

Shalom as a Sticky Wicket*

In January, Joyce Kronholm and I co-taught two sessions on Introduction to Unitarian Universalism. During one of the sessions, we discussed several of the UU traditions and symbols we use in our worship service including the chalice, song 123 in our Hymnal, Spirit of Life, and a survey of our hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition” – which contains much more about our evolving, growing faith than just songs.

We also discussed some of our special services that are unique to UUs – the water service, flower communion, all souls day. Also how our faith recognizes and celebrates life transitions: child naming or dedication service, marriage ceremonies and ceremonies of union, the ritual of membership, and memorial services. But one tradition we did not discuss was the singing of Shalom Havayreem at the end of our worship. Some members have recently asked the Worship Committee which I serve on about our closing song, so I agreed to devote today’s message to Shalom.

So what is this word Shalom?

The concept of Shalom is a major Old Testament theme that continues in the New Testament in its identification with the theme of *eirene*, which is also translated “peace.” Both *eirene* and shalom have many layers of meaning that cannot be represented by a single word translation. A good short summary of the concept of shalom is found in the book *The Church for Others*.

This word (shalom) is used to indicate all aspects of human life in its full . . . maturity; righteousness, truth, fellowship, peace, etc. This single word summarizes all the gifts of the messianic age , . . . Shalom is not something that can be objectified and set apart. It is not the plus which the haves can distribute to have-nots, nor is it an internal condition (peace of mind) that some can enjoy in isolation. Shalom is a social happening, an event in interpersonal relations. It can therefore never be reduced to a simple formula; it has to be discovered - in actual situations.

The inner dynamic of shalom is outward in concern for the world. Once the truth of shalom touches us, we know that this truth can only find fulfillment as all people are included. The later Old Testament prophets knew that Israel’s mission was to be “a light to the gentiles.” The gift of Shalom could not be hoarded; it had to be shared. Part of the inner essence of shalom seems to be inclusiveness. We might reflect on this with the Israel Palestine conflict today.

So Shalom

Let’s all sing it together now our traditional closing...

Shalom Havayreem

To learn about our fellowships history with this closing song, I called our longest serving members, Ruth and Lowell Luke, who reported that our Fellowship has been ending service with the singing of Shalom Havayreem since Mary Sriver, the Montana UU circuit rider of the 1980's help to reestablish our fellowship in 1983. Shalom Havayreem is #400 in our Hymnal and an ending service that is common to many but by no means a majority of Unitarian Universalist Churches. The notes to an earlier version of our hymnal trace it back to the Post WWII era in Palestine.

Well Palestine, now that's interesting because Shalom is a Hebrew word. Hebrew is the most widely spoken language in Israel today. While Arabic is the official language in Palestine and most Muslim and Christian residents in Palestine are Arabic speaking. Arabic is also the language of the Qur'en and the universal language of Muslims, but most of the world's Muslims do not speak Arabic as their native language.

At the time, in the midst of anti-Semitic fervor in this country, I can only surmise that UU's were trying to be inclusive by including this traditional Hebrew closing. But here is the irony, nearly 30 years later, some are wondering if these same words, Hebrew words, are alienating? Is this because of the ongoing strife in the Middle East right now.

Tempe Diego, a member of our fellowship who has since moved away from Helena, brought the last verse, the English translation "farewell dear friends, stay well dear friends – have peace, have peace" to us here at BSUU from her previous UU congregation. So for the last 8-10 years, we close our service with both the Hebrew shalom havaryreem and the English – have peace

Why am I devoting a Sunday to discussing this? Because it seems to me that this issue is a paradigm for what we are as a church, an illustration of the complexity and diversity of our community.

Let's put this question in context. Unitarian Universalism represents the left wing of the Protestant Reformation. We continued to reform beyond the point where most Protestants were comfortable to stop. But even many mainline Protestants were opposed to the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. Many decided there should be no organs in their churches, no incense, no genuflection. There is a wide range in Unitarian Universalist Churches today when it comes to ritual. At the high church end, we have King's Chapel in Boston which uses a slightly "Unitarianized" version of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. There are some UU churches in which "The Lord's Prayer" is said regularly or occasionally, in which the Bible is read from regularly, in which communion is served periodically. There are also many congregations in which there is a "sermon sandwich": a discourse preceded and followed by a piano solo – there is no singing, no chalice, no robes on the clergy.

A bit more background is in order – first about our UU heritage:

You all know that we covenant to affirm and promote 7 principles, including:

#1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person

#6) the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all

But you may be less familiar with our UU sources, UU is a living tradition – as our hymnal affirms is titled “singing the living tradition” - the living tradition we share draws from many sources (these 6 are listed in our Hymnal) 2 to point out that most directly relate include

#3) Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life, and

#4) Jewish and Christian teaching which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves:

We UU's specifically call out Jewish and Christian since these are our religious roots. Both Unitarianism and Universalism started out as Christian faiths with liberal views about Christianity AND recognizing the unity of God (as in Uni-tarian - similar to Jewish beliefs) (versus the trinity of God as in the Christian tradition). And our faith has evolved into a rich pluralism that included many traditions (as our opening words of every BSUU service asserts)

I want to move on and speak a bit about the tradition and value of ritual. Much of this is from research by Reverend Dave Weissbard now a retired minister from the UU Church in Rockford Illinois who preached the topic “Shalom as a Sticky Wicket” late fall 2001.

Von Ogden Vogt, the minister at First Unitarian Church in Chicago two generations ago, is the major liturgical figure in UU history. Vogt, in his classic, “Art and Religion” suggested:

For assisting the reproduction of the desired religious experience, all religions have some form of Apparatus, some Ritual. No social, spiritual experience has been maintained without external and formal aids. Merely getting together is the first of these aids. Merely keeping silent is a ritual in itself, and by no means the least formal. . . . The sum total of the public religious acts of a religious society or of a community constitutes its Cultus..

I know that many people come to church out of habit and some out of duty; I believe that most come for the joy of it. Whether the cultus consists of fervid, free, and easy recitals of conversion experiences; or of a simple, dignified service of hymns, readings and prayers, together with a strong and enthusing sermon; it is the emotional lift that the people come for.

Vogt goes on to say :

Modern religion has a deficient cultus. . .

It is commonly admitted that in the average Protestant worship, the chief dependence for whatever heightened experience is enjoyed, is upon the sermon. The sermon is becoming more and more inadequate to the task. . . Why depend upon the art of rhetoric alone, when other arts also afford rich resources of inspiration? . . . It would not necessarily minimize the sermon if there could be also a highly successful and moving religious exercise. We have too commonly regarded the other exercises as preparation for the sermon. It is possible to make them complete and wonderful in themselves.

In a fascinating article on ritual from the physiological perspective, Cliff Guthrie suggests:

. . . ritual accomplishes two important biological feats. First, it coordinates the neural systems and functions of ritual participants to allow for group action. Ritual behavior for most species seems to be a way of overcoming social distance between individuals so that they can coordinate their activity that would help the species survive. . .

The second biological achievement of ritual is that it causes cognitive development or socialization within the individual organism.

An anonymous article suggests that:

ritual is a virtual necessity to all humans, in fact to nearly all animals. This is so true that all human brains come "hard-wired" to respond to ritual. . . . Ritual is as natural to us as love, or aggression, or cooperation.

The author goes on to suggest that the functions of ritual are to:

- give us a framework to organize events
- help us in our relationships to others
- provide a powerful teaching tool
- give us a sense of identity
- help us to prepare, to get in the mood for what is to follow.

In her classic book on worship from the '30's, Evelyn Underhill wrote:

A religious ritual is an agreed pattern of ceremonial movements, sounds, and verbal formulas, creating a framework within which corporate religious action can take place. If human worship is to be other than a series of solitary undertakings, some such device is plainly essential to it. We cannot do things together without some general agreement as to what is going to be done; and some willing subordination to accepted routine.

Did you catch that last sentence? ***We cannot do things together without some general agreement as to what is going to be done; and some willing subordination to accepted routine.***

Aye, there's the rub! For Unitarian Universalists, it is very difficult to arrive at "general agreement as to what is going to be done" and particularly at "willing subordination to accepted routine." That goes against the grain!

In an authoritarian structure, arriving at general agreement is easy - or at least easier. The Pope announces that the Latin mass is out and the vernacular is in. Some Catholics aren't happy, but the next day, the mass all over the world is in the national language. In those churches in which tradition is strong, "the way we've always done it" rules. For Unitarian Universalists, anything that we've done more than twice is suspect. Tradition is almost a dys-value. So, when someone says, "I don't like that" about some part of what we do, our immediate impulse is to demonstrate our flexibility by saying, "If it offends you, we'll change it."

There is, however a problem. If we were to stop doing everything that offends anyone, we would practically have no service. None. Look at our Order of Service. We have a number of members who want no announcements. Some believe it is too high church to light a chalice – or that it is idol worship to sing about the light. There are some who oppose our having the children here for a story every week. There are some who do not like the singing of hymns. Some have expressed dislike of responsive readings. Taking an offering is offensive to some.

And then we come to the sermon or message as we now call it. As a lay led fellowship, we have no minister to arbitrate or make final decisions about the content of our services. Our members, friends, and invited guests plan and conduct worship service on Sundays. We cannot promise that everyone will equally appreciate or agree with every Sunday service - we are too diverse for that and so is the fare we offer. But we can promise you will not be bored and we strive to challenge each other to think and feel in both old and new ways – and in the process grow in love and respect.

When you come right down to it, a choral concert and a coffee hour are about all on which we might achieve unanimity – and the truth is that I've heard occasionally from potential UU heretics who do not care for singing and there are others who run from a coffee hour.

If our goal is to avoid offense, we need to fold our tent. Our mission is doomed.

Conflict, differing expectations, incongruous perspectives - these are part of every community. But some churches use authority or tradition to repress the conflict. We can accept conflict and value the diversity in perspective and faith.

I've already spoken to the meaning of Shalom in the reading. The fairly literal translation is "Peace, Friends, the whole world around." It is not a victory song. It is not anti-anyone. Is Shalom so sacrosanct that it could not be changed or eliminated? No. But, on the other hand, having been sung for 25+ years in our Fellowship, it has become a part of the *cultus* of this church. We could indeed join hands and sing some other song – but not without a significant reason. The solution of singing a variety of songs is not really a solution. Whatever we sing needs to be constant. We need to know it. We need to be able to sing without books.

There are other songs that could be sung. I cannot imagine any of the ones I've seen attracting strong approval ratings and we certainly have far less than a groundswell of opposition to Shalom.

That said, in keeping with the UU tradition, I have spent a couple of weeks researching options. I was motivated by the similarity of the Arabic word *Salaam*, and even found a You Tube video of the San Mateo UU Church choir in California singing *Salaam Alaikum*, while the children of the church did hand gestures to the words. I have a proposal to offer that might make the whole experience more meaningful for us all – or not.

Here it is.

Song: 'Shalom Havayreem - Salaam Alaikum'
(Jewish & Arabic & English - Trad melody)

*Shalom Havayreem, Shalom Havayreem, Shalom, Shalom,
Shalom Havayreem, Shalom Havayreem, Shalom, Shalom,
Salaam Alaikum, Salaam Alaikum, Salaam, Salaam,
Salaam Alaikum, Salaam Alaikum, Salaam, Salaam,
Fair well dear friends stay well dear friends.
Have peace have peace, have peace.
We'll see you again we'll see you again have peace have peace.
Go in Peace.*

It's printed on the back of our order of worship. I would suggest we try singing it for our closing just this one Sunday.

Friends, we live always with some tension. There is the comfort of the familiar, the value of repeated rituals like the singing of Shalom. At the same time, there is the knowledge that we have not yet achieved perfection and that change is the only constant. *Agreeing and disagreeing in love, making every effort to*

maintain the integrity of the fellowship community in the bond of peace, we acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our life ----- and in our church.

That is the reality with which we gather in community. I've given us the history of the word Shalom and its use in our fellowship and the value of ritual, but when it comes right down to it – it's not words so much as actions and how we live that matters.

Shalom. Salaam. Peace.

* Presented for 2/21/09 Big Sky UU Fellowship worship service by Lynda Saul with gratitude to Rev. Weissbard. The sermon title and research on ritual was adopted and other ideas in this message were adapted from a sermon by Reverend Dave Weissbard now a retired minister from the UU Church in Rockford Illinois who preached "Shalom as a Sticky Wicket" on December 9, 2001.