



North Shore Unitarian Church
... discover meaning together

370 Mathers Avenue,
West Vancouver, V7S 1H3 BC
Tel: 604.926.1621 www.nsuc.ca

A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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WORSHIP & SOCIAL ACTION

In these early months since you called me to be your minister, when I do something for the first time, or change anything, or make a decision, especially if it's questionable, I expect that you'll wonder what this indicates about my overall position, opinion or intentions. Each experience is like a piece of evidence, one clue as to how things might go or what I'm planning to do.

Earlier this fall, I made a decision not to include certain social justice information in a worship service. What I did then has come to haunt me a bit as it has become one of those clues about where I fundamentally stand on social justice. It's been interpreted as a sign of my or, even worse, of this community's social conservatism.

Decisions I make certainly reflect my values or my opinion, but often only about a specific angle on a larger picture. If you as a community decide to take a conscious and intentional approach to an issue, I will represent your decision and views. Meanwhile, much of what I do and say really represents my own thinking and doing, or my hope of what you'll come to think and to do.

That early decision has also led to the impression that I'm going to shy away from political issues in the church. That's partly true; some issues are more political than others, and every public act we make as a congregation is political in some way. As yet, you and I have not figured out how political we're going to be as a church or how we're going to be political, but I have opinions on how and when we can, should or must take a stand, and when it's best that we not.

One result of that decision is that it's become important I talk to you directly about what I think about the interaction between two major functions of every Unitarian Universalist church: worship on the one hand, and social responsibility on the other. Christmas is a good time for us to begin considering this relationship as it's the time of year when most of us turn our thoughts to the needs of the larger community.

The issue is that worship and social responsibility are crucial aspects of what we do as a church: crucial enough that sometimes they need to be distinguished from each other so that their purity can be treasured, and sometimes they need to be brought intentionally and carefully together so that their power can be vastly increased. Both

worship and social responsibility are part of our public face; they express our deepest values to people who know nothing else about us.

This is my basic stance about the interaction of worship and social responsibility: worship is our radical welcome; social responsibility is our radical declaration. To be radically welcoming in worship, I want us to be thoughtful and intentional about what radical declarations we make and how we make them.

Let's consider in more detail the nature of these two fundamental community activities. With respect to worship, we can refer back to the Opening Words that Vandy read for us. Kowalski covers so many bases in his short piece. He begins, "We gather here to worship," but what you don't hear is that there's a colon after that phrase. The rest of the reading outlines what we do in worship.

"[S]eek the truth." This search is intellectual and rational, yet it is also emotional and intuitive; it is both solitary and communal, so in worship we address all these aspects of search.

"[G]row in love." We grow through intellectual understanding, and through the development of warmth and empathy, so in worship we practice all these qualities.

"[J]oin in service." The act of attending worship serves our own community; by it we encourage each other and gather our strength. In worship we also are called to and informed about how to serve, both within the church and outside it.

"[C]elebrate life's beauty." We do this through song, music, aesthetics and joy.

"[F]ind healing for [life's] pain... [and C]reate a more compassionate world, beginning with ourselves." In communal worship, we begin to find the courage to handle the problems and losses that life brings us; we develop compassion for each other and then we are moved to enlarge it to all those around us, both nearby and far off.

"[F]ind courage for the journey's end." Beyond strengthening us to face pain, worship reminds us of our mortality and assures us we need not be alone.

"[H]onor our kinship." The kinship we feel together helps us recognize our own worth individually and collectively as human beings; we balance individuality with being part of a community, part of a species, part of the planet.

"[W]onder at the mystery that gave us birth." Worship confronts us with mystery, challenging us to look beyond the answers with which we are most comfortable and to experience awe, that special sense of wonder that makes us recognize our relative powerlessness in the face of all the mighty forces in the universe.

“[L]isten for the wisdom that guides us.” Worship gives us access to wisdom: the wisdom of great minds and great hearts; the deep wisdom hidden in the quietest recesses of our selves; the wisdom beyond human knowing.

Imagine us trying to do all that in every Sunday service! Any given time, some of these functions will rise higher than others; one or a few may be given short shrift temporarily, but on the whole, we endeavour to make it possible for all of this to happen. My approach is to emphasize somewhat more the aspects of worship that touch the heart and the spirit, nourishing, inspiring, healing and energizing these parts of ourselves that frequently in our daily lives we neglect, we Unitarian Universalists especially. Only slightly secondary to that is to be sure that the mind is also enlivened, stimulated and informed. I repeat: satisfying the mind is only slightly secondary.

To add one more thing about worship, the attempt to address as many of these needs in worship as possible every week requires both juggling and balancing, not only on the part of us who present worship, but also on your part as you manage your receptivity. We put care into how much you juggle at once and what might overturn the balance.

The social responsibility purposes of worship appear in several ways: seeking truth, growing in compassion and strength, being called to serve and honouring our broader kinship. The Candles of Joy and Concern, personal and global, remind us of our responsibilities. Today, at the start of the Christmas season, you’ve heard about two opportunities to address the pressing issue of the unequal distribution of resources and wealth: the Heifer Project and the collection of warm clothing for disadvantaged children. The latter has been a seasonal tradition of this church and the former was initiated by our Youth Group and affirmed by the Board. What I specifically want to address today, however, are the times social responsibility takes a higher profile in worship. Let me clarify my terms before I go further.

It’s helpful for us to think of social responsibility as taking three forms. The first is social justice, the phrase Unitarian Universalists most commonly use. I define social justice as *studying* issues, *learning* facts, *consulting* about policies, and *deciding* upon actions, in other words the intellectual, verbal and idea-driven part of social responsibility. At present, I see our church as in a hiatus about social justice by this definition. As a congregation, we are not much involved for now in studying issues and consulting about our collective responses. This is not to criticize those who have dedicated years of their lives to raising the congregation’s awareness and encouraging purposeful action. We needn’t feel guilty about it; few churches can do everything well all the time, and no minister, least of all me, can catalyze and inspire equally all areas of church life.

Distinct from social justice is social *action* by which I mean *any* act done to serve others. It’s what we actually do after we’ve decided what to do. Giving money is one aspect of

social action, an important act but also for many people the easiest; in 2008, our church will undertake to give more but to give consciously. Bringing necessary items to the church that we then deliver to others – clothes, food, mittens, toys – is also social action. There is more of this going on in our church than most of us know about, certainly more than most of us participate in. Still, this is also a temporarily neglected area, not by those who faithfully act on our behalf every week, but by most of the rest of us, partly from our lack of awareness about what we continue to do as a church.

It's also important that I acknowledge how many of you live out Unitarian Universalist principles by undertaking social action individually. Thanks to an introduction by one of our members, earlier this year I met the Executive Director of North Shore Community Services and she rattled off a number of worthy organizations and projects that were either initiated or are sustained by the work of members of our church. If all such work was being done in the name of Unitarian Universalism, our impact in the community would be widely known, but we often serve boldly as citizens, but too shyly as UUs.

Lastly, in distinction from social justice and social action, there is social activism, which directly challenges, to use a Biblical phrase, "principalities and powers." These are the persons and bodies in the world with the authority, clout and resources to make huge decisions affecting most people, other than themselves, of course, who are frequently shielded by money and power from the effects of their own decisions. Social activists openly work to change government policies through strong statements of conviction, such as gathering signatures, demonstrating publicly and on occasion rallying in protest, risking injury or prosecution. Our church has a history of social activism, the clearest example being our work to assist young American men resisting being drafted to Vietnam, but, unless I'm missing something important, at this time we are also not an activist congregation. So having defined these terms, what do I think about the interaction of worship and social responsibility at these three levels?

Worship is one of the most obvious times in which a congregation can undertake social justice work, in particular to be educated about an issue and challenged to fix a problem. In worship we announce times when we'll study and discuss matters further; we report how a decision-making process is going to take place or how it's coming along. Worship prepares us to attend a congregational meeting at which an important decision will be made. There is a limit to this, however, as we need Sunday services not to be overloaded with material or messages that distract us from meeting all the other purposes of worship. Our church has policies, possibly outdated ones that I will urge the Sunday Services Committee to review; these indicate how many and what kind of announcements are made and what's appropriate to do before, during or after worship or to include in the Order of Service. This is neither censoring nor exerting control; it's taking care to allow our worship as often as possible to fill as many of the functions that we all need it to meet. I feel strongly about taking care in our worship.

Likewise, worship is a wonderful opportunity for the church to invite members to social action. There are appeals for volunteers. Ideas are proposed about how to help with a problem or how to serve. During our Christmas pageant, our children will bring gifts here to worship to be distributed to disadvantaged children within our community. Again, we must do this with care and balance.

Despite how I might be sounding, I know that worship can be the best time for the congregation to be activist, not often perhaps but very powerfully when it's right. I remember the time at my church in Chicago when the minister and the Board had suddenly decided in the middle of a week that the coming Sunday service was the perfect time for the congregation to take a public stand on equal marriage. They made a banner, and hung it over the front door, ready to be displayed after Sunday worship; supportive politicians and the press were invited to come, and the whole congregation went out front as our minister made a statement and Board members pulled the cord to unfurl our banner: "Marriage Is a Civil Right." It made the local television news, so it was public witness and public relations all at once.

Now, in worship that morning, it was acknowledged, and this is important, that no congregational vote had been taken about this because the timing was so crucial. It was already clear, though, that this congregation with many bisexual, gay, lesbian and transexual members, located near the Chicago equivalent of Davie and Denman, would not balk at the opportunity. I include this information because to be able to take such action a congregation should have a process in place by which such a decision can be made, and usually this takes some time. Our church needs to decide what our process will be and who will drive it.

This morning, I have told you something of where I stand about how we will worship and how we can meet our social responsibilities. We cannot do everything all at once, but we can do something all the time. My strengths lie on the worship side, but I vow to assist and inspire those of you who are both skilled and keen to re-awaken this congregation's consciousness to make differences in our world.

May that come to pass.