

Order of Service "A Shy Person's Guide to Church Going"

Sunday, August 30, 2009

10:00 AM

Prelude: A Musical Moment Wherein the Shy Might Compose Themselves
Welcome and Announcements Board Host
Chalice Lighting and Opening Words
Opening Song: # 38 "Morning Has Broken"

Candles of Joy and Sorrow/Offering

Reading: "Cat Got Your Tongue?"
What's the matter son? Cat got your tongue?

(Lessons on being nice and normal)

To be civil and educated means
be articulate.

Articulate your heart with words.
Stand up there like a Man.
Don't suck your thumb.

Inarticulate is backward
as well as rude.

Join in the conversation.
If you don't say anything, you're stuck up.
Articulate your soul with words.

Say things that make people
admire you.

Admirable people have the Gift of Gab.
Without the Gift of Gab, you'll never have a girlfriend,
You'll never get a decent job.

Get out there in society.
Meet some people.

Go to socials, go to church.
Don't be timid. Get involved.
Get out on the floor and dance.

Introverts are self-indulgent.
Do not be shy.

Articulate your worth with words.
Success is the ability to converse with anyone.
Give 'em a good, firm handshake.

To get a good haircut, be as loquacious
as the barber.

Make yourself a gregarious star.
Don't be like this! Become someone else.
Be everyone you've ever admired.

Failing all that:
Articulate your self with deeds
Be someone YOU like.

You don't need the words:
You have the music.

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Music: "Menuet from Le Tombeau de Couperin" by Ravel
Sermon: "A Shy Person's Guide to Church-going"
Musical Interlude: A Musical Moment Wherein the Shy Might Muster their Courage to Speak
Spoken Response

Closing Song: #289 "Wake Now My Senses" (verses 1 & 2)
Closing Words
Closing Song: #289 "Wake Now My Senses" (verses 3 & 4)

Sermon

“A Shy Person’s Guide to Church-going” By Don Alan Hall

Here’s a question we each confront every Sunday we come together:
“Why did I come to church today rather than do something else?”

Each of us has her or his own particular reply, but the answer is seldom obvious to those of us associated with the labels “shy” or “introvert.” Just for today, I’ve appointed myself spokesman for introverts, wallflowers, and shy people of our congregation. If you ask us why we came, we might admit that we feel varying degrees of discomfort participating in these meetings. It might never be easy for us to tell you -- meaningfully -- why we are here. The conventional chit-chat of polite society does not come easy to us. We may read to -- or sing to -- a room full of people easier than we can start a conversation with one or two others.

We ALL have many other things we could be doing today. Missing a Sunday service is seldom a matter of laziness. And whether we attend or not (though fundamentalists must be horrified at this) our decision on how to spend a Sunday morning is never based on the threat of eternal damnation or the promise of everlasting life. We come together here because we want to. We may choose to be away with loved ones, out in the wilderness, by the sea, or in the city. Or we may be beckoned here by the announced topic, or speaker – or we may want to spend our morning in the company of people we know and respect. *Why did I come here this morning?*

The late Dale Willey – poet, gentleman, and long-time member of this congregation that many of you (I’m sorry to think) never got to know – expressed my feelings years ago when he said (*and he’ll pardon my paraphrase*) “This Fellowship is a place where I can be myself and feel accepted as I am.”

Yes!

Here, amid a crowd or as part of a small group, I never have to don a false smile, utter phrases that taste phony, or take part in activities that cause me discomfort. We are -- or should be -- as honest as we are considerate. Whoever we are, developing our own role and niche here in the Fellowship can be a comfort, although it can be challenging, too.

Whatever my personal role, I suspect that most of you recognize me as that old guy who sings in the choir. (Yes, choral music has been an important part of my life in recent years, and yes, choir probably has gotten me here to more services than anything else would have.) But choir is a rather recent interest for me. During most of the years I’ve been a member here, you probably would find me sitting back there. Or maybe over there. I seldom said anything, and often I made little effort to sing the hymns. In my worst times, I felt an outsider because I had little money to pledge and little time to volunteer.

Being able to give your time and your money definitely makes you feel more like you belong here. If you’re both shy and broke, joining a work party may be the best way you can get involved. This Fellowship puts a lot of effort into finding a role for each of us, but as some people can attest, our welcoming congregation can seem overwhelming or even a closed society to shy people. I’ve known of committees actively discouraging would-be members. UUs tend to be highly motivated (if we were dogs many of us would be border collies) and that can translate into the reluctance to share duties or responsibilities. I’ve attended work parties when it has seemed that everyone was competing and trying to out-perform everyone else. (Remember that just 63 years ago this was grassy, tree-dotted pasture – no Circle Boulevard, no Firwood, no Norwood.)

You will find no shortage of high-achievers among us – and people who know precisely how to perform each task and who stand ready to do it for you if you don’t know the rules. (I once quit helping make coffee because there was a rule to dump the coffee grounds to mulch a particular bush out front. I was not confident I knew which bush.)

There are innocent questions that can make shy people uncomfortable. I recall squirming when cornered by someone who said: “We haven’t seen you at the Fellowship lately...” – or – “We’ve missed you. Whatcha been up to lately?” -- or even “Is everything all right?”

Though probably asked as a conversation-opener (-- as in have you been skiing, traveling, working on your house or whatever), such questions -- when posed by one we regard as an authority figure or honored elder-- can be embarrassing and evoke defensive answer. Such questions may raise disagreeable memories of judgmental Christian fundamentalism with the questioner wishing (at best) to save you from damnation or (at worst) to condemn you to his own hell. And we U-Us aren’t immune from letting church attendance make us feel slightly smug or possibly even holier-than-thou. We must remember that it is who we are and what we do that matters – not where we do it or who sees us do it. If

one of us offends you, don't give up – there's definitely a place here for everyone who agrees with the Seven Principles of the Unitarian-Universalist faith.

We are likely to feel out of place at Sunday services if we don't sense that we have a place in this Fellowship. Examples set by some of our most saintly, highly articulate members can intimidate us. Truth is, the fact that you're here, occupying a seat, is by itself making us happy. You've chosen to join us.

Having some duty – being a greeter, a coffee maker, a house manager, a choir member, or sharing joys and concerns at candle time – may make you feel more a part of things, but you needn't do anything here but BE.

Many UUs are extraverts and joiners, but a lot of us are not. I chose a career that allowed – required – me to remain aloof from social and political organizations. Good journalists should be open-minded and neutral and therefore should be observers rather than participants -- I always tried to be a fair, honest and compassionate newsman and I joined virtually nothing. However, from childhood I was led to believe that I couldn't be a proper person unless I was an out-going and articulate joiner.

Shy people take note: it is my observation that UU churches now are more “social” – spiritual and ritualistic – than they were when I was a young father attending a moderate-size Midwestern church. Decades ago UU services tended to follow a format of a lecture with some music – “lecture and concert” if you were lucky. Being shy was easier in those days before candles, chalices, and Earth-centered circles. And back then, discussions tended to be confined more to meetings of “discussion groups,” for Unitarian-Universalists are known for liking to talk – and talk – about issues.

Many people who attend our services are highly articulate – they don't just talk, they often astonish me by perfectly enunciating appropriate ideas – completely extemporaneously. We're not all able to do that, and that is good, but it is easy to feel out of place if you can't find the words to join a discussion.

That's OK. Some of us prefer to listen. It's perfectly acceptable to remain silent. As a writer, I can be painfully inarticulate in conversation. (It can take me hours or days to think of the word I want.)

We come together for services that vary widely – together in mutual respect as community, believing that there is power and reward in pluralism, and in sharing concerns and working toward goals. Our togetherness here can be holy.

Possibly my most spiritual moments in our services have been sitting with you listening to beautiful music being performed well. My ideal worship service might consist of nothing but instrumental and wordless vocal music punctuated by a few carefully chosen words.

Yes, U-Us are highly individualistic people. We can be dichotomized (that's graduate-school talk for dividing into two parts) a number of ways. We are:

- Rich / poor
 - formally - highly educated / mostly self-educated
 - articulate / inarticulate
 - athletes / spectators
 - meat-eaters / vegans
 - straight / gay
 - old / young
- and, yes extraverts and introverts.

It's easy to think that because we share principal beliefs we are all alike, but some of us live in poverty while others are financially well-off. We may be well-educated on average, but having a master's degree does not assure one a job. Nor does a PhD. Academic degrees and lucrative jobs don't necessarily grant one wisdom. Some of us are process people who thrive on organizing, and meetings, and others among us dislike process and hate meetings. Some of us need to get together and discuss concerns, but others want to contemplate our concerns in solitude.

What one of us hears and values in a Sunday service will be overlooked and ignored by another. And yes, we may feel uncomfortable or nervous here at times. Does that mean we should have done something else with our Sunday morning?

The real question might be how important the Sunday service is to you relative to all the other things our Fellowship offers. Relative importance usually changes with time for each of us. There have been times when our worship services were all I cared about. There were other times when I involved myself only with other activities.

I wouldn't dare attempt to list all the action groups and committees that comprise this Fellowship, but I know they are like a foundation – the solid structure that makes the UUFC an important force in our community.

If there's one thing I've learned from 30 years of membership in this Fellowship it is that we can never become closely acquainted with each other by attending Sunday services. Back thirty five or forty years ago when there were relatively few members here, every one could be quite well acquainted. One of the first times I came to church here – when we met in what is now the Social Hall – a long-time member asserted herself during a Sunday service by announcing: "There are a lot of people here that I don't know!"

I thought she wanted me to leave, but soon it became evident that she was concerned that her Fellowship was growing too large for congregants to be well acquainted with each other. And she was correct. We combat size with small groups: chalice groups, covenant groups, action groups, book or film groups, the newsletter-folding group and the many others.

After nearly 20 years membership in this Fellowship, I became involved in a small creativity group that met around THAT table. It engendered a wonderful intimacy among even the most introverted of the 8 or 9 members. Those people became my closest friends.

Sitting here in this space, I'm frequently reminded of an old thought (and to me it is a poetic thought) about gatherings of people -- how the number of individuals changes the nature of the gathering. Consider the extremes: just two people, together in quiet conversation, their lives are interconnected. They share an intimacy and a responsibility. Then consider the polar opposite: a vast throng – hundreds of thousands, a sea of humanity, individuals of every age. Whatever brought them -- knit them -- together is a powerful force. It takes a great orator, a superstar, or a life-and-death cause. In such a gathering, any or all of humanity's processes are possible or likely. People are falling in love, coughing, comforting children, having heart attacks, suffering cramps, laughing, dying, giving birth, arriving and leaving.

Church – "*whatever it is you do there on Sunday mornings*" (as my old friend, actress and journalist Pat Kight, said) – is always somewhere in between those extremes. When you get up to light a candle before a group of 8 or 10, you can be confident of having everyone's sympathy and attention. If you're before a fellowship of 50, probably not. If it's a fellowship of 300, you can be sure that some people, for their own good reasons, will be ignoring you, or perhaps thinking that you're too self-indulgent.

I'm usually most comfortable here keeping my mouth shut unless called upon to sing or speak. Honoring the inherent dignity, worth and individuality of others, and meaning to practice justice, equity and compassion in my relations with others, I prefer the shy person's (or the Buddhist's) Golden Rule: "*Do nothing to others that you would not have them do to you.*"

You may not hold with this negative Golden Rule. You might think it too passive -- maybe even an excuse to avoid doing what is right -- but I think it has served me well. I believe that following the traditional Golden Rule can lead to actions that make other people uncomfortable or downright unhappy. How do I know if you want what I want or like what I like?

When called on to greet my neighbor at the end of a service, I feel a bit ill at ease. Maybe you don't WANT me to greet you. I don't want you to greet me merely because I look like I need greeting. Can we avoid the small talk? I'd like you to greet me because you'd like to exchange thoughts on the topic of the sermon or some other part of the service. I'm apt to greet you by telling you something that just occurred to me.

During these Sunday services, we often receive positive challenges, encouragement, and ideas – ideas that lead us to personal actions small or large that are by any definition "good." Such rewards are what bring me here.

Spiritual practice, however you define the effort to be at peace with yourself and cope with terrible events, may take you to the mountains or the coast on Sunday mornings. Sometimes, though, we need each other. Our UU spirituality is related to science, technology, and social conditions. We must not be Polly-annas or Professor Panglosses of denial when we face the reality of climate change and the terrible storms of change it promises. Or the growing social stresses brought on by the ever-increasing human population that the late Charles Ross warned us about. A forester and long-time member of this Fellowship that we honor for conceiving and engendering the Greenbelt Land Trust, Charlie rightly predicted that our worst environmental problems were yet to come.

Nature isn't innocuous. As enlightened individuals we respect science, and science assures us of the certainty that our region is due for an as-big-as-they-get earthquake, that our region's beloved volcanoes will wreak unpredictable destruction, and that another asteroid or comet is likely to bring holocaust as terrible as any nuclear war. Some-times we NEED each other.

Though shy people may seem unfriendly or aloof, we need you and this Fellowship we share. Sitting here among you all, I commonly feel a wonderful connection with everyone. For me that is holy. And though I frequently avoid our social affairs, kind people inevitably tell me they miss me at these events.

Here we are. Together – for as many reasons as we have chairs.

One may be an introvert and not be solitary or unfriendly. Our fellowship here is a safe haven for each of us and our best hopes and plans.

In this place good works you couldn't manage alone are regularly accomplished.

As the Rev. Art Wilnot said in his farewell sermon [May, 1996] from this pulpit: "BECAUSE OF YOU, I SHALL NEVER BE THE SAME."

Here, you grant a shy person a kind audience.

Thank You.

Acknowledgments

Celebrants:	Don Alan Hall and Nancy Weber
Oboist:	Michael Molk
Lay Leader:	Nancy Weber
House Manager:	Mina Carson
Board Host:	Jim Good