

Worth Shaping

Summary: On Sunday mornings, Unitarian Universalist congregations come together to light a chalice, create music, hear sermons, and pray or meditate. Worship services are meant to help congregants explore what matters most in life. Outside of worship services, Unitarian Universalists participate in classes, often on topics such as sexuality and religious education, and spend time seeking individual and communal spiritual growth.

Unitarian Universalist worship services are aptly described by investigating the original meaning of the word “worship.” As many Unitarian Universalist leaders have observed, the term comes from the Old English *weorthscipe*, which means “worth-shape” or to shape that which is of worth. Many Unitarian Universalists understand the Sunday morning gatherings as a time when they orient themselves toward what matters most in life.

Beginning with the lighting of a chalice, worship also includes instrumental music, hymns, a children’s story, readings, a sermon, prayer or meditation, the sharing of joys and concerns, and a monetary offering before concluding with a chalice extinguishing. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) recommends that worship speak to life experiences, challenge people to deepen their relationships with others, and help them connect to something greater than themselves. For some, it is God. For others, it is community.

Sermons are intended to help those gathered make sense of life and encourage them to recognize what is truly important. In preaching, ministers and lay leaders draw on a wide range of sources, including the wisdom of the world’s religious and philosophical traditions, the words of wise men and women, research and discoveries, literature and poetry, in addition to personal experience and insight. They typically preach on what it means to lead a good life, and relate the Seven Principles to contemporary social issues.

Each person is encouraged in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, thus “worth-shaping” can be seen as an essential part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. This process of identifying and shaping what is of worth in life starts at an early age and is a process supported by the congregation at all phases of life.

One notable example is the leadership Unitarian Universalist congregations have shown in education about sexuality. A comprehensive and sex-positive program with age-appropriate material has been developed by the UUA and tailored for six age groups, ranging from kindergarten through adulthood. The resource, called “Our Whole Lives” (OWL), helps participants clarify their values and make informed, emotionally sensitive, and responsible decisions. OWL covers topics that schools are less likely to address and provides opportunities for students to critique media messages about gender and sexuality. The classes are open to the public and the materials, which contain no religious references or doctrine, are widely used in community settings such as classrooms and after-school programs.

Children in Unitarian Universalist congregations are introduced to the world’s religions through Religious Education classes that are intended to allow them to develop their own beliefs. In youth group, high school students find a supportive atmosphere where they may openly discuss topics that matter to them. “Being UU means being able to find our own truths,” explains one youth group advisor. Regional Youth and Young Adult Conferences (called “Cons” for short) provide people between the ages of 14 and 35 with meaningful opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development. Small Group Ministries give adults an opportunity to reflect on what is happening in their lives and what they value most.

As individuals go through the process of “worth-shaping,” collectively each congregation creates a vision all its own. Each week the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley proclaims, in unison: “The mission of our congregation is to create loving community, inspire spiritual growth, and encourage lives of integrity, joy, and service.” On the other side of the country, at First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the congregation “works for justice, fosters spiritual curiosity and faith formation, shares joy, heals brokenness, and celebrates the sacred in all.”