

**“Becoming”**  
**May 3rd, 2020**  
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Like most of the world’s religions, we as Unitarian Universalists mark major life changes with rituals. There are six that we generally do: baby dedications or blessings, Coming of Age, bridging, weddings, ordinations, and memorial services. And, as with other traditions, these lifecycle rituals are imbued with our particular UU culture and theology.

During Community Hour on Thursday morning I asked if there was anything people wondered about these UU rituals. Erin Gold very astutely pointed out that in other religions there’s an underpinning of reverence, as she called it. But as UUs we don’t assume theism - the belief in a God or higher power. So then what’s the belief, maybe you’d call it the theology, that underlies our UU rituals?

Perhaps it’s this:

We are each people with inherent worth, being and becoming ourselves as we make meaning and search for our truths in life. We are also part of the great network of living, bound to each other, more ourselves when we are alive with connection.

Our rituals recognize this, reflect and celebrate when we step fully into a new stage, having already struggled to become whoever we are now.

And this is a critical difference. We are Universalists, born of a theological lineage that says no one is ever beyond the reaches of love,

no one is ever forsaken, no one is ever less than human, no one comes needing to be saved. See in UU theology our connection to sacredness, to grace, to love is not dependent on Jesus alone or any confession of faith. We are thus a people who don't perform sacraments.

In Christian traditions, at least in my understanding, sacraments create a change in which we become connected with God and grace.

In our UU rituals we don't claim this kind of shift - the power is not in the ritual, but in the person. So in the ritual we come together to say "we see who you have become." It is a moment of recognition.

This first moment of recognition is a baby dedication. And there are ways in which our ritual is similar to baptism - mainly that the minister puts water on the baby. But the meaning we give to it is entirely different from the meaning of baptism. In our conversation Thursday morning, there was a sort of collective horror at the idea that babies are born with inherent sin and the act of baptism purifies them. In at least some versions of Christian theology, it is the baptism itself, the holy water in which you become saved, reunited with God and grace.

But as I said in the beginning, we are Universalists. We say no one is damned, no one needs to be made lovable. So when I dip a rose in water and bless a baby, I'm not purifying it, I'm welcoming it into the world that it has already entered. When we come together as a congregation to dedicate babies and children, we are saying "we see you, we welcome you, and we promise to love you."

Sacraments connect you to some sacredness that is separate from you.

But as UUs we say “we recognize the sacredness, the sweetness, the magic that is inside you, and we will celebrate it together.”

The second moment of recognition is Coming of Age. This is an age when lots of traditions recognize some shift in consciousness, a transition from childhood into adulthood, or at least a time of greater responsibility and agency. For Jewish youth, this moment is recognized with a bar or bat mitzvah. After months of learning Hebrew, they chant from a Torah scroll to the congregation and officially become adult members of the community, taking responsibility for their own spiritual lives.

Our Coming of Age ritual is similar to this in ways, though with less Hebrew and no public singing required. But we do ask that the youth write a credo - a statement about their beliefs and values - and share it with the congregation. It is sometimes thought of as graduation from religious education, after which point young people decide they no longer have to come to church.

But perhaps it's really a moment when we come together to say: we see how much you've grown and we recognize that you have been on a journey of self discovery, of attuning to your own moral compass. We welcome you among us, we recognize that you have grown enough to choose. We see who you have become.

Bridging comes third, at the end of high school, when teens transition out of life at home to life on their own. In some sense, it's a goodbye, a recognition that you are ready to go out on your own, ready to enter adulthood and take full responsibility. We'll be doing a version of this in

two weeks, limited as we are by the realities of zoom, but graced by the capacity to be creative. Bridging is a moment when we gather to recognize how much a person has matured and give them our blessing as they prepare to enter adulthood.

Weddings follow in this vein - it is not a moment in which something is created, but one in which something is publicly recognized. The relationship is not made at the altar. Rather a wedding is a moment in which families come together to recognize that they have become connected, that two people have been changed by a relationship, and that they have chosen each other as family. In a wedding we witness that promise and say “we see your love.”

As ministers, the ritual is ordination. But unlike traditions in which the ritual changes us, turns us into someone who can touch and create the sacred, we UUs don't claim any transformation. Like with all of our rituals, it is not a moment that makes us who we are, it is a moment that recognizes who we are. Even when we go before the committee at the UUA that certifies us, the most common advice is “show them the minister you are.” We're not asked to demonstrate what we could be, we're asked to demonstrate who we already are. In the act of ordination, a congregation comes together to recognize that someone among them is a minister. To say we see you, we bless you, we know who you have become.

The last of these six lifecycle rituals marks the end of life. In memorial services, we recognize the fullness of people's lives, their dying, and their impact on the people who love them. We mark death, hold the magnitude of it together, and tell the stories of how someone else's

becoming changed our own. But it is not a moment in which we return a soul to the heavens or speak of damnation. Because the ritual doesn't change the person being celebrated, it recognizes that they have already gone from this world, but their having lived remains forever bound up with ours. Memorial services are more for the people left behind, the people left wondering how life goes on in the wake of death. They are already people holding both, grief cloaked around their beating hearts. And that is a thing that must be recognized.

In all of these rituals, the strangeness is necessary. The dressing up, the celebration, the grief in the open, the collective attention to the moment, it's all necessary because it helps understand that we have changed, that the person in front of us has changed. Becoming ourselves is marked, recognized, understood together.

But never do we claim power over this magic. We ministers are not the bestowers of being enough, of wholeness, nor are we the sole arbiters of meaning. We are not superhuman, thank goodness. Because as Unitarian Universalists, in these moments of ritual we don't claim to be making someone change. Instead, we gather together to hold the fullness of each other's becoming, to say we recognize you, and we gather in celebration of your being as you are. The reverence underlying it all is the spark of life within, the magic of connection, of knowing another and being known, it's the recognition that we will always be enough, forever on the journey of becoming ourselves.

Blessed be and amen.