

## LITURGY AND GORILLAS

(Art and Religion II) (A)

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Perhaps you have never thought of our Sunday service as an art form. Religious ritual, or liturgy, is the art of religious drama. Its goal, like that of all other arts, is psychological transformation.

## LITURGY AND GORILLAS

I have been thinking and reading a lot lately about the connection between art and religion, and I have come up with four related titles for talks. As you know, the first was called *Ritual and the Bower Bird*. This one, the second, I am calling *Liturgy and Gorillas*. If you are kind enough to invite me back a third time my title will be *Sir Isaac Newton and Our Neglected Liturgy*. My fourth talk will be called *Stained Glass and Plain Glass*.

You might call these four talks “Art In Religion I, II, III, and IV” in general I am trying to persuade you to regard each of our Sunday services as a religious drama, a work of art comparable to a Shakespearean play. Overall, I am also trying to point out four things: *one*, the critical importance of liturgy—the art of religious drama—to our Sunday services; *two*, the spiritual weaknesses of inadequately liturgical ‘religious’ services; *three*, some of the historical reasons for our rather narrow Unitarian Universalist view of liturgy; and *four*, the possibility that either traditional liturgy or traditional silence can lead to emotional transformation. Since my title this morning is *Liturgy and Gorillas* perhaps I should say what I mean by “liturgy”. Well, when you came in this morning the greeter gave you a printed piece of paper with a heading which read “Order of Service”. “Liturgy” is almost everything listed under “order of service”—ringing the singing bowl, lighting the chalice, readings, music, *etc.* Most church services are examples of liturgy, which is an organized structure of rituals, and all rituals are a form of drama. Religious ritual, which is usually called liturgy, is the art of religious drama. Its goal, like that of all other arts—poetry, the novel, music, painting—is the transformation of consciousness, which is Carl Jung’s name for the purpose of religion, and the goal of life. This transformation involves our senses and emotions, our awareness, but not our knowledge or ideas. Jung’s term implies that he sees mere rationalism as barren, and, that liturgy is naturalistic and psychological rather than supernatural. ***Liturgy is an art which***

***manipulates sensory data, in order to achieve the psychological transformation that is the purpose of natural religion. Arts like drama, music, painting, poetry, and fiction manipulate sensory data in order to achieve the psychological transformation which is the purpose of art.*** So primarily, this morning I want to point out the parallels between the art of secular drama and the art of liturgy. Both use the same means for the same objective.

Most liturgy is denominational. Liturgy is exemplified in prayer books (Unitarian--Universalists don't have one), such as the Anglican Book Of Common Prayer or the Roman Catholic missal, and is usually the same for all congregations in the denomination. Most denominations have liturgies for special occasions, such as marriage, communion, morning prayer, or funeral services, or for special times of the year, like Yom Kippur in Judaism. However, Unitarian Universalism, despite its many great virtues, is unfortunately not notable for its liturgy. So at times we are regarded as people who want to be religious, but don't know how to go about it; or as people who want to be wild, but have nothing to be wild about. I will have to confess that the liturgical drama I feel is essential is sometimes missing in our services. Perhaps this is what some of our members mean when they say that our services lack spirituality. So I've told you what liturgy is. But now, who are the gorillas? That's you and me, dear friends, regarded optimistically as animals who are almost human. Up in New England we used to say that the preacher's job was to keep talking until the congregation awoke. So now that you know what my sermon is going to be about, liturgy and gorillas, you can go back to sleep, knowing that you won't be missing anything important.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the west, a shift began in seeing religion as a natural event, rather than as a supernatural event. We began to talk about "natural religion" rather than "revealed religion". Discussion of religion then was generally carried on in theological terms. But later during the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was another shift, this time away from theological and supernatural terms to psychological terms. William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience (1902)*, was part of this development. Representatives of orthodox religions, and to some extent even Unitarian Universalists, were slow to adapt to this change. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1876-1961) was as much responsible as anyone for introducing the new naturalistic and psychological discourse into religion. And in his book *Modern Man In Search of a Soul (1933)*, he examined religious questions from a naturalistic and psychological viewpoint. He suggests that in speaking about religion we should use the language of psychology and not lapse into linguistic medievalism. We have all had to face for ourselves the ultimate questions, such as "what is the purpose of life?" Unfortunately, our religious and secular traditions often no longer provide us with adequate contemporary answers, but we continue to search, perhaps in the hope that some day we will be transformed. In the meantime I continue to read Jung. To some extent, he has become my analyst, if not the analyst for western culture generally. On the other hand, he is not my guru (I don't have One), or my saviour (I don't have one of those either). In what follows I will normally use the term "psychological" instead of older theological or supernatural terms. Jung generally, uses the term "psyche" rather than the older term "soul".

Jung believed the purpose of life was the continual expansion of consciousness, the increase of awareness, the transformation of an ever-increasing portion of the human unconscious into consciousness. Buddha seems to have had a similar view. When asked who he was, he replied that he was one who was awake, who was completely conscious. That view is acceptable to me because I have never found anything else I

like as well. For Jung, the purpose of religion, and the goal of life itself, was to promote this awakening, this transformation of consciousness, and I am suggesting that liturgy is one of several means we have for doing it. Art, music, poetry, great novels, and liturgy all seem to have similar effects, and like religion; they all arise from the unconscious. Whether the effect of liturgy is temporary or permanent, mild or intense, working sometimes and sometimes not, or working for some individuals and not for others, the drama of liturgy is meant to transform us, in the same way we are transformed by the experience of Mozart or Shakespeare or Picasso. Since liturgy, like drama, is radically naturalistic, it does not involve the supernatural. But our spirituality still needs the drama of liturgy to be effective. Religion needs art. Our human aspirations, our sense of awe and wonder amidst the beauty and terror of life, need the formal drama of liturgy for its fullest realization. Perhaps we participate in religious services in part because of our dimly sensed or unconscious feeling that as individuals we are seeking psychological transformation through the art of liturgy. Why else do we come here on Sunday mornings? Our Christian ancestors might have had something like this in mind when they talked of "conversion", and despite our religious differences from them we may have more feelings in common with them than we know or can normally bring our selves to admit. It is surprising how a religious outlook devoid of supernaturalism allows us to reclaim some good, old words, like "conversion" or "transformation" that we long ago sacrificed to the religious right. Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung and Karen Armstrong have taught religious liberals that words like "myth", or "ritual", or "liturgy", are not, as we may have thought, just outmoded survivals of somebody else's religious delusion, but deserve our serious effort to understand, rather than our contempt. The most important fact about the art of liturgy is that it *is* an art. Perhaps you have never thought of our Sunday service as an art form. I am concerned, that in Unitarian Universalism, liturgy is a lost art, an unacknowledged art, or even a rejected art. One consequence of what we now call natural religion, as opposed to supernatural religion, is that the art of liturgy can now be accepted and understood as an essential part of natural religion, and not some sort of supernatural mumbo-jumbo. Its loss should therefore be a matter of concern to our denomination. I would like to consider later some of the historical and psychological reasons why the art of liturgy has become diminished in our communion. But for now, since Unitarians are not notoriously indifferent to art, or incompetent as artists, it might help if we looked a bit at the components of liturgy, to remind ourselves of how, together, they constitute the art of religious drama; how almost every element of secular drama has a specific counterpart in religious drama; and how psychological transformation is the goal of both.

In a real sense, our church, any church, is a theater just look around you. Our sanctuary has a stage, and *is* a stage, on which the drama of our liturgy is enacted. The clergy and others officiating are the actors. In many secular plays there is music—the religious service may have a choir and instruments. Our religious actors often have costumes, or robes. Plays have a script; religious services have readings, prayers, sermons, and dialogue. Like choreography in secular drama, many religious observances have processions, recessions, and defined patterns of movement. Thus liturgy, the church service, is composed of the same elements as secular drama. Fitting all these elements together in the most effective psychological or aesthetic pattern is the job of the liturgist, or religious dramatist. And the goal of a religious service, of liturgical drama, like that of secular drama, is also psychological transformation. After seeing a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* you are changed, you are not the same person you were when the curtain went up. Similarly, after participating in a religious service, a liturgical drama, you are changed; you are not the same person you were when the

chalice was lighted. If a religious service is not a liturgical drama it is nothing. If you come out of church Sunday morning and don't know whether you have attended a sociology lecture or a religious service, something was very wrong with that service. Whenever in a religious service there is no drama, or ineffective drama, the ultimate religious nature of the event is doubtful consequently it is less likely that there will be any psychological transformation, or that we shall find the expansion of consciousness and compassion we are all seeking so desperately.

If you can see liturgy as a form of dramatic art you can understand how one can evaluate the liturgy of our services or of our denomination. That is to say, one can make aesthetic judgments about liturgy, even though one cannot say that the liturgy involved is true or false. There is no supernatural connection here. Liturgy is radically naturalistic. And in liturgy one is dealing with feelings, not with beliefs. One can only say that a service was aesthetically satisfying, or that it was not; that the liturgy involved was good art or bad art. On Sundays Unitarians apparently like to discuss the sermon. I am reminded of the little old man who told the minister that he liked every one of her sermons better than the next one. But, unfortunately, Unitarians rarely discuss their liturgy, and our denomination at large has, unfortunately, been little concerned about liturgy.

Jung and Buddha may be right, increased consciousness may be the purpose of life and the goal of religion, but we do not yet have an adequate psychology of natural religion. We don't know exactly how the effects of natural religion are achieved. But if you make up a brief list of the great exemplars of human compassion you would be likely to find on it names like Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis, Gandhi, Schweitzer, and Mother Teresa. Is it just an accident that so many of these names come from religions with highly developed liturgical traditions? Where is our Unitarian Universalist St. Francis? Our Buddha? Our Gandhi? Great psychological transformations rarely happen, but I would like to think that liturgy is sometimes instrumental in allowing them to happen, in allowing an Albert Schweitzer or a Mother Teresa to happen. So nothing could be more important to religion and its goal of psychological transformation than the effective use of the art of liturgy. The continued failure of Unitarian Universalism to develop an effective (and optional) denominational liturgy would be both an aesthetic and spiritual failure.

We all come in the church door every Sunday morning like gorillas, seeking transformation. When we go out that door an hour later we are all still gorillas, and still seeking transformation. Don't take my word for it. Experiment with Truth in your own life, as Gandhi did. Don't take my word for it. Be a light unto yourself, as Buddha advises us to do. Then perhaps we can keep hoping that, if our liturgy has any value at all, sometimes on Sundays when we go out the church door an hour later we will be a little less like the gorillas we were when we came in.