

Ritual, Worship & Belonging - Why they matter to UU Humanists

Purpose & Framing

UU Humanists occupy a distinctive position: they have left behind theistic belief but chosen to remain in — or seek out — a worshipping community, complete with chalice lightings, responsive readings, communal song, and seasonal rites. That choice is not accidental, and it deserves examination. This session opens three related questions:

- If no god is present, what is actually happening when we worship?
- Can a ritual we know was invented still carry genuine meaning?
- In an age of acute social loneliness, what can a Humanist congregation offer that nothing else quite can?

These are not merely abstract questions. They go to the heart of why people keep showing up — and what is at stake if congregational life thins or disappears. Participants are encouraged to speak from their own experience as well as to engage the philosophical and sociological dimensions of the topic. Personal testimony and intellectual rigor belong in the same room.

I. Conceptual Grounding

Ritual

A ritual is not merely a repeated action — it is a symbolically charged repeated action. What distinguishes lighting a chalice from boiling a kettle is not the physical act but the intentional weight it carries: it means something beyond itself. The anthropologist Victor Turner described rituals as liminal moments — thresholds between ordinary and heightened attention. You do not need to believe in God to cross a threshold. You need only to have chosen, with others, to pay attention differently for a bounded period of time.

Crucially, social science has established that the forms of ritual produce real effects — neurological, psychological, social — largely independently of the theological content attached to them. Communal singing releases endorphins. Shared silence lowers cortisol. Repeated gathering across time creates what Emile Durkheim called collective effervescence: the felt sense that one is part of something larger than the self. These effects belong to the ritual structure, not to the creed.

Worship

The word worship comes from the Old English *weorthscipe* — “the condition of being worthy.” To worship is to direct sustained, serious attention toward what one holds most worthy. For UU Humanists, this need not be a deity. It might be the community itself, the interdependent web of life, the long arc of human striving, the simple fact of being alive and conscious together. Worship, in this reading, is structured attention to ultimate concern — and the congregation is both the audience and the subject.

Belonging

Sociologists distinguish several kinds of loneliness. Collective loneliness — the absence of community, shared identity, and membership in something that transcends the self — is distinct from, and harder to address than, ordinary social loneliness. A congregation at its best is one of the few institutions specifically designed to

provide exactly this: a community that gathers people across the full arc of a life, marking birth and death, grief and celebration, ordinary Sundays and extraordinary ones. Ritual is what makes that continuity legible across years and decades.

The UU Humanist Position

Humanists within UU navigate a genuine tension. The first Humanist Manifesto (1933), signed primarily by Unitarian ministers, described Humanism as a religion — not in the supernatural sense but as a comprehensive life-stance capable of providing meaning, community, and moral orientation. That framing has always been contested within Humanism. But the very fact that UU Humanists gather, light a chalice, and hold one another through loss is itself a claim: that what happens here, without supernatural warrant, is still worth marking — and marking together.

Discussion Question 1

What is worship without a god? If no divine presence is invoked, what — or whom — are we actually worshipping? And does the answer matter?

Background

The word “worship” makes many Humanists uneasy, and understandably so: its most common usage implies a relationship to a divine being. But the UU tradition has long resisted surrendering the word entirely. The 2023 Shared Values speak of the interdependent web of all existence as something worthy of reverence. Reverence, redirected, is exactly what worship means in its root sense.

Social scientists have documented that the ingredients of collective worship — music, physical co-presence, shared story, structured silence, synchronized movement — produce measurable effects on human psychology and social bonding entirely independent of theological content. Researchers have found that communal singing releases oxytocin and endorphins, that synchrony between bodies increases felt trust and cooperation, and that regular shared ritual builds what Durkheim called collective effervescence: the sense of being part of something larger than oneself. The Humanist question is not whether these effects are real — they are — but how to account for them honestly: neither retreating to theism nor reducing worship to mere social engineering.

Discussion Question 2

Can a ritual we know was invented carry genuine meaning? Can a Humanist fully inhabit a form they helped create — or know was created by someone else, recently?

Background

This is the question that makes many intellectually honest Humanists quietly uncomfortable. Every ritual was invented by someone, at some time, for some purpose. The UU chalice lighting was adopted in the 20th century. The water ceremony is newer still. Knowing this — knowing the construction behind the form — can feel deflating. How do you bow before an altar you helped build?

Sasha Sagan, in her widely read book *For Small Creatures Such as We* (2019), offers one response: secular rituals are not second-rate substitutes for religious ones. They are the original form. Humans were marking

transitions and tending to what mattered long before theistic explanations were attached to those practices. From this view, the Humanist who lights a chalice is not performing a hollowed-out religious act. They are doing something ancient and genuinely human — the overlay of theology was the later addition, not the ritual itself.

A second response comes from philosophy. Psychological research consistently shows that ritual produces its strongest effects when performed with intentionality: a conscious choice to engage the practice with specific purpose and attention. This implies that believing a ritual is meaningful — even knowing you constructed that meaning — is not self-deception. The Humanist position might be: we choose to mean it, and that choice is not less real for being deliberate.

A harder question: does a tradition need depth of time to carry full weight? Can a ritual invented last year do what one practiced for centuries does? This may be the most genuinely open question in Humanist liturgical life.

Discussion Question 3

In an era of genuine and measurable social loneliness, what can a UU Humanist congregation offer that other communities cannot? And what does belonging here actually require of us?

Background

The evidence for a loneliness epidemic in America is now documented at the level of public health emergency. The U.S. Surgeon General declared it formally in 2023. The World Health Organization launched an international commission in 2024. What is less discussed is what specifically different kinds of community can and cannot offer — and whether Humanist congregational life is positioned to address the deepest form of disconnection people are experiencing.

Sociologists distinguish three types of loneliness: intimate loneliness (no close confiding relationship), relational loneliness (thin or absent friendship network), and collective loneliness — the absence of community belonging and shared identity. Research suggests this last form is the hardest to address and the least likely to be resolved by more digital connection or even more friendship. It requires membership in something: a community with its own practices, history, shared language, and stakes.

A congregation, when it functions well, provides exactly this. Unlike a book club, a fitness community, or a professional network, it gathers people across the full arc of a life: present for births and deaths, for seasons and anniversaries, for the ordinary weeks when nothing particular is happening but the need for belonging persists anyway. Ritual is what makes that continuity visible. The repeating chalice lighting says, across years and decades: you are still here, and we are still here, and this still matters.

But belonging is not free. It requires showing up when it is inconvenient, being known in ways that carry vulnerability, and accepting some degree of obligation to people you did not choose. In a non-theistic framework, no divine command enforces that commitment. The UU answer — covenant, mutual recognition of worth, interdependence — is intellectually honest and morally serious. The harder question is whether the congregation is actually delivering it or offering the forms of belonging without its costs.