

Service at the Unitarian Universalist Church of

Wilmington, DE

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>>Presentation

Have you ever noticed what happens when we talk about religion and spirituality? When we talk about religion and spirituality, it's easy for us to intellectualize, to resort to high-sounding phrases, and so forth.

Take the seventh principle of Unitarian-Universalism, for example: "Respect for the interdependent web of all of existence of which we are a part." That sounds pretty good, right? If we have respect for the interdependent web of existence, then it motivates us to show our concern for the environment and may prompt us to take action to prevent further harm to the environment.

And that's all well and good, but it's hard to feel the interdependent web of existence. I mean, suppose I were to ask you this question: What is your personal experience of the interdependent web of existence in society? You might find it difficult to answer. People sometimes say that they have these kinds of feelings when they are walking in the woods and communing with nature. But what about the experience of living with people, which is what we do most of the time? When and how can we feel connected to the interdependent web of all existence when we're with people? After all, people are part of the interdependent web of existence, right?

I've had two overwhelming experiences of feeling the interconnected web of existence, of feeling a transcendent sense of community—and neither of those experiences was in a church. The first one was in 1956. If you were alive in 1956, do you know where you were on September 29th of that year?

I know where I was. I was in my hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi, sitting in a grandstand at the Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show and looking at a simple wooden bandstand with a few musicians on it.

And then something happened that I'll never forget. Our walked our hometown hero, Elvis Presley.

[Dave...]

Yes, Dave, Chuck Berry wrote some of the songs that defined rock and roll, like "Maybelline" and "Johnny B. Goode." But what did Elvis do? Elvis changed the world. The world, and specifically America, is a different place now because of Elvis.

And although in later life Elvis got fat and lazy, as Southern men often do, the young Elvis was a force of nature. His very presence had such force and intensity that it knocked me back in my seat when he came out onstage.

And although we idolize our great stars—that's why there was a TV show called "American Idol"—what we often don't realize in this individualistic society is that our greatest singers bring us together.

And why is that, you ask? Because singing creates community as no other experience can. Our greatest singers have the power and charisma to bring us out of ourselves. They give us a tantalizing experience of what it's like not just to know that we belong to a community, as some of us we know that we belong to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington. Our greatest singers show us what it's like to be surrounded by our fellow community members and feel totally engaged in a shared experience. All of us who were lucky enough to see Elvis that afternoon in Tupelo were totally engaged—that's for sure. And that feeling of total engagement is a precious, precious experience, even if it only lasts for a short time. This shared experience

releases us from our feelings of isolation that occur all too commonly in a society in which we define ourselves by our differences.

My second overwhelming experience of feeling the interconnected web of existence was in the St. Louis arena, and I was at a Bruce Springsteen concert.

Afterwards, I felt stunned for days, and went around saying that Bruce took 13,000 people and lifted them a foot off the ground. I'm a huge Bruce Springsteen fan, and I devoted a whole chapter to him in the book I wrote on rock and roll.

Bruce is a great Elvis fan, and like Elvis he reaches out to America as a whole. That's also why he's a great Pete Seeger fan and sings a wonderful version of Pete Seeger's classic "This Land Is My Land." Beyond Pete Seeger, Bruce's roots reach back to Walt Whitman, and Whitman's great poem "I Hear America Singing." So there's a lineage of spokesmen for America, from Walt Whitman to Pete Seeger to Bruce Springsteen. That's why Bruce is America's unofficial poet laureate. When we listen to Bruce, we truly hear America singing.

Bruce said a great thing in an interview one time. He said that when he's playing, you're not at the concert—you're in the concert. It's like being in the E Street Band, except that you're not on stage.

What he's saying is that he and the fans co-create the concert together. And he acknowledges that with the microphone. When he comes to the chorus of a song like "Born to Run," he thrusts the microphone out toward the audience. Have you ever seen him do that? He knows that everybody in the audience knows the song by heart, so that they might as well sing it. It's a sign that he and the audience are after all co-creating the experience together.

Bruce has a magical ability to unite people and bring them together. If you've ever been to a Bruce Springsteen concert, you know what I mean.

Our greatest performers—Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen—can lift us out of our puny box of identity. We box ourselves in if all we can say about the world is “I like this” and “I don't like that.” Elvis, Bob, and Bruce and give us a chance to go beyond defining ourselves by our consumer preferences, and have at least a brief experience of community. And that brief experience of community is ultimately a brief experience of the transcendental unity of all humanity.

And it's not just white people at concerts who crave the community that singing creates. In the 1960s, when the Freedom Riders were travelling the dangerous roads of Mississippi and Alabama as part of the civil rights movement, what did they do? Instead of thinking about what a scary thing they were doing, and what awful things might happen to them, they sang. They knew that they needed the community that singing creates. They sang “We Shall Overcome,” of course, and “We Shall Not Be Moved,” but they also sang “This Little Light of Mine,” which I sang (not very well) in the Harrisburg Baptist Church, in Tupelo. Black churches and white churches in the South have lots of obvious differences, but what the people in them have in common are songs, from “This Little Light of Mine” to “Amazing Grace.”

And the thing is, the experience of community that singing creates goes beyond words, doesn't it? When you try to tell somebody about a great concert, words fail you because words are inadequate. Even saying that Bruce Springsteen lifted people a foot off the ground doesn't convey what it was like to someone who wasn't there. What it comes to, and this is a key point, is that the experience of transcendence goes beyond words—that's how you know it's transcendent.

And it's not just the legends of rock and roll like Bruce Springsteen who can bring people together and put them on the road to transcendence, so to speak. Rock and roll has been called "the invisible republic," because it brings people together in unseen ways. I know of no better example of this than the movie "Pitch Perfect."

Have any of you folks seen "Pitch Perfect"? The sequel, "Pitch Perfect 2" came out a while back. As young Americans everywhere know, the movie is about two rival a capella groups—boys versus girls, of course—who compete in the national finals. These groups, too, sing songs that everybody in the audience--everybody in that age group anyhow--recognizes. It's an indicative moment when the leader of the Bellas, the girls' group, announces that they're going to sing a song by Bruno Mars—and everybody knows it! Singing brings people together, no matter what their color and no matter what their gender.

So what do these wonderful musical experiences do for us? They lift us up and they bring us together—that's what they do. Here's the thing, though: Although these experiences are exhilarating, eventually every concert and every movie comes to an end...and we have to get up and go home...And then what?

And then we are left with ourselves, and if we're going to recapture those moments of blissful union with our community and with the cosmos, we have to recapture them for ourselves. There's a passage I love in the hymn "My Life Flows on in Endless Song": "When friends rejoice both far and near/How can I keep from singing." That line is about the mystical ecstasy of community that the great saints and Zen masters experience. When we have joy in our hearts, it flows out of us in song to friends both near and far.

And how about you? Does your life flow on in endless song? Are there any discords in the song of your life? Are there any missed notes in the song of your life?

If there are, that's where the 2,500 years of Buddhist tradition come in. We Buddhists believe that the only real freedom to experience life as endless song comes from self-discipline, and that the key to self-discipline is disciplining the mind. As the Buddha said, "All that we are is the result of what we have thought." That's so important that I want to repeat it: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought."

We cause ourselves a lot of grief with our mind, or what is sometimes called the "monkey mind." We do what psychologists call "self-talk." We think about the chances we missed, the dumb things we've done, or simply what we're going to have for dinner. When we get lost in our self-talk, it keeps us from being fully present in the moment. Does any of this sound familiar to anybody?

Your mind is always active, so you have to do something with it. Wouldn't it be good if you could do something with your mind besides worry and fret? So what can we do? You and I may not be able to sing like Bruce Springsteen or like Enya, but we can chant. Everybody can chant, which is a good thing because chanting can take us out of a stuck situation and puts us back into the flow of life. Chanting is an essential part of Buddhist practice.

So... I'd like to close today by sharing a chant with you. And I want to emphasize that you can do this chant perhaps better silently than aloud. Can you think of any situations in which you would want to chant silently?

How about standing in line at the grocery store? How about standing in the express line in the grocery store when the person ahead of you has 25 items? How about standing in the express line in the grocery store when the

person ahead of you has about 25 items, and the checkout person can't operate the cash register?

It's in situations like these that we need refuge from our monkey minds. What I say is, religion and spirituality and New Age thought are no good—no good at all--if they can't help you when you're standing in the express line at the grocery store, and the person ahead of you has 25 items, and the check-out person can't operate the cash register. That's when we need help in dealing with the nitty-gritty of life. So what to do?

You can shut down your monkey mind by refusing to let it torment you. Rather than standing in line and thinking how annoyed you are, and how hungry you are, and how much you want to get out of there and go home, you can use the chant that I want offer you. This is a centuries-old Sanskrit chant that means something like "**Behold the jewel in the lotus,**" but the meaning doesn't really matter. What matters is that silent chanting in a language you don't know keeps your mind from fretting and worrying. Chanting in a language you don't know takes you out of the stuckness of your situation and puts you back into the flow of life. Isn't that where we all want to be?

After all, we fret and worry in English, so if we go to Sanskrit, the traditional language of Buddhism, we simply can't fret and worry because we don't know the words. We can't do it.

Let's try this chant in two parts. It has six syllables, and here are the first three of them: "Om mani." Try that with me—"Om mani, om mani..." Okay, now the last three syllables : "Padme hum." "Padme hum...padme hum. So the whole chant is "Om mani padme hum." The six syllables together are: "Om mani padme hum." "Om mani padme hum...Om mani padme hum..."

So why not give that a try? The next thing you're stuck in a line in the grocery store, or stuck in traffic, or in a boring meeting at work, why not try getting back into the flow of life by chanting "Om mani padme hum" to yourself?

And if you do that, remember that silent chanting creates community, just as singing does. In saying "Om mani padme hum" you join with the community of millions of people who have been chanting it for thousands of years. And you don't have to buy a concert ticket to do it!

For your chanting convenience, I've written out that phrase on little slips on paper. Jan will bring down these slips so that you can pass them around, and you can take one. What the heck? Why not take two? One for yourself and one for a friend. You can slip them into a wallet, into a purse or into a shirt pocket. The next time you're stuck somewhere and your monkey mind starts to torment you, you can simply take out this slip of paper and chant. I hope that works well for you.

Namaste