

CREATING THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE: STOKING THE FIRES OF ECSTASY

Worship is, by its very nature, mysterious. To attempt to describe how to make it happen is like trying to explain how a flower blooms. We all recognize when it happens, but we find it tough to describe. I'll use the "As if" theory - "as if" it's even possible to explain worship.

First, there's homework, with its two parts: Planning and Preparation. Planning begins for me by reading the lessons for each Sunday several months in advance. Perhaps the reading will suggest a certain hymn or piece of music. This process is a bit like trolling: I just ride slowly in the boat and cast about, looking for what may surface to be caught. Like fishing, I learn patience. I read some more.

Next, the priests and I have informal conversation over a table filled with hymnal, Bible, other music resources. We begin to flesh out each service. Finally, the details of every service - mostly music, plus considering what may be "different" on a given week (like All Saints' Sunday next week) are discussed within the Lit. 6 group, consisting of the two priests, the music director, two choir members and one congregation member: the "6". We spend one hour together every 4-6 weeks, looking in great detail at each service, "trying on" each part to see if it fits together.

This is cognitive, mental work. Stoking the fires of ecstasy begins with study and brainstorming. NOW the choir can begin ITS cognitive, mental work of learning notes, rhythm, text, as well as the spiritual practice of becoming one unit. Priests study, pray, fashion thoughts into a homily.

Alongside this planning is ongoing personal preparation: paying close attention to my breath (In-Spiration is to breathe in Spirit); attuning myself to the Divine; really LOOKING at the face of whoever I'm with. All these moment-to-moment awarenesses gradually shape my being and develop my focus toward the Divine in all. This is the first step to opening my heart.

Here's a little "Pretend" exercise. Pretend that there are vertical blinds extending from your chin to the bottom of your ribs. They close off the heart. The Collect for Purity says that our hearts are open; so take your hands at your heart and pull open those blinds. "Lift up your heart" - could it also be "Open your heart?" This simple exercise - or even the thought of it - can stoke the fires of ecstasy, preparing me for worship.

After this planning and preparation comes the second step: the actual Practice of the Sunday Eucharist. As I arrive at church, just the act of entering the building changes me; it separates me from all the busy-ness of my life in the world.

The building, with its proportion, design, and sacred symbols - the work of many hands and hearts - invites us into the Sacred Space within Us. I am always seeking more interior space for the Divine to inhabit.

The weekly preparation of the Sacred Space is awesome to me. The sexton keeps the space clean and orderly. Flowers have been lovingly arranged, usually on Saturday, by people who have the skill of using nature's gifts of color, smell, shape, texture

to create beauty for us to see as we enter the nave. Behind

the scenes the sacristans have anonymously prepared the host and wine so that the elements are ready to nurture us. One among us has brought Prayers of the People to be offered up. Readers have rehearsed reading the lessons thoughtfully with inflection that helps us grasp the inner meaning. Some people are ready to assist in the distribution of the bread and wine. Secretaries have printed orders of service. The choir has rehearsed, priests have prepared a sermon. Greeters make us feel welcome. Already so much has been done before we begin at 10:30! There is a saying that for every minute of worship, there has been an hour spent in preparation. I suspect that's accurate regarding our corporate worship.

We all have a quilt that grandmother made, or a wooden table honed by a great-grandfather. These are treasures because they connect us with our heritage and all its wisdom. The prayers, scripture, music - all of it carries the richness of all that has gone before; they connect us to the stream of creation. And we realize that we are becoming part of that stream for future generations. This view backwards and forwards at once reminds us that we are smack in the middle of the Radical Now. In the Radical Now, we can connect with God.

And so we come to the practice of worship. We offer our very presence to each other and to God. We come to be changed, edified.

Acolytes light the candles and we begin to enter the mystery of worship together. Applying the concept of midrash to the prayers, hymns, chant, scripture, we are always looking beneath the words on the surface - always seeking to go deeper into our interior self, deeper into the Divine. Does a certain word evoke an image: Follow it. What happens in my gut? in my heart? in your gut? in your heart?

Lawrence Kusnher writes in GOD WAS IN THIS PLACE AND I, I DID NOT KNOW:

"Only when the words of the text are holy, or like a love letter, are read with a diligence of attention bordering on reverence, can midrash occur."

This diligence of attention is not passive. It is intensely active. It is mercurial, elusive, and invisible. This attention stretches me in ways I cannot imagine. I participate through

deep breathing, clearing my mind, opening my heart. I yearn, I do what I can do, I work on my diligence of attention, I ask. I am developing an intimate relationship with the Divine.

Father David teaches us the word Anamnesis: the creation of an experience where we transcend boundaries of time, space, and self. I must risk becoming changed, following the longing inside. The creation of this experience of Anamnesis is Worship.

A friend who knows quantum physics speaks of the Sinking Down

into us from Infinite Potential. We EXPERIENCE our BEING as part of a larger energy which we may call God, as we allow God to SINK INTO US.

The Sufis have a profound saying: Who you truly are is so much more beautiful than who you think you are. Worship gives me the opportunity to explore who I truly am, rather than living as the limited self I sometimes think I am.

Tom says: The single task of the heart is to remain open; that's all Jesus asked in a hundred different ways. Any semblance of defense or control is the work of the ego. THE SINGLE TASK OF THE HEART IS TO REMAIN OPEN.

As we leave our corporate worship time, these words: Send us out to love and serve, to do the work you have given us to do - speaks to our reflecting back to the Infinite Potential that which we absorbed. The task of the heart remaining open invites us to be the persons we were created to be. It's the beginning of the rest of our Worship experience: to BE our true selves, to love and serve.

We come in as individuals. We leave as part of the whole community - beautiful, enough, loving, serving.

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