

We want the Spirit, but does the Spirit want us?

Or Is God free enough in our churches to surprise us?

A Prairie Group response paper by Daniel C. Kanter

Response to Janne Eller-Isaacs' *The Gospel of Inclusion and The promise of the Spirit: From Religion Light to Religion Thick*

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Pere Marquette State Park, Grafton, Illinois

Psalm 83 “God, don’t stifle yourself from speaking; don’t deafen yourself to my plea; don’t stiffen into silence, Spark of my Strength.”

I want to thank Janne for her stimulating and complete paper on the topic of what a neo-Spiritualist Unitarian Universalism and worship might be. Her imaginings of the Wellspring UU church are inventive and hopeful. She is challenging us to embody worship and faith in a way we have only begun to touch on in our churches. I applaud her promptness in presenting the paper to me with ample time to respond before our gathering commenced. Her thorough examination of our history with regard to spiritualism, Universalism, Transcendentalism, and emotionalism are apt in our exploration of the neo-spiritual UU church and its worship. What I want to do is examine some of the assumptions in Janne’s imaginings of her Wellspring church and raise some questions about our faith with regard to her hopes for us in worship. I want to see if a neo-spiritual UUism is realistic, opportune, and authentic. I hope to respond in a way that raises more questions for our discussion and humbly acknowledges that many others in the room might be more appropriate respondents to such a large topic as our future as a movement and

faith. I want to focus this response more directly at worship and her Wellspring church order of worship rather than treat the entire history provided to us by her exploration.

Janne points us in the direction of a neo-spiritualist Unitarian Universalism when she says, “I want congregations that are thriving and spirit filled... (with) opportunities for people to have divine encounters within, among and beyond in the larger world and in the world of divine encounter.” In order to accomplish this we would need:

1. Shared spiritual practices.
2. A spirit of hospitality and belonging.
3. And spirit filled worship

Let us examine each of these assumptions.

First, the notion of spiritual practice as important to faith is foreign to none who have thought about the religious and spiritual life. The first question I have for Janne is what is the meaning or “shared”? Shared could imply mandatory or binding. In my experience any time the words “required” or “mandatory” appear in planning our faith’s future I hear the uproar of objections from members of our churches who stand firm on the requirement of ‘no requirements!’ Our colleague Fred Muir implied this in his Berry Street lecture this year when he challenged us about our commitment to individualism and its confusion with individuality. Fred said, “*We are being held back and stymied - really, we are being held captive - by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times.*”ⁱ

By and large the current membership of UU churches seems committed to a staunch and vocal lack of obligations being put upon their spiritual lives. All the same, I agree with Janne that spiritual practices can save us. Robert Wuthnow points out in his book *After Heaven* that, “*Spiritual practices require individuals to engage reflectively in a conversation with their past, examining who they have been, how they have been shaped, and where they are headed. Spiritual practices have a moral dimension, for they instruct people in how they should behave toward themselves and with each other, but these practices are also an item of faith, encouraging people to walk each day with partial knowledge and in cautious hope.*”ⁱⁱ (Wuthnow 16)

Janne is right that a church or UU community that nourishes spiritual practice as a central element of its life can thrive. Again Wuthnow agrees that, “*Practice-oriented spirituality can best be nurtured by practice-oriented religious organizations...that define their primary mission as one of strengthening the spiritual discipline of their members.*”ⁱⁱⁱ (Wuthnow17) To achieve this though, it might require us to necessitate practice as a primary part of membership in our churches which could be a cultural shift from the individualistic, “no requirement” culture we have today. We may or may not be able or willing to do this. Wuthnow encourages us that, “*to say that spirituality is practiced means that people engage intentionally in activities that deepen their relationship to the sacred. Often they do so over long periods of time and devote significant amounts of energy to these activities...causing people to engage in service to others and to lead their lives in a worshipful manner.*”^{iv} (Wuthnow169) Whether UU’s are suited to living in this deep a commitment to spirituality and service in a “worshipful manner” is a question to ponder. The answer may be up to us, as Janne points out, it may take a new church with a new vision to create a deeply grounded and willing UU religious community.

Janne's second point is that we need a spirit of hospitality which has been embraced by many UU churches and preachers speaking particularly about radical hospitality although in reality, its practice may be irregular and aspirational at best. We might agree that to enter into worship we should be met with a joyful hospitality coming from those with deep and centered spiritual lives. Janne states that a vital spiritual UUism will live in a way that embraces a renewed commitment to hospitality. We probably don't have to describe the difference between the beaming genuine smile of the usher that greets us at the sanctuary door with kind words of welcome versus the weathered disgruntled usher who seems to believe he is doing us a favor being at the door at all thank you very much. Hospitality requires joy and challenges us to find it, teach it, and embrace it as a value. It is also found in the church in numerous other ways. It is present in greeters who meet visitors at the curb as well as in ways in which we make orientation to the events and documents in worship easily understood. It is present in the use of broad and welcoming language from the pulpit, in the type of representation of the church community found its worship leaders, and in finding ways for visitors and members to take action that very day to act on their values rather than pointing to opportunities weeks away. Pentecostals led the way in worship representation by integrating their churches in the early 20th century with many successes and failures. Where they broke through in this regard was in diversifying their leadership in worship with women and children as early as the turn of the century.^v (Wacker105)

Hospitality is a mindset that imbues everything the church does and requires a willingness to risk old habits for new ones. Ana Marie Pineda in an essay on hospitality wrote, *"Hospitality is made up of hard work undertaken under risky conditions, and without structures and commitment for welcoming strangers, fear crowds out what needs to be done. Hospitable places where guests can disclose the gifts they bear come into being only when people take up this practice and grow*

wise, by experience, in doing it well. In the face of overwhelming human need for shelter and care, and in the face of our own fear of strangers, we need to develop ways of supporting one another in the practice of hospitality.”^{vi} (Bass 35) No doubt this is a stone that will be rolled up the hill many times and will roll back down as we experiment with becoming truly hospitable. Hospitality, as Janne points out, will be key to not only greeting worshippers with warmth but also in making room for all who seek us.

Janne also asks us to also consider worship as spirit filled. She asks for embodied and authentic movement through worship that includes an increased emotional range, solemnity, joy, and exuberance. She asks us to have embodied experiences and expand the range of senses utilized. She wants magic and oneness, and encounters with the divine. I agree with her although I wonder how we might judge or invite things like “magic” and “authenticity?” Certainly the dynamic range of emotion can be instructive to us all. Flat line unemotional worship accomplishes little. But forcing exuberance on worshippers can be difficult if not counterproductive. We can be authentic in creating choices making aesthetic decisions that have intention behind them with regard to evoking a certain emotion, and must ask ourselves if there are ethical dilemmas that border on emotional manipulation. On the other hand the choices we make every Sunday involve some form of inevitable manipulation but must include a feeling of safety, love, and explicit honoring of difference. We can offer worship based opportunities for people that respect the range of choices one makes in the moment. We might make explicit the invitation to worshippers to embody their feelings: to move their bodies or be still, to engage their senses or chose to experience worship through whatever dominant sense they know, to respond to sermons vocally or to remain quietly observant. The bottom line is that we can’t control or plan for magic, oneness or encounters with the divine but we can be more explicit in

helping it occur. Authenticity will be a quality that will support the invitation of magic and oneness and begins with a deep understanding of why we are worshipping at all. To encourage authenticity will require us to state and restate what worship is and what it is for. Both these requirements seem to cause confusion on the parts of UUs throughout our faith today.

The encouragement for spirit filled worship to be embodied worship also requires some consideration on our part. Janne writes about the experience of music at the Vineyard church quoting Luhrmann who suggests that “God enters the body of the worshipper.” And later she encourages us to consider rituals like communion, dance, and movement meditations as ways to embody the spirit. Here again UUs need clarity on what we are embodying. We would have to either learn how to enter parts of worship with an ego-less abandon and/or know a God that embodies and enters us physically. This may be a stretch for current UU communities who show suspicion toward surrender and any mention of a God that intervenes in individual lives. Embodiment though can be understood in another way says Clayton J. Schmit, Associate Professor of Preaching and Academic Director for the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts Fuller Theological Seminary wrote, “*Worship is embodied, or brought to life when pastors and church leaders learn to be highly attentive to the spiritual gifts among us and find ways to encourage them and equip for their use in public worship.*”^{vii} (Schmit 7) Schmit is leading us beyond the feeling of God within us to worship to a sense that “embodied” doesn’t necessarily mean bodies moving up and down aisles or speaking in tongues but rather leadership that promotes and cultivates the sharing gifts in worship. This means a fundamental shift for most UU’s to an understanding and willingness that they are “in” worship rather than “at” worship. It requires a confidence on the part of ministers to grow leaders who will take responsibility for the parts of worship experience perhaps in unscheduled and unplanned ways.

It means when we invite an elder or leader to pray in worship from the pulpit we are not met with laughter or astonishment but a satisfied willingness and competent ability to lead the people with confidence. It means choir members and lay worship leaders understand their roles in worship and feel an ownership of it that invites the Spirit with a desire to help crack open the experience we all have. This would essentially involve a willingness on the part of those “in charge” to share the leadership of the congregation in surprising ways.

Another way to facilitate vital spirit filled worship may be, as Janne points out, in the need for a common sung heritage. This seems a stumbling block for UUs to do in an authentic way without co-opting other traditions. We have been good at finding spirituals and changing the words so they sound “spiritual” but not Christian. We UUs for better or worse have thrown out the Father and the Son and are betting on the Spirit. All you have to do is just examine the recent hymnal supplement *Singing the Journey* and you will see spirit supplanting all other religious direction. We now sing hymns about not knowing where we are going but trying to trust a spirit that blows us somewhere or doing when the spirit says do. These hymns are moving at times and some are easier to sing. But we have supplanted hymns that praise the living God and draw us nearer to our God with such spirited pieces. I may be old fashion but I think we need both a theologically centered understanding of God (whatever that might be) and an invitation to the Spirit in our singing to truly make a difference in the lives of our congregations. Will singing these new hymns to the Spirit open us up enough to receive it? Is it our new common sung tradition that will save us?

Undergirding my entire response to Janne’s paper is the understanding that despite our challenges we may have opportunities for a new reform of our worship. As Janne says, “Old systems are difficult to break, but we must find a better balance between the head and heart in

worship.” This is true and I hope we do it with an eye on who we are rather than an eye on our neighbors or polls that tell us what people want. We must be careful not to fall prey to consumerist ideas of what is working and what is not in worship and what we think people want over what deep and spiritual needs abide.

I fear that implicit in the exercise of creating a “new” order of service with a neo-spiritual flavor we are assuming that our “cold” worship is not nourishing and needs resuscitation. While that may be true in some circumstances it can’t be universally true. The young adults who come up to me and say how appreciative they are that we wear robes and stoles ask for more organ music, ancient chants, and less technology are speaking of a deep need, not representing the recent Pew poll. They are not asking us for “neo-spiritual” rock-the-house kind of worship with drums and audio/visuals which saturate their lives. They are asking for something different and more grounding. They are doing what Diana Butler Bass calls, “*searching for a vibrant spiritual community.*”^{viii} (D. Bass 194) But that vibrant spiritual community need not mean we cater to the consumerist mentality as we imagine the desires of those who do not come to church or could. I’m not saying we can’t do worship in the ways Janne imagines with drums and processions and bodies moving. I am asking whether we have settled for an easy answer imagining that an encounter with the divine might now require a modern affect, a beat, group prayer, the use of technology, while catering to a shortened attention span.

Roger Scruton in his 2010 Gifford lectures at the University of St. Andrews in England challenged our understanding of encountering the divine by pointing out that it is the consumer world we live in and its pursuits that are counter to the work of the church saying, “*We shouldn’t be surprised if God is rarely encountered today. The consumer culture is one without sacrifices. Easy entertainment distracts us from our metaphysical loneliness. The rearranging of the world*

as an object of appetite obscures its meaning as a gift. The defacing of eros and the loss of rights-of-passage eliminate the old conception of human life as an adventure within the community and an offering to others. It is inevitable therefore that moments of sacred awe should be rare among us. Our world contains many openings to the transcendental but they have been blocked by waste. Our disenchanting life is, to use the Socratic idiom, not a life for a human being. By remaking the human being in their habitat as objects to consume rather than subjects to revere we invite the degradation of both. And so we so easily lose our humanity. And joy and repentance are the two key ingredients for recovering our vocation.”^{ix}(Scruton)

Scruton, who in his lectures challenges the hard hand of science to obscure human freedom and the experience of the divine, points to our “consumerization” of society and in turn religion. The challenge is less about freedom than it is about our assumptions about how we experience the divine and the challenge not to sell out because others are having success with one model of worship or another. While we imagine a raucous Pentecostal like UU spirited worship is the answer we might do well to remember that thousands of people, young and old, each year march to the Taize community in France to sing/chant songs in dimmed light as if in a cathedral without a drum beat or the words put on screens. Thousands of spiritual seeking American’s travel to India’s Kumbh Mela each time it is held where the spiritual exercise is simply to join with others to immerse themselves in the Ganges River and attend rituals as old as human civilization. They are seeking a vibrant spiritual experience while not following new trends in worship or community we tend to assume are best.

One question worth our attention seems to be whether we can do all Janne encourages us to do with the churches we have or will it take a complete overhaul to accomplish? Do we have

what it takes to invite the spirit to worship with us? In thinking about answers to these questions I would challenge us to consider why our people are coming to worship. In my cynical moments I wonder if we are not just entertainment for the mind of UU intellectuals who want ‘NPR Live.’ They seem at times to be keeping a measured distance from the spirit moving them in our sanctuaries, except through the intellect. They seem to come guarded against anything emotional that they cannot avoid. They seem to come not for the whole of the experience of being a person of faith but rather for elements of worship they judge to be good (or not) in their reviews following the performance. There is a qualitative difference in responses in the receiving line between, “good job” and “that moved me.” Both responses seem to come with some surprise on the part of the worshipper, as if they weren’t sure they would find much value in worship or that we preachers weren’t up to the task of moving their spiritual lives along. Why are they so often surprised by being moved? Do we promise them something other than a deep and meaningful spiritual experience when they enter our sanctuaries? The answer to these questions seems embedded in our UU DNA and might need some attention before we go any further. We might ask whether UUs can find a sense of abandon and humility to truly open to the Spirit moving in our worship at all. This desire for spirit filled worship may also be difficult without a God to surrender to or a tangible sense of a spirit that moves through us without our conscious urgings. This to me is perhaps the greatest challenge we have when considering how our worship should or could evolve. I wonder about the UU who comes not for the holistic experience of “worship” but to see what the minister has to say or hear a good song or see a friend. From examining the spirit filled modes of Pentecostal worship one is struck first and foremost with the worshippers’ mindset that is radically willing at least to be moved bodily and spiritually and followed often by

a sense of complete surrender without regard for the particulars of the service at all. This mindset is enviable but possibly out of reach for us.

If our churches are to thrive in this way we will have to rethink numerous aspects of how they exist and put down our fears about offending some stakeholders who hope to keep the Spirit at bay. Whether we want to make these changes is another issue. In honor of the work Janne has done I propose an alternative order of worship (see addendum) based on the framework of Diana Butler Bass' statement that what is needed by all worshippers is a vibrant spiritual community that will thrive into the next generation. I proceed here with the caution that an order of worship will not save us and may indeed hinder us. The Pentecostal tradition in some cases thrived because it had been "*...delivered from all the Romish nonsense,*"^x of orders of worship. They understood the "order" of worship effective when it, "*...oscillated between antistructural and structural impulses.*"^{xi} Perhaps the answer is to not have an order of worship at all and to practice surrender to the spirit so that we each show up, not because of the published sermon title, the sermon we wrote, or the musician of the day, but for God.

In conclusion, it occurs to me that Janne's Wellspring Church order of worship, or any other order of worship, may not get UUs to truly invite the spirit and give God the sovereignty to surprise us. What we may be talking about is less of a radical shift in the order of worship than in the style and attitude with which we approach all of what we do. It is possible that we are talking more about competence and the relinquishment of power on behalf of the institution and its leaders than loosening the ties that bind us in worship so that the spirit can enter. It is possible that the spirit is not containable and finds its way into worship great and small without the human intention to make it present at all. I have felt the spirit move in Hindu worship with

no discernible effort on the part of the priests to involve or even acknowledge the participants at all. I have felt it in Quaker meetings without singing, dancing, or spoken words. I have felt it as the sole worshipper in an Episcopal chapel with a scripted stale conservative liturgy, no sermon, no songs, not even any other worshippers to commune with except the priest who dryly read the prayers and psalms out of duty to the office. Will adding elements to our worship that seem Pentecostal or neo-spiritual save us?

The question is not whether we want the spirit but does the spirit want us? It seems that to truly find the kind of Pentecostal spirit in a neo-UUspiritual worship we must be willing to surrender and be truly humble in the eyes of God. Having seen little evidence for either humility or surrender in our churches I cringe at the thought of our trying to welcome a spirit that wants empty bowls to inhabit rather than rigidly individualistic ones filled with thoughts about how life should be or reasons why the preacher is wrong. Perhaps this is somewhat cynically said, but we may have to build this neo-spiritual UUism up from the ground floor up rather than apply it to the churches we have in hopes that we will carry what is good in our tradition into new forms that are not convinced they have it right already. I'm hedging the bet here and will say it still may be possible to make do with what we have. We have all seen flashes of it, and while hopeful for this new day, I still wonder if it is possible.

In the end we need congregations that thrive because they can cultivate a Spirit-filled approach to worship without losing the core of who they are. We need them to worship in ways that find new expressions to carry on tested values and missions not just to fill the pews. And we need to consider all these things in our hearts before we fully embrace this new form of UU spirituality or invite the Spirit to worship which at least today seems to be knocking on the door.

Addendum

I propose this order of worship based on Diana Butler Bass' paradigm of what is needed in the church of the future; vibrant spiritual community:

Vibrant-

Singing a common known song-singing songs without heads buried in hymnals can free the worshipper from feeling isolated.

Musical reflection-beautiful solos, instrumentals, choral pieces can remain as part of the neo-spiritual UU worship.

Singing an ancient song-honoring tradition is grounding. We have many songs that despite difference UU's have with language can be exercises in letting go and translating fluently to the modern day.

Silence-the Quakers have a corner on silence because they know how it invites presence and a sense of the spirit moving amongst us without the noise of everyday or distraction of being led the worshipper can ground themselves quietly. David Byrne wrote in an article in Smithsonian Magazine about the way we process music, "...silence is the rarity that we pay for and savor."^{xii}

Singing a new song-learning songs is a part of the vibrancy of worship. A focused music department could make this a priority.

Spiritual-

Prayer led by the minister or gifted lay person:

-prayer to do good and for gratitude

-prayer for unity that we overcome our differences and acknowledge our need to work for a common good.

-prayer for mutuality that we overcome our individualism and see a common bond

Lighting of candles—giving people an opportunity to light a candle in memory or celebration of something or someone in their lives silently can provide a kind of sacred moment for the worshipper and community. Many of our churches do this already.

Community-

Reflection by the minister on a question for the day-unlike a sermon this might be done spontaneously. It may be a spiritual question s/he has been wrestling with. It might be one s/he wants the congregation to wrestle with but it might be treated less intensely than a sermon would in the sense that it could be more conversational or even more interactive.

Passing the peace-people touching each other makes a community feel in their bodies the lives of others. Of course the history of Pentecostalism warns there should be boundaries in place to protect those who need more physical space.

Answering the question of the day with a neighbor-conversations of a spiritual nature in worship might help us to connect more deeply and go deeper especially when encouraged by leadership and guided in ways that work.

Singing-singing the new song.

Blessing each other for departure-communal benediction.

End Notes

ⁱ Muir, Fred. "UUMA.org." . N.p., 20 2012. Web. 24 Oct 2012. <<https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/BSE2012/?>>.

ⁱⁱ Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 16. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid Wuthnow, 17

^{iv} Ibid Wuthnow, 169

^v Wacker, Grant. *Heaven Below: Early Pentacostals and American Culture*. 2nd. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. 105. Print.

^{vi} Bass, Dorothy. *Practicing Our Faith*. 1st. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997. 35. Print.

^{vii} Clayton , Schmit. "www.clayschmit.com." . N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Oct 2012. <[http://www.clayschmit.com/articles/Embodying Worship-Catalyst Article.pdf](http://www.clayschmit.com/articles/Embodying%20Worship-Catalyst%20Article.pdf)>.

^{viii} Bass, Diana Butler. *Christianity After Religion*. 1st. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2012. 194. Print.

^{ix} Scruton, Roger. "www.st-andrews.ac.uk." . St. Andrews University, n.d. Web. 24 Oct 2012. <<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/gifford/2010/the-face-of-god/>>.

^x Op cit, Wacker

^{xi} Ibid Wacker

^{xii} Byrne, David. "Smithsonian Magazine." *Smithsonian Magazine*. October 2012 n. page. Print. <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/How-Do-Our-Brains-Process-Music-169360476.html>>.