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A Response to Rev. Justin Schroeder's paper "Spirit Filled Worship"
Prairie Group, November, 2012

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A Response

First, I want to thank Justin Schroeder for his paper, "Spirit Filled Worship." I appreciated my colleague's studied undertaking: his interest in placing his paper in both historical and sociological context, his analysis of Pentecostal worship in psychological and physiological terms, and his examination of Unitarian Universalist practices in light of the Pentecostal worship experience. Particularly relevant to my own story were his insights into the UU faith and his exhortation to practice discernment, listen for and then follow a call, and attend to how the Spirit is moving in our lives.

At the outset of my remarks I offer a word of sympathy: in my view the task assigned¹ was too broad for meaningful engagement. I wish the Program Committee's assignment has been succinct (a word limit, perhaps?). In this case, my preference would have been to focus all the presentation time on Pentecostalism itself, and save the comparisons to Unitarian Universalism for the discussion following the presentation.

While Justin approached this topic from an academic perspective, providing contextual analysis and an assessment of "worship technologies," I came at this assignment from a much different place. As someone whose spiritual needs have not been met in a Unitarian Universalist environment for quite some time, I was looking to be fed. I came to this topic as a seeker.

My seeking did not start with this paper. While my doubting mind loved the Unitarian services of my childhood, I have long yearned for something more than I have found in Unitarian Universalism. My grandparents were Catholic and for years I slipped into Catholic churches to worship and feel the ancient presence of a most holy God. Renewed, I would return to my UU congregation to serve and lead.

Midway through my ministry at Second Unitarian I discovered Leadership Conference at Willow Creek. This was the best environment I had ever been in: worshipful, lusty singing, arms lifted high, and the teaching and testimony of some of the brightest leaders from every part of American society. I loved it. My husband furthered my foray into evangelical Christianity, taking me to worship at Corpus Christi's local mega-church.

¹ The Program Committee assignment: "The Distinctive Practice of Pentecostalism: Spirit-Filled Worship" This presentation will explore the experience, theology, and practice of worship in Pentecostal and New-Pentecostal churches. Describe – or show – the form of worship in general, as well as the preaching, healing, music, and other key elements of the practice. Include references to variations among different denominations, geographies, and ethnicities. 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 presentation should include a multi-media component, which can be created using various clips of embodied worship experiences from actual services, and/or from films and TV shows including *The Apostle*, *Leap of Faith*, *Keeping the Faith*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, and the title sequence from *True Blood* (just to name a few). *Word count: 143*

(I hated that first experience, but I did get something out of it.) From the time my son was born until I moved to California last summer I worshiped regularly at Willow Creek on Saturday nights.

What I saw in the clip from Hillsong reflects what is normative in evangelical congregations, mega-churches in particular. While arms lifted high and eyes closed are certainly activities that take place in Pentecostal services, these are broadly part of the evangelical experience. Such behavior exhibits a mild touch of the Holy Spirit, if you will. What I have witnessed and experienced in Pentecostal worship is better reflected in these clips:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BOFYmcHEIc&feature=relatedHoly Ghost>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2boRenMOZg&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4pwGh2SvKA>

And what do we find in Unitarian Universalist worship settings? Something else entirely.

David and I joke that whenever we go and speak to UU's what we find everywhere are the spiritually starving. At conferences and church camps people come to us after we speak and tell the story of their profound spiritual hunger and how they cannot seem to have their spiritual needs met in their congregations. They want spiritually grounded, deeply meaningful and demanding practices that will sustain and challenge their spiritual resilience. Rev. Schroeder's analysis of UU worship experiences explain why this is what we hear. There is very little if any spiritual sustenance offered in too many UU worship settings.

And no wonder. There is very little sustenance offered when we gather as colleagues. If we can't nourish one another as leaders then there is no hope for our people being nourished. Here at Prairie Group, the collegial bonds are strong, intimate and lifelong, yet we do not pray fervently for one another. We do not even offer grace before taking a meal together. I think we do provide a safe place to let off steam and just be people, not pastors, an important gift to be sure. But we mature as we are able to show to one another the authenticity and coarseness of our own spiritual encounter with the Holy. Until we are able to do this with one another, how do we expect our people to mature? The responsibility is ours.

My Testimony

My own story at this point is one of realizing that I need to leave home to find what I need to sustain myself spiritually. Perhaps that is why I approached this paper both reluctantly and as a Divine appointment. It was fall before I found a Pentecostal service near my home. I went Labor Day weekend, my Sunday off. The sermon was about prayer. It wasn't all that different from the evangelical services I have attended, except for the alter call, the laying on of hands, the speaking in tongues, the receiving of the Holy Ghost, and the invitation to be baptized. This is how that worship service ended for me:



It was not a decision I made in the moment, somehow overtaken by the Holy Spirit. I was not levitated to the chancel. I have wanted to be baptized for a long time, and this was just the first opportunity that presented itself. I took it, and I am glad I did. It was an incredible experience. I was alone. No family and friend were with me. The women of the church circled around the baptistery. They laid hands on me and spoke in tongues over me. The church had hands lifted up praying over me.

The following weekend I went with a group of women to their semi-annual Encounter God retreat. It was an intense weekend of confession, prayer, praise and worship. I heard testimony that was clear, painfully honest and challenging. Pointed responses and counsel were offered. The teaching, all done by laywomen, was crisp and direct. I was struck most by the deep spiritual formation of these women. These lay leaders were some of the most spiritually mature people I have encountered. They worked and wrestled with their faith. They practiced, counseled, challenged, fell short, confessed, and practiced some more. It was inspiring to be around people who took their faith seriously.

The last night we were together there was worship and an opportunity to receive the Holy Ghost and I did. To be honest with you, when I went forward I thought there was no way in the world, given the amount of doubt and Unitarian Universalist intellectualism I was carrying, that I would receive the Holy Ghost. Imagine my surprise when the laughter, singing and holy noise erupted from the back of my throat. It was quite an experience. There were 24 women who attended. That service took 2 and a half hours. The singing was lustiest I have ever heard.

A final story: one of the women at this event was coming down from Meth. I had no idea at the time, but learned about her afterwards. She asked to come to the retreat to find God and get clean. One of the leaders told me they were not sure what was going to happen, way out in the sticks like we were, “but everything worked out.” The young woman made it through the weekend and has remained clean ever since.

My question is this: does your church and its ministry have the capacity to meet the spiritual needs of an active meth addict? Would a group of lay women in your congregation be able to welcome a stranger to the church to their upcoming retreat? Would they welcome that stranger if they knew she were an active, current meth user? Would they have any spiritual resources to offer this woman as she wrestled in real time with very the very manifest demon of drug addiction? Could she get clean and begin on her road to recovery over a weekend retreat?

What theological perspective and ecclesial support is your congregation capable of offering the most vulnerable souls among us? And are we satisfied with our answer?