

# **White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

We Are What We Worship

Rev. Sara Goodman

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**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

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### **The First Reading is from David Foster Wallace**

“Here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it [Jesus] or Allah, be it YHWH (YAW-way) or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”

### **The second reading is “An Extraordinary Morning” By Philip Levine**

Two young men—you just might call them boys—  
waiting for the Woodward streetcar to get  
them downtown. Yes, they're tired, they're also  
dirty, and happy. Happy because they've  
finished a short work week and if they're not rich  
they're as close to rich as they'll ever be  
in this town. Are they truly brothers?  
You could ask the husky one, the one  
in the black jacket he fills to bursting;  
he seems friendly enough, snapping  
his fingers while he shakes his butt and sings  
“Sweet Lorraine,” or if you're put off  
by his mocking tone ask the one leaning  
against the locked door of Ruby's Rib Shack,  
the one whose eyelids flutter in time  
with nothing. Tell him it's crucial to know  
if in truth this is brotherly love. He won't  
get angry, he's too tired for anger,  
too relieved to be here, he won't even laugh  
though he'll find you silly. It's Thursday,  
maybe a holy day somewhere else, maybe  
the Sabbath, but these two, neither devout  
nor cynical, have no idea how to worship  
except by doing what they're doing,  
singing a song about a woman they love  
merely for her name, breathing in and out  
the used and soiled air they wouldn't know  
how to live without, and by filling  
the twin bodies they've disguised as filth.

Humans are built to worship. Evolution has well trained us to pay attention to little details of the world. The things that would help keep us alive and together. We developed religion as a way to help us agree on rules and order, to help us to focus our lives.

As we've expanded our numbers and grown as humans we created diverse cultures and religions. And although we don't all worship the same things, we all worship. Some people worship one God or many, some people worship a set of ideals or principles. Some people worship nature, and some people worship science. Some people worship stillness, and living in the moment. Some people worship culture and art. Some people worship their community of friends, some people worship baseball or football or hockey.

Some people worship love, some people worship money, and some people don't know that what they are worshipping, but spend most of their time and money on it. We can chose not to worship a God or Deity, but we will worship. 'The only choice we get is what to worship.' [David Foster Wallace]

The question is, do we worship something that helps us to be our best selves, that helps us be who we are called to be? Or do we worship something that makes us fearful and petty, something that dehumanizes ourselves or others?

Or to think of it another way, as NT Wright does: "Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. ... Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns."

When we worship something like money or power, not only do our lives start to become shaped that way, we start to treat others as if their only purpose in our lives are to serve our needs. Western Society, for too long, has been worshipping the economy, productivity and profits. As if the profits that go into the pockets of the wealthiest among us have any reflection on the wellbeing of the people. Stagnant wages and ballooning corporate profits for the highest earners... we've all heard that sermon before.

We've worshiped profitability for so long, we've tied a human being's worth to their ability to produce profit. When do that, when we base a human person's value on their productivity, it's easy to lose their humanity. It's easy to lose our humanity. When people are profits we can buy and sell them, horde them, abandon them. We can coerce them and extort them. To believe "If they have no value to me, they have no value."

But human people are inherently valuable. Human people, if they can work or not, if they can walk or not, if they are born here or somewhere else, human people are worthy. No Matter What.

Growing up, I worshipped body and beauty. Not the commercial beauty of makeup and clothes, but the beauty of strength and grace. The beauty of dancers and athletes. The beauty of bodies that could move through the world with ease and purpose, that could do amazing things. My dad was an athlete, and still is well into his 70<sup>th</sup> year. My family were healers and performers, doctors and firefighters, dancers and athletes.

I was a dancer, I am a dancer. But I never believed that I would be any good, because I was always a little chunkier than what a ballerina should look like. My curves were so different than the willowy figures poised on their one toe, lithe limbs curved in graceful lines.

Even before I started taking ballet at 5 years old, I told everyone that I wanted to be a ballerina when I grew up. I loved it, dancing. On stage, at home. Moving my body to music. The fancy costumes. Mastering something hard. I felt good when I was moving. I feel good when I'm moving.

I also liked pancakes. Because I was 5 years old. I was making pancakes with my dad and his girlfriend one Saturday morning, and I was getting excited, I was going to eat all the pancakes! I remember stirring the batter and my dad's girlfriend telling me "You know, ballerinas don't eat pancakes. They have to be skinny."

I was crushed. I really liked pancakes, so I would never be skinny, so I would never get to be a dancer. I was sad and mad and told my mom I wanted to quit dance because my feet hurt. I didn't stop worshipping bodies and beauty though. Slim graceful ballerinas, strong-armed gymnasts, powerful legged figure skaters. Beauty, strength, productivity, and profit.

I still loved beauty, I just knew from then on that I would never be beautiful. I still loved bodies and strength, I just knew from the ways my parents talked about food and weight and health that I would never be enough the way my body was. So I stopped trying to be good enough – I still danced through middle and high school, but I didn't work hard to improve. I moved my body because it felt good, but I knew that would never be enough to make me good, to make me beautiful, to make me worthy of love.

I know that all bodies are beautiful. All bodies are worthy. All bodies, fat and skinny, disabled or temporarily abled, all bodies are worthy and loveable. All people who honor their lives and experience, expressing their gender in so many beautiful ways, are worthy and loveable. All bodies of all skin colors of all national origins, all bodies that speak one or many languages, and those that don't have the ability to speak and yet are able to communicate in ways vast or subtle, are valuable and worthy of love. I know this, and have gained more categories to include as I have grown and listened and learned. And yet, I didn't know how to apply it to myself.

In college I gained weight, I got fat. I hated it. I knew, once I graduated, if I wanted to be happy I would have to lose the weight. So I joined Weight Watchers. I devoted my attention to their methods, I devoted my life to making good food choices and being extremely active. I started to dance and swim again.

I felt happier than I had in a very long time because I started to feel confident. But all I thought about and talked about was food and calories in calories out. I gave all of my attention to my body and food. I started boring myself.

I was 23 when I hit my goal weight. I felt fit and strong and graceful. I felt attractive for the first time. This was the good life, this was how I would be for the rest of my adult life, as long as I stayed on weight watchers forever, as long as I tracked my food every day. As long as I spent many hours at the gym every week. As long as I went swimming three times a week before work, and spent my breaks running up and down five flights of stairs, and running and biking on the weekends, and eating only enough food to keep me alive, food that was healthy but didn't really taste like anything, food that never satisfied. As long as I was always hungry, and paid my dues, and paid attention, kept my focus on not-being-fat I could be slim the rest of my life.

As long as I was restricting myself I wouldn't burst out of the seams of my jeans. As long as I planned my meals in advance, and ate the same thing everyday, and only had sugar on special occasions. As long as I followed the rules and stuck to the plan, and

didn't think about or do anything else with my life, I could be attractive, young and strong forever. Isn't that the way it works? (spoiler alert: its not)

It worked pretty well when I was single. When I started sharing my life with another person, and this wasn't his priority, it became much harder.

I wanted to spend my time with him. I wanted to play mini-golf, and go to movies, and eat junk food while watching our favorite TV shows. I wanted to give my attention to doing things I loved doing with people I care about. I didn't want to bore everyone with talking about food all the time. I didn't want to say "I can't have that, I'm on a diet."

Inevitably I started gaining weight again, and was mad at myself and sad and scared that I wasn't worthy anymore. I started getting older and fatter and yet. AND YET. My life just kept getting better.

I decided to go to seminary, even though some folks worried that my weight might stop some churches from wanting to hire me. I graduated from seminary the fattest I had ever been. I married my soul mate, I didn't lose weight for the wedding, and it was still the happiest most beautiful day of my life.

I became a mom. I got ordained. I was installed into my dream job at my dream church. All of this, at the fattest I've ever been.

I am fat and happy. I'm fat, and healthy and not trying to lose weight, and I'm happy! Who even knew that was possible? (well all the hundreds of thousands of people who live this way know, but I didn't.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out.

"That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

When I was slim, it was because I worshiped slimness so much that all of me became slim, two dimensional. As I was becoming fat, I was making room in the recesses of my heart for so much more to flow in. This body has room in my imagination and thoughts for big dreams and excessive amounts of love and compassion.

If we worship something larger than ourselves, we can become larger ourselves. If we worship a deity, maybe we can take on some of the deity's good qualities. Maybe if we worship the vastness of the universe, we can become ever more expansive in our loving, more expansive in our compassion, more expansive in our imagination.

Maybe if we worship nature we will be, like nature, ever changing and ever growing. Living a flexible life, knowing that the seasons change, as do we, a cyclical evolution, ever spiraling into growth out of decay.

Maybe if we worship nature we can do something to help in the next 12 years, before climate change makes our home uninhabitable for life as we know it. Maybe.

Or Maybe, if we worship the present, this moment, we might find ourselves singing a song, breathing in and out, exhausted at the end of a short week, and if not rich, as rich as we will ever be in this town, too tired to be angry, too tired not to shake our butts and dance. Fat, and dirty, and happy.

Doing the only worship we know how to do: living.