

Spirit Filled Worship
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Every Sunday, in many of our churches, including First Universalist in Minneapolis, we sing:

Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

I love this hymn, but I wonder what we're really asking for when we sing it. Are we truly asking the Spirit to come to us? What Spirit beyond ourselves are we calling out to, asking to move in the world and in our lives?

What sort of experience do we have when we sing this song, and what exactly are we opening ourselves up to when we sing this song?

In this paper, I've been asked to describe – or show – the form of Pentecostal worship in general, as well as preaching, healing, music, and other key elements of Pentecostalism, paying attention to distinctions and differences in the Pentecostal tradition.

I've been asked to link these liturgical practices to specific historical and/or contemporary accounts in Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism and the ways in which each of these elements was/is affirmed, modified, and/or rejected.

This is a rich topic to explore, especially in light of the rapidly changing religious landscape around us. As religious scholar and historian, Diana Butler Bass, and others have noted, many religious institutions are stuck in old, lifeless ways of doing things. In fact, the fastest growing demographic in the United States, now greater than the number of identified Protestants, is the “nones,” those who claim no religious affiliation. Interestingly, these “nones” often long for a spirituality of “experience,” something that anchors and grounds them in the midst of a shallow and consumerist culture.¹

In the past 5 years, the number of “nones” has grown from 15% to 20% of the population. This trend is accelerating, but this trend, a desire for a more embodied religious began years ago. In fact, “at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism and liberal Protestantism – as well as various streams of mystical Catholicism – came together in a quest for an experience of God.”² The last century has revealed a deep yearning for an experience of God, not simply an experience of hearing about God.

¹ <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/174127941.html?refer=y>

² Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity After Religion*, 124.)

This distinction is critical. As the authors of the book, *Liberating Hope* point out, “The future progressive church [will] understand that people are no longer seeking information about God or the Bible. They are seeking experiences of God both in community and in their daily life.”³

This quest for an “experience of God” has essentially turned denominational and institutional loyalty into a thing of the past. The “none’s,” as well as many others, are interested in an encounter with the Holy, an encounter with the Spirit of Life, an encounter with the Holy Spirit, but this experience is less and less likely to be found in a mainline church. In short, many are looking for a way to commune with God, whether that is through Spirit filled worship, a spiritual practice, or being part of a practicing, service oriented, faith community, “moving them from meaningless doing to holistic being.”⁴

As the old forms and practices of faith have become dead, dull, and irrelevant to millions and millions of people, a deep hunger for meaning and connection remain. It is out of this context that Pentecostalism has grown and thrived.

Goal of this Paper

In this paper, I will explore the ways that Pentecostalism appears to be meeting the needs of those who long for an experience of God. This paper is informed by the required reading as well as an extended conversation with our colleague, the Rev. David Breedan, who serves the Minnesota Valley UU Church in Bloomington. David was raised Pentecostal, and I found his insights and experiences particularly helpful.

Pentecostal Worship: The Practices of Spirit Filled Worship

Background: As a religious movement, Pentecostalism began in April 1906, at the Azusa Street Revival, in Los Angeles.⁵ According to Edith Blumhofer, the revival was characterized by ecstatic spiritual experiences, inter-racial mingling, miracles, dramatic worship services, and speaking in tongues.⁶

Pentecostalism was (and is) a renewal movement within Christianity with a focus on a direct personal experience of God through the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The term Pentecostal is derived from Pentecost, the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks. For Christians, this event commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ, as described in the Book of Acts. Those baptized by the Holy Spirit live a Spirit filled and empowered life, and demonstrate such spiritual gifts as speaking in tongues and divine healing.⁷

Women were vital to the early Pentecostal movement and engaged in leadership and activities traditionally denied them. Additionally, the first generation of Pentecostal believers faced immense criticism and ostracism from other Christians.

³ Piazza and Trimble. *Liberating Hope*, p. 27.

⁴ Ibid. 16

⁵ It should be noted that there are a number of contending stories about the birth place of Pentecostalism.

⁶ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3321>

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentecostalism>

Finally, from its beginnings at Azusa Street, Pentecostalism has spread across the country and the world; today, it is one of the fastest growing branches of Christianity.

Spirit Filled Worship: For Pentecostals, worship is something one does with one's whole body. Pentecostal worshippers come to worship with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will touch them, be with them, and move them into an altered state. Worshippers come with the understanding that they will participate with noise, song, praise, and by lifting up their hands in prayer. In this process, they will experience the presence of God. In fact, "Individuals appear to come to worship with expectant hearts, ready for the triggers that will transport them into another state of consciousness."⁸

Music is one of the primary triggers for this, and it is a critical part of a Pentecostal service, regardless of region, community, or culture. Music is a central part of the "spiritual technology" that helps move people to another state of consciousness.

Music occurs at nearly every moment of a Pentecostal service, and there is a very intentional sound track that surrounds the sermon. As Miller and Yamamori note, there are no hymnals or sheet music in a Pentecostal service. All that is required is to feel the music; the songs are simple one-liners that can be easily learned and picked up by everyone.⁹

Pentecostal music, which leads to movement, swaying, dancing, and putting arms in the air, helps worship participants let go and enjoy the Spirit's presence. Pentecostal worship spaces are often of a simple construction, but almost always have an excellent sound system and room for a band.

This time for praise and release, to be completely open with one's emotions, is a central part of a Pentecostal service. As Miller and Yamamori suggest, "Deep within all of us is undoubtedly a desire to be free, unguarded, and open with our emotions, since the responsibilities of ordinary life tend to require a certain degree of restraint. Worship for Pentecostals creates these moments [of release] on a regular basis...The lid can be taken off our repressive tendencies; public worship is a safe place to realize the unity of mind, body, and spirit. Emotions can flow...it is no wonder that people dance, fall down prostrate before God, and lift their hands high in celebration."¹⁰

While there are countless examples of this type of Pentecostal music, I'd like to highlight the music from Hillsong Church, a Pentecostal megachurch, affiliated with Assemblies of God, located in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Over 21,000 people attend services each week, and "Hillsong Church has a well-recognized music ministry...as of December 2011, Hillsong Church has sold more than 12 million records across the globe." Their music, often modified, is used in countless other Pentecostal

⁸ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism*, p. 139.

⁹ Ibid, 137.

¹⁰ Ibid, 142.

churches; one of their songs, "Shout to the Lord," is song by an estimated 25 million Christians each week worldwide.¹¹

Here's the song, called "[Across the Earth](#):"

As one can see from the video, this music had a deep impact on those gathered for worship. This is no accident. As Calvin Johansson writes, 'Evangelizing the unsaved...obliges Pentecostals to select music that unbelievers prefer (not 19th or 20th century hymns), given that musical likability is believed to be a pre-requisite for relevant communication.'¹² This is because a Pentecostal worship service is designed to be an experience of letting oneself feel the presence of God in one's life. As Miller and Yamamori point out, "the music tends to move you; it is hard to remain immobilized as the divides between heart and mind, body and spirit dissolve...we observed people who could scarcely wait for the music to start and for the officially sanctioned moment in which they could 'let go' and enjoy the Spirit."¹³

Finally, it's important to remember, that "these songs are not *about* God or Jesus; rather, the worshippers are singing directly to God. The assumption is that God is present, enabling direct communication with the transcendent. God is not a concept or a being who dwells somewhere in the stratosphere. He is there in the midst of these people."¹⁴ Recall the images from the Hillsong video, images of worshippers, eye closed, singing directly to God.

This sense of full congregational participation (through singing) is an essential element of Pentecostalism. In fact, the "...changes wrought by Luther, Calvin, and all other reformers were adopted by Pentecostals – the absolute necessity of full congregational involvement in worship. The priesthood of all believers demanded that individuals within the worshipping community eschew spectatorship and fully and consciously employ their hearts, minds, and bodies in acts of worship. One did not go to church to view worship. One went to *do* worship."¹⁵

For Pentecostals, worship is a verb, not a noun. The Pentecostal worship experience seems to be like a "singing bowl," from start to finish, something that creates a deep resonance and invites all in, to sing, to move, to feel the Holy Spirit vibrating in one's own life, as well.

[A quick aside: I'm less sure what "worship" is in many of our Unitarian Universalist Churches; is it something we *view* or *do*? Do we sing to a presence that is in the midst of us, or do we sing and worship from a distance, viewing worship is an abstract way? How do those of us who are worship leaders show up?]

The power of the music in a Pentecostal service, combined with movement and dance, is something that allows worshippers to be "filled with the Spirit," and to be touched in a deep way. As theologian Harvey Cox says, "part of the appeal of Pentecostalism is that it fills the void of the ecstasy deficit that characterizes

¹¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/44.34.html>

¹² Patterson and Rybarczyk. *The Future of Pentecostalism in the United States*. Page 63.

¹³ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism*, 141.

¹⁴ Ibid, 131.

¹⁵ Patterson and Rybarczyk. *The Future of Pentecostalism in the United States*, 50.

contemporary life. Unlike many forms of New Age religion, which are individualistic, Pentecostalism is simultaneously a communal experience and an individual encounter with the spiritual dimension.”¹⁶

In fact, Pentecostal worship leaders strive to assist people in temporarily putting aside the “tensions of daily living and exist, even if fleetingly, in an egoless state of vulnerability in which the transcendent (God) can break into their lives.”¹⁷

When Miller and Yamamori inquired of various people about the physicality of worship, they were reminded that “David danced before God and the Hebraic understanding of worship did not employ the mind-body split that is so typical of many traditional forms of Protestantism.”¹⁸ One of the worship leaders in Nairobi said that the word for song and dance is identical. Thus, in his view, it is unimaginable that one would sing and not dance at the same time.¹⁹

Prayer, and the various related dimensions – testimony, healing, speaking in tongues, and being Baptized in the Spirit - are another central element of a Pentecostal worship service.

In a Pentecostal service, prayerful testimony is often offered. In Pentecostal churches, this testimony is a “highly democratic process in which people from the congregation come forward to testify or to offer a ‘word of knowledge.’”²⁰ In fact, at a service that Miller and Yamamori observed, “Dozens of people participated [in testimony and prayer] as they were moved by the Spirit. One woman took the microphone and spoke on behalf of God, “Do not be afraid of the sin you fear...” Between these testimonies, the leader said, “Be magnified, oh God. We worship you...”²¹

This time of prayer and testimony was clearly about giving oneself completely to God, to bringing the news of your life into this corporate space, to testify how Jesus and God were working in your life. In a Pentecostal service, there is no shame in doing this.

Our Unitarian Universalist joys and concerns contain echoes of this practice, including the highly democratic nature of Joys and Concerns; however, our joys and concerns seem mundane in comparison to the power of prayerfully, Pentecostal testifying. As Rev. David Breedan says, “Joys and concerns are a pale shadow of testifying.”

In my judgment, part of what makes joys and concerns a pale shadow is that they are often (though not always) bound up in the personal and/or the ego; joys and concerns leave no room for God or the Spirit. It does not have to be this way; as the Rev. John Buehrens has said, "If done well, joys and concerns can serve as the UU equivalent of what more liturgical traditions call 'the prayers of the people.' The problem is that we have little sense...of how worship needs to have a shape and tone that is reverent rather than self-indulgent."²²

¹⁶ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism* , 143.

¹⁷ Ibid, 139

¹⁸ Ibid, 138.

¹⁹ Ibid, 141.

²⁰ Ibid, 131.

²¹ Ibid, 130

²² <http://www.uua.org/interconnections/interconnections/47579.shtml>

There is a joy and reverence to be found in Pentecostal testimony and prayer. According to Arlene Sanchez Walsh, Associate Professor of Church History & Latino Church Studies at Azusa Pacific University in California

...Pentecostals focus on the making of what can be called "spiritual life stories" as a way to corroborate the biblical sacred narrative. Such testimonies take on a sacred nature because they are stories told and re-told to validate the ongoing active work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

If someone responds and speaks in tongues-as is often the case in such testimonies-that person now becomes part of the ongoing narrative, assuring that others will hear a similar story and assuaging the doubts and fears of both fellow congregants and visitors, who may view the practice with suspicion.

Probably no sacred narrative is more prized in the Pentecostal world than the testimony of healing. Physical healing, provided for in the atonement, is expected and anticipated. Because one of the key elements of Pentecostal theology is the belief that the ongoing supernatural work of God exists as an unbroken continuum, healing solidifies today's Pentecostals in their spiritual lineage, connecting them to the biblical times as no other narrative can.²³

In my estimation, Unitarian Universalist joys and concerns do very little to help us construct a "spiritual life story."

Futhermore, unlike in joys and concerns or even many Unitarian Universalist worship services, Pentecostals bring their full bodies to their testimony and prayer lives. As James K. A. Smith says, "When Pentecostals pray for one another, we *touch* one another. We lay hands on our sister or brother. Pentecostal worship always involves dedicated periods of prayer—"altar time"—that bring together the people of God with hands clasped, embraced in prayer, laying hands in hope. Faith, hope, and love are channeled and charged when the community expresses itself in that kind of touch."²⁴

As Miller and Yamamori observes, contact between people in Pentecostal churches is not limited to the Kiss of Peace, or a simple greeting and handshake. In fact, many of the Pentecostal churches "appear to be a family of believers who love and support each other, not a corporate institution where professional distance is the norm."²⁵ Touch matters. Touch triggers hormones, including oxytocin, which can provide a sense of comfort, calm, and of being loved.

As noted, healing is also a central parts of Pentecostal worship services. As James K. A. Smith says, "God doesn't want to just save your soul; God also cares about your body. The Pentecostal emphasis on the healing of the body is an affirmation of the goodness of embodiment."²⁶

²³ <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Pentecostal/Beliefs/Sacred-narratives.html>

²⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/may/25.42.html?start=3>.

²⁵ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism*, 143.

²⁶ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/may/25.42.html?start=3>

This healing can take many forms, and often happens as part of the “altar time,” or right after the sermon or teaching.

Let’s take a look at a healing scene, from the movie *Leap of Faith* (1:22- 1:28).

Movement, dance, swaying, raising one’s hands in the air, praising and praying – this are all practices that help Pentecostals feel the presence of God, and they are all informed by a literal understanding of the Bible and the practices described therein. For example, Pentecostals take seriously these source texts: “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1 Corinthians 14:26); “Clap your hands, shout to God with cries of joy” (Psalm 47:1), and “Lift up holy hands in prayer” (1 Timothy 2:8); “Give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:4); “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6); “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

In Pentecostal worship services, the dull, habitual, dry and dusty God is replaced by the wild and boundless experience of the living God, present among those gathered, breaking into people’s lives and hearts.

Unitarian Universalism and Spirit Filled Worship: Some Reflections

We live in a time of great change and immense physical, spiritual, emotional, and economic suffering. Although the nature of the suffering is different, those in both the First World and the Third World suffer.

We’re in a global recession that shows little signs of ending; the distance between the haves and the have-nots is increasing. We’re in the midst of rapid global climate change that is impacting our global food and water security, our economies, and life as we know it. Global hunger is on the rise; grain shortages are becoming the “new normal.” We’re in a decade long war in Afghanistan, and many institutions, including churches and even the government, appear to be ineffective, unable to adapt to the times, or work for the common good.

The apocalypse is happening/has happened (as Rebecca Parker would say) and the world as we have known it has ended. Something new is being born. While I am painting with a broad brush here, in the middle of this Global Catastrophe are human beings, deeply impacted by what is happening and they are carrying grief, despair, anxiety, hopelessness and more in their bodies.

In the midst of great suffering and change, human beings need a faith that can speak to the depth of their experience – and give them a place to release the pain, grief, and despair that often fills their bodies and spirits – so that they might awaken to hope and to love. Pentecostalism – a particular kind of Spirit-filled, embodied religion – gives adherents a chance to discharge some of the toxic content they are carrying, and to engage life in a new way, in the face of harsh realities.

Alcohol, drugs, sex, the internet, food, and countless other things all can provide a release as well, but these things doesn't adequately fill the "God shaped hollow" that seems to exist in each human heart. Pentecostalism, which emerged as a pre-cursor to the 4th great awakening, seems to fill the "God shaped hollow" in a deeply meaningful and relevant way.

Pentecostalism uses a worship technology based on embodied practice that allows for release – a transcendent, ecstatic moment. Pentecostalism creates a container in which its adherents can deeply resonant with "Spirit." It's worth pointing out that many other faith traditions use these deeply embodied, spiritual technologies as well, including Sufis (whirling dervishes), Muslims (prayer practices), mystical expressions of Christianity, Kirtan, and more.

It seems to me that the embodied practices of Pentecostalism are ultimately liberating, as they remind participants of their place in the universe, in the face of a sovereign God who is active in their lives. As James K. A. Smith writes in his article, "Teaching a Calvinist to Dance," "To be in a position with hands outstretched, or prostrate on the floor, is to be in a position of vulnerability and humility...I thank God for those practices of embodied humiliation that are part and parcel of Pentecostal worship."²⁷

In summary, Pentecostal worship focuses on release, surrender, humility, vulnerability, and egolessness.

I could be wrong, but frankly, I do not think that these are words or practices that are particularly associated with Unitarian Universalism, our social justice and social engagement work, or with our worship.

For Pentecostals, "Worship...is the divine-human encounter that empowers people to help their immediate neighbor as well as engage in various community-building activities. It is also this encounter that humbles people, enabling them to be, in the view of believers, the "servant of others."²⁸ These practices help purge the self of ego, and help worshippers listen to what God is calling them to be and do, as part of a larger community.

By way of contrast, Unitarian Universalist worship culture and church culture often seems to be one of control and restraint; we're in control of our bodies, our lives, and emotions, no matter what anguish or joy rests right below the surface. We seem to actively resist the transcendent breaking into our lives and readjusting our priorities.

Near as I can tell, with very few exceptions, Spirit filled worship has not been the style of Unitarians, or Universalists, or Unitarian Universalists. I spoke with John Cummins, Minister Emeritus of First Universalist, and he shared his thoughts on this. John, as the son of Robert Cummins (often called the "modern architect of organized Universalism") has a deep and abiding love of Universalism. John, perhaps unfairly, characterized Unitarian worship as arid and sterile ("corpse cold," one might say). And yet, this intellectual tradition, while perhaps arid, is also something to be proud of, as it has helped liberate many from oppressive and fear based faith.

²⁷ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/may/25.42.html?start=3>

²⁸ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism*, 133.

And obviously, not all Unitarians fall into the heady intellectual category either. There were Unitarian Transcendentalists who certainly strove for an emotional, intuitive, and Spirit filled life; with rare exception, this was a solitary experience, not a communal one.

And for many Unitarians, release, surrender, and humility were not central to their way of being, nor was the notion of “emotion” filled worship. In fact, many Unitarians were horrified by the emotionalism of the Great Awakening.

Universalists, as we’ve already heard in other papers, leaned into spiritualism, a more “spirit-filled movement.” Furthermore, Universalist, many of them ex-Baptists, often led with an open heart, proclaiming, “God is Love.” And often, though not always, Universalist churches had (and have) a more affective quality to their preaching and worship life. Many Unitarians came to their faith by their head, while many Universalists came to their faith by their heart – a conversion experience of discovery – realizing - in one’s mind and body - that one is loved.

All of which leads me to this: spirit filled worship, spiritual practices, even religion itself – none of it is a head game. Religion might involve the head and the intellect, but ultimately, *religion is not a head game, it’s a heart game*. The heart of the Pentecostal experience is this: faith starts in the body. Given that Unitarian Universalists process to trust our own bodies and personal experiences as authentic sources of religious knowing, one would think that we might have more spirit filled worship than we do. Whether because of the strong influence of scientific rationalism or humanism on Unitarian Universalist worship and thought, or a deep and abiding Puritan-based distrust of the body, it seems as if we’ve remained in our heads. We’re not alone in this. Much of mainline Christianity struggles with this split, which has its roots with the Greeks who believed that the soul and the body were separate and unequal.

Pentecostalism breaks this mold and is clearly a heart game religion, not a head game religion, and it is stories – testimonies – that touch and impact the hearts of believers and non-believers alike.

All of which makes me wonder: What’s our sacred story, our “spiritual life story” as Unitarian Universalists? Not, “What is the story we’re against?” but rather, “What story are we are inviting people in to?” What story do we find ourselves swept up in? In other words, “What’s our heart story, our embodied story? What’s the story that nourishes us, that anchors us, that holds us?”

The Story at First Universalist

At First Universalist, drawing on our rich Universalist tradition, we have begun telling this story: “We are all called to be Love’s people in the world, held by a Love that will not let us go. As Love’s people, we welcome, affirm, and protect the sacred in each human heart, we act for justice and healing in the world, and we listen with our whole being to where Love is calling us next.” This is the story we invite people into at First Universalist. And every Sunday we tell a piece of this story.

I believe we are offering a compelling story in a time when cynicism, despair, and consumer culture reign. To be called to be “Love’s people” in the world suggests that there is more to our lives than consumption, struggle, and our personal needs and wants. Instead, in Love’s story, we are called to recognize and then incarnate the Love that is at the heart of things, the Love that has been holding us all along.

Thus, in our worship and Small Groups (through the spiritual practice of deep listening) at First Universalist, people have an *experience* of being held by a Love that will not let them go, an experience of the Holy. We may never achieve the musical/spiritual technology of Pentecostals, but we are striving to create worship where people actually *do* worship, rather just receive worship. And as a faith community, we are slowly re-imagining how we engage the world and do faith in action, attempting to put aside our own egos and desires in order to be led by the Spirit (i.e., to discern where is Love calling us next, both personally and as a faith community.) We are beginning to weave this practice into various areas of church life.

In this narrative, “Love’s people,” called by Love, long to commune and connect with Love/God. Our spirits and our bodies long to rest, to be held, by that source that will not let us go. This fits with Sociologist Christian Smith’s theory (which, as he notes, is not empirically verifiable, but explains lots of the things that standard social sciences fail to explain), that “...human religions have existed and do exist everywhere because a God really does actually exist, and many humans - especially those not blinded by the reigning narratives of modern science and academia – feel a recurrent and deeply compelling ‘built-in’ desire to know and worship, in their various ways, the God who is there”²⁹

While this narrative and these practices are a far cry from Pentecostalism, the practice of discernment *is* connected to Pentecostalism and seems central to our vitality and relevancy as a faith. However one understands “God,” discernment means listening for the call (and discovering the movement) of something or someone greater than oneself. It means paying attention to how the Spirit of Love is moving in one’s life.

Living in this reality – of being Love’s people in the world, listening to the call of Love on our lives – invites us to sing “Spirit of Life” with a new understanding, open to the possibility that a transcendent, living truth – Love’s truth – can and will break into our lives – and we will never be the same afterwards.

In these ways, crafting this kind of story, perhaps Unitarian Universalists can create a more embodied, spirit filled worship.

²⁹ Miller and Yamamore. *Global Pentecostalism*, 158.