

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield  
Reverend Maddie Sifantus  
January 24, 2010  
“Working on the Holy”

**READING**

Our reading is from the introduction to the book from which much of my thinking about our service today has evolved. It is called *Working on God* by Winifred Gallagher. She says:

This is a book for people who aren't sure about religion. These “neoagnostics” are well-educated skeptics who have inexplicable metaphysical feelings. They regard religion as belief in the unbelievable. Yet they sense something important that eludes their most trusted tools of intellect and learning. Defined by ambivalence and longing, their credos are various: “There may be something,” perhaps, or “I'm spiritual, not religious.” Neoagnostics are America's most subdued, neglected religious group, yet they are one of its most powerful. They are everywhere, especially at the top.

Religion starts with a question about meaning. *What's true? What matters? Why is there something instead of nothing? Is this all there is? Who am I? What should I do?* Sometimes the question presents itself as rainy-Sunday-afternoon existential blues. A fear of death. A shadow or hole in a fortunate life. Unlike believers, neoagnostics don't have a ready answer to the question. Unlike atheists, however, they can't help hearing in it the possibility of something else.<sup>1</sup>

**SERMON**

So here we are again on a Sunday morning. Here we are on a morning where we might have wanted to stay in bed, cradling a cup of tea and with the Sunday papers spread out all over the covers. Or perhaps puttering around the house or chipping away the ice on the edges of your driveway. Or heading out to a jazz brunch or the January white sales.

Why are we here? Is it that we are asking the questions that Winifred Gallagher begins her introduction with? *What's true? What matters? Why is there something instead of nothing? Is this all there is? Who am I? What should I do?* Did we come here to try to answer them this morning? Don't hold your breath...I probably won't get to *all* of them! Or are we here because it is true that it is good to be together? Do we really have answers here or is it just a really good place to ask the big questions? How *are* we doing at working on the holy?

I am going to pause for a minute to ask you a few questions. Just to give us all a sense of who is here this morning, I am curious to know how many of you grew up as Unitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Gallagher, Winifred (1999). *Working on God*. NY: Modern Library, xiii-xiv.

Universalists?...Roman Catholics?... Protestants?... Which stripe of Protestant? I'll bet each of you has had a story of how you came to attend this congregation. Perhaps some of you grew up right here!

Last March on one of the first Sundays I was with you, I asked you the question, "why church?" Why do you go? Why do we have it and why do we come, some of us, week after week? You may remember I passed out small pieces of paper and you wrote your answers on little slips of paper, and I drew them out of a basket and used their words as part of my words that morning. Your answers that morning were varied, I suspect yours would be this morning. Here are a few of your answers:

#### WHY CHURCH

(For) spiritual nourishment; intellectual stimulation; to see everyone and catch up with them; enrichment; "time out" to slow down and get in touch with what's important.

#### WHY CHURCH

I'm feeling the need for spiritual sustenance.

#### WHY CHURCH

This church plays a critical part in and provides the right context for connecting the material and the spiritual; helping us interface with the community...

#### WHY CHURCH

Liberal religious testimony. Not required to conform to answer in the back of the book (could concentrate on message of Jesus rather the special claim of who he was.)

#### WHY CHURCH

To sing and experience sacred space and time.

"Experience sacred space and time." I think that about gets some of it.

Some years ago—on a Labor Day weekend—I drove my only child, my son Nigel, off to adulthood. He was beginning Skidmore College—heading off on an adventure that neither of us knew where it would lead, just as so many other parents are preparing for at this time this year when college acceptances and rejections are being pondered. One thing I did know then was that this would be a momentous change in my life, Nigel living so far away, with people I didn't know, making many choices I would not be involved in. As a single parent for many years, I used to joke that Nigel and I were "joined at the hip". Since we were both musicians and had similar interests, we were particularly close. I knew that we needed to let go of each other for

him to grow and become an independent adult...and I knew that it was going to be a poignant time and not a little sad for me. So I planned a treat for myself. I had always heard of the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY, about an hour south of Skidmore, and thought I would do a weekend retreat there. So I looked at their glossy brochure to see what would be available the weekend I would nearby. So it was that I signed up for “Zen and the Art of Business” and became familiar with Omega and its programs. The main thing I remember coming away from the weekend with—other than the beautiful location and enjoying fabulous vegetarian food, was a question to myself, one I have wondered about on a number of other occasions. My question was “who are all these people—these seekers—and why have they come here to find answers rather than their church, fellowship or faith community?” Why are these folks traveling many miles and paying big bucks to attend workshops such as:

The Healing Power of Unconditional Presence: Psychological Work in a Spiritual Context (John Welwood) OR

Touching Life Within: Training in Somato-Psychopedagogy (Danis Bois) OR

Intuitive Astrology: Following Your Best Instincts (Elizabeth Rose Campbell) OR

Sanskrit Training Level I (Manorama) OR

Rio Samba School with someone named Carioca—which the catalog describes this way: “Samba in Brazil is a party sound, a spirit-opening music that calls us to become one with the beat. Each percussive voice contributes its own unique sound and rhythm and the combination creates a trance groove that becomes a celebration, invoking a powerful collective ecstasy.” In this workshop, you and I could “awaken... our soul’s song”, one of the learning goals for the workshop. The description tells us that “no previous experience in music is necessary; beginners as well as veteran musicians are invited.”<sup>2</sup> Phew! That’s lucky for me! Even though I am a professional singer with a drummer for a son, and I can beat a mean tambourine upon occasion, poly-rhythms are beyond my music-making capabilities. Perhaps I would be better suited to “Ecstatic Chant: The Yoga of Voice”. I could “join some of the Western world’s leading devotional singers in this rare gathering of ecstatic chant...(which, they say) awakens a longing in the heart for the experience of inner silence, meditation, boundless love, and union with the divine.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Omega Institute Catalog 2004, 86.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 88.

All these and more are available, if we made a pilgrimage to Rhinebeck NY instead being here in Wakefield. Now I don't mean to make fun of or minimize in any way the appeal or value of a place like Omega Institute—or our very own Rowe Camp and Conference Center which presents similar. But it occurred to me on Labor Day weekend 1994, that these workshops are addressing the religious, what used to be primarily considered within the walls of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish faith communities in this country, not to mention in our UU congregations. With the new pluralism, the religious marketplace in America has indeed expanded exponentially in the last several decades. People seem to shop for churches and faith communities in the same way they are consumers of goods and services in the rest of their increasingly materialistic lives. But I agree with Winifred Gallagher that some else is going on as well. Folks *are* having “inexplicable metaphysical feelings”, as she said in our reading. Remember her questions? *What's true? What matters? Why is there something instead of nothing? Is this all there is? Who am I? What should I do?* Folks want to address the gnawing emptiness many feel at their centers. Having the latest model SUV, a luxury vacation home, the fastest computer, or cell phone with all the whistles and bells isn't enough. But they don't want to park their reason and intelligence at the door either. What to do?

Of course, for many of us the answer is Unitarian Universalism. But I will leave that for a bit. Some statistics interest me first. In an issue of *The Christian Century*, a liberal religious magazine that many ministers read, there is a brief editorial by John M. Buchanan titled “Applauding Diversity”. It reads in part:

“Protestants are about to become a minority in the U.S. after almost four centuries of numerical superiority and cultural dominance. A new study...reports that by the end of the year Protestants will probably make up less than 50 percent of the population.

The proportion of Roman Catholics in the population has remained stable at 25 percent. And the overwhelming majority of Americans continue to identify themselves as Christian.”

Buchanan asks: “So what is happening? The data suggest that the population cohort that is significantly growing is those who declare no religious affiliation. That suggests that people are dropping out of churches, or that young adults are taking their traditional leave of absence from organized religion and not returning as they used to.”

He goes on to say: “Another interesting thing has been happening as well, namely a dramatic increase in the nation’s religious diversity. And that (Buchanan maintains) is a good thing....The world has had quite enough of one-religion nationalism ...”

Where are those former parishioners going? As it said in our reading, Gallagher describes a category of modern seeker which she names “neo-agnostic”. A review I read of the book describes how she tells how “a vast slice of (our country) is no longer interested in or willing to be bound by institutions, creeds, or family tradition. They want experiences that touch them to the core... (Gallagher says that) ‘In religion as in politics, scholarship and the arts, sophisticated citizens of a global society, they no longer look to a single source for all the good ideas, much less Truth.’”<sup>4</sup>

The title of that review in the Boston Globe was “Browsing in the new religious marketplace” which fired my imagination. Is that how many of us do religion now? Do we surf the internet for religion? Many of us do! And there are good things to be found, to be sure. Some newcomers to UU congregations find us on the UUA website, believe it or not! And there are places like [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)...and places to download the texts from Augustine to Origen...and places to find every kind of translation of the Bible imaginable, along with side by side comparisons of the Synoptic Gospels, something only true scholars in days gone by had easy access to. We can surf here and pluck some Buddhist practices, surf there and participate in Sufi dance, surf over there and find a Native American drumming community and go to the Omega site to sign on for the Rio Samba soul-opening music. Gallagher calls this the blending or layering of religion. It’s as though each tradition has become a toolbox and we pluck out a tool from one or another, choosing what “feels right”. It sure feels a bit eclectic...and reminds me of some of our own issues in our UU community.

There was a discussion in recent years—or perhaps I should use stronger language—amongst my UU ministerial colleagues about a revision of the Guidelines we agree to follow if we are members of the UU Minister’s Association. This document covers a wide range of things, as you might imagine, but what is currently causing a ruckus is one section that was being proposed. The UUMA Committee on Ministry for Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression and Multiculturalism, affectionately called by some “Anti-Anti-Em”, had spent time reviewing the Guidelines, with the goal of becoming a more anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural

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<sup>4</sup> Diego Ribaneneira, *The Boston Globe*, 3/8/99, C10.

organization—a worthy goal for sure, and not one easy to attain or even reach for, given our demographic history. These Guidelines are meant to be a living document and are periodically revised to reflect our changing understandings of ourselves and our congregations.

The ruckus in question concerns two sentences that were proposed to be inserted right after one that reads, “I will not speak scornfully of any colleague in public...” The new sentences to be inserted read: “I will personally honor the religious and cultural traditions, as well as the rituals and understandings of others. I will foster respect and cultivate awareness by rejecting inappropriate uses of the rituals of other religious communities and by avoiding the misappropriation of the traditional practices of another’s culture.” Sounds good- or at least good intentioned. But the problem is, who is deciding what is the inappropriate use of rituals of other religious communities? What does the misappropriation of traditional practices look like in our pluralistic, millennial world? For instance, I know a number of UU congregations which host Passover Seders. And I myself have sung the Kol Nidrei for Yom Kippur services at First and Second Church in Boston. Is this misappropriation? Some might say so. But let’s think again. The entire history of religion is made up of such blendings and layerings. Jesus, after all, was a Jew, and even a superficial reading of the Gospels reveals his speaking from within his tradition. Islam also includes Jesus, as well as the great figures from the Hebrew Bible as part of their sacred tradition. Many of my Christian colleagues today have Buddhist meditation practices.

So, I guess what it comes down to is respect and dialogue. Winifred Gallagher undertook the project which resulted in the book, *Working on God*, as a sort of “pilgrimage to resolve her uncertainty regarding the role religion would play in her life.”<sup>5</sup> Did it fit, and if so where? She came to believe that exploring religion was a process, a sort of “working on God”, which became the title. As a reporter of behavioral science, Winifred Gallagher began her investigation of postmodern religion with research and interviews, but watched it also become a very personal story of epektasis--straining toward mystery. Journalism and journey unfold over time spent in a Zen monastery and a cloistered convent, small-group discussions and healing rituals, a Conservative synagogue that shares a Christian church, and the birthplace of the New Age.<sup>6</sup> It’s a very funny book in places, and sometimes feels all over the map—a smorgasbord. A taste of Asian spices here, some noodle pudding there, and some Russian Easter eggs.

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<sup>5</sup> Amazon

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Not unlike what we can find in our UU churches and fellowships. Not unlike what some folks criticize us for. Those who don't know us wonder what it is we actually believe anyway (and perhaps some of us do, some days). Just take a look at our hymnal! We have everything from very Christian hymns for Easter to Jewish hymns to chants from several traditions to songs written for our tradition. In our UU communities we have water ceremonies, flower communions, seders, ritual dances, earth based rituals and more. All this can feel something of a mish-mash. But I prefer to think of it as the spirit boundless of our choir anthem. I hope that what we hope we are addressing is all the varieties of human working on the holy, or as Gallagher puts it, working on God. We don't want someone else to tell us what to believe. We want to remain open. We don't want anyone else to provide the answers for the questions of the ages. But we do want to provide a container for the asking of the questions. Unitarian Universalism is that container. Come Sunday, we come together in the asking, in the celebration, in our lifting up of the difficult patches and the rays of sunlight. We sit side by side, and we walk the mountains on trails that cross each other, being with each other as we reflect and take action, as we move from head to heart. As Paul Tillich, the great theologian once said, "There are many windows through which to see God at work." And as the other Paul said, "In my father's house, there are many mansions." And as we will say in our hymn, we can bring many names for the holy. May you each find the window that illuminates your heart and mind. Blessed be. Amen.

## CLOSING WORDS

I end with words adapted from Winifred Gallagher's conclusion from her book, *Working on God*: She says, "I believe that religion is right. Even if it's not, it hasn't deprived me of any good thing and has given me many."<sup>7</sup> May we know the many good things we find here in this company. May we replace narcissism and fear with compassion...and with straining toward the mystery. May we do the best we can right now—pay attention to what's most true and be kind—and keep on working on the holy.

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<sup>7</sup> Gallagher, Winifred (1999). *Working on God*. NY: Modern Library, 317.