

Meadville Lombard Theological School

Project Paper: *Addressing Meaning in Congregational Worship Through the Arts*

Completed in pursuit of the Doctor of Ministry degree

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ADDRESSING MEANING IN CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP
THROUGH THE ARTS

BY

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VITA

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Addressing Meaning in Congregational Worship Through the Arts

Abstract:

My goals in pursuing this project were multifold. While continuing to engage congregants' minds, I hoped to use storytelling, graphic art, music, and dance to move beyond linear, traditional spiritual language or the regular passive forms of listening. Creating a Mythos worship team to produce these interactive, experiential services monthly, I hoped to meet this objective in conjunction with lay leaders to present services in a truly shared ministry context. The services were planned, presented and evaluated favorably by the team itself and by the congregation. The Mythos Team will continue to present services into the future, drawing on a wider array of congregants.

Introduction

Robert (name altered) walked heavily into my office: his job had been outsourced, his divorce finalized, his cancer returning. Yet the overwhelming character of his ills was not his primary focus; he came for help in dealing with the raw existential realities of life. My experience as a spiritual director has taught me that many of the folks in this congregation have similar battles with meaninglessness in their lives: both in and out of traumatic situations. This realization formed my focus question: “How can weekly worship services nurture congregants as they dealt with these issues?” Although Chaplain David Hodge works with hospital patients rather than a congregation, his writing encouraged me:

To some extent God and/or religious communities act as ideal self-Objects, holding environments fostering increased ego cohesion, integration and mastery; a productive reframing can occur that shifts the focus away from the present obstacle to the spiritual lessons clients are desirous of learning. Religious communities have programs, activities and social networks that can be beneficially used by clients to overcome obstacles and reorient their lives along ends more in keeping with their ultimate life goals. ¹

¹ David Hodge, *Spiritual Assessment: Handbook for Helping Professionals*. (Bostford: National Association of Americans in Social Work, 2003), 26.

I hypothesized that there could be similarities with my congregation. In Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals, Anderson and Foley claim the integration of worship and pastoral care is a critical agenda for the church: the splintering of social structures leaves people feeling disconnected and lost in a world less likely to define who they are to be. Healthy living becomes an overwhelming “psycho-spiritual quest.”² As I reflected on the ways in which worship could touch this need, I thought of the role sacred imagery can play in moving people toward experiences of depth and meaning. John F. Hayward’s words proved useful:

The unique function of the church lies in its acts of worship. People seek together to commune directly with those realities that they believe sustain their lives and give meaning to their existence...the preservation and presentation of traditional forms and ideas of worship ensure that there shall be definitive articulation of religious feeling and not an endless and unfulfilled groping.³

I pondered. If worship could invite congregants to deeper levels of participation and meaning, then it could be meaningful enough to address concerns such as Robert’s. But could this happen in my Unitarian Universalist congregation where traditional spiritual language often alienates rather than heals? Again from my spiritual direction work, I knew that myths can be the bridge out of one’s personal trials as it invites the individual into common human dilemma and hope. I determined to develop a “Mythos Team” made up experts in the arts, drama and liturgy; together we would develop what I hoped

² Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), x.

³ John F. Hayward, *Through the Rose Window: Art, Myth and the Religious Imagination*, (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002), 50.

would become transformational worship which would bring individuals out of their own crises and into a healing common human experience.

Coursework focusing on the interface of religion and psychology provided two principles which gave me a foundation. Edward Edinger's work on the ego-Self axis contributed to my understanding of the isolating individualism which too often prevents congregants from sharing their fears and glories. When the ego is balanced with the larger Self (whether viewed as transcendent or immanent) whole new resources arise. As I listened to individual congregants express their fears, I heard a common emphasis on the ego as the sole tool of redemption from life's challenges. Rather than aiding people, though, this fierce individualism seemed to isolate them from their fellow human beings, people who were experiencing similar frustrations and fears. Edinger presented the ego-Self axis as the vital connecting link.⁴ Whereas a non-integrated ego thinks of itself as everything or as nothing, the Self (which exists beyond the ego) enables us to understand life experiences. This Self supplies perspective which allows us to take the longer look, to reach beyond ourselves either in church or otherwise.⁵ This seemed to suggest myth as a focus in worship because of its ability to connect the universal with the personal.

Secondly, I found help in the concept of the "Good Enough Mother" as expressed by Kohut, Winnicott, and Miller. The empathy of the Good Enough Mother provides the loving support and warm acceptance which engenders a sense of worthwhileness in the

⁴ Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, (Boston: Shambala, 1972), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

child.⁶ I wondered how to we create ‘good enough’ worship. Can a congregation become a holding environment which is adequate to calm the existential uncertainties of real people’s lives? In Archetypes of Initiation, Robert Moore posits the question directly, “Can God be good enough to hold all of me?”⁷

What you need is a container that allows the real people to emerge and give them enough support so that they do not immediately leave. We need creative ritualization... We need ritualized containment with human beings in relationships to help people manage unregulated grandiosity.⁸

How do we create a regular “holding environment” which will embrace the range of needs as congregants confront the core issues of life while helping them to tap their deepest spiritual core? Again, myth seemed to be the tool. The Greek word, *Muthos*, refers to anything delivered by word of mouth: a conversation, a speech, a story, a legend. This title gave me an organizing principle which was flexible. And so, we needed to provide a worship experience which would invite people into the larger human story of which their days were a part. And we needed to do this in a way which provided a safe container of support as they allowed themselves to emerge into that larger story. I set out to work in a shared ministry process with the Mythos Team, hoping our combined talents could develop a worship form which would test these ideas.

⁶ Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self: Rooting Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction in Self-Transcendence*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 61.

⁷ Robert L. Moore, “Analysis as Initiatory Process (1985),” in *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation. Lectures and Essays by Robert Moore*, ed. Max J. Havlick, Jr.. (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2001), 130.

⁸ Robert Moore, *Facing the Dragon: Confronting Personal and Spiritual Grandiosity*. (Wilmette: Chiron Publishing, 2007), 151

My Theology

In my view, a congregation is a community of mutual caring and support which then extends its compassion outwards to the world. Nurturing spiritual depth and renewal is a core function of the weekly worship experience. Inviting the numinous—or even Edinger’s “Self” into worship without relying on God talk can be challenging in a Unitarian Universalist setting. And yet, I believed, our egos alone cannot grasp all that is contained within our deepest beings. June Singer’s words on counseling mirror some of my challenges and goals in the worship experience:

The consulting room is, in large measure, a sort of staging area, where the experiences and the insights stemming from them are assembled, and the analytic discussion takes place, a discussion which is aimed at finding meaning in what has been brought for consideration. The analyzand is sent forth again into the battle with the world, armed with whatever understanding has emerged as he and the analyst have together dealt with the material at hand.⁹

Like Singer’s consulting room, I view worship as a sort of staging area, where experiences of life are laid out, discussed and examined to find meaning; this activity, then, provides the impetus for congregants to go back out into the world with deeper understanding and the courage to keep on living their experiences with integrity. I hoped

⁹ Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung’s Psychology*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 153.

the services planned and implemented by the Mythos Team could embody this transformational ritual. Once again, I saw myth as our key tool. Karen Armstrong surmised that anxieties which can't be answered by logical arguments can be transformed through myth.¹⁰ It was my intent to combine learnings from Jungian thought, spiritual direction practices, and psychology classes to put together a format which could draw disparate theological viewpoints into a common experience of depth. In spiritual direction, I had to learn to listen beyond the details of the directee's particular life events in order to find the themes and symbols which would provide the liberation she or he was seeking. Now I needed to learn to do the same thing in a congregational context. The Mythos Team would present a thematic story—myth—in a way which allowed people to move beyond the details and recognize the reference points of their own story. Also, I hoped this process would expand the traditional cognitive styles of worship into a kinesthetic shift felt within congregants' inner selves. Again John Hayward's words gave me the courage I needed to begin:

[In the worship setting] one is lifted out of the isolating belief that one's ecstasies and agonies are unique and related solely to an immediate location in time and space. One is put into a relationship at once historical, concrete in time, and eternal, essential, and beyond time...The dramatic and celebrative element should dominate and the element of inquiry should be secondary.¹¹

I knew this focus on ritual rather than study could be a challenge in some Unitarian Universalist congregations. Abraham Maslow described Unitarian Universalists as

¹⁰ Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, (New York: Cannongate, 2005), 30.

¹¹ Hayward, *ibid.*, 51.

people who rely on the positivistic, cognitive and scientific.¹² Theistic traditions often use traditional religious symbols to achieve the type of worship experience I envisioned. Carl Jung wrote that sacred images together with ritual expressed important unconscious factors and provided a safe way of dealing with the unpredictable fever of the unconscious.¹³ Joseph Campbell offered the example that when Catholics attend a mass in Latin, the priest is addressing the infinite in a language that has no domestic associations and thereby is elevated into transcendence.¹⁴

The Humanist heritage of the Unitarian Universalist congregation I serve places the emphasis on reason versus ritual. The experience of many congregants who came with negative religious experiences has meant that tradition, and religion in general, contain negative memories which can get in the way of emotional (and one might say spiritual) depth in worship. In the past a majority of the congregation has felt comfortable only with cognitive expression. The growth of the congregation has broadened those needs. More theological diversity makes it harder and harder to provide a worship experience which is deeply meaningful to a majority of those attending. The emergent question is one of making worship vital in a growing congregation which is now calling for diversity.

¹² Maslow, *Values and Peak Experiences*, (New York: Penguin, 1964), 40.

¹³ Carl Jung, "Psychology and Religion: West and East, 1938" in *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub de Laszlo, (New York: Random House, 1959), 512.

¹⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth through Time*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 33.

The Setting and Project

The Congregation: This project was centered in my parish in the rural Midwest. A parish which grew out of the Fellowship Movement in Unitarian Universalism, the founding members in 1972 were strong Humanists. In the last 12 years the congregation has expanded from 60 to 170 members, greatly broadening the theological outlook and needs of the worshipping community.

The majority of the congregants are well educated European-Americans; there are a few Asians, several African Americans, and a few Columbian, German, and French nationals. Socio-economically the congregation is diverse, but often unaware of the dynamics of social class. The congregation is about 25% liberal Christian, 35% Humanist, 25% Naturalist, 10% Buddhist with a few Jews and Muslims. It serves three conservative counties, one housing the largest concentration of Amish in the United States.

Two particular traits present both problems and possibilities. First, because of the congregation's Humanist beginnings, many members are deeply intellectual; the Christianity from which they came makes them resist religious language and images. Second, because the congregation is rapidly getting larger and more theologically

diverse it is harder and harder to provide a deeply meaningful worship experience. These bases formed the foundation for developing my project.

Development The continuing quest for relevance and meaning in the Sunday service has been a driving goal in my ministry. My keen interest in stages of spiritual growth led to an interest in the images and rituals which people use to make sense of the world. I wondered how a large group—such as a congregation—might use the fine arts to express deep concern and meaning. I formed a Mythos Team to experiment with themes and create innovative worship experiences. In doing so, I considered Jean Houston’s idea that the human brain needs a variety of experiences: the old reptilian brain needs ritual, security, repetition; the mammalian mid-brain needs emotional charges and the cognitive neo-cortex needs intellectual stimulation.¹⁵

The title “Mythos Team” was mine. I believed that myths could function as an integral core for our work. In his 1912 essay *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung commented on his own use of myth:

The man who thinks he can live without myth, or outside it, is an exception. He is like one uprooted, having no true link with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society... I was driven to ask myself in all seriousness: “What is the myth you are living?” I found no answer to this question, and had to admit that I was not living with a myth, or even in a myth, but rather in an uncertain cloud of theoretical possibilities which I was beginning to regard with increasing distrust....this

¹⁵ Jean Houston, *The Search for the Beloved: Journeys in Mythology and Sacred Psychology*. (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1987), 43.

resolve led me to devote many years of my life to investigating the subjective contents which are the products of unconscious processes.¹⁶

The work of Carl Jung, Maria von Franz, Joseph Campbell, and Jean Houston inspired me to think of the classical myths as means for putting our individual life journeys into context, thus providing both depth and perspective. As the team developed, their emphasis became less formal; their focus lay more on the natural world and its seasons, and on more current stories. I supplemented these with ancient texts. For example, the October 2007 service flowed from Chuang-Tzu's ancient story of the useless tree to Shel Silverstein's famous story, The Giving Tree¹⁷ and then to the lessons of nature's changing seasons in the "The Sarah Tree," a personal experience made into story by one of the members of the Mythos Team. At first this focus on contemporary stories and life experiences troubled me; I had hoped to rely on the classical myths. With great interest I had read Jean Houston's analysis of the journey of Odysseus going home to Ithaca.¹⁸ She believed that dramatizing the great universal myths could give new perspective, helping one discover where their personal story joined the universal story.¹⁹ But the words of Anderson and Foley broadened my perspective. "Narrative and ritual are the larger vehicles by which we define meaning in life, communicate that meaning to others

¹⁶ Jung, "Symbols of Transformation" (1912), in *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub de Laszlo, (New York: Random House, 1959), 5.

¹⁷ Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1964).

¹⁸ Houston, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

and give order to individual and communal activity.”²⁰ They cite the example of the women of Rwanda who found healing through telling their own horrid experiences and reframing them as a means to fashion a world that included their experiences. Again, Anderson and Foley stress, “When they are honest, stories express and create community.”²¹

My second reason for focusing on myth or story was its capacity to help the congregation find a common language, which traditional ritual was not able to do. Wendy Doniger wrote, “Most people may convert to myths more easily than to rituals, defining themselves by what they do (orthopraxy), rather than what they believe (orthodoxy).”²² Armstrong sees it as the work of professional religious leaders to show their congregants and the culture how to look into their hearts and to see our world from a perspective that goes beyond our own self-interest. “If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight to our lost and damaged world.”²³ And myths, by nature, cannot be contained or owned by any one interpreter. Doniger points out, “we never really have the myth at all we just see the tracks it leaves in our minds.”²⁴ Myths change with every

²⁰ Anderson and Foley, *ibid.*, xiii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² Wendy Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths: the Cave of Echoes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 125.

²³ Armstrong, *ibid.*, 149.

²⁴ Doniger, *ibid.*, 31.

telling; the circumstances and the identity of the storyteller change the “facts” of the story, even as they bring the myth into relevance in the contemporary setting.

Persons involved: On April 27, 2007, I invited three artists (a trained storyteller who is also a communications professor at a local university, a dance instructor who taught at the local art center, and a graphic artist with keen interest in ritual) to join me in the “Mythos Project”; this invitation laid out my own form.

Once a month we will do a Sunday service based on a sacred myth (Demeter and Persephone, etc). D— would tell the story. (Which could include acting, moving/dancing?) We can plan by email, in person, and meet at the church 45 minutes early for a "rehearsal" and invite anybody who wants to be part of it to come. I would host a session after the service for reflections about the service (questions about the service or the myth and evaluations.)

Two responded by email:

“YAY! I'm in! I love a challenge and this sounds like it could be one that is absolutely fun! Challenging, but fun. Let me know when and where! I have ideas...”

“Count me in too! I am not quite sure what this will look like, but I can't wait to meet and hear everyone's ideas. Let me know when.”

The third woman responded in person, indicating excitement. I chose NOT to involve three semi-professional actors who belong to the congregation; the emphasis of this project was on creativity as a tool for communication, not professional performance.

In the middle of the summer, our artist announced that she was moving out of the area and couldn't participate. I invited two men to join the team: a young adult stage manager who works with a theatrical supply company, and a professional graphic artist who is also a professor at the local art institute. So, in August, we began the year with two new people and a slightly different group dynamic.

At the end of November, 2007 the dancer moved and was replaced by two women: one who had taught dance in high schools and one who taught yoga. At the end of March, our graphic artist left the team to work in the presidential campaign.

Design: The increase in our congregational size has impacted the tradition of strong lay-leadership; it has become a more formal setting in which many attendees are only observers. For this reason, it was important to create an atmosphere of group worship rather than of performance before an audience. To nurture the members of the congregation who expect an intellectual service at least two services per month continued to follow a traditional, sermon focused format. Throughout the year when visitors arrive, trained greeters welcome them and explain when the service is a little different (as in Humor Services, Water Communion, and All Souls). Mythos services were added to the list.

Use of Rituals: Over the course of the first year, the team experimented with ritual. The April service involved a ritual in which congregants blessed one another with water. The first year concluded with a pilgrimage through the congregation's property: a drummer led people from the sanctuary to the fire pit "chalice", the dance around the labyrinth, singing in the grove, and a story in the Memorial Garden. Care was taken to

assure people that all actions during the services were voluntary; the goal was to be inviting, but not alienating. There were no intergenerational services.²⁵

Sequencing: Each month the team met to plan the theme of the next service. This was sometimes a maddeningly chaotic but creative session. At the end, each person took away his/her own assignments. Between the first meeting and the actual service, the group adjusted details and checked developments by email. Bits of each service were videotaped; the entire service was recorded and orders of service were kept. A week after the service, the team would meet to review the past service, discuss feedback and plan the theme of the next service. The team worked together well, and responded to physical limitations and liability considerations easily. From the beginning I asked them to adjust to the constraints of the congregation around them: when the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's *Guest At Your Table* service fell on the Mythos Sunday, they incorporated it; when the choir was scheduled to sing a "preview" of their Madrigal, the group included them, also. The largest concerns focused on lighting (the team didn't ever want it, some of the congregation did), number of chairs (the team wanted to arrange the space creatively, the Greeters wanted all the chairs to be set up) and bulletins (the team wanted to alternate fonts, colors, design and some congregants had difficulty reading it).

Evaluation: Attendance records at these services was kept and compared to attendance at other, more traditional, services. Participation of members on Sunday mornings is

²⁵ In December of the second year, the Team planned an intergenerational service which included dancing, a children's choir, a reader's theatre, a multi-media presentation from the youth and humorous holiday poetry. Feedback was positive and the idea will be repeated at intervals in the future.

usually very high; there was no measurable difference detected on Mythos Sundays. Secondly, each month the team evaluated itself and reported informal feedback received from members of the congregation; this allowed us to talk about what worked, what didn't work, and what seemed to be transformative. Finally, in June, a formal written evaluation (provided in the appendix) was circulated by team members who then engaged people in discussion. This evaluation was also available on the website. Twenty percent of the congregation responded.

Organization: Originally, I suggested that we organize our services around classical myths. I suggested using a thematic based on Karen Armstrong's Chronological outline, or David Leeming's three types (Creation, Deity, and Heroes) or Joseph Campbell's geographical themes. At our first meeting, the group chose to use none of these. The purpose of myth, however, did win approval and the group agreed to focus on mythic themes to open up life to the larger whole. Also, we discussed limitations (for example, order of service, space). The graphic artist was firm that we needed to create sacred space, suggesting that the welcome, announcements and offering sections should occur before the service actually began. Others indicated that this seemed too drastic a change for the congregation. The children's time would set the stage and be the first telling of the day's myth. Then followed the means of reaching adults: telling, dancing, inviting participation. An appropriate postlude would conclude the service. For planning, we would meet two weeks before each service for 90 minutes; also, we would gather 30 minutes before the service to set-up and make final changes. Other creative ideas found their places in the project:

- changing the set-up to add something and take something away each month,
- using the space on the stage and setting the chairs differently each service,
- using a symbol reflecting the theme of the service as a watermark on the bulletin,
- making the watermark darker each month and the lettering lighter until the bulletin was completely symbolic,
- using background sounds at the beginning and end (for example, water, leaves rustling),
- beginning each service with some interpretation of what was to follow,
- focusing on a unified theme; possibly breaking the story into “chapters” to insert throughout the service,
- using all the senses, saving tactile until late in the project to allow people to get more comfortable; starting simply to ease us all into the flow.

The Actual Process

September: Getting Started

Planning: On September 9, 2007, the Mythos Team Services began. Friday the group met to set a scene which would let people know something different was about to happen:

- All plants had been moved onto the stage to “bring the outside in”; the plants filled the chancel against a background of trees outside the window.



- A recording of water sounds played in the background before and after the service.
- The chairs were set-up in a deep semi-circle.
- The artist made a ripple of water design as the first watermark on the bulletin.

A few concerns arose before the service. The assigned Worship Associate was not an expressive reader, the volunteer sound technician usually arrived late, our substitute

pianist for the service tended to bring her own agenda of propriety to any service of which she was a part. Also, it was the Sunday in which “The Time for All Children” was devoted to the installation of teachers rather than to a story.

The Service: Despite our group nervousness, the service went well. I introduced the service by setting a scene of ancient cultures gathered around a fire to hear and learn the stories of their people. I adapted thoughts of Jean Houston for chalice lighting:

We light this flame in the spirit of Odysseus, cunning and brilliant in the known ways of the world, but somewhat ignorant of his own deeper nature. His learning must come out of the deeps. From these deeps will come most of his adventures and a larger experience of reality...For all those years of travel and turmoil, all he really wanted to do was go home to Ithaca. Perhaps the story sounds familiar. May this flame light the way to our depths, and light our journey home.

The dancer choreographed movements which brought the attention around the circle of participants and into the center where the storyteller shared a Native American story of communities gathered around the fire. The dancer moved attention back into the circle and gathered community. Verbally, I offered a bridge back to the cognitive. The congregation sang “Dancing Sarah’s Circle” and I closed with an invitation to take this space into the world. Water sounds again made the Postlude.

Feedback: Time constraints prohibited us from having a discussion after the service. Feedback came in through conversations with the members of the team. Of the many very positive comments, a few were heard to say “This is nice” as they entered the

sanctuary, others found it hard to adjust to the lights being off. Congregants' comments indicated that they liked the movement, enjoyed the story, and appreciated the interpretation and bridge back to the cognitive. After the service the Worship Associate told me that he had felt a little stand-offish and hadn't known what to expect. The one negative comment was that the service lacked a clear message, and seemed to be entertainment. Greeters were concerned that our set-up didn't leave room for enough chairs. The team, also, had their own feedback: one thought it was too formulaic. All thought it was compositionally good and flowed well. The dancer's movement in silence allowed congregants to concentrate without music.

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October: Dealing with Physical Limitations

Planning: As we planned the October service, we began to move away from the original idea of using classical myth. The storyteller wrote,

I told [a colleague] about a tree in our yard that doesn't lose its leaves until spring. I call it The Sarah Tree because it reminds me of my friend Sarah who just graduated from college in May at the age of 48. Whenever Sarah gets down on herself for the timing of things in her life I always remind her that everything cycles in its own time and that she is a lot like that tree in our yard. Do you want the myth to be something more ancient, or would it be okay for me to work up this story about cycles and seasons and uniqueness of timing. I have always intended to create a story around The Sarah Tree. Maybe this is the right time.

The group wanted the "incense" of burning leaves to help create the atmosphere of changing seasons. Our Facilities chairperson indicated that we could burn leaves outside

the sanctuary if we did it in a self-contained vessel, but I still worried about allergies. The artist agreed to bring a container and keep the fire small, closing the window when the service started. When the group suggested dry leaves covering the floor in the sanctuary, I mentioned the hazard of people falling. We agreed to keep leaves only in the front which the dancer would “rustle” during her movement section. The group process was going well. Our young adult team member wrote,

I would also like to say that this process of developing the service as a community is really special and from a second ex-altar boy the reason that a UU congregation has such draw.

The set-up changed from the previous month. On Saturday, the team arranged the stage pieces around the center to replicate an amphitheatre. The front of the sanctuary was cleared and a large log placed in the middle. Around this, a few bags of leaves were strewn on the floor. The bulletin watermark—a little darker than last time—was a tree.

The Service: Our artist and his son burned leaf “incense,” with one window open. They brought in a flaming ember to light the chalice. The service was divided into three parts:

- Part I: The Giving Tree A team member read the children’s story while seated on the stump with children playing in the leaves. The congregation sang *Lean on Me* as the children left.
- Part II: The Living Tree: The dancer moved in silence imitating the groundedness and change of a tree. The story teller shared *Sarah Tree*, the minister did a summation.
- Part III: The Resting Tree – Closing words

Feedback:

- From the Mythos Team: We need new ways of incorporating the congregation rather than hymns and responsive readings. Maybe we could involve some children in November. Two other dancers have asked to be included in the movement parts.
- The Facilities Committee requested that we have some protective barrier on the back of the stage pieces when we have people seated there.
- From the congregation: This was the favorite Mythos Service for several people. Comments included "The one with the leaves on the floor and dancing in the leaves and the story about the girl's tree." and "The fall one - where the kids of all ages played in the leaves."

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November: Incorporating the Larger Life of the Congregation

Planning: The Social Action Committee was scheduled to do their Guest At Your Table [GAYT] collection kick-off during the Mythos Service. Although this requires much of the service time, the Mythos team agreed and began to plan. The stage returned to its normal placement at the front of the sanctuary with chairs in four concentric circles around the center. The group suggested a theme of timelessness unity. Because the GAYT event takes us beyond our own lives and into the world at large, the artist suggested that we broaden that to include all ages of humanity:

I have toyed with the idea of art from "cave to alley" so that the first panel is reminiscent of cave paintings and the second has a "tag" or graffiti motif. I played with in-between panels like an abstract expression panel ala Pollock and another easily recognizable in-between period. Way too much work for a guy with a bunch of projects and dinner to cook every night. So I have opted for the bookends "caves to alleys" I thought that the alley art would mesh nicely with the trash can ending. (His daughter would drum on trash cans.)



Drumming seemed to be a way to incorporate more of the congregation. Unfortunately, members of our Drum Circle were going to be out of town and the dancer was concerned about moving to the sound of volunteers' irregular beat. Members of the congregation brought percussion instruments which were given out as people entered the sanctuary. And the artist's daughter (a member of a high school steel drum group) came to the rescue for an amazing conclusion to the service:

My daughter will be playing on 3 trash cans...My idea is that we can set up the cans and hide them behind a curtain, then at the end of the service she will start drumming and two of us can slowly remove the curtain.

The Service: "Joining in the World Beat" was the emergent theme, with congregational percussion serving as prelude and postlude. Each segment of the service ended with a tambourine beat. The dancer choreographed a movement she called "Uniting the Ancient with the Present." For Joys and Concerns we used a large sharing stone:

Life has a way of reminding us that we are human. The joys and the sorrows which touch our lives make us so. As you come this morning to share the important events of your week, please take this Sharing Stone in your hands. Know that those who have held it before have also known joy and pain; know that those to whom you will pass it will experience similar things. In this circle of sharing, we gain the strength and insight to act for justice in the ever larger world beyond our gathering here. The Stone passes from generation to generation and from continent to continent; we are all the same.

The choir however, chose to sing a piece from their upcoming Madrigal dinner...so we needed to work *Personent Hodie* into the "world beat." The chair of the Social Action Committee was pleased with the way GAYT had become the center of the service:

Thank you very much for forwarding the order of service. I can see how things fit together for the Sunday service. It is a real honor to be worked into the Sunday Service when the Mythos group is presenting the service. They have done an excellent job with their programs.

The storyteller told the real-life stories provided in the GAYT resources (Katrina in the USA, Hepatitis A in Ecuador and child labor Nairobi) in tandem with the "drumming voices" from the congregation. I pulled the pieces together and rephrased our theme.

Feedback: A youth group visiting from a neighboring Unitarian Universalist congregation liked the service so much they wanted to start attending our church. Other comments came in:

- You keep raising the bar...what will you do next?
- It fit so well together; it was the best one.

Comments from the Mythos Team varied:

- Not much prep time.
- Really nervous...didn't gel until 10am that morning.
- The seating arrangement having people face one another was great.

And they had incorporated the congregation in a new way. They felt good about this:

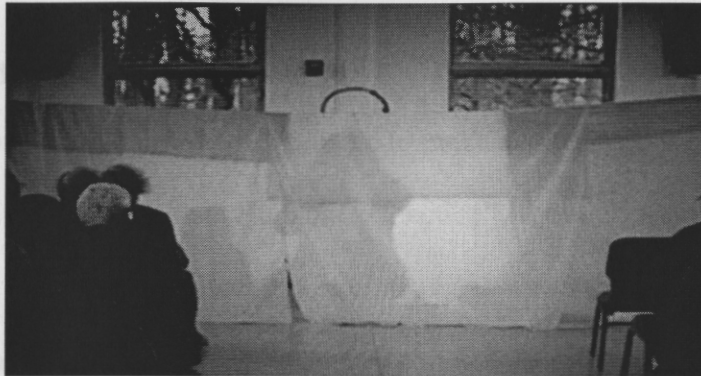
- Participation with the drums [rather than hymns or responsive readings] was powerful. Having it come from all four quadrants and from different rows worked very well. People felt they were participating even if they didn't have a percussion instrument.
- It brought the service into the audience....from all quadrants.
- Telling and retelling the GAYT stories--the Social Action person giving statistics, the storyteller using the actual stories and Elaine wrapping it up—[I brought the attention back to the congregation's responsibility in the world and especially in supporting the work of the UUSC] reinforced it all; Social Action felt very supported. It was helpful, not redundant.
- And from the storyteller: I was very worried about last Sunday, but it did fall together well. We either got lucky or I need to "trust the artistic process" a bit more. I am not sure which applies most.

+ + + + +

January: Integrating the Congregation

Planning: In January, our dancer moved to another state and we invited two new dancers, both women who had dancing experience. Ideas came quickly. The goal was to create a setting which reflected the dead of winter and then move towards the warmth of community. The sanctuary should start out cold and uninviting. No lights were to be used. A Native American story of how light comes to the world would serve as the

focus; this would be told in three sections. Hymnals would be concentrated at the front of the sanctuary so that people would have to share, and the rows would be in straight lines. The plants and pulpit would be removed and the water garden covered with a sheet. This proved harder than expected again because we were sharing space with other committees; the Stewardship Committee was hosting a breakfast just before the service, so there was no possibility of changing the temperature or the arrangement of the chairs.



The Service: In order to lay the groundwork of exclusion and coldness the storyteller and children sat behind a white sheet during the Time for All Children. She presented the “classical version” of the myth about how light comes to the world through the spider.

Backlighting exaggerated the fact that the adults were being excluded. After the children went to their classes, the storyteller told a modern version which focused on material comforts. One of the dancers came onto the barren stage, dressed all in black; as her movement continued, she donned colorful rags which were “pretty” but useless in keeping her warm. (These cloths were used later in the service to help the congregation tie themselves to one another in bonds of community.)



Focusing on “Appearances” the storyteller told an anecdote of Ellen Burstyn acting as a homeless woman; when passersby refused to make eye contact, they stole her personhood from her. Finally the “Human Connection” emerged; the dancers entered with a fabric ball made of lengths of orange cloth, came down the center aisle, unraveling the ball and spreading it out as they moved. They gave a strand to the first person in each row and asked them to share it with their aisle. As the fabric wove through the congregation it became apparent that they must pass it on in order to stay connected. The whole Mythos Team helped people cut pieces of cloth to take home with them as a symbol of community. The Sharing Time followed this, and the lighting of the chalice reminded us of the warmth and light of connection with other people around the globe.

Feedback:

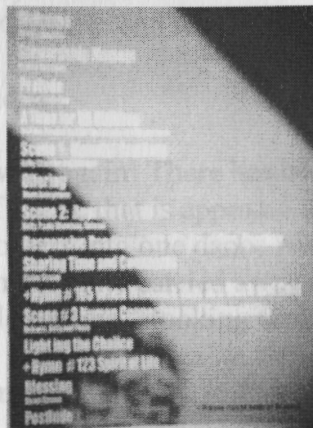
I heard from other people that what they had expected to be a silly exercise (the woven fabric) turned out to be a meaningful experience for them. One of the team members said to me after the service,

Wow! Now I really know what you had in mind for these services. I could feel it. We’ve made the intimacy connection, now where do we take them?

And a note came that week:

Sunday's service really reached me and I wanted to thank those who are involved in putting these wonderful services together...The service was very warm and personal, it touched people in their hearts and left us feeling like we were all connected. Thank you for your efforts so very much!

Not all the feedback was positive. One person doesn't get the music, but liked holding onto the fabric; for another the bulletin was hard to read: white letters on grey design.



One of the new dancers was fitting in well. She wrote:

I got a lot of great feedback too. Thanks so much for asking me to be part of the team! I really enjoyed the opportunity to be creative (although my out of shape muscles will be griping for the rest of this week!) Looking forward to our next meeting! Who knows what we'll come up with! Thanks!

+++++

February: A Look at Process and Lay Leadership

Planning: The stage manager initiated the planning for the February Service.

Hey everyone, I wanted to get your ideas and start the creative ball rolling before our meeting Wednesday. I have been getting back to my theatre history and looking at how the Greeks and the origins of theatre were religious and based on myths and legends and I would like to explore that more. I think the set up

should be either an entire circle around the whole room or a 1/2 moon Greek style theatre. Yes that means moving the platforms somewhere... I think we should throw out the entire format of a traditional service. My idea for the service would be;

Prologue (spoken)

Scene #1 - Love (Humanity) [Dance or Voice] (Kids Story?)

Interlude A (Dance or Song)

Scene #2 - Love (Community) (this is where joys and concerns come in)

Interlude B

Scene # 3- Love (Family)

Interlude C

Scene #4 - Love (Self)

Epilogue (musical)

Dance (typically Greek to end with a dance)

Then one of the dancers shared ideas:

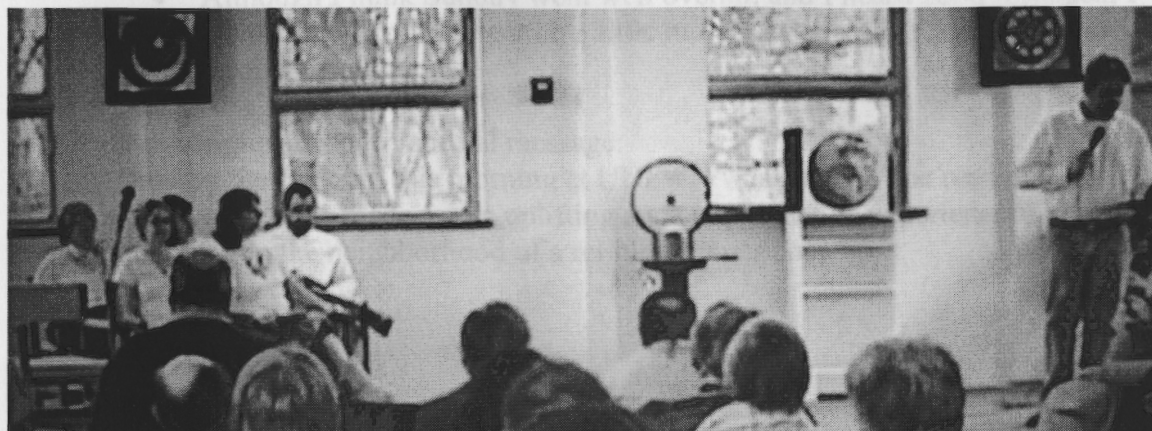
Wow, creative ideas flowing again! There has been an idea in my head for many years... I have a piece of music that is approx 5 minutes long,...and an idea using masks, and including... others into one dance piece...This project has truly sparked my fire and I can get quite carried away in the creative process! Thanks everyone for an incredible service....looking forward to more! :)

Then the artist began his visioning:

I will create a cube: pictures on four sides: 1. Earth, 2. Chalice, 3. Fireplace, 4. Mirror. We begin with the earth, the others covered with black paper. The sides are color coordinated with quotes we read during the Interludes:...Earth – blue, Community (Chalice) – green, Family (hearth) - yellow, Self (Mirror) – white...maybe we could have a young child carry the cube, more dramatic.....

The basic outline was established and the team seemed pleased with the format. The storyteller decorated masks for the children to wear during the first scene. I collected the quotes as team members sent them in, and arranged them for the service. It also became apparent that, due to a problem with Sharing of Joys and Concerns, I would do a special piece about compassion and true listening as an introduction.

The Service: The chairs were placed in a half moon formation facing the front with the stage intact. The team sat facing them in a formation replicating Greek theatre.



The stage manager wrote the Opening Words as a prologue, beginning with Shakespeare's line "All the world is a stage..." and incorporated an explanation of the service as well as the regular words of Welcome. During the Story for All Ages the kids and Team donned masks. The stage manager started a rhythm, and then incorporated the adults. Various rhythms emerged to replicate the diverse sounds of the world community. The topical quotes we had collected formed the skeleton of the service. In three segments, the "chorus" of the Mythos Team shared quotes from Anne Frank, Francis David, Thich Nhat Hahn and the Talmud to share wisdom from the world's traditions on Community, Family, and Self. The movement section using "Your Children" and incorporating two youth dancers was inserted between two segments, as was a story which focused on love of self. Concluding with "Shabbat Shalom" the dancers led the whole congregation in a circle, and ended with the *Namaste* greeting.

Feedback: The team commented:

- I am really enjoying being a part of it, and honored to have been included.
- Although I think Sunday went well overall, and I heard good feedback, I would feel comfortable with a little more rehearsal time! I just want to throw this out here...

And another congregant sent a special message:

I thought the program this morning at UFWC was terrific. The readings, music, stories, and dance made for an uplifting and contemplative experience for me, something in the neighborhood of a religious experience.

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March: The Use of Silence and Image (All Done in Power Point Format)

Planning: One of the dancers initiated the planning this time:

Hi guys. Since Feb. is a short month, I thought it wouldn't hurt to start thinking about March now! The following are the lyrics to one of my all time favorite songs Closer to Fine (by the Indigo Girls). I cannot hear this song without dancing!

The Service: The stage manager developed a Power Point which served as the “worship leader;” other than music lyrics and Sharing Time no words were spoken. The goal was to worship in reflective silence. The Welcome, Offering Words, and Sharing Time words were all projected onto the screen in silence. This was followed by movement embodying the Indigo Girl’s song, “Closer to Fine.” The sermon, too, was done without words through linking powerful images with music. Rather than a children’s story, the

dancers taught the children movements to the song “It’s Good to Be Me.” The service concluded with a recording of “We Are.”

Feedback:

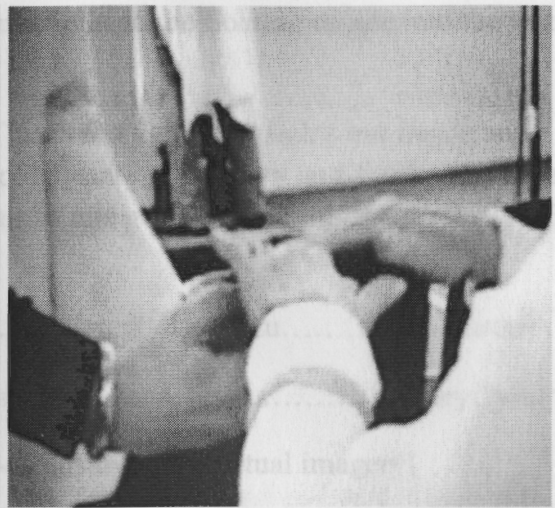
The congregation had a variety of reactions:

- the non-speaking essence especially appealed to one woman,
- several people requested the music from the service and one man requested a similar service using classical music,
- people seated in the back missed all the action which happened on the floor,
- some people commented that it was very passive,
- another asked, “Was there a theme?”
- a participant reflected that silent services make it hard to share Joys or Concerns,
- the pianist asked to be informed about music needs earlier in the process.
- several observed that the PowerPoint presentation needed all or some of the following: shades on doors/windows, dark backgrounds, with light letters,
- for another person, “The pictures and music in March were my favorite, ‘The Cosmos Service’.”

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April: a “Traditional Ritual”

Planning: The team wanted to do a traditional ritual in their own way. They chose water. Symbolism included a clear glass bowl and a floating candle used as a chalice to represent the light of community in the water; the bulletin graphic was an intertwined, double wave.



Movement [Congregants do improvisational movements to wave sounds]

Sharing of Personal Stories from the congregation

Service:

Because this is a more structured and liturgical service, I will include the entire order.

Blessing (The first team member held the chalice, the next member to dip their hands... and it proceeded down... and then three team members offered the bowl to the first person in each section of the congregation, inviting them to share)

April Mythos
“Cool Water”

An emotional story journey of human experience though the use of WATER.

Postlude Hymn *There's a River Flowing in My Soul*

Pre-Set.....Water Noise, Traditional Setup, No Chalice

Procession (During Hymn) Mythos Team

Feedback:

(The Mythos Team processed in wearing white robes. Each was carrying a symbol: the chalice, two pitchers of water, and a candle.)

Chalice LightingMythos Team (Underscored by water sounds)

The stage manager said, “We come to this meeting place as one individual on our own life’s journey. We all come to share our story, to grow as people, to expand our horizons. This bowl represents our common ground, this fellowship that we all built, our common experience, our meeting place.” (One team member poured some of the water into the bowl, followed by each other team member)

“This water represents each one of us, our stories, our experience, our sorrows, our lives. This is the water of our communion, the water of this active community. From all its different sources it has become one body of water, our ocean of love,

tears, trust, and unity.” (A team member placed the floating candle into the water and another member lit it)

“This is the flame of our Tradition. This is the flame that lights our hearts and guides our community on a Journey of Mystery, Discovery and Truth. This is the flame of our Community that unites us as one group of individuals. PEACE BE WITH YOU!”

Opening Words..... Lao-Tzu “Become Like Water” –Lao-Tzu.....Minister

Time for All Children (“Tear Drop Soup” story)Story Teller

Personal Stories [# 1-blessing; #2-trust; #3-cleansing; #3-spiritual imagery]

Movement [dancers do improvisational movements to wave sounds]

Sharing of Personal Stories from the congregation

“Come forward. Dip in the water and share a personal story...” (This was clearly defined so folks didn’t go on and on, taking the energy somewhere else.)

Blessing (The first team member held out a bowl of water for the next member to dip their hands...and it proceeded down the line to the end and then three team members offered the bowl to the first person in each section of the congregation, inviting them to share with one another. The pianist underscored this with meditative music.)

Postlude Hymn *There’s a River Flowing in My Soul*

Feedback:

This service drew the congregation into the action and the feedback reflected that.

- One person liked the personal stories: another commented that it was powerful, people got involved and water was shared and baptism happened without any mention of the word, therefore it was not offensive.
- One child shared the death of her brother during the *Tear Drop Soup* story.
- A woman was helped to heal from a traumatic experience, and was now ready to go back and finish the process,
- One team member wished we had added more interaction with the audience.
“The water bowls continued what we started with the fabric balls. If we truly are going to have them moving outside next time (June) it would be nice to have a

"stepping stone" activity in May. Something that moves them a tad further into interacting with us. I am just not sure what it could be.

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May: Moving the Focus, a Home, Using Lights to Move Attention

Planning: One of the dancers was really enjoying the team work:

Hi everyone, a great magical meeting last night...I am just in awe of that entire process and how beautifully it works ;) A thought about the service....since we are ending with the front porch, is this a good time for a talk-back...as in, "we invite to you to join us (figuratively) on the front porch and share your feelings about mythos" kind of thing?

Service: Theme: Building a home (sustenance, creating life and conditions where life can continue; communion)

- The stage sections were placed around the sanctuary creating "rooms" of a house.
- Chairs were arranged in a circle, with an aisle at the four doors.
- Each section was set with furniture and lamps. Each person carried one last thing into their "room" and turned on the light, and then talked about what that room meant to them. Between these vignettes we inserted the Sharing Time, the Offering and the Anthem.

This time there were some strong comments prior to the service from the Greeters:

- Why was the chalice moved?
- There are not enough seats when the stage is moved around.
- The stage corners are sticking out.



Service:

- **Chalice** [the stage manager turned on the table lamp]

The Kitchen (The Time for All Children) The stage manager set the table, explained the service, asked kids: “What is your favorite room?”

Nursery One dancer moved among the items including a rocking chair and crib.

Living Room (Sharing of Joys and Concerns) The minister gathered the community around the fireplace in the Living Room.

Laundry Room (Offering) The storyteller told her story while ironing; we used laundry baskets to gather the offering.

Front Porch (Closing Words) A dancer moved around the swing with a broom and invited the congregation to share, “What makes a home?”

Feedback:

From the Mythos Team:

1. Ask people to bring lawn chairs and blankets, shoes and socks.
2. In case of rain the Team will prepare a slide show of sites for use indoors.
3. For the mobility challenged, we will set up chairs and a car to transport people.
4. Housework will lead staging on the shaded gathering circle.
5. A torch and drummer will lead people from site to site.

- Comment from Mythos Team member “We don’t always know how people are touched.”

From the congregation:

- One woman was very inspired; she is writing a memoir based on homes.
- A visitor at the church for the first time loved it, and will come back.
- A few people were weeping at the end; the minister, team checked in with them.
- Several people were distressed because they had to turn to face the action, and couldn’t see everything.
- It was the favorite service for some, “The one with the four rooms of the house, that ended on the porch was my favorite.”

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June: going on a pilgrimage through our property

Planning: Our building rests on six acres, including a labyrinth, a memorial garden, and a fire pit, but many in the congregation have never been to these places. This service functioned partly as a blessing of our entire property. Careful attention needed to be paid to this unusual service. The Mythos Team decided how to make it work.

1. Ask people to bring lawn chairs and blankets, shoes and socks.
2. In case of rain the Team will prepare a slide show of sites for use indoors.
3. For the mobility challenged, we will set up chairs and a car to transport people.
4. The choir will lead singing on the shaded gathering circle.
5. A torch and drummer will lead people from site to site.

Feedback: from the congregation:

Service:

- consider spaces for wheelchair
- consider the elderly;

I. Preparation

- **Prelude/setting** Drumming
- **Opening Words** *The Rabbi of Cracow* -Martin Buber (minister)

- **First Chalice Lighting** *The Centre in Ourselves* -Bede Griffiths

Song *Come Sing a Song with Me* [choir led]

Sending Forth *The Journey*

Drumming leads us out to the fire pit

II. Pilgrimage

Second Chalice Lighting [fire pit] stage manager (people add sticks)

Moving through the Cycles [labyrinth] dancer (People add stones)

Shaded area: Sharing a Song #1001 *Breaths* [at the shaded mowed circle]

Memorial Garden Story [Memorial Garden] storyteller

III. Returning Home

Blessing Song # 1059 *May Your Life Be Filled with Song?*

Drumming leads us back to the building



Their plans for the future included:

- We will do a service every other month, but meet every month (for planning).
- The group will act as stage directors, seeking to bring more people into the action.

Feedback from the congregation:

- consider water buckets when you have fires;
- consider spaces for wheelchairs and seating for the elderly;
- a marvelous conclusion with the outdoor service this year;
- really got us out into nature and gave us some new perspectives;
- especially meaningful to me, I loved having the service move about the grounds.

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Year End Evaluation Meeting:

The team met for a nice dinner in July to evaluate the year, the experience, and to look toward the future. Some of the congregational evaluations suggested that the Mythos service be every other month; the team appeared to be relieved. They were a little hurt at the comments about the services seeming like performances and criticized themselves for not including the congregation in more services and in more ways.

They enjoyed the process. One dancer opted out of the project for the next year because she was adding an extra job. Two others (a musician and an elementary school teacher) wanted to join the group and I was asked to invite them. There was some discussion about people who might come onto the team as visual artists. This was left unsettled.

Their plans for the future included:

- We will do a service every other month, but meet every month (for planning).
- The group will act as stage directors, seeking to bring more people into the action.

- The minister will invite S-- and M-- to join the Mythos group because they are interested and because they are needed. We need a music component to the planning sessions and the teacher may help us work on our goal of doing an intergenerational service.
- We need to add poetry.
- Every service will begin with an explanation (it helped people feel comfortable).
- The minister would like to go “deeper” and maybe incorporate a classic myth at some point in the year. We would base the theme on some current, core issue in the culture/congregation

My Final Analysis

In the beginning my goal was to turn the project over to the team by March and simply become a process observer. The group was ahead of me; they took the lead from the beginning. In September, the project reflected our combined ideas. By January they were initiating the whole process. At times, I even felt guilty; it seemed that others were doing all my doctoral work for me. First the stage manager and then one of the dancers took the reigns of planning. My role became simply one of facilitating the process and adapting the regular segments (the Sharing of Joys and Concerns and Announcements sections) in a way that flowed with the service. Ironically, the congregation's comments often reflected the belief that the Mythos Services were the stage manager's project! To date, I have not yet excused myself totally from the project; I am still the convener, note taker, overall manager, and occasional nay-sayer. My role during the actual services, however, has decreased gradually since January 2008.

Some of Anderson and Foley's guiding principles for ritual making and pastoral worship are helpful as I evaluate the project:²⁶

- 1. Respect the chronological priority of a human story in shaping ritual.**

I think the organic process of choosing themes actually reflected this well.

- 2. Allow a significant role for non-verbal symbols.**

²⁶ Anderson and Foley, *ibid.*, 130.

The bulletin watermarks, the graphics, elements such as the water used in April's blessing service as well as the use of movement, music and slides within the context of silence in March's silent service allowed us to experiment with this aspect.

3. Resist the compulsion to explain this action.

We get varied marks for this. By January, the team realized that the congregation followed the ritual more easily if it were explained in a "prologue" section at the beginning of the service. In the early services and some of the later ones, I did a concluding explanation, pulling the pieces together. This seemed to make the service more accessible for some of our members.

4. Attend to the particularity of this moment.

The team was always very sensitive to the affect a particular action or story might have on the gathered community; they were sensitive to people's vulnerabilities, and they were very open to the strictures of the organic body which is this congregation. They incorporated the calendar of the church year. They planned services which would facilitate the needs of Social Action and Stewardship Committees, Religious Education, and the choir. The most difficult compromise centered on space limitations. This creative team wanted to focus on art and message; the Membership and Finance Committees focused on offerings and numbers of chairs. Through increased listening, explaining and compromise, the year ended peacefully among all parties.

5.

6. Beware of overcomplicating the ritual.

This is a hard principle, I suspect, for many Unitarian Universalists. It was a challenge for the team; much energy went into the planning of these services. Many ideas were edited out because of complications in set-up or complexity of presentation within a one hour service. I often found myself being the advocate for the congregation: for example, dry leaves on a cement floor could be slippery, smoke and incense might trigger allergies, complex movements on the floor were hard to see from the back of the room. Often ideas were suggested in our initial planning session and then discouraged by me in email discussions prior to the actual service. The team seemed to roll well with these restrictions.

In addition to these considerations, several issues arose which surprised me. The dancers were placed in a vulnerable position, possibly because they used their bodies as the medium to express their message. The dancers were most often criticized in both the spoken evaluations through the year and in the formal evaluation at the end. People felt theirs was a performance (more so than storytelling or graphic arts). One comment contained frustration, "If you must dance at least use better music...make it easy or possible for someone other than the dancers to relate to the dance." People failed to understand their message, seeing it as a mere performance rather than an integral part of the service. I can only guess that this is because dancing or creative movement has not been used before and, therefore, felt alien. Other responses, however, conveyed the opposite opinion, "Sometimes I felt so moved by the Mythos Service that I wanted to join the dance... ." My deeper concern related to personal boundaries. One dancer received

several unwelcome romantic invitations from a congregant. She dealt with this well (as did her husband) and the issue calmed after I spoke with the man. It was, however, a learning experience for me; something I hadn't foreseen.

As indicated by my decision not to use some of the professional actors in the congregation, this project was not intended as a professional performance. Rather my hope was for genuine impact. As mentioned above, it did help to have a prologue outlining the service and a conclusion which explained the service and drew clear links to meaning.

The Worship Associates were not part of the planning process nor were any of them part of the Mythos group at its inception. The Worship Associates offered no reaction as the project began. Only later did one Worship Associate say, "I thought it was going to be a cornball idea, but it turned out to be a meaningful experience." When the Mythos Team's stage manager became a Worship Associate, it established a bond of communication. It did, however, eliminate the need for any other Worship Associates to work with the Mythos Team on their Sundays. (Note: One additional Worship Associate did join the Mythos Team in the second year.)

It was my hope at the beginning of the project that this would be a vehicle for transformative worship experiences. Even some of the Mythos Team took awhile to understand the impact; after January's service one team member said, "Wow! Now I know what you were talking about. I could feel it. We've made the intimacy

connection...” Many of the comments throughout the year and on the evaluations indicated a transformation:

- Sunday’s service really touched me.
- [It was] an uplifting and contemplative experience for me, something in the neighborhood of a religious experience.
- [It was] a very spiritual experience for me...please continue.
- The emotional impact through the “right brain” integrated cognitive, physical and affective through experiential learning.
- It enhanced spiritual and sense of community in human dimension and depth centered.
- I think the explanations were appropriate and effective in conveying the concepts.
- We enjoy the aspiration and obvious pleasure of the Mythos Team to express themselves for our benefit.
- It stimulates the vitality of the covenant; I found all the mythos services very meaningful.
- Sometimes they were surprisingly meaningful.

The comments which had the most impact on me came from two different long term members of the Fellowship. First a quiet woman who rarely comments on anything called the office to offer thanks, “I feel personally cared for with all the loving attention required to set up these services.” The second person, a man whose focus is usually on doing justice work through the Social Action Committee took time to write a note, “These services are very important to our congregation. I don’t like to miss Mythos.” Throughout the year, one child was helped to talk about her brother’s death; another person began the journey of healing from traumatic experience. The May service set up like rooms of a house enabled a woman to look at her struggle with housework; another was inspired to begin a memoir. A few services brought tears and gave me the opportunity to engage in intentional follow-up visits. Several people felt especially grounded after the pilgrimage around the ritual sites on our acreage.

There were others whom I most expected to feel the impact of these Mythos Services but who were noticeably absent. Especially, I had hoped the services would provide a salve to some of the congregants who live with ongoing depression and anxiety. Although one of these indicated an interest in working with the project, several others were absent. I chose not to ask why. Robert was one of those people. I don't know that these services touched him any more deeply than any others. It may be that situations of particular wretched angst or meaninglessness are best handled in a one-to-one basis. He continues to attend the services regularly; the congregation welcomes him warmly and that may be enough. Possibly a clearer work with story and symbolism might have met this goal. It is also possible that people were touched in ways they either didn't notice immediately or did not communicate.

We have continued the Mythos project for a second year. And the congregational response would indicate that we should keep the Mythos Team alive into the future. The current team consists of one of the dancers, the original story teller, the stage manager, and the pianist and elementary school teacher who were added. This has, obviously changed the process. The team chose a year-long theme this year and services are every other month. It is beyond the purview of this paper to evaluate the second year; however there are a few comments which have given me insight. First, there is a less cohesive feel to the process, maybe because meetings are farther apart, maybe because the pressure is less. Second, there was a little tension among members this year; the process heretofore has been a free-flowing rush of creative ideas. The elementary school teacher has called for more organization, tighter planning, and greater readiness. This has changed the

process. The services seem to be a little more cognitive and activity oriented rather than drama and story focused, although the stories continue to be a large part of the services.

I do continue to wrestle with some issues. My style of ministry is one of facilitation rather than leading, which works well in this congregation and in shared ministry. In the context of this project, however, I am not sure it is the best style. First, I wanted to allow the project to flow from the team. This meant we never created a service deeply rooted in one of the classical myths (my original vision). Second, I did not take a strong theological role in planning. Thus the project may be missing a clear connection to some of the symbolism beyond the surface reading of the myths. Services may have lost some of the depth which reflection on theodicy could bring. Finally, I question whether this is too much to ask of congregants. Team members were very pleased to be part of the project. In this second year, however, there have been a few meetings needing to be rescheduled, missing a team member, or projects not completely finished due to time constraints. In future years, the Mythos Team may reduce the number of services and the minister may take on a larger role. Based on congregational feedback and team member participation and dedication, the Mythos Project will continue into the future sharing its challenges, learnings and transformations all along the way.

Appendix I: The Evaluation Form

Evaluation Form

The “team” has appreciated your participation in this year’s Mythos Series of Sunday Services. If you would be willing, would you give us a little feedback so that we may plan the future? We will be mingling about during the picnic and would love to talk to any of you about your experiences with this format. Thanks for taking the time to share this with us.

1. How many Mythos services did you attend this year?

Did you have a favorite?

2. Please rate the effectiveness in using:

- a. Story
- b. Dance/movement
- c. Graphics
- d. Arrangement of the objects [chairs, stage, etc] during these services
- e. Music/sound

3. Was it possible to follow the “flow” of the service?

4. Did the services seem to hold some meaning for you?

5. Would you recommend that Mythos Services occur again next year?

6. If so, do you have suggestions for next year?

Please return these to the box on Elaine’s desk.

Appendix II: The Evaluation Results [Year End]

Mythos Project Evaluation

1. How many Mythos services did you attend this year?

All of them – 10; about half of them – 5; several - 3; One – 1; Not sure - 6

Did you have a favorite? (Only general comments listed here; specific comments about a service are located in the main paper with the service indicated in the comment)

No—moved by all [perhaps each has been my favorite until the next!!;
Like the concept; I felt each focus was beautifully expressed; Please
continue; Very spiritual experience for me; It's hard to say, I loved them
all; I liked all of them; I remember the gimmick better than the message

2. Please rate the effectiveness in using:

a. Story

Excellent – 13; Good - 2; OK – 1

Comments: Continue! Anything she tells is excellent; she is amazing; she
is great at presenting, making it an effective medium; Well prepared.

b. Dance/movement

Great - 10; Good - 7; Bad - 1

Comments: Loved the dance, just didn't get it!!?!; Often the dance
seemed more to please the dancer than the congregation; If you must
dance at least use better music like you did in the music with the pictures
projected on the wall and make it easy or possible at all for someone
other than the dancer to relate to the dance; Sometimes I felt so moved
by the Mythos Service that I wanted to join the dance, or participate in
some way.

c. Graphics

Great - 3; Good - 2; OK – 3; Fair – 2; Bad 1

Comments: Could do more? Interesting but less memorable; Liked the wall hangings; this is often what I remember; I don't remember a lot of graphics; Sometimes not easy to see, but otherwise effective

d. Arrangement of the objects [chairs, stage, etc] during these services

Great – 2; Good – 3; Fair – 1;

Comments: Vibrant; Hard to see behind us; I like the changes—especially in a circle; Great to move things around; I loved the variety; I like the diversity; I really enjoyed the way the room moved around. I liked sitting in a different space within the same space; it's always a treat to see what the team does with the space! Often a practical challenge to the less mobile

e. Music/sound

Great – 2; Good – 7; Moderate – 1; Incidental-literally

Comments: Do like always having sound in service-it can be meditative in nature, unique; Could music be integrated more with story and movement?; Expand the types; Enjoy the fine gifts of instrumental, vocal talents of our fellowship; I especially find the drumming to be powerful; Didn't notice. Like the drumming; I enjoyed the music, but sometimes when it was quiet it seemed a little unsettling. Maybe I was just worried about how other people were perceiving it, or newcomers. I was also concerned during periods of silence how it would come across on the recording to those who couldn't come to the service.

3. Was it possible to follow the “flow” of the service?

Yes – 14; Mostly – 3; No - 1

Comments: Traditional activities like hymn singing may not fit in a mythos service...I say feel free to change the whole service [eg. Could any of the following activities be done differently? Singing-offertory-announcements-readings-use of time & space-children's moment. [though I know that some people do depend on the old traditions to feel they have been to church]; You just have to let go and go with it; it was very easy for me to see and enjoy the flow; The title could make more sense so we can differentiate; Except in the weird dances; They kept me longer awake.

4. Did the services seem to hold some meaning for you?

Yes – 12; Mostly – 2; Sometimes – 2; No - 1

Comments: The emotional impact through the “right brain” integrated cognitive, physical, and affective through experiential learning; Enhance spiritual and sense of community in human dimension and earth centered; I think the explanations were appropriate and effective in conveying the concepts; Good to do things differently, upset routines; Very connected to nature, our land, homes; We enjoy the aspiration and obvious pleasure of the Mythos Team to express themselves for our benefit. It stimulates the vitality of the covenant; I found all of the Mythos services very meaningful; Very much so, but I'm a Universalist - ha!; Not sure can generalize on this. Some points came through really well; Sometimes-sometimes they were way too obscure; I liked variety of expressions but can't say they held special meaning; Sometimes surprisingly so-----; Fun and nice to watch and to listen to; N. B. Wanted me to pass on her thanks and gratitude for our commitment and dedication to this project. She enjoys each service; I gave it a try, and it wasn't as quirky as could have been.”; Feels like being taken care of, thank you, work hard to set this up; These services are important to the congregation; Don't like to miss Mythos

5. Would you recommend that Mythos Services occur again next year?

Yes -15

Comments: Absolutely! I love the diversity of all our services. I like the balance between Elaine's sermons and Mythos' unique creative approaches; Keeps things fresh; Definitely. I enjoy them very much. They're interactive in an emotional way, and I like that they involve many people; Maybe with less frequency and more focus on the congregation than on the actors; Yeah, but maybe fewer (three responses); Other experiential-type services could take the place of the mythos service, too [ie, pagan service]; Consistently high; I felt taken care of with all the care taken to put this together, thank you.

If so, do you have suggestions for next year?

How to become a member of the mythos team? There should be an open invitation at some point to those with talent or interest. I like it when the congregation participates in some way in some part of the service, whether through change of position/location, voice, nonverbal, or structure interaction. Better to be active participants than passive observers. [perhaps the Mythos team

could take charge of the Humor Sunday one time—mythos activities need not be solemn and serious all the time.]; I find that the expression of imagination by the doers is as neat as the messages; I'm a learner, not a suggester; Less dance, more art [photos, paintings, etc.] and good music [ps: I liked the one with the leaves]; Increase poetry-around the world; Perhaps if possible have one intergenerational and involve kids. I know it's a big undertaking even without them; Whole congregation dance ; Add visual arts or create art; I'd enjoy being part of the Mythos group, yet have already committed to too much for the Fall-Winter 2008 at church. I say to the Mythos group-Bravo!; The bulletin needs to be large enough to read; The services were very diverse, but I bet they still have some great ideas; I think you are on the right track, let these creative people shape it in the future too; My one suggestions is that I (the pianist) would like to be a little more involved so that I could bring special music/service music that is more meaningful and a greater addition to the service. I felt a little frustrated that I could not be more prepared and contribute more; Keep doing more of the same - the services were wonderful; Don't make it so personal. Only the "mythos group" understood what was the meaning. At times, one felt very left out. Vision problems/don't read-trouble with bulletins; sometimes too much like a stage play instead of a service; Maybe a future evaluation question: "What would you miss if the Mythos service weren't here?"

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