



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

A History of Religion in 5½ Objects

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Incense fills the nostrils of a Krishna devotee in a temple in Vrindavan, India, letting him know he is in a sacred place; Muslim worshipers heed the muezzin's amplified call to prayer from the minaret of a Moroccan mosque; a girl tastes bitter herbs at a Passover Seder in Brooklyn, reminding her of the harshness of her ancestors' slavery in Egypt; a Greek Orthodox woman gazes reverently upon an icon of Jesus Christ and sees the gaze returned, knowing she is blessed; a Zen Buddhist acolyte strolls meditatively through gardens in Kyoto, experiencing form and emptiness. These sensual experiences are part and parcel of the stuff of religion. Myths, rituals, symbols, acts of devotion, prayer, and faith itself do not occur without sensual encounters. To learn about religion we have to come to our senses.

— Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses*, 8

The late Andrew Greeley (1928-2013) was a Roman Catholic priest, bestselling novelist, popular columnist, and respected sociologist of religion. His breakthrough bestseller was *The Cardinal Sins* (1981). In the words of one [review](#), Greeley “did for the Catholic Church what *The Godfather* did for the mafia.” My favorite of his books is *The Catholic Imagination* in which he explores the different ways that Catholicism and Protestantism shape the religious imaginations of those who are raised in the Christian tradition. Many Protestants grow up worshipping in brightly-lit sanctuaries with stark, blank white walls. In contrast, many Catholics grow up in more dimly-lit, dark-walled, richly-ornate spaces. Greeley writes that, “Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures.” And among the many important implications are that, the Catholic Imagination is “one of the reasons, [Greeley believed](#), that the Catholic

church over the centuries has been a great patron of the arts: It grasps the power of imagery to convey what precise doctrinal formula cannot.”

In contrast, a significant part of the Protestant Reformation that shaped the Protestant religious imagination was a rebellion *against* rituals, customs, and traditions that became viewed as meaningless — as either “tradition for tradition’s sake” or that religious hierarchies had come to abuse to control and extort the laity. The stripping away of meaningless or manipulative rituals led to those stark, blank white walls of Protestant worship spaces and the simplified liturgies of Protestant worship services that were much more literal and text-based than Catholic mass.

Reflecting on how the communities we have been apart of have shaped our religious imagination can help us become more aware of the ways that what we experience during our childhoods can unconsciously become our normative reference point — the standard against which all deviations are judged — even to the extent that we can sometimes find ourselves unreflectively thinking that it has always been that way since the beginning.

I witnessed this phenomenon most frequently during the seven years I spent as a youth minister, especially in regard to a youth camp that I helped plan for many years in conjunction with some neighboring congregations. Each year there would be some change to the camp schedule or format, which would trigger some individual or group to protest, “But we’ve always done it the other way.” And if you’ve only been attending an annual event for three years, and something changes in year four, then that claim of “it’s always been that way” seems true to you. But from a more longterm view, those who had been attending the camp much longer knew that almost every aspect of the camp had changed multiple times in its twenty-plus year history.

At the same time, I can appreciate that underneath that protest of “We’ve always done it that way” is a genuine longing for tradition, meaning, and ritual that can only be experienced through repetition over time. And during the eight years I served on the camp planning team, nothing evoked more howls of protest than the periodic proposal of changing the camp’s location.

I have spent a significant amount of time in my life at various camp and retreat centers, and I can say with certainty that the camp in question in Laurel Ridge, North Carolina that this group had been renting for a week each year since the year 2,000 was — despite a one truly

brehtaking outlook on top of the mountain — nothing special. I could list ten immensely more beautiful retreat locations in North Carolina without even trying hard. But these grounds, however humble, had become sacred to these young people through the transformative experiences they had there. And although the camp has now met there for more than a decade, that same camp met at a different location for most the 1990s and that seaside retreat location was equally sacred ground that a different group of young people couldn't imagine changing. There were also two previous settings before that.

My point is that there is power in repetition and ritual. Even the most humble setting or rite can become sacred and hallowed time and space over time because it becomes imbued with the depth and thickness of time, tradition, and experience. However, an overemphasis on a tradition can sometimes prevent us from seeing that new rituals and traditions can become equally meaningful — or potentially even more meaningful.

As Unitarian Universalists, our tradition emerged from what is known as the Radical Reformation, the left-wing of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. So if you look around our sanctuary this morning, you can see the ways that we are shaped by the Protestant Imagination: our spare, clean, plain white walls. But our large open windows on to the world also testify to the ways the nature mysticism of our 19th-century Transcendentalist forebears continues to influence us. And one of our growing edges as Unitarian Universalists is reclaiming the ways that some rituals can be deeply meaningful and transformative — engaging not only our minds, but also our bodies through our five senses of taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight. As one of my mentors taught me, worship should be a “Symphony for the Senses.”

At their best, rituals invite us into a liminal, “threshold” time and space in which we become more open than we might otherwise be to an encounter with the sacred, depth dimension of life. And the search for moving, meaningful ritual that engages our bodies not just our minds is one of the reasons that during Joys and Sorrows, we invite you not only to share verbally, but also to drop a stone into the water — or during the other half of the year to light a candle. The realization that the Protestant Imagination had overcompensated in demanding that sanctuaries always have plain white walls is one of the reasons that we commissioned this art piece behind

the pulpit and why we are so fortunate to have the regular monthly art shows rotating through our Blanche Ames Art Gallery in our Religious Education wing.

And as you know (or will find out if you stick around here regularly for a full year) we UUs increasingly have our rituals including a fall Water Communion, winter Fire Communion, and spring Flower Communion — as well as Child Dedication rituals, Christmas Eve Candlelight services, and more. Indeed, the longing and power of ritual can be seen in our practice of opening and closing our worship services with a Chalice Lighting — a practice that is only a few decades old, but that spread incredibly quickly and has become so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget that it is a fairly recent ritual innovation in the history of our movement. And as I've been reflecting on our UU rituals this past week, it seems to me that an occasion such as Easter Sunday could be an important to also offer some form of Bread Communion — perhaps with everyone invited to bring a loaf of their favorite bread — out of Unitarian Universalism's Liberal Christian heritage, offered to those to whom would find it meaningful to participate.

To be clear, such a Communion ritual in a UU setting would not be about Jesus' body and blood, which both myself and many scholars would argue is a later development that had nothing to do with the historical Jesus' intention. Instead, it would be about remembering the radical way that the historical Jesus' sought to build community: a willingness to invite everyone present — whether friends or enemies — to share in a simple meal during which divisions might begin to break down through table fellowship across socio-economic boundaries in which all are invited to eat.

From a broader perspective, there is an interesting new book from Beacon Press that reflects on the role of ritual in religious traditions titled *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses*. The author Brent Plate reflects on the ways that often the simplest, most commonplace objects — stones, incense, drums, crosses, bread — can become invested with tremendous, even transformative, pathos and meaning.

The author claims that the “1/2” in the title is “a symbolic of our incomplete natures, the need for a human body to be made whole through relations with something outside itself” (3). And although I agree with that statement from the perspective of our Seventh Principle (“the interdependent web of all existence”), to be honest, my perception is that making the title “A

History of Religion in Five 1/2 Objects” is mostly just a marketing ploy to pique your curiosity enough to open the book and find out what he means. It’s like the spin behind the news announcer that throws to commercial with the line, “Up next, the three common items in your basement that could kill you.” (You are meant to think, “No! I need to know what those three things are now!) But just because it’s an obvious manipulation doesn’t mean it isn’t effective — just like it’s not paranoid if they really are out to get you.

I find the book’s subtitle more direct and persuasive: “Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses.” That’s what I find most important about ritual: simple objects — stones, incense, drums, crosses, bread — can transform our worship and ourselves through engaging our taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound. The senses can transport and transforms us.

When I think of the long history of stones in the history of religion, what immediately comes to mind are the Pyramids in Egypt, which astoundingly were constructed 4,000 years ago, or Stone Henge in England built around the same time. Or more simply cairns: those simple but often breathtakingly beautiful stacks of rocks. Or the stones built into the Jerusalem Temple, including those that remain as the Wailing Wall. Or the rock at the center of the *Ka’ba* in Mecca that are a central part of the Islamic pilgrimage the Hajj. But Plate’s book also reminded me of:

The discovery in the 1960s of the great stone rings of Gobekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey evidence ritual gatherings, aesthetic creations, and the use of stone more than eleven thousand years ago. Dating six thousand years before Stonehenge, and seven thousand before the...Pyramid at Giza, this is the place of the oldest known temple on earth. (39)

That’s *Neolithic* religion! I invite you to remember some of those deep, resonate connections through space and time between rocks and religion the next time you hold one of those stones in your hand for Joys and Sorrows or for a related ritual.

If you are particularly moved by your sense of smell perhaps you would appreciate some of the meetings of our Earth-centered spirituality group here at UUCF, who regularly incorporates incense into their rituals both on 3rd Sundays at 10:00 a.m. in the chapel and in the evenings during celebration of the eight Sabbaths on the Wheel of the Year.

And if you have never experienced the ritual walking of our outdoor Labyrinth, I encourage you to do so at anytime or especially as part of our monthly full-moon walks. Usually the first hour from 8:00 - 9:00 p.m. is silent. But the second hour from 9:00 - 10:00 p.m. welcomes hand drums and other percussion instruments as part of the walk. The drum is Plate's third example of objects that have a deep history in religious ritual. Drums at the most primal level remind us our heartbeat, the rhythmic pumping of our lifeblood.

Plate's fourth religious ritual object are crosses, which Western Civilization has come to associate most strongly with Christianity. But the Egyptian ankh is one of many reminders that the cross precedes Christianity and archetypically represents the intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of life, the meeting of the sacred and mundane. And if you look at the cover of your order of service, you'll see our version here at UUCF of the classic Unitarian Universalist Association logo of a chalice surrounded by a circle. And if you look closely, especially at the classic UUA version, you'll notice that the chalice itself is both cruciform and off-center, recognizing our deep roots in liberal Christianity and acknowledging that Christianity is no longer at the center of our movement, but now is decentered as one among five other major sources of our living tradition.

Plate's final religious ritual object is bread, which we've already explored some. And as we move toward the conclusion of this service and toward the lunch hour, I invite you to consider that the word *com-pan-ion* literally means "with bread." A companion is literally someone with whom you break bread. As you sit down to eat in the coming days I invite you to allow that ritual— that may not always involve literally break bread — of taking the first bite of your meal to remind you to be more fully present that that companion or companions with whom you are eating. Each meal is another opportunity and invitation to break down walls and build community.

For now, I'll leave you with a final invitation. Sometime this afternoon or in the next week or so, I invite you to take a leisurely walk. It can be as short as to the end of the block and back. Allow that walk to be a symphony for the senses for you. Pay attention to all that you notice through your senses. Perhaps you'll see a particular object that resonates with you. Perhaps that object might be the start of a simple home altar in the corner of a room or the corner

of the desk that can remind you to pause periodically and remember the beauty and the wonder all around us — even or especially through such common objects as stones, incense, drums, crosses, or bread. As Mary Oliver says in this poem from her collection titled *Thirst*:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.