t want to name it worship.

When we gather together on Sunday morning I say we gather to worship because we lift up and honor that which we collectively hold to be of ultimate worth. Our shared values are not idols we bow down to exactly, but they are ideals we hope to follow. In that sense we humble ourselves before them, knowing we don’t always live up to these high ideals.

I might be accused of twisting words to mean whatever I want them to mean. That’s proof of a living language. Words mean what we want them to mean, and when we don’t have a word for something, we create a new word or we borrow a word from another language, such as kayak, guru, or hallelujah.

Several years ago, then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Reverend Bill Sinkford challenged us to reclaim religious language. He refused to allow any particular group to hijack some religious words by narrowly interpreting their meaning. God doesn’t have to mean an omnipotent supernatural being. Sin doesn’t have to mean humans are born in a corrupted state. Hallelujah can mean more than just ‘praise God.’

This exultant expression conveys that worship is a celebration. Those who lead worship are celebrants. Together we celebrate life and all that life includes—the holy and the broken. And together we get through the good and the bad. Together we offer times to show gratitude, to give thanks for blessings. We offer times to give praise to all the sources of love and life, including one another. We offer times to share sorrows, pains, hopes, and needs for healing and wholeness. We offer times to joyfully welcome new life into the world and we offer times to celebrate a life when it ends. Whatever life brings, we are here to witness it, share it, and be glad of it. “Hallelujah!”

Calvin Coolidge once said, “It is only when ~~men~~ [people] begin to worship that they begin to grow.” I think Coolidge means that worship is what you do when you know you are not the center of the universe. Something else has become more important. And that allows for meaningful, maturational growth. And that enables further growth. In worship we connect to something beyond ourselves worthy of our allegiance and commitment.

I worship love. Not gooey passionate love, wonderful as that is, but altruistic love that makes me affirm your worth and dignity, your freedom to believe what you must, and your right to basic needs and happiness alongside my own. The same love that calls me to act with compassion and serve the common good. Call that God, call that human goodness, call that what you will. I call it love, or even the Spirit of Love and Life.

The UU minister Jacob Trapp describes worship better than I can. I invite you to open your gray hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition (SLT)*, to #441. Please respond to me by reading the words in italics. [*Reading omitted here.*] Thank you. Our readings and hymns speak so poetically and go straight to the heart.

We sang in our opening hymn, “Gathered here in one strong body.” Although I highly recommend it, we don’t have to be one strong body to worship. Like prayer, worship can be done all alone and in any place. As 19th century Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist Theodore Parker writes in another *SLT* reading: (#683)

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.

Although I’m particularly fond of wilderness temples formed by softly whispering trees or by night’s dark ceiling, I value gatherings here on Sunday morning because I believe we need to be together, in one strong body. We humans are social beings and we need one another. As George E. Odell writes in another *SLT* hymnal reading (#468): [*Reading omitted here.*]

When we worship together, we affirm we are here for one another. That get’s messy sometimes, for every community, even ones with holy aspirations, can become broken and in need of healing. Nothing in life is easy, but that doesn’t make life unworthy.

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share what makes you sing, “Hallelujah!” or some other expression of joy and thanks.
2. How does gathering together encourage your worship, a term meaning to ‘ascribe worth’ to some person or divinity, or to some ideal or thing?
3. What do you worship or hold to be most important? In what ways does this require you to behave or act in accord with it?