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# Rite in nature: cultivating religious naturalist ritual leadership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Project Thesis

**RITE IN NATURE:  
CULTIVATING RELIGIOUS NATURALIST RITUAL LEADERSHIP  
IN A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION**

by

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work in memory of my mentor, minister, and colleague, the Rev. Edward J. Searl (1947 – 2019), who served the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, IL for over thirty years. You were a religious naturalist before there was ever an association or name for it. Vast and humble gratitude...for guiding me into this liberal religious path; for keeping alive the wondrous spirit of the heretics and rebels of our faith; for instilling a deep love of Americana and small town church potlucks; for telling me I was going to seminary, no questions asked; for joining in the gathered company who laid their hands upon me in ordination; for being in that great cloud of witnesses now and forevermore – “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

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**RITE IN NATURE: CULTIVATING RELIGIOUS NATURALIST RITUAL  
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**ABSTRACT**

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY, longs for religious naturalist ritual, but a framework for cultivating leaders of religious naturalist ritual does not exist. This project will explore and encourage the development of religious naturalist ritual leadership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation through experimentation and engagement with established ritual theory. Using characteristics of ritual as outlined in the work of Richard Grimes, the intersection of pastoral care and ritual leadership, and ritual improvisation, an ethic of ritual leadership will start to emerge. From this theory of ritual leadership, a curriculum to create a Ritual Design Lab in a congregational context will be formed to form ritual leaders while creating rituals rooted in a religious naturalist worldview.

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## **Introduction: Everybody's Story**

Imagine this. In the beginning, roughly 13.8 billion years ago, there was darkness. A dazzling, deep darkness. It can be unfathomable to imagine such a thing, but this darkness was full of possibility and wonder. In this darkness was a speck, so tiny you could not see it no matter how hard you tried. Within that tiny speck was everything. Everything that would be, everything that could be. And suddenly, from that little speck, in that brilliant darkness, everything changed.

The Universe as we know it came into being from the rapid, explosive expansion of space-time itself. The enriched atoms and matter from that explosion spread far out into the great expanse, churning and burning and swirling. Eventually, those atoms and primordial elements would come together, creating the deep roaring foundries of early stars, only for those stars to explode and create new stars and more elements and new objects soaring and floating throughout what we call space.

This continued for over 9.3 billion years until a tiny rock formed around a tiny star in a small galaxy. This is where our story really begins. On that tiny rock, as volcanos erupted, meteors bombarded the surface, and great oceans of water formed and boiled — suddenly, in the first billion years that tiny rock existed, something wondrous emerged: Life! And as that life grew and evolved, lived and died, survived and endured, the planet we now call Earth continued to take shape.

The volcanos became less frequent, the seas stopped boiling, the magma cooled, and the atmosphere stopped the endless bombardment of meteors. The planet settled into a comfortable orbit around the sun, and the seasons took shape. Brilliant summers led to

crestfallen autumns, only for the somberness of winter to take hold.<sup>1</sup> Life held on in those early winters. And just when it felt like the winters would never end, the sun would shine just a little brighter.

The snow would melt, the ice would thaw, and the air would warm. The promise of spring became known and felt, and life flourished once more. Birds nested, reptiles would sun themselves on rocks, the bees would flit about collecting pollen, and all life felt free and whole. The cycle continued; the animals and insects were sometimes completely different. And then, around 350,000 years ago, one animal, in particular, started to take notice of the natural world and asked: What does it all mean?

### **The Problem & Promise**

Known variably as the “Evolutionary Epic,” “Everybody’s Story,” and by so many other names, the story above is one of many re-tellings of the origins of the Universe and life on Earth.<sup>2</sup> Eschewing the specifics of the scientific processes, it invites hearers and readers into a mythopoetic experience of the Universe’s formation. The biologist E.O. Wilson offers a decisive explanation of this retelling of the Big Bang, whose purpose is “...to participate in the important work of constructing a new wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize the telling of the story has a mid-latitude bias and would take on a different shape in different parts of the world. The far north and equatorial narratives would differ significantly. Part of this exploration of “Everybody’s Story” focuses on rooting narratives and rituals in a particular context. The context for this project is that of Kentucky and its experience of seasons.

<sup>2</sup> E.O Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004), 201; Loyal D. Rue, *Everybody’s Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).

tradition... to tell the story of the universe in a manner that might inspire grateful service to the enduring promise of life on the planet.”<sup>3</sup> This is a noble and monumental aim. E.O. Wilson’s specifics for rooting this wisdom tradition in people’s lives are not limited to any one community, though there is also a recognition that this imperative requires a “depth of change” from the loftiest human structures to individual daily life.<sup>4</sup> The possibilities, then, are many.

One such possibility in rooting “Everybody’s Story” in community life rests within the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY (UUCL) and the emerging religious naturalist orientation of the community. As a community comprised of primarily non-theists, UUCL has the opportunity to examine its Protestant Christian past as a religious institution and foster new ways of being religious that, as Wilson suggests, “inspire[s] grateful service.” How this is accomplished is the big question. As a religious community, UUCLs primary expression of faith and joining together is through ritual. Whether through Sunday morning services, vespers gatherings, rites of passage, or other ritual celebrations and observances, these are the touchpoints for expressing what it means to be the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington. It offers concrete enactment of Unitarian Universalist values and, due to the openness of the tradition, the ethos of the local congregation. In this context, the ethos is overwhelmingly non-theist and increasingly religious naturalist.

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<sup>3</sup> Rue, *Everybody’s Story*, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Rue, *Everybody’s Story*, 125.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY longs for religious naturalist ritual, but a framework for cultivating leaders of religious naturalist ritual do not yet exist. This project will explore and encourage the development of religious naturalist ritual leadership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation through experimentation and engagement with established ritual theory. The primary question asked in this endeavor will be, when looking at the mythopoetic “Everybody’s Story,” Unitarian Universalist tradition, and the emerging religious naturalist community: “What would happen if the road from narrative to ethics passed through ritual?”<sup>5</sup> As we will see, the ethics and narrative of UUCL is already religious naturalist. Still, the ritual expression of the community feels beholden to a Protestant Christian past that is increasingly irrelevant to the gathering and growth of the community.

This question then becomes increasingly interesting to explore and leads to further inquiries. How can ritual effectively tell religious naturalist stories about the Universe and life on Earth? Will this inspire transformative ethical commitments in a person’s life? How about ethical actions? While these questions will not be fully answered, exploring the transformative power of ritual is a crucial initial phase. However, a further step needs to be undertaken.

In exploring the power of ritual, specifically, that of religious naturalist ritual and how it relates to UUCL, as well as examining best practices and current religious naturalist experiments and applications, the manner in which narrative and ethics passes

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 156.



through ritual will not be passive. This is crucial. Ongoing dialogue in ritual theory often labels a passive experience of ritual as stale ceremony. This is especially true in churches where:

...the standard public rituals in our churches are often ceremonies without stories, events disconnected from peoples' lives. In the sermons, song texts, and prayers punctuating our worship, the human and divine narratives seldom connect in recognizable and accessible ways. The ceremony may be proper, but the ritual has no soul.<sup>6</sup>

When the current liturgy and ritual expression of UUCL is already feeling out-of-place to the community members, what good will it do to educate leaders who enact passive ceremonies that do not encourage active participation in the natural world?

The promise and shape of this project begins to emerge. After outlining two separate but complimentary communities of context, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington and the loosely connected religious naturalist orientation, a deep dive into ritual theory will illustrate several possibilities. Using adaptive leadership models, ritual theory and design will be engaged as a meaningful way to lead a community into generative, transformative, and creative change. The nature of an adaptive challenge means an ethic of experimentation and risk is necessary. There will not be a single solution to the ritual leadership needs of UUCL. From engaging ritual theory as a leadership model, it is essential to move to practical applications of said theories. Liturgical and ritual experimentation in progressive faith communities will highlight an

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), xiv.

emerging desire complimentary to and beyond UUCL. Several communities are beginning this work of ritual exploration!

The final product, after defining our context, engaging ritual theory, and documenting current explorations into ritual design, is a toolkit that will create frameworks for ritual leadership and innovation at UUCL and other communities. A curriculum using this model, grounded in religious naturalism, will offer an example of this leadership model by creating a religious naturalist ritual lab where new rituals are created, and leadership principles are taught. The hope here is to offer a beginning guide that will spark other creativity and engagement with religious naturalist ritual in additional gatherings and communities who desire it. Furthermore, this model could be adapted to various contexts that desire ritual leadership.

## **Chapter 1: Rite Communities**

### **Getting to Know Religious Naturalism and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington**

To take this road through ritual, we need to understand, as well as possible, two distinct intersecting communities: The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY, and Religious Naturalism. Both have nuances, connections to larger entities, limitations, boundaries, and established or emerging identities. The act of defining and outlining is a means of understanding. Every healthy community has shared characteristics, including but not limited to having shared values, membership identity, moral proscriptions, and insider understanding.<sup>7</sup> However, when is this practice of defining these categories undertaken? If communities engage in a conscious and unconscious expression of their values, it is essential to discover how those expressed characteristics align with internal understandings.<sup>8</sup> Such alignment is beneficial with community ritual and whether it is authentic or dishonest. Furthermore, it is critical to outline how two communities relate to one another and how they diverge.

Using the framework outlined by Charles H. Vogl and beginning with a general overview of the community, we will explore seven distinct areas of community life for both UUCL and Religious Naturalism: Story (history), Boundaries (rules/behavior), Initiation (membership), Inner Ring (leadership), Ritual, Symbols, and Temple (sacred

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<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 12.

space).<sup>9</sup> Vogl suggests exploring these characteristics as critical to understanding, building, and transforming community. These characteristics and explorations help with identifying leadership opportunities within any given community. While these categories provide a snapshot of the community from a distinct point in time, each community is strongly encouraged to engage in these practices, preferably as part of a more extensive process where multiple pictures are painted.<sup>10</sup>

While Vogl suggests eight areas total, a community portrait plus the seven listed, the category of ‘Ritual’ will be explored concerning these two communities in the next chapter. The questions presented for each of the various characteristics of a community are essential to ask. When it comes to ritual craft, leadership, and the problem of emerging rituals, more is required. Vogl suggests exploring current practices and identifying ideals as they are. The aim here is to push that portrait into the realm of ritual theory, adaptive leadership, and creative engagement with ritual. All of this is important for cultivating leaders and, by extension, reinvigorating ritual life and requires special attention.

### **A Word About Context & Ritual Authenticity**

For meaningful ritual exploration, the context where such a ritual could take place will inform crucial areas of the practice of leadership. This is not just an issue of making bespoke rituals or getting enough people to sign up to lead a ritual for the Lexington

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<sup>9</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 156.

congregation or a religious naturalist community. Instead, this is a fundamental good practice in any ritual leadership: that of knowing, as deeply as possible, the people in a given location. The word used here for this is authentic. The craft of authentic ritual is a loaded statement, and the term has several implications. Authenticity can and will mean several things to different people. As far as an authentic ritual is concerned, it all comes back to how rituals provide space for the community's identity and allows the individuals to be present, including leadership. The converse of ritual authenticity would be ritual dishonesty. A state of ritual dishonesty is one where a ritual does not,

...match the real-life experience of the participants, even when these are painful...rituals that do not acknowledge the painful or parabolic cannot sustain an honest narrative. The stories we tell will be vital and life-enhancing if the rituals that sustain them are authentic and if there is a true convergence of private, public, and official meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Anderson and Foley give us a glimpse into the shape of ritual authenticity. A good portion of this definition rests on defining ritual in and of itself, which will be explored later. Yet what do ritual authenticity and dishonesty have to do with establishing and understanding context? There is a hint of an answer when the "true convergence" of different areas of life is referenced. In understanding context, especially when looking at two faith communities centered in an earthly worldview, it is crucial to have as complete a picture as possible. What are the real-life experiences of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington and the broader religious naturalist community? What about the emerging religious naturalist community within UUCL? If a primary problem is that

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<sup>11</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 35.

UUCL is desiring new ritual expressions and leaders and the religious naturalist community is also navigating similar formative areas, then it is integral to this exploration to ensure an “honest narrative” is engaged.

As the aim of this project is to primarily provide a path for ritual leadership, it is especially important to encourage potential leaders to also identify a given context. If you do not know a community then a ritual could fall flat or not resonate. According to Jelte Gordon-Lennox, ritual must “...be right to feel right; using our own objects, symbols, and language provides the best base for crafting authentic ritual.”<sup>12</sup> The positive application of this advice is in knowing potential ritual leaders have everything they need if they get to know their given context.

### **Getting to Know UUCL**

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY, is a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA). The UUA is a global body of Unitarian Universalists, primarily situated in North America, that provides resources, guidance, publications, and clergy credentialing, develops global initiatives, and trains lay leaders. There are more duties within the scope of UUA work as well as carrying out the business of the association. The UUA is comprised of roughly 1100 congregations representing roughly 150,000 members.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jeltje Godon-Lennox, *Crafting Secular Ritual: A Practical Guide* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Walton, “UUA membership rises for first time since 2008,” *UU World Magazine*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uua-membership-2018>.

Unitarian Universalism is the result of a merger between two historically Protestant Christian traditions in 1961, the Unitarians and the Universalists. Traditionally, the Unitarians denied the doctrine of the Trinity and affirmed the Unity of God, whereas the Universalists, while often affirming the Trinity, asserted the ultimate and universal salvation of all people. The two denominations continued to evolve theologically until they recognized they had much more in common with one another. Upon merger, most of the newly formed Unitarian Universalists saw this as a step outside of Christianity while still affirming its Protestant roots.

Since 1961, Unitarian Universalism has continued to be a progressive religious community. Pagans, Wiccans, and other earth-centered religious traditions were welcomed more widely into the tradition in the 1980s and several justice stances have been taken nationwide, such as affirming the Black Lives Matter movement, supporting immigrants, advocating for women's health, ordaining LGBTQ+ ministers, celebrating same-sex marriage, and many others. It presents itself as a living tradition that is open to change and continually looks at ways in which to update and transform its stated goals and sources of religious inspiration.

#### *UUCL Community & Values*

UUCL is a progressive congregation in the heart of the bluegrass region of central and eastern Kentucky. The congregation, while holding just above or below 300 members for several years, reaches an additional 500 loosely affiliated friends spread throughout

the eastern part of the Commonwealth, which is primarily Appalachian. It is the largest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Commonwealth.<sup>14</sup>

The theological orientation of the congregation has remained overwhelmingly non-theistic and naturalistic since its founding. However, the congregation readily welcomes a diversity of beliefs across the religious, spiritual, and philosophical spectrum. Sunday morning service gathers around half the membership every week. This is reflective of a highly mobile population due to professional obligations. The demographics of the congregation are increasingly diverse in regard to ethnic, racial, and cultural background. There is also a wide breadth of class diversity among the membership. Much of the demographics reflect the general make-up of Unitarian Universalists nationwide, with the exception of class diversity.<sup>15</sup> UUCL is an anomaly in an otherwise highly affluent religious tradition.

The church community actively seeks to increase in racial and ethnic diversity as well as continuing to offer a spiritual home to a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Greater emphasis is being placed on attracting younger members and there is a growing young adult group whose leadership ebbs and flows. Implicit in some of these hopes for

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<sup>14</sup> “MyUUA: Congregations,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://my.uua.org/directory/congregations/3714>.

<sup>15</sup> “Unitarians and Other Liberal Faiths in ‘Other Faiths’ Tradition,” Pew Research Center, accessed January 7, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-family/unitarians-and-other-liberal-faiths-in-the-other-faiths-tradition/>.



demographics is also a desire to see more members who are committed to social justice, anti-racist work, environmentalism, and liberal religious values.

While UUCL is clear in being a free church open to all, there is always the caveat that it is for those who “share our values.”<sup>16</sup> This puts a boundary on the types of people who are sought out to join UUCL. More importantly, it also suggests who will be comfortable in a community such as this. Given the historical context within which UUCL resides as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, there are theological boundaries that set up some barriers to entry. At once, Unitarian Universalism denies any notion of hellfire or damnation, supports LGBTQ rights, women’s health, combatting global climate change, anti-racist work and the Black Lives Matter movement, and several other traditionally progressive causes.<sup>17</sup>

The core values of UUCL are, primarily, the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism plus an additional Eighth Principle adopted by a congregation vote in December 2019. The Eight Principles of UUCL are:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all; *and*

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<sup>16</sup> This is a distinction made at UUCL in their weekly “Welcome Statement.”

<sup>17</sup> “Justice & Inclusion,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/justice>.

- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.<sup>18</sup>
- Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.<sup>19</sup>

These principles provide the foundation of ethical life at UUCL and are printed in posters, given out on bookmarks, taught during newcomer classes, preached about on Sunday morning, and present in several other formats at UUCL.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, they are readily available to anyone that wishes to know them. Their importance is further underscored by being prominent in the Unitarian Universalist Association by-laws.<sup>21</sup> As a non-creedal religious tradition, the seven principles, including the eighth adopted by many congregations, provide a breadth of possible beliefs welcome within the faith.

The manner in which the identity of the congregation is communicated to members is multi-faceted. Sunday morning services present a prominent focal point in sharing identity among other valuable aspects of the faith. Sermons are grounded in Unitarian Universalist history and ethics, hymns are taken mostly from denomination-provided hymnals, the style of prayer reflects a Unitarian Universalist approach, and all

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<sup>18</sup> “The Seven Principles,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

<sup>19</sup> “The 8<sup>th</sup> Principle of Unitarian Universalism,” 8<sup>th</sup> Principle Project, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org>.

<sup>20</sup> As of 2024, the Unitarian Universalist Association and its member congregations are concluding a years long exploration that involves a major overhaul of the Principles. It remains unknown if this overhaul will be approved by delegates of the yearly General Assembly in June 2024. The current Principles are still relevant since, if the new ones are adopted, the congregation has yet to formally adopt any changes.

<sup>21</sup> “Bylaws and Rules,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/bylaws>.

other aspects lift up UU practices. Beyond this, there are visual cues as to what our identity is throughout the church campus. From the official symbol of Unitarian Universalism, the flaming chalice, to rainbow flags, Black Lives Matter banners and signs, eco-friendly reminders, and several other visual cues, the communication is ever-present. This leads naturally into not just ‘being’ but ‘doing’ and ‘believing’ as well. With our principles, values, and causes prominently displayed, there is an implied understanding that the congregation will unite behind these particular items. While being non-creedal, there are several displays of religious symbols, saints, and prophets in religious education classrooms and elsewhere. This is not to say UUs believe in all religions, but rather to promote interfaith engagement and religious literacy.

Communication of our values and beliefs leads naturally into moral prescriptions. Being a non-creedal, non-Christian, and mostly non-theist religious community in the heart of the bluegrass region of Kentucky means that our moral distinctions are often relatively straightforward compared to other religious communities. The source of our morality could be argued to be different as well. Exact moral beliefs vary but are usually in line with American liberal or progressive movements.

Harkening back to the principles, however, will show that within the moral framework of Unitarian Universalism and the Lexington congregation is a commitment to justice. This commitment takes several forms, but chief among them is the guarantee of affirming the worth of all human beings. Therein lies a natural boundary in UUCLs morality. What is named unacceptable among us is anything that would undermine human worth or the provisions outlined in the other principles. This includes church

disagreements and negative feedback as well. The terminology used in UU communities is often that of being in covenant or right-relationship. UUCL will disagree and have squabbles, but to ensure worth and dignity are maintained, a process of how the congregation relates to one another is outlined.

### *UUCL Story*

The story of UUCL begins in 1950 when New England transplants to the Commonwealth of Kentucky and local religious progressives sought to form a Unitarian fellowship in the Bluegrass. In cooperation with the Rev. Robert T. Weston, who was serving as the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Louisville, KY, the church was planted as the Lexington Unitarian Fellowship. The congregation changed its name after the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961 which created the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Since its founding, UUCL has seen itself as a liberal religious beacon in Eastern Kentucky.

This story goes further back than this church planting encounter. After meeting in members' homes, renting space in downtown Lexington, and having an earlier building near Transylvania University (which has connections to Unitarian history), the church bought property on what was once the Allen Farm. The history of this plot of land involves a man named Richard Allen who was an early religious progressive. After being asked to leave his current church for radical views, Richard Allen decided to build a meetinghouse on his farm property to be a house of prayer for all people in Kentucky. In 1903, after a reported revelation from God, Allen solidified his plans further and ultimately built the Republican Meetinghouse. In it, he encouraged preachers of any

persuasion to come and preach and brought progressive Christianity to freed slave communities in Lexington.<sup>22</sup> UUCL sees itself as the inheritors of this legacy, which includes the reality that Richard Allen was a slaveholder himself. Furthermore, there is an emerging exploration of the indigenous tribes who stewarded the land before white settlement.

This is the story that is told to visitors and members. It is evolving as new information is gathered, but the broader picture of inhabiting land once owned by an early religious progressive is an integral part of UUCLs mythos. This inspires its affirmation of itself as a liberal religious beacon as well as becomes a part of other stories of religious progressive initiatives in Kentucky, from being a part of anti-segregation protests to helping found the LGBTQ+ Pride Festival. Adding to the mythos is the oft repeated story of the founders mortgaging their homes to purchase the land the congregation resides on to this day. There are elements of risk and sacrifice in this history that continue to push the congregation to new ventures.

The story of UUCL also faced additional hardships beyond having members mortgage their homes to purchase land. Early conflicts with ministers led to embedded distrust of ministry and authority. The church has also faced several financial shortfalls and, more recently, has never quite recovered from the Great Recession of 2008. All of these challenges were faced with an attitude that they would be somehow overcome and, as far as meeting minutes and member testimony convey, they were. This

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<sup>22</sup> Jim Burdine, "Old Meeting House Free to Worshipers," *The Lexington Leader*, October 17, 1950, 2.

leads to interesting attributes in the community. First, there is a “can do” attitude but also an isolation. The community has felt it is always up to them to resolve their conflicts and ensure their sustainability. For this reason, there is hesitancy to engage the larger Unitarian Universalist world, though past years have softened this hesitancy.

Missteps and challenges aside, UUCL has learned a great deal and continues to do so around what constitutes community. Recent years have shown an increase in spiritual awareness and desire as well as a strong push for involvement in justice work. A great deal of this has to do with the lay leadership and not just ministry staff. All of these imperfections and successes are part of the larger story that is communicated to both visitors and members.

### *UUCL Community Boundaries*

An exploration of boundaries is necessary as that provides a clear delineation between what constitutes the community or does not. How do we know who is inside the community or outside of it? Some of this has been covered and will not require further commentary outside of historical analysis.

UUCL is a community with a large number of affiliated non-members. This makes clear lines of distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the community an exciting exercise. Whose perspective do we prioritize? The individual? The staff? The leaders? What becomes clear in defining community membership boundaries is that among the general membership, there are no clear lines. There is a ceremony for becoming an official member and a singing of the membership book, but that is a formality in a system that prizes informality. On top of this, UUCL was, for a good

portion of its history, the radical church in Lexington, KY. This means there is a great deal of people who associate with the community, often support it financially, but never officially join. All of this is not unusual to a Unitarian Universalist community of faith. As the theologian James Luther Adams shared in one of his cornerstones of liberal religion, Unitarian Universalism is a “voluntary association.”<sup>23</sup> This relates directly to the fifth principle and its emphasis on the “democratic process.” While this is often referring to church governance, it can be argued that it also refers to the voluntary nature of our communities.

That being said, the congregation emphasizes boundaries by educating members and potential members on the topic of right relationship, which offers guidelines on how the congregation interacts with individuals, staff, the Board, and the congregation as a whole. The emphasis on right-relationship means there are some clear distinctions between what is acceptable and unacceptable. People have been asked not to attend if there as a clear breach of right-relationship and there is a disruptive person policy in place for repeat offenders. The history of the congregation indicates a hesitancy to enforce boundaries around behavior, so that responsibility often falls to the Minister and President of the Board.

### *UUCL Membership*

Initiation into the community, by which visitors are officially welcomed, is a subject already touched upon. The process at UUCL is decidedly simple. Visitors must

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<sup>23</sup> James Luther Adams, *The Essential James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1998), 179.

attend two membership classes, sign the membership book, and participate in a Sunday morning service where they are officially welcomed. However, there are loopholes in this process. One could, in theory, sign the book upon first attending and be considered a member without participating in any of the other requirements. This is not a commentary on how this is good or bad. Vogl offers a question about initiation that implies commentary on these loopholes: “Would members appreciate an option for a more ritualized initiation?”<sup>24</sup> A quick answer to this concerns the whole point of a community profile, which is to know the community.

Membership rituals at UUCL take place primarily in the sanctuary and focus on the aforementioned practice of right-relationship and covenant. The eight principles of UUCL are affirmed and members join in a liturgy of welcoming. The majority of the experience is led by the President of the Congregation to emphasize that membership is the responsibility of the gathered congregation. New members are given a small gift containing an introductory book on Unitarian Universalism, pocket cards with the principles, stickers, bookmarks, and other assorted items. Upon officially joining, a new member can vote at congregation meetings and hold leadership positions. Far more important than voting in a congregational meeting would be the recognition as someone who desires to deepen their relationship with the congregation.

### *UUCL Leadership*

The structure of community at UUCL is consistent with that of communities that hold a congregationalist polity. An organization chart would emphasize that every

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<sup>24</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 150.



member in the community is a stakeholder with a vested interest in the leadership and management of the congregation. In practice, however, there is a hierarchy for the execution of governance, administration, and ministry. This structure gives shape to how people enter in and leave the community as well as how the overall ethos of the congregation is molded.

The leap from a visitor to a member at UUCL is rather sudden. There is no exact status of being a “novice” that Vogl implies between the two. It would be worth exploring for UUCLs process of initiation, especially if it becomes increasingly important to educate potential members on both a Unitarian Universalist and religious naturalist identity. From there, people become members and it is up to them how they progress from there. It would be worth attention but outside of the scope of this project to explore meaningful ways to strengthen that identity.

Of particular interest are categories that Vogl refers to as “elders” and “principal elders.” In other words, what is leadership at UUCL? When examining ritual structures, this is a crucial set of categories. While the general membership and visitors will have a part in ritual, it is the leadership that will craft and execute it. Leadership at UUCL carries with it significant authority in determining the overall flow and structure of a particular group or initiative. Outside of mostly voluntary identification with most groups, worship-related teams are selected by the minister. This is not to present such groups as elite or even in the category of “principal elders,” but rather that the primary movers and crafters will be a team working in close proximity with the spiritual leader of the congregation

and are trusted to do so. Entering these rings of identification or leadership are, as mentioned, mostly voluntary.

The closest thing to a diaconate that UUCL has would be the aforementioned worship-related teams. They are identified in their various roles on Sunday morning and represent the minister in his or her absence. It is generally expected that those who would become a part of these teams are established in their identity as Unitarian Universalists and have a good working relationship with the ministry staff.

### *UUCL Sacred Space*

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington is comprised of a seven-acre campus and two buildings. The seven-acres contain a creek running through the property, two of every native Kentucky tree planted, two monarch waystation gardens, a memorial garden that is a registered columbarium with a stone altar underneath an oak tree, a rain garden, and a large forested area. The oldest building on the campus is a farmhouse originally belonging to Richard Allen. It is the second oldest building in the county and currently houses a music studio, religious education classes, a Buddhist meditation group, and a small Independent Catholic Church. The main building consists of a large fellowship hall and kitchen, a religious education wing, staff offices, and the sanctuary. The sanctuary was designed by the architect Herb Greene, who was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright. It was intentionally designed to draw people's eyes to the natural world around them.

All of these spaces inspire a connection with nature in some way. Whether it is having multiple windows, a relationship with the history of the land, or the natural

features themselves, it is an ever-present theme. While it is hard to discern which is the most important place since several meaningful activities take place, the apparent answer is where the corporate ritual of the community resides, which is primarily in the sanctuary. This is where all of the critical events of the community take place, including rites of passage and celebrations.

It should be acknowledged the congregation is increasingly exploring its connection with the natural landscape it inhabits. This is serving as a secondary sacred space where more rituals and events are taking place. Events have taken place in the past but the awareness and connection to the land is evolving in a more meaningful way. The land and buildings are also adapted to meet different understandings of the sacred. From having multiple Buddhist groups using several spaces, earth-centered groups (Pagan, Wiccan, Druid, etc.) celebrating rites on the property, and the Independent Catholic Church holding mass in the farmhouse, there are several interpretations that complement and sanctify the land and buildings alongside Unitarian Universalism.

### *UUCL Symbols*

There are several symbols that anchor the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington in their identity as a church and communicate to others necessary information. As mentioned previously, the seven (or eight) principles are printed on posters, notecards, bookmarks, and several other media. This is a very present symbol that lays out the ethical foundation of the faith. Additionally, various forms of the official Unitarian Universalist symbol are present: the flaming chalice. There is one for ritual purposes in nearly every room of the church, including the official church chalice in the sanctuary.

People wear them on pendants, get tattoos of them, put stickers on their cars, have them on t-shirts, draw them, paint them, and find other creative uses to represent the symbol. The chalice means different things to various people. Amidst this diversity is a shared history for the symbol that dates back to World War II and the Unitarian Service Committee providing aid to those in Europe.<sup>25</sup> One commonality of the traditional version of the flaming chalice is two intertwined circles representing Unitarianism and Universalism, with a gap between the two circles and the cup that holds the flame. The gap represents the UU ethic that espouses “revelation is not sealed.”<sup>26</sup>

There are other uses for the symbols beyond what was described here and they all rest in personal applications and appreciations. When people join the congregation, they often receive a chalice pin or some other representation of the symbol. Each service is started with the lighting of a chalice and a brief explanation of what the chalice means for the current moment. Outside of the principles and flaming chalice, symbols in Unitarian Universalist congregations vary. At UUCL, apple trees and the natural world are commonly represented due to the congregation being steeped in nature on the grounds it meets.

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<sup>25</sup> “Flaming Chalice: Symbol of Unitarian Universalism,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/chalice>.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, *The Essential James Luther Adams*, 149.

## Getting to Know Religious Naturalism

Religious Naturalism is a religious viewpoint that succinctly states, “Nature is enough.”<sup>27</sup> It is enough in understanding the universe, the world, life, death, and the myriad in-between categories and moments human beings experience. It is non-theistic, holding no supernatural affirmations, and yet affirms the emotional validity of transcendent experiences, which they term “religious.”

Where the connection between the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington and Unitarian Universalist Association is established, the connection between Religious Naturalism (RN) and the Religious Naturalist Association (RNA) is not. There are several questions worth asking about the relationship between RN and RNA. Chief among them is how the RNA relates to the broader RN worldview. Rex Hunt asks several additional questions regarding RN and RNA:

- Does RN seek to go down the track of becoming a new, separate religious institution?
- Is its future primarily for individual religious naturalists, gathering as an online association with little to no institutional embodiment at all?
- Could it become a subgroup grafted onto or within existing religious traditions without the baggage of the old institutions?
- Can RN sustain itself apart from religious organisations—that is, recruiting creative, largely compatible allies and secular RNs outside religious traditions for fellowship, collective enjoyment, and a stimulus to ethical/moral behaviour?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Loyal D. Rue, *Nature is Enough: Religious Naturalism and the Meaning of Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), x.

<sup>28</sup> Rex Hunt, “Old Trees, Stardust, and Moments of Wonder: An Introduction to Religious Naturalism,” *The Fourth R* 33, no. 6 (November/December 2020): 7.

For the purposes of this project it is necessary to examine both the institutional Religious Naturalist Association and Religious Naturalism worldview. However, as will be evident, the conversation concerning ritual will relate to the broader RN community in their relationship with Unitarian Universalism. This will answer, partially, Hunt's third question concerning grafting RN onto an existing religious tradition.

### *RNA Community & Values*

The RNA is a worldwide network of religious naturalists that seeks to serve as a public expression of an emerging religious orientation.<sup>29</sup> Current membership in the RNA is ~620 members of which 70% is male and 30% female, representing thirty-four countries and forty-nine American states.<sup>30</sup> There are no established figures on how many more religious naturalists there are outside of the official RNA, but one could determine an affinity based on writings, expressed beliefs, and other RN friendly organizations.

Further demographic analysis would require looking to statistics from November 2015 that break down professional affiliation and identity among what was then an organization of 354 members. The largest professional identifications from this time were the humanities and sciences. The broadness of these categories included teachers, clergy, retired, writers, philosophers, and several other professional arenas. Data on class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or age are not collected unless that information is offered up in freeform text responses on the membership form. A little

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<sup>29</sup> "About RNA," Religious Naturalist Association, accessed August 1, 2020, <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/668-2/>.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Cavanaugh, email correspondence, October 12, 2020.

data can be mined concerning self-identified clergy and their religious backgrounds. Either way, all members have found the stated mission and aims of the RNA to be in accord with their beliefs and have expressed as much by joining.

The RNA expresses its desire to welcome anyone that shares the aims of the organization. Of particular note, a clear boundary is set concerning who might not be comfortable within the RNA. The website offers links to alternative organizations that do not espouse a religious viewpoint and yet still espouse naturalism such as the American Humanist Association, the Brights, and others.<sup>31</sup>

The stated purpose and central value of the RNA is to “encourage the development and spread the awareness of the RN orientation.”<sup>32</sup> Further explorations of values are rooted entirely in a naturalistic orientation to the world. While there are several RN authors that share their understanding of what RN means and the principles it upholds, the words of Loyal Rue shared above are a succinct summary of what is found on a sister website of the RNA that describes the RN worldview:

- A story of origins (of the cosmos, Earth, and life) gives a sense of who we are and why we are here.
- An understanding of natural laws give a sense of what seems possible and real.
- Naturalist views on life give perspectives on mortality, and on relationships among people and ecosystems.

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<sup>31</sup> “Who is a Religious Naturalist?,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed August 1, 2020, <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/what-is-religious-naturalism/>.

<sup>32</sup> “About RNA,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed August 1, 2020, <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/668-2/>.

- As views of human nature explain why we do the things we do, they affect what we expect of ourselves and others<sup>33</sup>

As the membership system for RNA is quite simple, the way these values and this worldview are communicated are primarily through the website or in discovering a book written by an RN author.

How the community communicates its identity further is not clear. Surface evaluation indicates there is a strong push for religious naturalism to be present at academic conferences on religion and science. The RNA was set to present several papers at the Institute on Religion and Science conference at Star Island, which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Additional communications rest in the monthly RNA newsletter, listserv, and Facebook group. As for communicating desired actions, it appears there is some increased movement in this area for the RNA with their statement of racial solidarity which calls for “people of good will to speak up now...” and to “not stand idly by.”<sup>35</sup> As an emerging organization for an emerging religious orientation, this feels like a concrete move toward action as opposed to the philosophical ponderings on the listserv or further explorations of worldview on the websites.

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<sup>33</sup> “Worldview,” Religious Naturalism, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://religiousnaturalism.org/information/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Homepage,” Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.iras.org>.

<sup>35</sup> “RNA Statement of Solidarity,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed September 30, 2020, <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/rna-statement-of-solidarity/>.



Venturing into moral character and prescriptions in the RNA presents some interesting data. The affirmation of a naturalistic (non-supernatural) worldview where nature is the prime source of inspiration, awe, and wonder offers an immediate contrast to religious traditions that emphasize something outside of the natural realm. Traditional terms such as transcendent are redefined to mean a connection to the natural world that invokes the aforementioned awe and wonder. Religious naturalism, then, provides a nontheistic, post-supernaturalist religious path.

### *Religious Naturalist Story*

One could quickly tell the story of the Universe here and state that was the story of religious naturalism.<sup>36</sup> However, the development of the RNA is much simpler. According to newsletters and the website, the RNA was formed in the summer of 2014 as a means to provide an official organization to support religious naturalists worldwide. People involved in the formation of the RNA included Ursula Goodenough, the author of a foundational book on religious naturalism, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*.

In the formation of the RNA, several questions were asked and debated. For instance, why use the word religious? The RNA settled on the word religious since it represents the intentionality of being in community. Another question was concerning the use of the word “naturalist” versus “naturalism.” The result of that debate was to ensure the focus was on the individual and the way in which they sought to “synthesize his/her

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<sup>36</sup> An example of this is in the introduction with a retelling of “Everybody’s Story.”

interpretive, spiritual, and moral responses to the natural world into a coherent whole...”<sup>37</sup>

These challenges all lead to an understanding that as an emerging organization in an emerging religious orientation, there is a lot of concrete work to be accomplished. Much of this will involve personal stories told by members. The word religious implies community and is a central emphasis of the RNA. Further telling of the stories of members, the impact of RN in their lives, and the promise of this religious orientation will be critical in the continued development of the RNA. However, it is also worth reflecting on the nature of a newer organization that seeks to distill a broader unorganized religious orientation into something people can easily engage and learn about. This presents an opportunity to explore as many avenues as possible to provide these learning moments for individuals. Anecdotal stories of religious naturalists often share that they never knew such a religious orientation existed but always felt that way!

Chief among these stories is ‘Everybody’s Story’ shared in the introduction. What is the personal relationship to this origin story? How are awe and wonder experienced by members of RNA? As the only RN organization, it has an opportunity to give voice to RN perspectives. This will allow, as we will see in chapter 2, an engagement with ritual from an RN perspective that is authentic, organic, and original.

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<sup>37</sup> Ursula W. Goodenough, Michael Cavanaugh, and Todd Macalister, “Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*, ed. Donald A. Crosby and Jerome A. Stone (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 311.

### *RNA Boundaries & Membership*

Not much is known about official community boundaries within the RNA in regard to behavior. There are no documents provided that outline behavioral expectations, managing disruptive persons, and how to be in relationship with other religious naturalists. Whether this is a deficiency is up to the leadership of the RNA to determine.

Some new types of boundaries emerge, however, with regard to RNA being an online community. There are significant advantages to this method of forming community and yet one obvious disadvantage: being together in community.<sup>38</sup> A boundary in place that is outside of the control of RNA leadership is a reluctance among people to join online communities. There are two reasons for this. First, there is a general reluctance to join online groups when there's been personal or anecdotal accounts of personal information being misused. Second, there is the fear of disappointment when discovering other members or the online group itself is "different from what I expected."<sup>39</sup> This does translate to in-person groups but it is clear from the RNA leadership that it is a noticeable boundary that prevents some people from joining.

Closely linked with the boundary challenges within RNA is the method by which people join the organization. The primary activity signifying a shift to membership is

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<sup>38</sup> Goodenough, Cavanaugh, and Macalister, "Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online," 312.

<sup>39</sup> Goodenough, Cavanaugh, and Macalister, "Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online," 314.

filling out a brief form on the RNA website and submitting it. This concludes with a welcome letter from the RNA secretary, an invitation to join a listserv, and a reminder about the RNA Facebook page. Discovering the RNA and membership within is mostly from personal discovery or word of mouth. There is an imperative to increase membership via the second stated goal of the organization: “to encourage the development and spread awareness of a religious naturalist orientation.”<sup>40</sup> It is not clear what initiatives are being undertaken to satisfy that goal. Outside of this simple online expression of membership, there is significant room to add in ritualization, gifts or tokens, and privileges.

#### *RNA Leadership*

Leadership of RNA includes organizational officers, a board of directors, and several advisors. The advisors range in profession but all have a stated interest in religious naturalism in their biographical sketches. In addition to this, there is a very active listserv and Facebook group where leadership regularly engages members of RNA. As a younger organization, RNA has not yet experienced significant transitions in leadership, especially that of the founders. When this occurs, it will learn and communicate a great deal about how the membership can navigate roles and identities within the organization.

This leads to some questions about structure and building up the community. One of the additional benefits of an online community is that it often requires less time than an

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<sup>40</sup> Goodenough, Cavanaugh, and Macalister, “Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online,” 310.

in-person gathering.<sup>41</sup> What teams, initiatives, and mobilization around the stated goals of RNA are possible besides an active listserv or Facebook group? Is there room for a ritual team in this model? These are all questions the RNA will have to answer themselves should additional teams be deemed necessary.

### *RNA Sacred Space*

The topic of sacred space with both the RNA and RN is at once simple and incomplete. The simplicity is in the affirmation of RN as a religion of nature, rooted in the here and now, with no supernaturalistic tendencies. Taking that at face value would lead to the conclusion that an RN perspective on sacred space includes the natural order, which is everything that ever is or will be. Moving into the realm of institutional RN as presented by the RNA, we find that the conversation on sacred space is incomplete. The former remains true regarding where a religious naturalist can find sanctuary, but in a structured community of religious naturalists, there are no prescriptive methods.

A glimpse into some places where sacred space has been created involves established institutions. While no specific sacred space is documented, RN subgroups are documented within Unitarian Universalist congregations.<sup>42</sup> The longevity of the groups varies and it is rightly noted that sustaining subgroups within institutions having their own agendas can prove to be complicated. However, what remains is an

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<sup>41</sup> Goodenough, Cavanaugh, and Macalister, “Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online,” 312-13.

<sup>42</sup> Goodenough, Cavanaugh, and Macalister, “Bringing Religious Naturalists Together Online,” 312.

acknowledgement that in-person sacred space has been identified and claimed. This leads to more questions than answers regarding the designation of sacred space. What rituals, if any, were enacted? Was it sharing of personal information? Form or informal discussion? Were there ceremonies, liturgies, or something else entirely?

However these questions are answered, what remains is a clear understanding that in order to create sacred space, not just acknowledge the natural order but designate a portion of it for a meeting of religious naturalists, there must be an understanding of nature as a source of ultimacy. Softer language would describe this as an “at-homeness” in nature.<sup>43</sup> This opens up more than an incomplete assessment of sacred space but a wealth of possibilities.

### *RNA Symbols*

There are no clear symbols that represent either RN or the RNA. A logo on the RNA website shows geese flying above a wetland over an orange background. Recent discussion among the RNA reveals this logo was inspired by the poem “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver but that the association was open to new logos.<sup>44</sup> This example aside, just as the question of sacred space is open and incomplete, the question of symbols is as well. As an emerging religious organization, what symbols can be adopted that would become recognizable, imbued with meaning, and usable by religious naturalists?

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<sup>43</sup> Hunt, “Old Trees, Stardust, and Moments of Wonder,” 5.

<sup>44</sup> RNA Net listserv correspondence, April 29, 2020.

Suggested symbols do exist, such as Donald Crosby's emphasis on water as a symbol of ultimacy in religious naturalism.<sup>45</sup> This is worthy of exploration as it relates to ritual design. Water is a symbol present in several religious traditions and Crosby illustrates several ways in which it is useful to represent religious naturalism. Ursula Goodenough uses an ouroboros-like reference in her "Credo of Continuation" to paint an RN image: "The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no superordinate meaning of meaning, no purposes other than that the continuation continue..."<sup>46</sup> Several other suggested symbols exist among RN authors, though the discussion continues.

### **Current State of UUCL Ritual Life**

The Sunday morning experience at UUCL is what you could expect in many Protestant Christian churches. There is a Call to Worship, Hymns, Readings, Sermon, Offering, Prayers of the People, and a Benediction. While the delivery of most of these liturgical categories reflects the dominant theology of the congregation, there is a general sense that we are forcing non-theistic expressions of faith into leftover Protestant categories. This is partly due to the Unitarian and Universalist denominations identifying as Protestant until their merger in 1961, at which point the combined traditions identified

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<sup>45</sup> Donald A. Crosby, *More Than Discourse* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 67.

<sup>46</sup> Ursula W. Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 171.

as “more than Christian.”<sup>47</sup> UUCL specifically identifies itself to its members, friends, and visitors as a church community that supports freethinking and is unbound from creeds and dogma. While this is true, the church experience presents a flow and expression that is decidedly Protestant. Though the intent behind the Sunday morning service is not to hearken back to what the Unitarians and Universalists once were, that Protestant Christian connection still alienates those who specifically left Protestant Christianity to join a non-theistic community such as UUCL. Feedback gathered by the membership team from some unchurched seekers who explored UUCL indicate the experience was “very Protestant.”<sup>48</sup>

This is a problem of ritual expression and points to larger issues within the religious community. How are our ritual expressions communicating with clarity as it relates to who we are and aspire to be? Or how are they merely perpetuating an experience and ethos of “performance without belief?”<sup>49</sup> In a congregation such as UUCL with a high proportion of non-theists seeking out religious community, is there a grounding for corporate ritual life beyond the leftover Protestant liturgies that were inherited and continue to be practiced? All of these questions lead into questions of

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<sup>47</sup> John Buehrens and Forrester Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with church visitor, November 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Adam Seligman, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.



formation and leadership. Ritual theorists such as Ronald Grimes indicate that ritual is a deeply formative experience and, as such, reflects the nature of a community.<sup>50</sup>

As a community comprised mostly of non-theists with an emerging religious-naturalist perspective, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington (UUCL) has an opportunity to re-examine its ritual life in regard to form, theological expression, and leadership.

The form of ritual life, specifically Sunday morning services, still follows a close Protestant Christian formula resembling seventeenth-century Puritan orders of worship.<sup>51</sup> While this has much to do with the history of the Unitarian tradition before the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists, it does not reflect the dominant theological position of UUCL in the 2020s. The pressing need in this context is also a theological and liturgical opportunity to examine the ritual form (i.e. order of service) and experiment with orders that clearly express a religious-naturalist worldview and ethic. This includes the totality of the religious service, including the sermon and longstanding traditions such as Joys & Sorrows, Christmas Eve, or unique Unitarian Universalist holidays like Flower Communion.

Deeper examination of liturgical forms will inevitably raise questions about the content and intent behind each ritual act. Most religious services held at UUCL include

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<sup>50</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship that Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017), 5.

content that is rooted in religious naturalism. Despite encouraging and nurturing this as the current minister, it was present among the membership before my arrival. Our inquiry will require us to return to the form of our ritual life. In designing our religious services, what is the intent of each category or event? Has thought been given to intent? In focusing on the intent of ritual design, the “character and quality” of UUCLs ritual life will open up opportunities for authenticity, both in the community and within individual congregants.<sup>52</sup>

Authentic expression of ritual practice at UUCL calls on us to examine the forms and content of our corporate ritual life and then to adjust to meet the current dominant theology and needs of the people. The consequences of this self-evaluation are not merely performing different rituals or performing familiar rituals differently; they extend to the pastoral domain by supplying a new language, by way of corporate ritual life, that allows congregations and those present to wrestle anew with questions of hope, awe, and ultimacy. Additionally, while hope, awe, and ultimacy are important, the authenticity sought here needs to be rooted in “human necessity” that encourages us to live in and not escape “our own bodies and psyches.”<sup>53</sup> The examination of ritual life and the affirmation of the religious-naturalist worldview and ethic of UUCL will be an affirmation of the individual minds and bodies within the pews as well as the emerging community identity.

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<sup>52</sup> Don E. Saliers, *Worship Come to its Senses* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, “Modes of Ritual Necessity,” *Worship* 53, no. 2 (1979): 127.

Existing ritual theory can aid UUCLs attempt to explore what understandings of corporate ritual life can sustain the community, while affirming individual worth and participation.<sup>54</sup> The level of experimentation required will be high. Words and phrases such as ‘liturgy’ or ‘order of service’ give the impression of something static, especially when wrestling with a persistent seventeenth-century liturgical framework, but this is not necessarily the case. We may come to an understanding of our ritual life that is quite fluid and continually creative. This all begins with leadership, which is the primary question here.

Further results of this experimentation will allow the congregation to meaningfully steward its rituals and traditions in the present rather than being beholden to an increasingly distant Protestant past that is difficult to define and to appreciate for both members and newcomers.<sup>55</sup> If it is well-known that UUCL finds difficulty in expressing their religious truths, is it a problem with what they believe or with the liturgical and ritual container that those beliefs are being squeezed into? This question connects with the understanding that the Unitarian Universalist faith was founded as a living tradition.<sup>56</sup> The tradition should be defined by those who are currently living it! In that spirit, ritual renewal and examination should be living, growing, changing, dying, and being reborn as

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 31.

<sup>55</sup> Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity: A Report* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, 130.

well. As religious naturalism encourages reverence in the presence of life and death, the old structures in question at UUCL will be tended to and remembered with renewed intimacy rather than dismissed as “intellectual, disembodied, and elitist” -- notions that represent our current ritual life at its worst.<sup>57</sup> Instead of our ritual life together being the ‘work of the tradition,’ the liturgy will return to the ‘work of the people.’

This ritual work also provides a solid framework for individual formation that both engages and moves beyond the ethical foundations of Unitarian Universalism. Congregants will have a toolkit within which to practice and cultivate not just the aforementioned authenticity, but also a new understanding of what it means to lead in a religious community. Though Unitarian Universalists do not have a diaconate, a process by which new ritual leaders are educated to address the opportunities before us will, in effect, expand ideas of ministry.

### **Lack of Religious Naturalist Ritual Frameworks & Leadership**

As an emerging religious viewpoint, religious naturalism does not yet have a solid framework for organizing, identifying, leading, and designing ritual life. Several theoretical resources describe the experience of the transcendent from a religious-naturalist perspective, such as Ursula Goodenough and her “Credo of Continuation,” which asserts that every part of nature is continuous with every other part in a self-explanatory and spiritually profound way that requires no external supernatural

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<sup>57</sup> Arnason and Rolenz, *Worship that Works*, 6.

explanation.<sup>58</sup> Such resources are invaluable but further highlight the issue of translating these experiences into ritual. The RNA (founded in 2014) makes it clear that their choice of the word “religious” in their name signifies a communal and embodied practice, not just the theoretical or individual worldview.<sup>59</sup> There is an aspiration, then, to gather and enact some form of community life.

However, with an aspiration there needs to be an imperative. It is not clear by looking at materials from the RNA if there is any ritual imperative beyond offering a few readings for weddings or funerals.<sup>60</sup> This is not to suggest there is no desire among the members of the RNA for rituals to express their religious viewpoint, but it does signal that the primary focus of this organization is providing community. The exciting possibility here is for religious naturalists both within and beyond the RNA to explore ritual design and leadership to spark a larger conversation.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 70.

<sup>59</sup> “Who is a Religious Naturalist?,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed January 31, 2020, <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/what-is-religious-naturalism/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Readings for Life Events,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://religiousnaturalism.org/readings-for-life-events-weddings-funerals-etc/>.

<sup>61</sup> Conversations with leadership in the Religious Naturalist Association indicated a lack of bandwidth to explore this intentionally. Hence, my focus is on engaging religious naturalists within a Unitarian Universalist setting while still acknowledging the importance of the broader RN movement.

## Bringing UUCL & RN Together

Synthesizing these communities would be a disservice to their emergent goals and unique identities. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY is evolving in a way that is deeply contextual and the RNA is doing the same. However, while these two organizations present goals that are different, the overarching religious traditions they represent have intersectional opportunities. Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion with an appreciation for religious diversity, including nontheistic and post-supernaturalistic paths. The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism celebrates the “interconnected web of existence,” which is interpreted as referring to the natural order.<sup>62</sup> Religious naturalism presents a religious orientation which proclaims, “Nature is enough.”<sup>63</sup>

As already noted, UUCL has within it a desire to explore more profoundly religious naturalism and develop deeper ritual leadership and frameworks within that religious orientation for community life. Though the RNA has acknowledged some difficulty in maintaining RN subgroups, an adjacent question is what would happen if religious naturalism was more deeply ingrained into the entire life of an established congregation? The exploration of ritual theory and design as a means of religious leadership and transformation will approach this question. Developing RN frameworks and leadership will offer a toolkit for further experimentation.

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<sup>62</sup> “The Seven Principles,” The Unitarian Universalist Association.

<sup>63</sup> Rue, *Nature is Enough*, x.

Both communities explored are prime for experimentation. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington occupies a religious tradition that is open, creedless, and at the forefront of progressive religious expression in Kentucky. This makes UUCL an ideal candidate to open its arms to an RN ritual experience. As for the RNA, their engagement with ritual and communities such as UUCL remains open ended. However, religious naturalism as a broader entity is prime for ritual leadership and design. The possibilities here are exciting. UUCL already has several observances that could be classified as RN friendly. The question, then, is what would it look like to design every ritual encounter through that lens? Given the location, natural setting, theological orientation, and history of the congregation, UUCL is primed for this venture. The parallel opportunity for RNA is to see if such an experiment will provide further data for the possibility of in-person communities.

It is important to look to Heifetz and the promise of adaptive leadership. The adaptive nature of this exploration centers primarily on Heifetz's focus on espoused values and behavior.<sup>64</sup> UUCL is a congregation whose ritual practice is still rooted in a Protestant liturgical framework while their theological orientation is decidedly nontheist and open to religious naturalism. This distinction in behavior and values is the very problem itself. As Heifetz outlines several times, adaptive challenges are not for easy solutions. In this context of this project, a central adaptive question emerges: Can ritual theory be a form of leadership theory? Human communities have bonded and grown

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<sup>64</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 78.

amidst ritual enactments for innumerable generations, so there might be the possibility of a leadership theory lurking in our ritual expressions. Furthermore, when moving from theory to design in ritual, an opportunity presents itself. In ritual design it is possible to align values with behavior. This does not mean it will be perfect and avoid adjustment. Quite the contrary, it will foster a creative means by which assessment of values and observation of behavior are continually practiced.

The tension at UUCL starts to emerge more clearly against this background. As the wider religious-naturalist community is yet to define a framework for ritual life, UUCL is feeling dis-ease with the Protestant categories used in community ritual experiences, such as Sunday morning, because they no longer meaningfully sustain or reflect the spiritual and religious engagement of the congregation. By providing a framework for ritual design and pathway to ritual leadership, this tension will be meaningfully explored and, more importantly, enacted in the life of the congregation.



## **Chapter 2: The Rite Stuff**

### **Engaging Ritual Theory as a Means of Leadership Development**

Knowing a context, in this case two intersecting communities of religious orientation and practice, is the first step in the craft of ritual and development of ritual leaders. This is knowing in the broadest sense of the word. Who are the people that will join in creating and enacting whatever ritual is imagined with this or that intention and purpose? It is from that question that leaders and designers of ritual should contextualize themselves. What is their leadership style? How have they thought through the multifaceted nature of ritual? How will they preside, improvise, and stay in tune with themselves and the gathered people? Elaine Ramshaw reminds ritual leaders that, “A good presider is not one who force-feeds rubrics to people, like small helpings of a dried-out tradition; a good presider is one who draws her congregation into the ancient dance with a new song.”<sup>65</sup> The leadership imperative emerges in seeking a new song for UUCL with an RN worldview. In accomplishing this, UUCL is poised to transform how leaders and members approach their ritual craft and life while religious naturalism is wading in.

This exploration of ritual will first include best practices as discovered by the Ritual Studies Lab and ritual mishaps. It is useful to know what has worked for communities specifically studying ritual and what has not worked. This is not a means to remove any element of failure from this experimentation, but rather to foster a culture of curiosity and intentionality. If a particular ritual element does not work in one instance

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<sup>65</sup> Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 22.

but in another it is received well, what can be learned from this? How do the best practices of ritual design inform this? How does context relate to the craft of ritual? More importantly, what are the emergent leadership principles from these best practices? It is necessary to explore leadership through the application of ritual theory as it meets the adaptive challenge posed. Two communities, one in search of transformation and one emerging, do not have quick solutions. Leaders, professional and lay, need to be ready to engage pastorally and engage the existing and new ritual frameworks with creativity and experimentalism. Furthermore, leaders need to discover the power of centering improvisation as an ethic from which they base their leadership. By doing so, they will weave together the aforementioned skills.

Examining the characteristics of ritual identified by the Ritual Studies Lab gives us several useful points to foster leadership craft. Briefly looking at the dimensions of pastoral care intersecting with ritual theory will humanize what could otherwise be just a list of checkboxes for designing a ritual. Remembering the pastoral dimension allows this exploration to open up into a collaborative, supportive, and nurturing endeavor.

This ultimately leads us to exploring religious naturalism, its relationship with UUCL, and the drive for RN-specific leadership and rituals. What structures can one operate within to foster meaningful RN ritual and leadership in a congregational context? What can be learned from these emergent leadership principles and what applications, if any, are there for RN and UUCL? What are the needs of potential leaders and those who participate in the eventual rituals?

## Crafting Rite

Creating ritual is not an easy task. Here is a category that is at once difficult to define and deeply ingrained in human culture. Rituals often have a history to them that is connected to a larger story and tradition, whether it is religious or not. One need only look at specific religious traditions and their practices for illustrations of this ethic. A primary example is the Unitarian Universalist Flower Communion service. It is widely understood this service is connected to the history of the Unitarian communities in Prague during the second World War.<sup>66</sup> Without the story and martyrdom of Norbert Capek, would this celebration run as deep as it does? This is a relatively modern example, which indicates that new ritual celebrations are possible within religious communities. However, not all ritual stories will have a mythopoetic narrative. The question, then, becomes how one creates ritual. What is the process for creating ritual? What makes a good ritual? A bad one? Are there steps and formulae for ritual creation worth lifting up as useful? It is established that ritual has the power to be transformative and a method of leadership within a religious community is possible. The follow-up question to this is in asking what's next? If ritual is affirmed in its power, what steps does a community need to take to empower leaders?

The body of work in ritual studies provides several signposts that will aid in the creation of rites, liturgies, ceremonies, and ritual leaders. All of these terms, as mentioned, have nuances to their definitions depending on referenced sources. The

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<sup>66</sup> Carl Seaburg, *The Communion Book* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1993), 150-51.

common denominator is the act of ritual. The question of what makes a good ritual is one that is answered with broad categories. There are also plenty of lists that define what is not a good ritual as well. These are useful in shaping the craft of ritual. Additionally, several newer initiatives and communities are emerging that engage the craft of ritual with intentionality. These communities provide frameworks and suggestions for the act of ritual creation as well as an awareness of what has been learned and not worked.

UUCL, as mentioned, is beholden to a ritual and liturgical shape that harkens back to 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritanism. Conversely, religious naturalism is loosely defined as far as ritual practices are concerned. The opportunity here is to take a close look at ritual creation analysis and efforts to start identifying best practices for the act of RN ritual craft and leadership. In looking at the bigger picture, narrowing in on experimentation occurring, and then identifying a best practice that works in dialogue with the communities examined, the result will be a roadmap for next steps that at once inspire the creation of ritual while cultivating leadership.

As to the question of a mythopoetic narrative to anchor ritual craft in religious naturalism, the common mythos of “Everybody’s Story” emerges once more. This is the overarching story. This is what inspires gathering, celebrating, mourning, and any other intent in an RN ritual setting. The specific reasons for gathering might differ, but the grounding story is that of the natural world, the formation of the Universe, and the experiences of humans as conscious beings amid this. The difficulty here could be that “Everybody’s Story” is far too expansive. Are there smaller aspects of this mythic narrative that can anchor the craft and enactment of ritual? This is crucial in ensuring

ritual is created in a meaningful way. If ritual creation is explored through a grounding narrative, it becomes, “an essential aspect of and motivation for ritual.” Furthermore, “through ritual and narrative we mediate the many identities and narratives that shape...life.”<sup>67</sup> This might give the impression that ritual is something to be carefully controlled and curated. While part of that caution is necessary, as will be shown by examples of poorly done ritual and best practices, there also needs to be a willingness to let ritual re-shape the narrative as well. While ritual is acting upon a person’s many identities and potentially providing a means of transformation, so, too, are the stories that ground rituals re-shaped. What becomes clear is the idea that there is no primary actor but, rather, a mutual enactment between ritual, story, and participant. As Anderson and Foley put it, “Rituals shape our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehear that narrative through bodies. There is no dualism or conflict here.”<sup>68</sup> The wondering, here, is how the mythopoetic narrative of religious naturalism will be shaped by ritual and vice versa. Amidst all of this, there is a call for embodiment and centering active participation.

Before diving into best practices regarding ritual creation, ritual frameworks, and mishaps, it is worth noting that ritual holds within it several complex moods and modes. This widespread and peculiar nature of ritual modes and moods is documented by Richard Grimes and he goes to great length to document them.

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<sup>67</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 28.

There are quite a few moods ritual can invoke or evoke according to Grimes, including but not limited to feeling:

- polite, civil, courteous
- celebrative, expansive, exuberant, excessive, festive, ludic
- creative, imaginative
- solemn, dignified, reverent, respectful
- mysterious, awesome
- reflective, thoughtful
- anxious, ambivalent, resigned
- assertive, contentious, resistant, manipulative, devious
- ostentatious, flamboyant
- indifferent, routinized, flat, matter-of-fact
- expectant, hopeful
- sad, mournful, pensive
- warm, friendly, cozy<sup>69</sup>

As the leadership principles from the Ritual Studies Lab are experimented with, so should the moods by Grimes. As a leader comes to understand the unique context of a given ritual environment or occasion, moods will naturally fall into place. What is called for in a given moment? Is it a mix of politeness and expectancy? Creativity and resignation? Anxiety and friendliness? The combinations, not just of two at a time, are endless here in ritual experimentation. Couple this list with ritual actions and a leader has a great deal to consider. As with moods, the range of ritual actions is extensive and can include:

- worshipping, venerating, praising
- remembering, commemorating, making present
- celebrating, being grateful, thanking
- paying dues/debts, offering, carrying out duties
- exchanging, gift-giving, giving, receiving
- being good, doing good
- cleansing, purifying, protecting, banishing
- feasting, fasting, sacrificing

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<sup>69</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 205.

- marking transitions, marking time
- marking space, sanctifying, consecrating
- making things, using things
- praying, contacting, being receptive to, communicating with, becoming aligned with, becoming attuned to
- causing, effecting influencing
- becoming one with, embodying, learning, practicing
- competing, empowering, making, doing
- ordering, putting things in their proper places
- showing, displaying
- telling, reciting, preaching, reading
- pretending, playing, exaggerating, inverting<sup>70</sup>

It may be overwhelming to think about crafting a ritual only to discover there is a mental block as to what this will look and feel like. These lists are starting points for creativity and claiming leadership.

What one learns from these lists and charts is that ritual encompasses a wide span of human behavior. Working with these two tables will provide all of the necessary feelings and actions needed to engage the craft and leadership of ritual. Grimes is careful to note that the actions certainly are not infinite in their scope, but they do cover a lot of ground. The conclusion here rests in understanding ritual as a widespread part of daily life and the encouragement is to discover new items for these lists. The characteristics and modes of ritual can be applied to several rites, liturgies, ceremonies, and other enactments that one would classify as ritual. It is disappointing to venture into new ritual territory and not discover a handbook waiting to be used in ritual design. What these lists emphasize is that that is not a major concern. There is nothing intrinsically unique about the behavior of potential RN rituals. The wording, actions, and intent of the community

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<sup>70</sup> Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 206.

may be different and emerging, but the content and modes of behavior will look familiar. It is helpful to keep these lists in mind as the leadership principles from the Ritual Studies Lab are explored further. This will give shape to emerging ritual ideas, foster new ideas, or concretize previously lofty desires.

### **Principles for the Craft**

Asking what makes a ritual ‘good’ is a question with no clear answer. The better question is to ask what components foster successful completion of a ritual and a desire to continue its practice. It’s also worth exploring elements that did not go well. Within these two considerations lie everything necessary for both ritual craft and leadership. In the case of communities such as UUCL and its desire for RN ritual, the enactment and re-enactment of ritual is desirable as it is one of the primary modes of building community. Richard Grimes puts forth twenty-nine characteristics of ritual documented by the Ritual Studies Lab between 1975 and 2006. These characteristics are not identified as creating ‘good’ or ‘bad’ ritual, but rather as observed practices, processes, and principles.<sup>71</sup> Within these characteristics is counsel regarding what to avoid or encourage over three decades of learning with thousands of students and countless rituals designed and carried out in Grimes’ Ritual Studies Lab. Just as ritual and liturgical theory provide a means of leadership, these characteristics provide a roadmap for the craft and leadership of ritual, with specific focus on RN opportunities and their relation to UUCL. The converse of these categories constitutes ritual missteps or experiences of ritual design that felt

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<sup>71</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies* (Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International, 2020), 371-75.



incomplete. A further glance at what Grimes refers to as infelicitous performances will round out potential missteps. A word of caution here is that there could be a desire for a concrete formula or guidebook on ritual creation. Such a desire is not wrong, but as outlined below, can lead to rigidity in ritual design. Focusing on these categories provides an interesting model of leadership for those involved in the craft of ritual and, while not providing absolute steps, will lead to rewarding discoveries about the community they inhabit and serve. As this is an adaptive challenge both at UUCL and for religious naturalism, the encouragement is to move into these categories in the spirit of openness and reflection.

#### *Ordinariness*<sup>72</sup>

This first characteristic is interesting to begin with as it counters any presupposition that rituals must be supranormal as they relate to lived experience. Grimes refers to the removal of ordinariness as “pretension and rarefication.”<sup>73</sup> When looking at a religious orientation such as religious naturalism and its emphasis on the here and now with special attention given proclaiming “Nature is enough,”<sup>74</sup> the call for ordinariness is evident. So, what does one make of the desire for RN ritual? Is this a cry for ritual rooted in human experience and the natural world? The remaining characteristics will shed some

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<sup>72</sup> The following twenty-nine sub-headings, pages 53 to 70, are all taken from the same source, found in the previous footnote, in succession.

<sup>73</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 371.

<sup>74</sup> Rue, *Nature is Enough*, x.

light on the motives and desires. The emergent leadership principle in ordinariness is to work with what you have.

### *Creativity*

Grimes reflects a great deal on ritual improvisation as shown in exploring ritual theory as a leadership model. Creativity takes improvisation and adds in further elements for designing and enacting ritual such as the arts, imagination, and embodied action. Distinctions are made between ritual and ceremony, often with the latter being described as rote and unengaging, with “little real action or depth.”<sup>75</sup> Creativity draws a distinction between the participatory and the merely observed. This requires ritual design and leadership to include the gathered people both in the process of creating and enacting. When dealing with the natural world as the primary source of religious inspiration, creativity can focus on endless possibilities. A useful starting point is to look at the cycle of seasons in each context and document their expression. For example, mid-October in Kentucky is when autumnal leaf colors are at their prime and late winter often has the first emergence of tulip bulbs. Further naturalist observations provide a depth of possibility while rooting a community in its context. Tying ritual celebrations to these observances would differ from other locations but also be a creative expression of an ordinary occurrence.

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<sup>75</sup> Jim Clarke, *Creating Rituals: A New Way of Healing for Everyday Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011), 117.

### *Receptivity*

This has as much to do with the design of ritual as it has to do with enactment. It leads to questions rather than specific proscriptions or prescriptions. How is the atmosphere of the ritual inviting receptivity? What actions or cues foster this? How is this being engaged by the ritual designers and leaders as well? Another element of leadership emerges in receptivity. Grimes posits a link between receptivity and creativity, though all these categories are not exclusive of one another. As it relates to RN ritual design, the receptivity of UUCL is already there. In past RN rituals, the community expressed a desire for more services rooted in the natural world. The danger is if the receptivity of UUCL and of ritualists in the congregation was not aligned with religious naturalism. This would result in flat enactments instead of rituals born out of desire. Furthermore, are the potential leaders of rituals receptive as well? Do they want to be in this role?

### *Attunement*

A principle similar to receptivity is the requirement for those leading rituals to be fully aligned to the task at hand. This, of course, centers on preparation but also a belief in the power of the ritual. Furthermore, inculcating this as a leadership characteristic will prevent ritual engagement from being rigid or chaotic. The key is a comfortable balance between the two. Attunement asks ritualists to be deeply invested in the atmosphere, gathered people, goals, and methods of a ritual so that chaos can be meaningfully engaged and steered toward generative ritual expression. Conversely, while every ritual has an order to it, attunement allows for the improvisation necessary for effective leadership and design. The seasons are not always static in each location and as the global

climate crisis continues to shift weather patterns, ritual celebrations anchored in the seasons will need to adapt. Another example would be a rite of spring that speaks of renewal and rebirth. The community might experience a significant loss during this time and the theme of renewal would take on a different tone and shape instead of enforcing the ritual as written.

### *Flow*

What becomes of ritual attunement for presiders and participants? Is the enactment effortless or rigid? This is where flow comes into the forefront by recognizing all of these characteristics are intrinsically linked. A necessary question in ritual design is for people to remember a time when there was no flow in an experience. What did that look and feel like? How did you know there was a lack of flow? Often this characteristic could be interpreted to the overarching liturgy of a ritual, but this has more to do with how participants and leaders engage without obstruction. What barriers are given to a ritual, whether it is RN or not? Is more time spent describing what religious naturalism or Unitarian Universalism are instead of getting to the intent of the ritual?

### *Practice*

Grimes makes two distinctions in the use of practice. First, is the ritual well-prepared or is it being done at the last minute? Does everyone leading know their part? Second, is this ritual poised to become part of a religious canon of regular practices? This is an interesting question as RN ritual is explored. Having no set ritual practices, how and what will be deemed worthy of repetition? UUCL has a set of practices related to Unitarian Universalism that are repeated in accordance with the desires of the

congregation and the larger faith. Sunday morning service is a prime example of this. The shape of the experience can differ from church to church, yet it is still a practice universally repeated.

### *Process*

How are rituals being designed? Who is involved? Why are they involved? These are necessary questions when creating new rituals. It is implied that if a community is desiring a more concerted RN ethic in ritual life, that members of the community should be involved. This means that while rituals will be created and enacted, continual feedback and contributions from the wider community are essential. Are these rituals just the desire of the minister or a small group? Or are they the result of a co-creative process? The hurdle here is that in engaging a larger swath of the congregation, ritual creation can become quite slow. First, there is no urgency, so a slowed down timeline is acceptable. Second, creation of ritual and engaging the community are not mutually exclusive. They can both happen and rituals can be adapted, shifted, re-framed and reimagined. The opportunity here is to give the community a real sense of agency in stages of ritual creation. What does UUCL see as the largest gaps in their ritual life? Is it springtime rituals that are not connected to Easter? Or what about summer and fall rituals, where there is usually a dearth of celebrations in the church year already? Those two examples are identified gaps in ritual life at UUCL, but those responses could shift and ritual designers and leaders need to be prepared to address them.

### *Enactment*

Grimes and the students of the Ritual Studies Lab offer a critical question for ritual design: “What work needs doing here?” It is not sufficient to identify a desire for RN ritual within a Unitarian Universalist congregation. What is the real desire? What is the ‘doing’ that the community wants to participate in? In the case of UUCL, enactment centers on relevant religious expression more closely aligned with the emerging orientation of the congregation. In other words, the drive is centered in the ordinariness of the community. Here is an emerging ethic that yearns for more expression of it. The other risk with enactment is in constructing rituals and doing nothing with them. Creating a framework for RN ritual expression gives space to future enactment. The problem, as it is, is in shoehorning current enactments into a framework that increasingly does not resonate.

### *Performance*

Clergy and religious professionals will often remind themselves that a worship service is not a performance. This is not true, according to Grimes. The ritual being witnessed, dissected, and talked about means there is a performative element that is witnessed. This is not pushing ritual into the realm of entertainment and there is a fine line between the two. However, the balance comes into play when there is an acknowledgement of witnessing but also a clear and growing invitation to participate. In doing so, the person witnessing a performance is also enacting it. This creates a situation where there is ownership in the ritual itself and means the process by which it is created is even more important.

## *Value*

Leaning into the axiological dimensions of ritual require further analyses beyond the act of creating. What is available to a community and ritual makers is to provide opportunities for dearly held interests to be honored and affirmed. The best place to begin is in assessing what is of value to the given community. UUCL is a Unitarian Universalist congregation with a growing RN inclination. What are the values inherent in such a community profile? In such a case a ritual leader would return to contextual analysis and draw from the history, tradition, and current state of the congregation. How do these characteristics align with religious naturalism? How do they differ? Will there be competing values? Ritual design ensures there is space for the negotiation between competing values, even if they seem strikingly similar. For example, the Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalist affirms, “the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.”<sup>76</sup> At first glance, this appears to be completely congruous with the RN emphasis on the natural world, the here and now, and humanity’s place within nature. Further examination of the history and expression of the UU Seventh Principle will reveal several engagements with neo-pagan faith traditions that affirm polytheism, magic, divination, communicating with deities, and other supernatural expressions of faith. Is this a dialogue that needs to happen at UUCL in relation to RN ritual. The answer is yes but other communities may have different answers. The key here is not to subvert RN ritual but rather to know who might be in the room or how contextual

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<sup>76</sup> “7<sup>th</sup> Principle: Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part,” Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/7th>.

expressions of Unitarian Universalism could inform or impact ritual design. Competing value systems, even if the differences are seemingly small, have the potential to impact receptivity and attunement, as well as several other characteristics.

### *Meaning*

Why are we doing what we are doing? This feels like a common question with recent characteristics: What is the work that needs doing? How are people invested in the performance? What worth is being ascribed to the experience? Fine lines exist between each of these. Grimes outlines things as meaningful by, “what is *done* with them and *how* they are situated in their contexts and environments.” Does this have something to do with integrity, or more specifically, ritual integrity? Are the rituals being created in each context in line with the states values and needs of the community? The answer here is yes regarding UUCL. Zooming out from specific rituals to ritual frameworks, and in the case of UUCL this means liturgy and liturgical year, can the same be said about ritual integrity? The desire is certainly there. As mentioned, there is feeling that the emerging orientation of the congregation is being shoehorned into a 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant liturgy and a Christian liturgical year. There is meaning to be found in both of these and they are not necessarily wrong. Meanings can be “multiple and overlapping, even contradictory.” Yet the question of how ritual frameworks are situated becomes more interesting. The ultimate test is to see how meaning shifts once the context is addressed.

### *Togetherness*

The coming together of UUCL is a weekly occurrence. This does not consider the daily small groups ranging interests, motives, and goals that also meet daily. The



apparatus for togetherness is already in place in a congregational setting. It is also increasingly in place for a worldwide RN community as seen in the RNA and their experiment with online community. In ritual design, the aim of togetherness centers on shared values and goals. UUCL already shares Unitarian Universalist values, but there is a sense that something is not quite congruent with the ethos of the community.

### *Leadership*

These characteristics are further commentary on the leadership principles outlined in regard to ritual theory. While leadership is often described in a way that is hierarchical, in the realm of ritual it can take several shapes. It is true that in a community such as UUCL there is a desire and tradition for trained religious leadership and a growing network of lay leadership. Some communities may not need such leadership and, in the case of UUCL, there may be ritual opportunities that are organic and appearing as leaderless. What remains is that in a congregationalist setting such as UUCL, the religious professionals primarily set the tone for all areas of congregational life. The growing lay leadership team, especially as it concerns ritual, will shift the focus but the system in place will remain. The lay leaders and those invested in ritual design will be seen as reflecting the religious professionals hired and affirmed by the congregation. The RNA does not have any specific training or affirming of religious leaders right now. This, in part, creates a vacuum where communities such as UUCL are free to interpret and design ritual through an RN orientation with few boundaries.

### *Intention*

Determining the intent of participants in a ritual would involve a visual or auditory expression or be learned through feedback given before or after the rite. Despite this difficulty, the intentions of the gathered people should always be thought of by those designing and leading a ritual. Every single need cannot be met, but there can be multiple ways of engaging that give freedom and the power of improvisation to participants. Above all else, it needs to be clear what a particular ritual is for in the first place. Why is UUCL looking at RN ritual? Why is the community questioning Protestant frameworks? If a winter solstice service is design, will people know immediately the purpose and intent of such a rite? These and further questions will help with the actual design process.

### *Function*

Though people arrive with intentions and ritual makers create with specific intentions in mind, the question remains, what does the ritual accomplish? This is a crucial piece of feedback to be gathered informally and formally by religious and lay leadership after a ritual is conducted.<sup>77</sup> It will illustrate how meaning, intent, value, and several other characteristics of the ritual were interpreted and experienced. The learning here may be to emphasize the impact of the ritual in further iterations or to learn that the aim of the ritual was entirely off in its intent!

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<sup>77</sup> For more on ritual evaluation methods, see Chapter 4.

### *Metaphor*

What metaphors are possible with RN ritual? The answer is partially available in looking at Unitarian Universalist rituals that already foster an RN orientation. The UU Flower Communion service asks all present to bring a flower to the service and, when it is almost over, they leave with a different flower. There is much more to the celebration than that, but the chief act of giving and receiving flowers is centered in metaphors of diversity. The flowers themselves represent the participants' diversity and mortality. To ensure RN metaphors are present in ritual requires grounding questions related to value, meaning, and function. If water is a primary symbol, what is the intended meaning? How is that expressed? How will water change in meaning between seasons or events in the community and world?

### *Embodiment*

Related to performance, are participants merely observing the ritual or are they actively engaged? If so, how are they engaged? In what ways is the body welcome into the ritual? It is important to ensure accessibility is a concern in ritual design, so multiple avenues of bodily engagement are encouraged. Are people free to dance, whatever that means for their bodies? Sing? Move and gesture? Close their eyes, cry, laugh, or speak? These are merely a few suggestions for consideration. Ensuring ritual is embodied will further push it away from the realm of ceremony or passivity. We return to the UU Flower Communion service and how it expresses religious naturalism. Are people being encouraged to smell the flowers? Feel them? Look at them and reflect? Or are they props

removed from engagement? Even props that help facilitate ritual performance should be careful not to take the place of embodied participation.

### *Context*

The impulse with context is to look to the environment, and that is allowable. However, the specific aim of understanding context is centered in history, custom, tradition, and other features, “shaping the sensibilities of participants, even if your aim is to challenge or change them.” Christmas Eve is a beloved tradition at UUCL and it would be disastrous to radically change that observance. Furthermore, Derby Day in Kentucky as well as March Madness impact availability and the general mood of the congregation. Knowing contextual factors and influences will further the goals of attunement. If the history of UUCL is deeply known, confronted, and celebrated, it will lead to a more authentic ritual experience.

### *Environment*

Closely related to context, the environment asks where is this all taking place? UUCL has a seven-acre campus with a mid-century modern sanctuary, a wooded area, a memorial garden, two of every Kentucky native tree, and several other natural settings. Though the sanctuary pulls the vision toward the natural world, a necessary question is in determining if a ritual would be best enacted in a setting other than the sanctuary. Is this possible and accessible? What elements from the natural landscape can be brought into the sanctuary? In wintertime, snow and ice will melt indoors, but are there other ways to bring in the natural setting if not being outdoors? The challenge here is to also not be bound to the physical campus. What other settings for smaller ritual experiences are

possible? For instance, a coming of age ritual for UU teens anchored in religious naturalism might have them crossing over a natural land bridge at Red River Gorge with family and friends followed by a small recognition by a religious leader.

### *Timing*

Is Sunday morning the best time to hold an RN ritual? Is it good practice to radically alter the flow of Sunday morning in service of the desires of the congregation? What other time periods are beneficial to ritual exploration? What rituals would be best served by early morning, late evening, or other time periods? As they relate to timing, these are essential questions that need to be asked. In experimenting with ritual, it is encouraged to have test groups. Some RN rituals were celebrated in the morning and evening at UUCL and received completely different reactions. It is up to the ritual designers to learn from that feedback and determine when a ritual would best meet the needs of the community. In addition to this, sometimes a moment within a ritual setting needs to be carefully orchestrated. If a ritual act comes too soon or too hastily, it can be met with a refusal to participate, confusion, or an unexpected response.

### *Texts*

How are people learning what to do and when to do it? Is the ritual text heavy? Is it an exhaustive liturgy with instructions on every action? Grimes focuses on how texts and instructions are a great way to divide attention in a ritual setting. When looking at UUCL and its reliance on a 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan liturgy plus anecdotal commentary from religious leaders on how an Order of Service becomes somehow necessary to have in printed form, there is work to be done. Can an RN ethic break free from the reliance on

printed instructions? It is entirely possible that shifting focus from an inherited liturgy to a ritual atmosphere rooted in the here and now would lessen this requirement. If embodied ritual engagement is encouraged, a reduction in printed material could free up opportunities to participate in ways that are comfortable. How are hymnals a part of this, then? There is not an RN hymnal as of right now, though attempts to collate RN-friendly songs have been undertaken by the RNA.<sup>78</sup> Centering on texts and printed material also calls into question technology in ritual. Is the answer to have screens for projecting? How does this carry to an outdoor setting? Is analog ritual the way to go? All necessary in assessing ritual needs and mapping out something that is both accessible and enabling of participation.

### *Things*

The ritual life of UUCL emphasizes words heavily. The main question is if this will continue with an RN ritual expression. What actions are invited and what objects or things help facilitate this? The use of objects in ritual helps to focus participants intentions, engages the body, and often provides tokens to continue the ritual work beyond the community gathering. A RN ritual has the entirety of nature at its disposal for objects and things. From water to dirt, rocks to leaves, fire to light – there is an endless number of objects with varied symbols. Another question for ritual makers is determining which objects become implements of ritual facilitation. Is water a necessary part of this

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<sup>78</sup> “Music,” Religious Naturalist Association, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://religiousnaturalism.org/music/>.

rite? If using fall leaves, what is their purpose if not decoration? The questions continue as the ritual takes shape.

### *Play*

What is the mood of the ritual being experienced and enacted? There are times for seriousness and solemnity, but even amidst these, there is room for “inversion, foolishness, clowning, divination, and other forms of play.”<sup>79</sup> All of these can have seriousness mixed into them or perhaps becomes a focus of the ritual. An interesting tension appears in ritual craft and leadership where seriousness is balanced with the characteristics of play. This hearkens back to the commentary on ceremony. Play provides another opportunity for engagement, whether embodied or just the act of enjoyment. How does a religious naturalist play amidst nature or derive enjoyment? Is there a way for this to be distilled into a collective action?

### *Improvisation*

The commentary Grimes offers on improvisation is fleshed out elsewhere and contributes to a theory of ritual leadership. In the context of design characteristics, improvisation is giving space for adaptation on the spot or just before a ritual takes place. Improvisation allows for the needs of the moment to be met, whether closely linked with the community or broader world issues. It also permits ritual leadership to imbue their own personalities and style into a ritual. This creates a dynamism where, even if the same ritual is being performed, there is difference in tone, delivery, or even the ritual elements themselves.

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<sup>79</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 374.

### *Subjunctivity*

A slight tension emerges when subjunctivity in ritual design is considered. As a religious orientation centered in the here and now, what are the limits of aspiration and imagination? Of course, a conversation concerning being dogmatic is necessary. It isn't that religious naturalists only center the here and now. They are still human beings with hopes and aspirations. With this caution in mind, a ritual that asks 'what could be' is an important way to give voice to collective hope and aspiration. Additionally, it creates a simple opportunity for improvisation and play in allowing individual imaginations room to thrive within a ritual setting. The converse of this is akin to ritual rigidity. A ritual such as this would declare 'this is how things are' and describe what everyone should experience. A ritual with room for subjunctivity gives mental and spiritual freedom.

### *Belief*

What beliefs are centered in an RN ritual or one at UUCL? Without answering, it is necessary to first ask. Given the breadth of belief and engagement in both religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism, it is a question that may not have a concrete answer. However, it is important to know who will be present, what their beliefs are, and what beliefs the ritual might try to convey. Rather than being a lofty characteristic of ritual design, belief has everything to do with being in tune with a participating community and ensuring intention digs deeper. Belief moves desire, as expressed by intention, into a place where concrete outcomes can occur.



### *Stillness*

Rather than focus entirely on silence, Grimes opens up mystery, awe, and wonder in his exploration of stillness. Is a ritual invoking these characteristics? Is there a sense of ultimacy? Is respect fostered in the face of awe and wonder? A RN ritual could focus on the magnitude of the Universe, the beauty of nature, the wonders of the molecular, and so many other topics. The key is to invoke that spirit of stillness, that of being in the presence of awe. This might be one of the most crucial elements listed here. If a ritual is not invoking feelings and experiences closely associated with the religious, what is its purpose?

### *Research*

This characteristic is mostly a caution from Grimes. It calls attention back to the previous characteristics, which encourage getting to know a context really well and making room for engagement and improvisation. Addressing the above characteristics may mean not having to research ritual design or best practices at all. If you know the community well, you will identify the intentions and desires of the people. It is important to still research and learn what you can and, by doing so, call upon best practices. Yet even then, is it authentic to simply copy best practices from another community and assume they will work in another context? Surely those practices were developed with a specific community in mind. How does this hold true or differ for another? This presents a significant challenge to RN and Unitarian Universalist ritual. If religious naturalism will anchor its practices in the here and now, the seasonal expressions and experiences of a given location will differ worldwide. There are similarities, but even the season shifts

between Kentucky and Tennessee present a breadth of difference. Furthermore, Unitarian Universalism often takes on local customs and identities, weaving them into the fabric of community life. Will a ritual designed for a congregation in Pasadena, California work for Lexington, Kentucky? Asking this question is where meaningful ritual research begins and leaders return to the beginning of this list.

### *Criticism*

Evaluative measures in ritual craft ensure sincerity is a part of the process. This is not criticism or evaluation that identifies data in order to determine effectiveness. The data presented here looks at the categories described above and asks if they were part of the design process. If not, why? Additionally, it asks how participants felt in the ritual experience. Did the ritual miss the mark? Why was that? Was it well-received? Why? Evaluations of all involved, including the ritual framework itself, deepens understanding of a context and offers finetuning for future rituals.

These twenty-nine characteristics of ritual design do not provide a specific how-to for leadership and craft. Rather, these categories provide leadership principles for ritualizing. Being deeply in tune with a context and the ritual needs of the community lead to effective ritual. However, it is not enough to just outline these principles and expect a ritual designer to know exactly what is possible. Atmospheres, moods, and actions still need to be identified to actually create the ritual. Grimes provides a breadth of moods and actions that are possible for rituals.<sup>80</sup> In thoroughly outlining the ritual

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<sup>80</sup> See pages 50 and 51 for lists of moods and actions.

context of a community with the characteristics above, it is now time for the design aspect. In the case of UUCL, the focus in a congregational context is liturgical ritual, or, in other words, sacred ritual. However, before getting to specific design and acknowledging that while this list provides leadership principles, what are the applications of those principles in community life? How are they put into practice?

### **Leading Rite**

The twenty-nine characteristics documented by the Ritual Studies Lab offer a set of leadership principles for people engaged in ritualization. Each category provides flexibility in addition to focused mindfulness on a necessary component of either creating ritual or knowing the desires and intentions of a given context. Perhaps the greatest gift of these characteristics from the Ritual Studies Lab, according to Grimes, is that they encourage, “experimentalism...incessant trying, testing, criticizing, and reimagining.”<sup>81</sup> These are the qualities of adaptive leaders. When presented with a problem having no readily available solution, adaptive leaders commit to an ethic of experimentalism. Implicit in this ethic, along with the other listed traits, is the possibility of failure. There is no guarantee, even with knowing a context as fully as possible, that a ritual will meet definitions of success. Ritual, then, is a continual process of learning, trying, and creativity. The critique of ceremony does not mean all ceremonies are stale. The word used here is in contrast with contextualized ritual.

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<sup>81</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 139.

Communities like UUCL are naming this tension by asking what else is possible in ritual life. Some communities may conclude a feeling of ceremony in their liturgy is what they want. However, for communities like UUCL asking what is possible, the adaptive qualities emerging from the Ritual Studies Lab characteristics offer additional leadership possibilities. Chief among these possibilities is creating an ethic of pastoral care in each ritual, making room for improvisation, and strengthening community life. Each offer different approaches to leadership. In pastoral care, a more concrete application of leadership emerges in the form of tending to the needs of the community. In improvisation, the ethic of experimentalism receives a framework in which it can be responsibly explored. From there, it circles back to the desire to strengthen and transform community. All of this is accomplished in the spirit of reinventing ritual and, in the case of UUCL, this takes the shape of liturgy.

#### *Ritual Leadership & Pastoral Care*

It has been suggested that “ritual is always in service of the participants.”<sup>82</sup> That statement could be explanation enough as to the power of pastoral care in ritual. The power of leading a community into a pastoral moment through ritual should also be considered. The promise of this is evident in varieties of rituals from countless cultures, nations, communities, and moments. One need only look for images of rituals to see the diversity of emotional expression. Conversely, when ritual fails to invoke a generative emotional response, examples of this can be found as well. The main drive here is to

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<sup>82</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 6.

ensure those in ritual leadership are intimately connected with the needs of the community. Ritual provides the possibility of pastoral care if the intention of the ritual is expansive, creative, and touches upon several moods and actions. As religious ritual is of particular interest here, a second but equally important aim is the cultivating of faith. In theistic traditions this has outcomes that are certainly pastoral as they provide connections to a deity or feelings of mystery. For Unitarian Universalists and religious naturalists, the cultivating of faith is a cultivating of connection to the here and now. This underscores, perhaps more strikingly, the words of Thomas O’Loughlin: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations weaken and destroy it.”<sup>83</sup> The stakes are high, indeed! If Unitarian Universalism and religious naturalism are two religious expressions centered in the here and now with no supernatural hopes or inclinations, the cultivation of faith is crucially important as it means living life fully, with hope, and making meaning out of a mortal and temporary existence.

The overarching pastoral needs are now evident. In celebrating the here and now, one must confront their mortality with no reliance upon supernatural beliefs. How does one confront existential fear or confusion? How about when a loved one dies and is understood to be gone forever? Or all of the bittersweet in life where mourning and joy are intertwined? Supernatural beliefs or not, the common motive here is a desire to make meaning, discover a way to live life, and confront fear. The greatest gift of claiming the need for pastoral care in ritual and in effectively creating the space for that to be possible

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Rites and Wrongs of Liturgy: Why Good Liturgy Matters* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 11.

is that, “rituals not only construct reality and make meaning...rituals are essential and powerful means for making the world a habitable and hospitable place.”<sup>84</sup> In a world of uncertainty, a countercultural act emerges in ritualizing and the enactment of ritual.

As a leadership principle, pastoral care in ritual is a means of showing up, being present, and tending to the community. It provides collective expression of varied responses and cathartic or emerging opportunities. Furthermore, it provides the tools necessary for people to re-enter the world with a renewed sense of how their faith connects to the challenges and opportunities they face. This is a reinforcement of the values held by the religious community and connects people to issues larger than their individual joys and sorrows. In many ways, what a person learns is, “the tradition’s understanding of good and evil, its models of the good person, its image of a just society. This normative dimension can never be separated out from the ritual functions of bonding the community or linking it with the transcendent.”<sup>85</sup> A pastoral element fostered by ritual leaders takes on the act of formation in addition to individual care. This, in itself, is an act of care. Educating participants and even ritual leaders in the core tenets of the faith as a means to sustain, uplift, and encourage. The task before leadership is monumental. Not only are the moods of the participants taken into account, the desires of the ritual designers, as well as a variety of actions to make a ritual accessible, but unpredictable

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<sup>84</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, 26.

responses and pastoral needs add further complexity. In order to wade deeper into the call for pastoral care in ritualization, a principle of improvisation needs to be cultivated.

### *Ritual Leadership & Improvisation*

Discussing pastoral care in ritual leads to an interesting balancing act. In what ways are ritual leaders being intentional and creating moments for a certain emotion, experience, and outcome to occur, and how are they allowing for unexpected responses? What about unexpected actions? How is improvisation given space in a ritual dimension? While care of community is a necessary leadership trait, allowing for a variety of experiences, expressions, and deftly tending to those unpredictable moments is just as important for ritual leaders. Improvisation, “can create space for ritual change.”<sup>86</sup> Change in ritual is not just in liturgy, flow, plans, or the overall design, but the change can also be in the connections made during the ritual and the outcomes experienced by participants and leaders. That is the power of improvisation. Yet, what is improvisation? Is it making it up as a ritual goes along? Is it lacking in preparation? Quite the opposite, according to Grimes. Improvisation, he writes, “is not mere spontaneity, anarchy, or doing what you please. It is a practiced skill enabling you to respond in an environment that is changing, sometimes rapidly, sometimes unpredictably.”<sup>87</sup> The keywords here are “practiced skill.” Improvisation is a leadership tool and tactic which gives greater freedom to both ritual

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<sup>86</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 17.

leaders and participants. It requires experimentation, success, failure, and learning to connect deeply with the atmosphere and intentions in the room.

Clergy and other ritual leaders will observe, from personal experience, that improvisation is indeed a skill that requires practice. An interesting question is to wonder why Grimes ensures there is ample attention devoted to defining and encouraging ritual improvisation. The motive for this leadership practice is in recognizing, “Improvisation tends to occur in situations where resources are limited or restricted, on frontiers where experimentation or resistance is required for survival, or among people wanting to distinguish themselves from the mainstream.”<sup>88</sup> Right there, in the words of Grimes, is a challenging realization. In what ways do most modern religious communities lack anything in regard to ritual expression? Liturgies are celebrated with minor modifications from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, rules are in place that prevent adapting prayerbooks, and many new ritual expressions are given a label that excludes them from experimentation. In the case of UUCL, there is both a ritual limit and restriction. These two traits serve an ethic of comfort. Removing this ethic of comfort would thrust a community into the frontier of experimentation where resistance rests. However, Grimes is implicitly encouraging this. To break free from a 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan format of worship and experiment with a nontheistic religious orientation, both in ritual expression and in belief, is to wade into a new frontier. Additionally, for religious naturalists, to move beyond being an online

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<sup>88</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 17.



discussion group and lean heavily into the religious side, the community building side, is just as expansive of a frontier.

The range of improvisation is just as vast as the range of ritual expression. In a continuum of ritual formality, it can span from the “scripted and read” to “composing while performing.”<sup>89</sup> This is a wide range of possible action, though resting heavily on one end of the spectrum or the other presents challenges. Being too unscripted and composing while playing could result in ritual chaos. On the other hand, being too scripted leads to stale liturgy and rote expression. Integrating improvisation into ritual in a meaningful, balanced, and intentional way avoids both ends of this spectrum. While the goal of improvisation is to give space for the unexpected, carving that space out is quite intentional and requires planning. This intentionality allows for ritual leaders and participants to engage self-consciousness and move toward self-awareness.<sup>90</sup> In self-awareness, people engaged in ritual find their place, the freedom that is afforded to them to act and engage, and a breadth of outcomes.

One crucial observation regarding improvisation remains. How is it sustainable? How can improvised rituals “last across generations?”<sup>91</sup> A question of balance is also necessary. If improvised rituals are sustainable, how do they avoid the staleness that pushed for improvisation in the first place? This is worth reflecting on as UUCL engaged

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<sup>89</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 19-20.

<sup>90</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 23.

its own ritual staleness and explores new ways of expressing themselves through ritual. Can an ethic of continual creativity that is both affirming and critical be worked into the ritual life of a community? Grimes offers simple advice that does not answer the question but illustrates a potential way through: "...sin bravely, make ritual mistakes."<sup>92</sup> It is in letting go of perfectionism that the traps of the past are dismantled. Ritual that gives room for human imperfection leads to a spirit of curiosity and an avoidance of overly critical standards. Leaders take note, improvisation is messy yet highly rewarding.

*Transformative Community by Way of Ritual Leadership*

There is a larger promise to centering leadership in ritual. The benefits of pastoral care and improvisation are manifold. However, the main goal is transformation not only of individuals but of the community as well. Ritual can make this possible. The transformations needed for UUCL and religious naturalism are different with one looking to reinvent its practice and the other is still emerging. However, in reinvention there is a sense of emergence and in emergence there is a sense of creation. The two are not that far off. The main promise here is in doubling down on the benefits of community over individualism. Unitarian Universalists are known to be a people that value individualism, sometimes to a fault. A recent commission on institutional change remarked, "If freedom and individualism are our most important values, we have little to offer in these times."<sup>93</sup> This observation happening after a national examination of priorities and recommended

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<sup>92</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> UUA Commission on Institutional Change, *Widening the Circle of Concern* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020), 18.

changes indicates a serious problem. As for religious naturalism, the institutional expression of it in the RNA is fairly new. The bonds of community are still being determined both within the institution and for religious naturalists who wish to gather adjacently or in an RN friendly organization. UUCL offers a path forward both for its own institutional aims and as a laboratory for RN communities affiliated with an existing organization. What are the transformative opportunities in this?

Leaders need to recognize the goals of community. It is more than shared values, choosing to affiliate, or being in line with the overall mission. Those are important standards and certainly contribute. However, as it relates to ritual, the central goal needs to be in recognizing, “Community happens when individuals live lives that are directed toward the other.”<sup>94</sup> If UUCL is not gathering on Sunday morning or at other ritual moments to worship a deity, the focus needs to be toward the gathered community. This is in line with RN tendencies to both center community, implied in the word religious and affirmed by the RNA, and also in statements such as those made by Ursula Goodenough which affirm “human continuation.”<sup>95</sup> It is not just the continuation of the species, but also the continuation of practices and communities that are life-affirming and life-giving.

It is worth asking centering questions of community and especially in relation to ritual. Thomas O’Loughlin offers several questions leaders should ask as they look at ritual and liturgy in a given setting. These questions offer further possibilities for truly

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<sup>94</sup> Tércio Bretanha Junker, *Prophetic Liturgy: Toward a Transforming Christian Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 78.

<sup>95</sup> Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, 171.

understanding a context and weaving in moods, actions, and other ritual elements.

O'Loughlin asks:

How are we a community – why have such variety of individuals come to one place;  
What is it that characterizes us as “us” here;  
What have each of us present to offer to the others today;  
How should we express *on this occasion* whatever identity we have found;  
How should that which is standard and inherited be adapted to the spontaneity by this moment;  
What should be the tone and flavor of our worship on this occasion?<sup>96</sup>

All of these questions get back to the power of community, identity, and collective ritual.

Of particular interest, they also remind ritual leaders that they have gifts to offer in ritual as well. All of them lead to the final two questions about spontaneity, tone, and flavor.

These recall improvisation and the characteristics, moods, and actions of ritual put forward by Grimes.

The ethic of ritual leadership begins with knowing and cannot be emphasized enough. Without knowing a community and continually asking questions, there is a risk of rituals falling flat or not speaking to a community. It is also in this knowing that a spirit of trust is developed among ritual leaders, between ritual leaders and the gathered community, and in the power of ritual itself. It is through knowing that trust can be given space to form. Why is this important? Will there be people that never trust? Yes, it is possible. The importance of this is in the transformation of community through ritual. When a ritual is designed, set-up, and ready to be enacted, no transformation has occurred. However, “the actual transformation can occur only when the individual

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<sup>96</sup> O'Loughlin, *The Rites and Wrongs of Liturgy*, 52-53

surrenders to the experience.”<sup>97</sup> Given the power of community, there is a community surrendering that occurs as well.

Linda Vogel speaks to what is at stake when transformation in ritual occurs. She writes that the hallmarks of transformation are when the community can, “Name your joys and your pains. Claim and tell and retell your stories. Find connections with your stories and the stories of your faith community. Create liturgies or rituals that can help you, and those who share life’s faith journey with you, to focus on who and Whose you are and what it means to be experiencing losses or new beginnings.”<sup>98</sup> This is a powerful call for ritual leaders in a community. At UUCL, the stakes are quite high. There is a storied tradition that UUCL is a part of and an emerging religious orientation it wishes to claim and express. In other words, there is a deep desire. When leaders learn how their ritual leadership is transformative for the community, a clearer understanding of the desire in a community emerges: “The desire for change legitimates rituals. Rituals are born when desire is present.”<sup>99</sup> Leaders have everything they need in the desires of UUCL for more RN ritual. The follow-up question to those desires presented by O’Loughlin would be, ‘what is being born out of desire in this community?’

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<sup>97</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 30.

<sup>98</sup> Junker, *Prophetic Liturgy*, 110.

<sup>99</sup> Junker, *Prophetic Liturgy*, 110.

### *Bringing Together Principles for Ritual Reinvention*

By now a ritual leader should have a thorough toolkit for effective, adaptive, and transformative leadership. This work is messy. It asks leaders to embrace emotions, hopes, fears, actions, movements, co-creation, failure, improvisation, deep reflection, care, resistance, and vision. All good leadership embraces the entire person and ritual is no different. Reflecting on ritual as a method and means of leadership asks people to look at the history of ritual. Communities have joined together, time after time, experiencing the messiness, the successes, and the failures of ritual. New religions or communities of support have flourished and many have died almost as quickly as they began.

For religious naturalists in their emerging organizational state, many failures and successes await. Unitarian Universalists, while not replacing the good work of the RNA, offers glimpses into their history and the breadth of trials it experienced. This spans the history of Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists as well. In 1948, Imaoka Shin'ichirō helped found the Japanese Free Religious Association, a religious community of Unitarians, naturalists, Shinto, Confucian, Buddhist, Christian, and otherwise identified religious liberals. Their goal in meeting and worshipping was to foster “liberating spirituality.”<sup>100</sup> Otherwise stated, the Japanese Free Religious Association sought to create a worshipping religious community that met the desires of the gathered people and cultivated transformation. Further back in Unitarian history, the Transcendentalists also sought to support a liberating spiritual community. James

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<sup>100</sup> George M. Williams, *Cosmic Sage: Imaoka Shin'ichiro, Prophet of Free Religion* (Uniquist Publishing, 2019), 283.

Freeman Clarke challenged earlier Puritan liturgies and practices and sought to include the laity fully in the religious life of the church.<sup>101</sup> This was radical for the time as it meant singing hymns as a congregation instead of having the minister read them from the pulpit. It meant allowing the laity to offer up readings, learn to pray publicly, allow both nonordained men and women to preach, and include more silence in worship. Clarke went a step further and challenged the liturgical calendar and insisted it should reflect local practices.<sup>102</sup> Even further back in Unitarian history, this time in Transylvania during Catholic oppression, the Unitarian bishop, Matthew Toroczkai found himself hiding in an abandoned mine, waiting for the oppression to subside. During this time of great uncertainty and fearing for his life, he used that opportunity to write new hymns for Unitarian churches and collect the first ever Unitarian hymnal.<sup>103</sup>

Looking at these three brief historic occurrences from across cultures, generations, and periods of Unitarian history, one thing is evident. Unitarians, and today Unitarian Universalists, have a history of ritual leadership. The characteristics outlined by Grimes, the moods and actions, an ethic of pastoral care, the daring to wade into improvisation, and fostering a sense of transformation in community are right there in these stories. This is a rich history that Unitarian Universalists, and specifically UUCL,

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<sup>101</sup> John A. Buehrens, *Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2020), 106.

<sup>102</sup> Buehrens, *Conflagration*, 106.

<sup>103</sup> Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1997), 115.

has to draw upon. In these ritual innovations, communities were led out of oppression, led into new eras, and gathered anew. These are the hallmarks of leadership done well. Yet new stories need to be centered as well. It is inspiration to see leaders of past generations using ritual as a means to lead and grow a community. However, UUCL finds itself in the 2020s with a desire to innovate for its own time. Anderson and Foley capture this imperative: “Because we live in the stories we create, we need to be sure that the stories we live are shaped, in large measure, by our own vision of life. Trying to live according to someone else’s story is like wearing hand-me-down clothes all the time. Therefore, the life narrative we compose should be significantly shaped by the choices we make and the actions we take.”<sup>104</sup> The story front and center is a congregation with a growing RN orientation in need of new ritual leadership. How can UUCL lead into and through this desire?

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<sup>104</sup> Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 7.



### **Chapter 3: Rite in Practice**

#### **Designing a Curriculum for Religious Naturalist Leadership and Ritual Creation**

It is not enough to look at ritual theory and hope it works out with both cultivating leaders and designing rituals. The next step rests on a question from the theoretical exploration: How did the characteristics of the Ritual Design Lab emerge? The answer is that they created rituals. We need to acknowledge that the Ritual Design Lab had this as their intent from the get-go and they were all anchored in the world of ritual studies. For our purposes, in both contexts, we are working with potential leaders that are not in the field of ritual studies. The work ahead is to both emulate as well as focus. To create a Ritual Design Lab for a Unitarian Universalist congregation in search of RN ritual as well as leaders to facilitate and create such rituals, a curriculum that makes the characteristics discussed digestible is required. This does not mean the characteristics identified by Grimes are the end of the discussion. Room should be made in a congregational context for new values and characteristics to be identified as well as existing ones be modified.

As this is anchored in a Unitarian Universalist context, religious education best practices will be used to create the workshop curriculum. It's important that the curriculum not be arduous. The goal is for potential leaders to want to engage the curriculum and lean into adaptive possibilities. It also requires looking at twenty-nine Ritual Design Lab characteristics, which may seem overwhelming. The methods employed allow for flexibility in approaching what could otherwise be seen as a significant task. Another goal is to allow space for a variety of outcomes and skills learned by potential leaders.

Creating a curriculum for a congregationally based Ritual Design Lab is not the end of the discussion. It is the beginning of cracking open the problems faced by communities, like UUCL, that wish to explore new avenues of ritual creation and leadership. The possibility for a rich engagement with a variety of leadership approaches, skills, and potential ritual outcomes is immense.

### **Engaging Unitarian Universalist Curriculum Design Theory**

Unitarian Universalists have a unique approach to religious education, leadership development, and curriculum design. It is rooted in historic developments of Unitarian and Universalist theology that is distilled into the here and now. The word curriculum, in this instance and in most Unitarian Universalists contexts, should not conjure up images of a dusty tome with step-by-step instructions that should be followed. Instead, it should point to emergent possibilities for the gathered community around a shared goal.

The primary philosophy of Unitarian Universalist religious education, leadership development, and curriculum designs is stated simply as, “The medium is the message.”<sup>105</sup> The medium can span from actual physical media to methods. Within this philosophy, significant attention is paid to illustrating what it means to live life as Unitarian Universalist. For children and youth this often looks like an invitation to explore different possibilities on a given theme. It is not about specific beliefs, dogma, doctrines, or even outcomes other than creating a space that models values by way of carefully curated educational spaces.

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<sup>105</sup> The Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee, *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2001), 61.

This is the linchpin in looking at the twenty-nine characteristics of Grimes' Ritual Design Lab and seeing not just elements of ritual but also elements of leadership development. The media involved include the twenty-nine characteristics, the RN ethos, and the participants themselves. A simple message that affirms RN ritual is possible and within reach emerges when they are gathered together.

A further understanding of this philosophy from Unitarian Universalist religious education theory comes from Elliot Eisner's understanding of curricula, which includes the explicit, implicit, and null curricula.<sup>106</sup> The explicit curriculum examines what is expressly said and done within the workshop setting while the implicit points to design, materials, objects, and so on. The null curriculum is referred to as paradoxical in that it is precisely what is not said, done, or provided. This expands the understanding that the medium or method is the message into something broader. Suddenly, not only is the medium and method part of the message, but so, too, is the content, action, and inaction.<sup>107</sup>

In preparing a ritual design lab curriculum for UUCL, we can look at the explicit, implicit, and null expressions. Explicitly, a curriculum that fosters both RN leadership development and ritual design are the stated goals. The main tools are the twenty-nine characteristics of ritual as identified by Grimes. Implicitly, we see materials made available to facilitate interaction with the twenty-nine characteristics. The null expression is interesting to explore. What is left out? This curriculum will not engage theism directly

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<sup>106</sup> The Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee, *Essex Conversations*, 60.

<sup>107</sup> The Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee, *Essex Conversations*, 61.

or anything counter to Unitarian Universalist or RN expressions. The null aspect is not entirely negative, though. As this curriculum will primarily engage the twenty-nine characteristics explored, anything beyond these that is in support of the stated goals of the curriculum is welcome. This allows for continued life and growth to be present in this work.

Additionally, a shared praxis model will anchor this curriculum. The shared praxis model builds upon the concept of ‘the medium is the message’ and the three types of curricula inherent to that philosophy. Shared praxis identifies the role of the individual within community during a learning event, in this case a workshop, and gives space for any issues of significance. The steps for shared praxis are as follows:

...the first step in the model takes the individual in the present, by naming a present understanding of an issue in their life (their own truth). The second step helps the individual examine the basis and impact of that present understanding. The third step moves the person into dialogue with the faith community so that both are enriched by individual and community stories. The fourth step continues the dialogue between and among the individual and faith community as meaning is made of the intersections of the individual and community stories. The fifth step leads to decision for action on an issue on the part of both the community and the individual, in the context of the faith community.<sup>108</sup>

Within these steps are the necessary ingredients for putting the medium and method into effect as the primary message. Expanding upon these steps has one looking at the stated problems, stakeholders, and moving into both individual and community actions. Some truths that are possible for an individual are a desire to connect with Unitarian

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<sup>108</sup> The Unitarian Universalist Association, “Teacher Development Renaissance Module,” accessed December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023, <https://www.uua.org/midamerica/events/teacher-development-renaissance-module>. See specifically handout #6 in the handouts PDF linked on the website.

Universalism as a non-theist or religious naturalist, someone who desires more leadership experience, and someone that wants to collaborate with others in the ritual life of the congregation. What is then needed is clarity of goals and intention both for the individual and community. This is not a gatekeeping mechanism but rather another layer of reflection that moves from the individual level into the community. In engaging the curriculum and creating rituals, while also developing leadership skills, it is important that individuals involved can bring their full selves into the exercise of the Ritual Design Lab characteristics. These are not stale categories but invitations for people to bring their gifts and talents. This is where the fourth step comes into play with the deepening of individual and community contexts. I would contend this is where the alchemy of ritual creation occurs. Stories, intentions, passions, and presence are clarified and begin to mesh, which leads to the conclusion and final step. Then is the time for the ritual to be finalized and acted upon at an agreed upon time.

Pursuing a workshop curriculum with these theoretical tools at hand will allow for the goals of this project to come alive by getting members of a congregation with an affinity for religious naturalism in the same space to generate ritual ideas, create and enact said rituals, and foster leadership development. This is accomplished with recognizing the medium, method, actions, and inactions are all part of the message. Furthermore, an approach that centers the lived experiences of participants who are both Unitarian Universalist and religious naturalist encourages a deepened experience.

### **Is There a Religious Naturalist Curriculum Design Theory?**

Given the contextual information about religious naturalism, the seeming lack of motivation to pursue ritual formation and design with the RNA, and the far flung and loosely connected community that it is, it would be peculiar to have a well-documented curriculum design theory in addition to any of the other stated goals of this project. This is primarily because it's a new movement with loose connections. Even with this in mind, however, there are movements adjacent to religious naturalism which offer a glimpse into how parameters for a workshop, leadership experience, and eventual ritual might be constructed.

#### *Looking to the Church of the Wild*

The Church of the Wild movement, while not specifically RN or Unitarian Universalist, offers tools for consideration that augment the exploration of ritual theory. The bulk of information about the Church of the Wild is found in a book of the same name by Victoria Loorz that recounts her experiences leaving traditional Christianity and seeking a spirituality that reconnects people with nature, or “re-wilds” the church.<sup>109</sup> The method of entering into, leading, and experiencing a Wild Church reinforces both Unitarian Universalist curriculum philosophy and the leadership principles explored in Chapter 2. These principles offer blueprint for how this workshop curriculum will be designed.

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<sup>109</sup> Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2001), 5.

The Church of the Wild opens with gathering and silence.<sup>110</sup> The silence hearkens back to the null expression of curriculum. In silence, what is left out is noticed as well as what is present. This allows for a meditative experience to occur right at the beginning of the experience. While this is applicable to Wild Church experiences, seeing its relationship with the curriculum theory already explored, it is clear that the method really is the medium. In the case of the Church of the Wild, it is the outdoors and what's available in that setting.

Wild Church experiences continue with a land acknowledgement.<sup>111</sup> For our purposes and closely linked with the type of land acknowledgement described by Victoria Loorz, this is a contextual moment. Just as the land, trees, animals, insects, ancient peoples, and so on are described in detail in the Church of the Wild to set the stage for the ritual experience, what contextual information is needed for a workshop that creates rituals? In identifying context, the stage is set for a deeper exploration of opportunities for leadership and the creation of rituals.

Loorz suggest offering sacred readings next. As this project connects to religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism, the sacred space can be continued with readings that anchor the gathered people in those traditions. This segment is combined with a check-in session in the curriculum design below. More than literal readings, Loorz

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<sup>110</sup> Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 204.

<sup>111</sup> Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 206.

contends that the real sacred readings occur in the revelation of the gathered people by their experiences.<sup>112</sup>

As the Church of the Wild is loosely connected with Protestant Christianity, space for the sermon, called the sermo by Loorz, is given.<sup>113</sup> The sermon is divided into three sections relevant to our goal of creating an experiential curriculum. The first part is an invitation. This sets the tone for the remainder of the experience. It is followed by sacred wandering, where people wander out in nature and are inspired by chance encounters in the wild. The third is a sharing and witnessing of what was experienced by the individuals. Translating this into an RN ritual design lab requires removing the sermon language altogether. Sermons can still be a part of a ritual experience, but they are not required and the language is not helpful to the intent of the program. In this workshop curriculum, the sermon as described the Church of the Wild becomes a setting of intentions, experiential activities, and the sharing and design of a ritual. It is modeled similarly and fulfills the same functions as the Church of the Wild, but re-contextualized for a workshop setting.

The Church of the Wild concludes with a celebration of communion and a benediction.<sup>114</sup> The communion aspect can be closely linked with Christian communion, or it can be something else entirely different. There is no clear parallel in an RN setting and even a Unitarian Universalist setting. Communion, as understood by Christians, are

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<sup>112</sup> Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 210.

<sup>113</sup> Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 210-15.

<sup>114</sup> Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 217-20.



not standard practices in each community. However, the communion piece is entirely experiential and grounded in the tradition from which the Church of the Wild emerged. At this point in the workshop, the ritual is ready to be experienced, changed, and re-experienced. That is a type of communion. The community is coming together, grounded in tradition, and experiencing something new together. The closing benediction is an opportunity for everyone to share a word of affirmation and say farewell.

### *Looking to the Forest Church Movement*

The Forest Church movement, founded by Bruce Stanley, shares similar aims with the Church of the Wild but puts great effort into diversifying the participatory aspect of the experience. The language used is all about participating with nature instead of going back into nature or observing it.<sup>115</sup> The experiential component is crucial. The RN movement, as a nascent religious identity, cannot live in the realm of the theoretical if it wants to flourish. Unitarian Universalist cannot do likewise if it wants to transform its practices. The Forest Church offers simple practices to deepen reflection before sharing with a wider community.

Stanley begins with breaking down these practices into simple and complex. The focus here is to illustrate the basic practices, knowing that others are encouraged. This foray into spiritual practices usable by religious naturalists provides a sampling of activities that reinforce the medium is the message philosophy. The first is a concept

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<sup>115</sup> Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to a Spiritual Connection with Nature* (Vestal, NY: Anamchara Books, 2014), 14.

called the “sit spot.”<sup>116</sup> This is relevant to forming a Ritual Design Lab in a congregational setting if there are regular meetings and invitations to engage RN spiritual practices. The concept is simple in that it asks someone to find a spot they can regularly sit and observe. The key is returning to the same spot again and again and allowing the experience to deepen. In this chosen “sit spot” or elsewhere, the other practices can be engaged. They are self-explanatory and the only reminder needed is for them to be anchored in both an RN and Unitarian Universalist perspective. They include journaling, study, wandering, and giving thanks.<sup>117</sup> Each one can take place within nature or in a meeting room or anywhere this workshop is taking place. The goal of these practices in the Forest Church movement is to, as mentioned, participate with nature. This is a goal worthy of exploration for creating RN ritual and developing leaders. Participants must first connect and be with nature.

### *Bringing it All Together*

While there is not an official, documented RN curriculum design theory, it is evident there are principles from adjacent communities and leaders that start giving birth to the broader principles from Unitarian Universalism. The Church of the Wild provides a helpful structure that guides the specific shape of the curriculum while reinforcing the axiom, the medium and method are the message. From the contextual information identified at the beginning, what other observations are made that will be collected and potentially used? What birds, flowers, trees, and so on are present for this ritual

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<sup>116</sup> Stanley, *Forest Church*, 65.

<sup>117</sup> Stanley, *Forest Church*, 66-69.

experience? If it is not apparent, there will be space to take time to immerse oneself in a context and reconvene. Lastly, the Forest Church movement offers sample experiential activities to concretize what could otherwise be a lofty undertaking. While the curriculum will use the twenty-nine characteristics from the Ritual Design Lab, it is overwhelming to give the directive: Create a ritual out of these. These activities are only a few suggestions that can be adapted or changed entirely if they reinforce the twenty-nine characteristics.

All of this leads to the necessary framework for a curriculum that allows participants to create a local Ritual Design Lab to develop leadership skills and create RN rituals in a Unitarian Universalist congregation or elsewhere. The twenty-nine characteristics of Grimes' Ritual Design Lab serve as the underpinning, with Unitarian Universalist religious education theory reinforcing it, while emergent naturalist-adjacent communities and thinkers distill it into concrete actions.

### **Creating a Religious Naturalist Ritual Lab**

There are several questions that arise in the creation of a Religious Naturalist Ritual Lab at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington. Before answering these questions, one must understand that this highlights the high level of contextuality for this project. The motivations and setting for this Ritual Lab are not necessarily identical to any other context. Furthermore, should non-Unitarian Universalist or non-Kentuckian communities wish to create their own, they must ask these questions of themselves and adapt as needed.

### *Why Do We Need an RN Ritual Lab?*

This is a restatement of the original problem. The need for an RN Ritual Lab is to provide a workshop environment where RN rituals can be imagined, created, fine-tuned, and enacted. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington has an emerging RN presence where there is a need for new rituals that reflect this perspective. There is also the possibility that in creating new rituals, the overall ritual life of the congregation itself could be transformed and help UUCL reimagine its liturgy, rituals, and understanding of corporate worship. This Ritual Lab will also provide opportunities for participants to develop and practice leadership skills gleaned from the twenty-nine characteristics of Richard Grimes' Ritual Design Lab in addition to the other ritual theory principles discussed.

### *Who is Involved?*

The entire congregation as well as anyone interested in religious naturalism is invited to eventually be involved. Narrowing this in from a wide welcome to a smaller group initially will allow for important beta testing. If not the minister, a designated leader or leaders from the congregation should invite interested participants and convene it from there. It is recommended that created rituals are tested with participants in the Ritual Lab before a larger group. Both with participants in the Lab and when it is experienced beyond it, evaluation is encouraged to gauge ritual cohesion and further develop leadership skills.

At least some of the participants in the Ritual Lab need to be comfortable with performing or speaking in public. In other words, they need to know how to hold the

ritual space and be a presence. However, in the spirit of eventually broadening participation beyond the ritual lab participants, the structure of this lab, the curriculum, allows for multiple avenues of participation.

The role of the minister of UUCL is left open. As the minister currently identifies as a religious naturalist and is involved in the creation of this Ritual Design Lab, it is important for involvement to be initially high.

### *What Is Involved?*

While the words workshop and curriculum are used to describe the foundation of this Ritual Design Lab, that does not capture it in its entirety. Yes, it is a workshop. Yes, it will have a curriculum anchored in ritual theory. What is also involved is experiencing a religious atmosphere. This sets the tone for the work of creating rituals and fostering leadership. It also helps accomplish these goals by immersing participants in it from the beginning. The goal is to learn and create by doing with little to no previous experience in ritual theory or design. This asks participants to trust the process and understand the basics of Unitarian Universalist educational and curriculum theory. This is not an immense hurdle, but it will require reminding every time the Ritual Design Lab convenes as it is a core principle. Furthermore, as religious naturalism is a unique religious outlook, having a religious atmosphere sets the time apart as something other than a solitary walk in the woods. Both communal and individual experiences can be sacred, but religious naturalism chose the word religious as a movement to underscore the power of community in sharing common values and perspectives.

### *When and Where Will This Happen?*

The possibilities of when and where are endless. However, as this is immersed in a specific context, it is recommended it happens at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington. It provides ample natural encounters on seven acres of wooded property. This will allow for members of the congregation to participate more readily and allow for proximity between both religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism. The familiarity of the setting will also ease nerves. As for if this should occur inside or outside, that is also up to the particular group. Inside allows for a level of focus and a closed environment while outside could be incredibly immersive.

The frequency of Ritual Design Lab meetings will be agreed upon by group participants at their first meeting. Some possibilities include monthly or on the equinoxes, solstices, and cross-quarter days. Sometimes the group will need to meet more often. What is important to stress is that there is not a correct number of times to meet. If the Ritual Design Lab meets at least monthly and follows the suggested outline in the curriculum, they will encounter all twenty-nine characteristics of ritual from Grimes. As outlined below, more or less of these characteristics can be addressed in a gathering of the Ritual Design Lab, but it is designed to work through the characteristics in one year.

### **The Ritual Design Lab Curriculum Structure**

As mentioned, the structure of this curriculum is modeled after the suggested Church of the Wild order of service. This is not a means to replicate that experience, but to instill a religious atmosphere to the Ritual Design Lab curriculum and workshop. The hope is that in doing this, it becomes a supportive community of learners that have the

potential to transform the ritual life of a congregation. The terms curriculum and workshop also give the impression of completing a set of criteria or a one-and-done experience. The Ritual Design Lab created here will hopefully continue just as the corporate ritual life of the congregation continues week after week. The main characteristics of the curriculum include: Gathering, Silence, Intentions, Experience, Collaborate, Enact, and Evaluate.

### *Gathering*

Bringing people together sounds simpler than it is and begins with considering the setting that you want for this workshop. That alone matters in setting the tone or inviting people to participate. Will this be outdoors or indoors? Will this be near someplace special? How will people be welcomed into the space? How will people be introduced and what will everyone learn about each other? Questions like these and more begin the structure of this curriculum. If this Ritual Design Lab continues beyond one workshop, people will get to know each other better. For both one-time experiences and continued sessions, it's important to consider where this will take place and if it is a comfortable space. Names, pronouns, their experience with religious naturalism, and one hope each person has for the experience should be shared. For repeat participants, they can check in about new hopes or new learnings experienced over previous sessions. Since Unitarian Universalism is one of the anchors for this experience, a chalice will be lit at the very beginning. Consider using a chime or bell to ring to get people settled and proceed with the chalice lighting and check-in criteria.

This segment should afford each person one minute of time to check-in. Use a small sand timer if needed and a talking stick to limit crosstalk. If needed, before check-ins happen and if it is known this will continue beyond one session, develop a quick group behavioral covenant for how people will interact during times of check-in and beyond.

### *Silence*

Again, consider using a chime or bell after the check-ins for a few minutes of silence. Use a prompt appropriate for the season such as, ‘What are your fondest and most challenging memories of winter?’ or ‘How did you encounter nature today?’ The convener can come up with their own prompts or offer a brief reading that is nature-inspired for the silence. In silence, it becomes apparent who and what is and is not in the space. If outside, people will surely connect with familiar sounds and wonder about others being present or absent. In a classroom or similar setting, a person’s focus could be anything. A moment of silence and meditation gives space between the casual nature of a check-in, even if it had a deep check-in question, and the work ahead. Sacred space is delineated, and a threshold is crossed.

### *Intentions*

The group now moves into setting the focus for the remainder of the session. Yes, everything that has happened up to this point will also set the tone, but this practice will narrow it into the leadership skills and ritual characteristics being explored. During the first sessions, the convener or conveners can group the twenty-nine characteristics into sets of two or three, knowing there will be an extra either way. This can be accomplished



by going down the list of characteristics or putting them onto slips of paper and drawing them at random. The latter is recommended as it reinforces an ethic of improvisations. Each of the twenty-nine characteristics has a brief definition and keywords that connect to religious naturalism.<sup>118</sup>

Once two or three characteristics are identified, those are the intentions for the remainder of the time together. Spend five minutes getting initial brief thoughts on what was chosen. Remind people that the goal is to use these characteristics in the creation of a ritual. This is crucial as we do not want this to become a discussion group alone. The development of leadership happens in direct engagement and enactment of these characteristics in ritual design. After discussing, give everyone a minute and then introduce the next segment.

### *Experience*

Like the first part of the sermon in a Church of the Wild service, the experience phase allows individuals to have direct contact and engagement with the intentions chosen a few minutes prior. Let the group decide if everyone will do the same experience or choose their own. Lift up some options such as journaling, wandering, drawing, researching, and meditating. Stress that these are just a handful of possibilities but also the most accessible for your time together. Ensure there is access to supplies if artwork is an available option.

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<sup>118</sup> Appendix II contains sample flashcards for this purpose to be printed, cut up, and used.

This is where creative engagement comes alive. If ‘Subjunctivity’ is one of the characteristics selected, it is not enough to engage it on a purely intellectual level. It is also likely going to be one of the more obscure characteristics given the language and that it is rooted purely in what could be. Participants should be asked to use their experience in an openhearted way so the characteristics come alive. Subjunctivity could lead somewhere wild or somewhere heartbreaking. Imagine a ritual where the personal climate change encounters of individuals are funneled into hopes of what could be in a new ritual. What would that look like and how would that serve the pastoral needs of a community? Understanding the definition of subjunctivity does not accomplish this but creative exploration does. Give roughly thirty minutes for participants to engage in this portion of the workshop.

### *Collaborate*

Collaboration brings the personal reflections into the open and allows for mutuality, difference, consensus, and compromise. The goal for the next thirty minutes to an hour is to gather highlights from individual experiences and start creating a ritual. Anchoring questions will center on: What do we want to accomplish emotionally? Physically? Spiritually? How do we want people to participate? What supplies do we have that we can use? What do we need? How long do we want this ritual to be? What is our theme? What moods and actions do we want in the ritual?

After sharing experiences and answering these questions, the hard work of collaborating on the ritual itself begins. It is important that participants are reminded of Grimes’ list of ritual actions and moods to assist in creating a ritual. There is no set length

for what is created. This is also the portion of the workshop that carries the greatest risk for growing edges to emerge. A strong convener is needed to keep everything on track and nudge participants back toward the act of creating versus theorizing. If needed, move to a new space, or go outdoors if you have not already. Do what it takes to shift the energy of the space toward creation.

### *Enact*

Now that a new ritual has been created, rooted in religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism, it is time to enact it. Decide who will be the facilitators, if needed, for the ritual. If it is entirely collaborative, have the convener get it started. If something does not work out or feel right, the group can decide to pause and edit the ritual as needed. This is still the laboratory where adaptation, correction, and editing on the fly can happen. Remind participants of the moods, actions, goals, and intentions for this ritual. Once the draft of the ritual is smoothed out by the group, it's time for the full rehearsal. Enact the ritual as a group or with however many participants are needed. Remember that if someone is not actively participating in a ritual, they are still observers and by extension, still participating.

### *Evaluate & Conclude*

The ritual was enacted and hopefully everyone is feeling a sense of accomplishment. The time for celebration is not yet at hand. Allow for up to fifteen minutes to answer the evaluation questions either as a group or individually, using the form found in Appendix III. If people were only observers, still have them participate in

evaluation. In an evaluative space, leadership and ritual are assessed for growing edges, strengths, and further possibilities.

Conclude the evening with a closing affirmation from each participant. If there are a lot of people, this can be limited to one-word affirmations or use the sand timer and talking stick. Extinguish the chalice and ensure people know when the next workshop is held.

### **Summary and Final Thoughts on Curriculum**

The structure for the curriculum is summarized in Appendix I. This structure allows for several things to happen. Unitarian Universalist values and philosophy are woven into the entirety of the experience. The medium and method are the message here. Ritual improvisation opportunities are present. This is not a workshop curriculum that forces participants to achieve one goal above all else. The goal is to create a ritual, no matter what it is, that is anchored in religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism. If improvisation does not occur, that is worth reflecting on in the evaluation. Additionally, a religious experience is created. It is not a Sunday morning experience, but it is a laboratory where the sacred is explored, mined, created, and enacted.

The timing of segments is only a suggestion. This workshop is designed to last from two to three hours. A skilled facilitator and abbreviated sections can accomplish this in an hour. This would likely be experienced as a quick ritual lab experience that focuses on only one Ritual Design Lab characteristic. There is no wrong way to do this if the basic intent is followed. It is important there is structure and boundaries as these categories reinforce Unitarian Universalist values, religious naturalist experimentation

already occurring, and the dual purpose of fostering leadership while creating RN rituals.

The timing is secondary to these stated purposes.

## **Chapter 4: Getting it Rite**

### **Evaluative Methods in Ritual Design and Experience**

We find ourselves at an interesting conclusion of this exploration. This journey identified a ritual desire at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington among a strong constituency of its members. The emerging RN movement, as expressed by the RNA, finds itself wading into new fields of discovery. Bringing the two communities together for ritual exploration required a deep dive into ritual theory and the leadership principles it provides. Ritual modalities – moods and actions – offered starting points for crafting new rituals, and characteristics of effective ritual served as a foundation for leadership. The imperatives of pastoral care and improvisation led to the need for centering community and guiding it toward transformation. Our attention turned toward the bigger problem at hand. How can we cultivate leaders and, by extension, co-create rituals while instilling leadership principles? How do you do this while also bringing together necessary stakeholders and leading through ritual categories, modalities, and wading into adaptive challenges? All of this leads to the question: What now?

Ritual evaluation offers an opportunity for self and communal examination but also, given the method we have undertaken, an evaluation of leadership. It is important to look back upon all of the good work pursued to determine how a ritual was experienced, what the process felt like, and what is needed for future endeavors. A caution in this process is that evaluative methods can lead to treating ritual as stale ceremony. The evaluations necessary here are less about checking off boxes of decorum, guaranteed outcomes, and determining if a ritual was effective but more about gaining an

understanding of the range of connections, intentions, fears, hopes, and surprises possible. It is also possible that a ritual will be panned by leaders and participants. Critique offers a way forward and should not be about success or failure. A so-called failed ritual could offer new possibilities for leadership to hone their skills.

Who should be involved in these evaluations? This varies by community. At UUCL, as a congregationalist institution, it does require feedback that is both formal and informal. The informal feedback is a natural part of any community experience. How leaders take into the account such feedback will determine the weight it is given in relation to formal structures. A necessary caution for informal feedback is to both pay attention to it and determine appropriate boundaries concerning urgency. Not all feedback must be addressed immediately. Formal feedback will include one-to-one and group meeting sessions in addition to submitted evaluations from focus groups in the congregation. Additionally, ritual leaders and designers will be invited to offer their feedback in a similar way. Some necessary questions need to be answered. Will people be able to look at and experience these rituals as religious naturalist? As Unitarian Universalist? Given the body of ethics in RN and Unitarian Universalist perspectives, will there be markers of behavioral change and depth in the people who participate? Will members of the congregation that ascribe to an RN orientation find renewed energy in their behavior and will non-RN members adopt similar behaviors?

Using the liturgical analysis model as interpreted from Pierre Hegy, these evaluative criteria will have a structure for use by ministers and other leaders. The criteria included in this model include assessing emotional content and engagement, formative

relationships (to members, leaders, and the faith), as well as an overall description of the ritual process.<sup>119</sup>

The timing for evaluation is ongoing. When changes are being implemented, immediate evaluation is useful as a means of affirmation or course correction. Yet there will be added value in evaluating long-term impacts on congregational identity as well as ritual engagement. Despite the ongoing nature of evaluating ritual practice, monthly and yearly evaluations from religious professionals and the participants in the program will be conducted.

### **Reframing Ritual Efficacy**

Determining ritual efficacy requires clear boundaries. The question itself, “Did this ritual work?,” has immediate follow-up questions. Who is determining if it worked? Who isn’t determining if it worked? How are different opinions accounted for? What criteria determines effectiveness? How does leadership take this feedback into account for their own edification? All of these questions and more wade into the murky territory of efficacy. William Sax sums up the problem of ritual efficacy and, for our purposes, evaluation by looking to ritual reification. Of this problem with ritual observers, researchers, and educators, he writes, “...and after some time they begin to think that “ritual” is something out there in the world, whose characteristics can be classified,

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<sup>119</sup> Pierre Hégy, *Worship as Community Drama: Introduction to Liturgy Evaluation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 17-22.



enumerated, and analyzed...<sup>120</sup> In the case of UCL exploring RN ritual frameworks through cultivating leaders, there is no separation from ritual life and those evaluating it. Positing ritual theory and craft as a mode of leadership means that leaders are also deeply intertwined. This may be a benefit when grounding ritual design in a particular context though several questions still remain. Even if ritual designers and leaders are amidst a particular context, what qualifies them to determine efficacy over someone else? Sax confronts this question by flipping it around and working from a belief that rituals are intrinsically effective.<sup>121</sup> This moves evaluators (leaders and participants) from an attitude of seeking imperfection to one of strengthening efficacy. The ritual is already effective if the intent is clear, so how can everyone involved highlight that further? Instead of asking “how does a ritual work?” or “did this ritual work?,” evaluators can ask “what in this ritual already works and what will improve this?”

### **Ritual Mishaps**

The road to evaluation will undoubtedly include mishaps. Again, mishaps and mistakes are not criteria for a ritual being ineffective. Sometimes there will be more mishaps than others which can detract from the ritual itself and are indicative of poor leadership. The question in such an instance, where all might seem lost, is “was this the ritual or was it a rehearsal?” Of course, participants will still highlight the mishaps and may not have a good experience. A deft ritual leader, should this occur, will work toward

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<sup>120</sup> William Sax, Johannes Quack, and Jan Weinhold, *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-4.

<sup>121</sup> Sax, Quack, and Weinhold, *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*, 7.

ensuring it does not happen again by revisiting the ritual characteristics outlined in Chapter 2. If the only critique offered is the failure of a ritual, it must be wondered where the breakdown began.

Complete ritual failure aside, mishaps and mistakes will still occur. Grimes lists several ritual mishaps, called types of infelicitous performance, for ritual leaders and observers to take note of and learn from. The list is quite exhaustive and includes but is not limited to:

1. Misfire (act purported but void)
  - 1.1 Misinvocation (act disallowed)
    - 1.11 Nonplay (lack of accepted convention procedure)
    - 1.12 Misapplication (inappropriate persons or circumstances)
  - 1.2 Misexecutions (act vitiated)
    - 1.21 Flaw (incorrect, vague, or inexplicit formula)
    - 1.22 Hitch (incomplete procedure)
2. Abuse (act professed but hollow)
  - 2.1 Insincerity (lack of requisite feelings, thoughts, orientations)
  - 2.2 Breach (failure to follow through)
  - 2.3 “Gloss” (procedures used to cover up problems)
  - 2.4 “Flop” (failure to produce appropriate mood or atmosphere)
3. “Ineffectuality” (act fails to precipitate anticipated empirical change)
4. “Violation” (act effective but demeaning)
5. “Contagion” (act leaps beyond proper boundaries)
6. “Opacity” (act unrecognizable or unintelligible)
7. “Defeat” (act discredits or invalidates acts of others)
8. “Omission” (act not performed)
9. “Misframe” (genre of act misconstrued)<sup>122</sup>

Many of these mishaps relate directly to the characteristics of ritual design explored. For instance, if a misexecution occurs, the question for ritual leaders is to explore whether

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<sup>122</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International, 2010), 195-96.

this was a problem of ritual flow or simply human error. Many of these mishaps steer away from small mistakes toward larger problems. A misexecution would not take note of a leader stumbling over a word, but rather vagueness, confusion, or incompleteness in the ritual. If music is a point of contention, the real question would be if it was a matter of taste or if the music really did what Grimes refers to as a “flop,” or failure to foster an appropriate atmosphere. Despite the reframing of ritual efficacy, there is the real possibility, as mentioned, that a ritual will experience mishaps from conception to completion, which requires a deeper examination of leaders and their intent or preparedness.

All of these mishaps help ritual leaders further flesh out their leadership toolkit. The goal is not perfection though the mentioned ritual problems do lead to significant disruptions in a ritual. Jim Clarke offers a brief troubleshooting guide for rituals that works off of the overarching themes of Grimes’ infelicitous performance list.<sup>123</sup>

Clarke begins with the observation that a ritual sometimes does not work. Turning this toward a generative approach to ritual critique, helpful questions would probe the original scope of the ritual and if that was met, exceeded, or avoided altogether. Furthermore, a hard look at the characteristics of ritual, especially words and actions, may point out if there was ritual bloat, wordiness, or the converse of those critiques.

Moving along and related to examining words and actions is the reality that participants, or worse yet, leaders, may not be engaged in the ritual. What attitudes are

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<sup>123</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 108-12.

ritual leaders bringing to the act? Is the atmosphere appropriate? Is this ritual shifting focus too often or too little? Everything must be examining with the goal of increasing focus, even if it means repeating a ritual or breaking it into smaller rituals. In other words, one ritual does not need to accomplish everything.

Do participants and leaders feel there is a real sense of power in this ritual? This is an important question. This power can be anything from the divine to fostering a sense of transformation in those participating. However, if there is a lack of power being identified, what is preventing this? Are opportunities to break down defenses, such as humor or play, being employed to usher participants into a deeper place? Was this ritual designed to be too “polite or nice?”<sup>124</sup> If this is the case, ritual leaders need to ask themselves if what they want is a ceremony or a ritual. Grimes refers to this as ritual abuse when the ritual is performed but the power is hollow.

This leads right into the wordiness of the ritual. If a ritual is too descriptive, there is little room for the thoughts, interpretations, feelings, and experiences of the participants. How can concision in words become a ritual value? Is what is being said enabling or dismantling a space of transformation? Important questions as they force ritual leaders into a creative dialogue about the use of words and the clarity of rituals.

Creative dialogue means exploring the use of symbols and actions. Even here, there can be an instance where the use of symbols or actions crowds out the possibility of participants having their own experience. Needless to say, ritual design is about a healthy

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<sup>124</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 109.

balance between symbol, action, and words. Clarke offers up a necessary question for the use of symbols: “Is [the symbol] multivocal? Does it speak to several layers and levels of human experience?”<sup>125</sup> Related to this is the use of actions, which are often symbolic. Are actions clear, recognizable, and intelligible? Do people leave a ritual and know what transpired with what was seen and experienced? Troubleshooting this requires congruency in ritual design between symbols, words, actions, and takeaways.<sup>126</sup>

Ambiance rounds out the list of troubleshooting categories identified by Clarke in relation to Grimes. Focusing on what is visible and understood in the ritual itself is incredibly important. However, the environment matters as well. This can include designing the environment to compliment the ritual or ensuring the environment can accompany it without significant alteration. This extends to sounds, smells, placement, and anything else in the physical environment. It also includes the participants. Are they showing up with a sincere attitude or an understanding of why this ritual is taking place? If they are not, it could mean there is a problem with leadership educating participants or the emotional intelligence of the participants. Either way, it requires leaders to emphasize boundaries, which is a form of education. This ensure that, whatever mishaps or troubleshooting needs to occur, the ritual community is showing up with a vested interest in the act.

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<sup>125</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 110.

<sup>126</sup> Clarke, *Creating Rituals*, 111.

These troubleshooting categories offer beginning reflections for ritual leaders in their evaluations. From here, it is time to determine who else will contribute feedback and how to document and collate data.

### **Leadership Evaluation**

Evaluating the craft of RN ritual and the cultivation of leadership will require self-reflection from those involved as well as the community. It is useful to identify the levels of membership and commitment, or as Vogl referred to them, the inner rings of a community.<sup>127</sup> Each ring of leadership or membership does not need a separate way of evaluating ritual. However, it should be understood that people will approach evaluation from how they see themselves and how they are recognized in leadership. A new member of the community would not approach evaluation in the same way as the clergy and so on and so forth. This is an important distinction as it will help those involved in ritual design and leadership in the congregation understand the context of comments.

The proposed evaluation is based on the work of Pierre Hégy, inspired by Richard Collins in his work *Interaction Ritual Chains*. An adaptation of his characteristics of worship analysis are provided in Appendix III, with modifications to language that reflect the ritual lab workshop curriculum. The evaluative process is twofold. It first looks at the processes of the ritual experience and moves into the analysis of it. Given the characteristics of ritual explored here and their relationship to leadership, an evaluation such as this provides plenty of data for leaders to reflect and digest. Hégy's original

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<sup>127</sup> Vogl, *The Art of Community*, 31.

model was for assessing liturgy and, for the most part, Sunday worship services. This was also adapted to address ritual experiences outside of those confines.

Hégy's evaluation begins with re-identifying basic contextual information.<sup>128</sup> This includes identifying who was involved, where it happened, when it happened, and other relevant information about the place and setting. Some of this information in our context will likely remain tethered to the congregational setting. However, it could be interesting to compare data from similar ritual experiences in different locations. As our curriculum encourages a diversity of leadership principles to be used in designing rituals, that is worth noting on the evaluation as well.

From there, we assess the ritual process itself. Hégy suggests taking thorough notes or recording the entire experience to get as much information as possible.<sup>129</sup> If this is possible, it could provide a lot of helpful information. However, the structure of this evaluation assumes it is a post-experience reflection. These details include thoughts on any element of the ritual experience itself, from speakers to actions to any mishaps or successes that occurred.

The third and fourth areas of evaluation conclude the process observation phase and involve emotions, attitudes, and, as Hégy terms it, closeness to God.<sup>130</sup> The terminology used by both Unitarian Universalist and religious naturalists is different and

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<sup>128</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 6.

<sup>130</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 7.

would be more focused on closeness to community or nature. I left the term in the evaluation as ‘closeness’ and offered a few options. Both categories require some restraint. It is possible to infer the emotional state of participants and leaders in a ritual without further conversation, but that would not be helpful for evaluating either the ritual or the leadership. Hégy suggests formal interviews will benefit the evaluation of a ritual experience.<sup>131</sup> For regular evaluations in a ritual lab setting, informal feedback is likely the bulk of data resembling an interview that will be collected. Beyond that, this is another contextual question that asks about the desired emotional content and how the community responded. It’s important to take note if informal feedback aligns with the desired mood and if the community and leaders were engaged in the ritual itself.

The ritual and leadership analysis aspect of evaluation begins with a direct look at what leaders learned and what opportunities for further leadership growth are present. Hégy, citing Collins, refers to this as a commentary on the intellectual content of the ritual and the leaders’ role in it.<sup>132</sup> This feels out of place as it is about leadership and growth, but it is elaborated to include important traits of the leaders such as rapport, preparedness, grasp of the ritual or theme, theological quality, and sharing a vision with the gathered community.<sup>133</sup> For the purposes of this project and related to the ritual lab curriculum, a reflection on how the various traits of the workshop, whether one, a few, or

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<sup>131</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 7.

<sup>132</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 20.

<sup>133</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 8.



many, were grasped and integrated is also worthwhile. These traits, including the curriculum, allow for a breadth of leadership reflection that will identify strengths and growing edges.

Leadership and ritual experience do not exist in a vacuum where identified leaders are the only ones in need of observation. We turn our attention toward evaluating the patterns of relationship present as a crucial component of a ritual community.<sup>134</sup> This involves asking several questions about observed relationship dynamics. This is important if, like in the Wild Church Movement, the gathered community wants shared leadership and multiple voices present, that that is observed or reflected upon as a growing edge for the next experience. Other questions involved asking what kind of active participation is there? Was there tension in the community? How were leaders, if more than one, relating to one another? What other observations about relationships are worth lifting up? In a Unitarian Universalist setting, relationship is often framed in covenantal language. This evaluation reflects that ethos.

Hégy turns our attention toward evaluating moral consensus, stating, "...social consensus must be...related to common values"<sup>135</sup> As Unitarian Universalism is a religion rooted in shared values over a shared creed or dogma, and the ritual lab created here centers several values of good ritual through the lens of religious naturalism, time reflecting on those values is valuable. This could range from the specifics of the

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<sup>134</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 8.

<sup>135</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 9.

curriculum, the principles of Unitarian Universalism, or something new and unexpected. It also requires leaders to listen for stated values from participants and others that might reflect a specific experience. Even amidst diversity by way of life experience, are there common values or common categories and what can leadership learn about how a ritual met the needs of the community or what unfulfilled needs remain?

The evaluation concludes with concluding thoughts. Hégy identifies this as a summation of the positive spiritual and emotional energy from the leaders, participants, and the ritual itself.<sup>136</sup> This is the opportunity to add anything else that is generative and builds upon the good already outlined in the experience. This is not about identifying failure in a negative sense, but about assessing growing edges, growth opportunities, and the positive outcomes already present. This section also includes another opportunity to reflect up on any spiritual, philosophical, religious, and emotional content that is relevant to the concluding thoughts. What worked well and how was it experienced?

### **Limitations**

The creation of a Ritual Design Lab for use in a Unitarian Universalist congregation that desires more RN rituals and leadership has two main limitations. First, this is not the end of leadership development. A community that wants thriving leaders needs to invest in them beyond one experience. This curriculum is designed with Unitarian Universalist and emerging RN, or RN-adjacent, principles in mind. It does not address leadership boundaries, public speaking, or other leadership skills.

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<sup>136</sup> Hégy, *Worship as Community*, 9.

Secondly, this is only the beginning of ritual creation. The hope is that this workshop curriculum facilitates interesting engagement with what it means to create rituals through an RN lens. This is a simple way to get people together to begin that exploration. While the original intent of this project was to create a handful of rituals themselves or look at creating a liturgical year for religious naturalists, it became clear that the real issue is a lack of leadership. This is due to conversations with the RNA and within the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington. It is a disservice to both religious movements to rely solely on clergy to lead the creation of new rituals and develop ritual leaders. This shifts the power dynamic and returns leadership development and ritual creation to the gathered people. Will the clergy remain important to this project? That depends on each community.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This project identified the needs of two intersecting communities and realized the issue at hand was in developing leaders to create rituals rooted in the RN perspective in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Reflecting on ritual theory and educational philosophy from both communities, an RN ritual design lab was created to accomplish both goals. By focusing on characteristics of ritual design and getting into the work of ritual creation, leadership skills are imparted and practiced.

Reflecting on how this workshop will unfold presents several hopes. While this project is only a glimpse into what is possible, I know with enthusiastic and steady support that it could thrive into something that is not seen in traditional religious communities: a thriving ritual life that is not reliant upon the clergy. As religion

continues to shift dramatically across the world, this is an important step to take. As more people identify with non-theistic religious and spiritual paths, having a place to experiment and create religious experiences for the current needs of the people is invaluable. It is entirely possible a Ritual Design Lab in a congregational setting will address other perspectives. This is welcomed.

Religious naturalism asks people to look to nature as a source of inspiration, wonder, awe, ultimacy, and so many other religious and spiritual attributes. I would contend that leadership is one of those attributes as well. Participants need to remember that they are not entering into nature but an inescapable part of it. In loftier terms, this means that human beings have access to what they need already to envision a new ritual life for new religious perspectives. I look forward to seeing what people create at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington and, one day, elsewhere.

## Appendices

### Appendix I: Ritual Design Lab Curriculum Structure

<b>Component</b>	<b>Quick Description</b>	<b>Timing (in minutes)</b>
Gathering	Gather, create sacred space, light a chalice, check-in, and share connections to religious naturalism and hopes for the workshop.	15
Silence	Shift the energy from checking-in to preparing for the remaining time. Ask a centering question, share a reading, or simply enter into silence.	3
Intentions	Selected 2-3 Ritual Design Lab characteristics. Spend a few minutes sharing initial reactions.	10-15
Experience	Engage in a practice such as journaling, art, wandering, meditating, or something else with the intentions as the focus.	30
Collaborate	Share, as a group, highlights from the experience. Identify ritual moods and actions that come to mind. Begin crafting a ritual of any length.	30-45
Enact	Rehearse the ritual. Correct, edit, and adapt as needed. Conclude with a full run through.	30-45
Evaluate	Answer the evaluation questions, keeping in mind both leadership and the ritual.	15
Conclude	Share a concluding affirmation, celebrate, and part ways.	5

**Total Time:** 138-173

## Appendix II: Ritual Characteristics for Use in Ritual Design Lab Curriculum

<p>Ordinariness</p> <p>...means working with what you have.</p> <p>Create a ritual that uses only what is available to you right now in the natural world.</p>	<p>Creativity</p> <p>...is asking how can this be different?</p> <p>Create a ritual unique to the day, weather, season, and time of day.</p>
<p>Receptivity</p> <p>...asks us to create an atmosphere of welcome.</p> <p>Create a ritual that welcomes newcomers to religious naturalism.</p>	<p>Attunement</p> <p>...encourages leaders to be immersed in the task.</p> <p>Create a ritual where leaders can participate as much as facilitate.</p>
<p>Flow</p> <p>...looks for fluidity, seamlessness, and less time describing what is going to happen.</p> <p>Create a ritual that is rooted in a religious naturalist perspective without talking about it.</p>	<p>Practice</p> <p>...asks if a ritual is well-prepared and poised to become a regular occurrence.</p> <p>Create a ritual for honoring joys and sorrows using the natural world.</p>
<p>Process</p> <p>...asks leaders to consider their methods for ritual creation.</p> <p>Create a ritual that encourages everyone to contribute some element to it.</p>	<p>Enactment</p> <p>...asks, "What work needs doing here?"</p> <p>Create a ritual based on a specific community need (e.g. aging population, climate impacts in the local area, celebrating a certain species in the wild, loss or celebration in the community)</p>

<p>Performance</p> <p>...reminds us that rituals are not only for viewing.</p> <p>Create a ritual where the leaders are not the primary actors.</p>	<p>Value</p> <p>...considers the ethics of a community.</p> <p>Create a ritual that expresses, “Nature is enough.”</p>
<p>Meaning</p> <p>...asks why we are doing what we are doing?</p> <p>Create a ritual that allows participants to discover what religious naturalism means to them.</p>	<p>Togetherness</p> <p>...centers the creation of community.</p> <p>Create a ritual that celebrates the many communities of plants, animals, insects, minerals, humans, etc.</p>
<p>Leadership</p> <p>...identifies those among the community who are called to service.</p> <p>Create a ritual that encourages people to discern, in nature, their role in a religious naturalist community.</p>	<p>Intention</p> <p>...considers the needs of the larger community.</p> <p>Create a ritual that addresses one of the following from a religious naturalist perspective: loss / joy / hope / sorrow / grace / faith / love</p>
<p>Function</p> <p>...wonders what a ritual accomplishes.</p> <p>Create a ritual that addresses one of the following from a religious naturalist perspective: healing / grounding / confessing / saving / communion</p>	<p>Metaphor</p> <p>...finds meaning in symbols.</p> <p>Create a ritual that uses the four elements as metaphors for life.</p>

<p>Embodiment</p> <p>...considers how one is actively engaged.</p> <p>Create a ritual that engages the senses with the natural world.</p>	<p>Context</p> <p>...understands where you are.</p> <p>Create a ritual that honors an aspect of daily life unique to your location.</p>
<p>Environment</p> <p>...broadens your context to look closely at what's available around you.</p> <p>Create a rite of passage that uses natural symbols and metaphors to illustrate what is happening.</p>	<p>Timing</p> <p>...considers when something happens and the pace of it.</p> <p>Create a ritual that changes based on the time of day.</p>
<p>Texts</p> <p>...considers the use of instructions, words, and technology.</p> <p>Create a ritual that: uses limited words OR is entirely online OR has no instructions.</p>	<p>Things</p> <p>...centers objects for use in a ritual.</p> <p>Create a ritual that uses several natural objects for its enactment.</p>
<p>Play</p> <p>...reminds us that there is room for joyful participation in every ritual.</p> <p>Create a ritual where participants can play in nature.</p>	<p>Improvisation</p> <p>...gives space for adaptation.</p> <p>Create a ritual where the main element, while outlined, is improvised.</p>



<p>Subjunctivity</p> <p>...asks “What could be?”</p> <p>Create a ritual that answers this question in relation to the natural world.</p>	<p>Belief</p> <p>...gets to what is deeply held in leaders and participants.</p> <p>Create a ritual that allows for the desires and beliefs of a religious naturalist perspective to be expressed and celebrated.</p>
<p>Stillness</p> <p>...is more than silence. It also makes room for mystery, awe, and wonder.</p> <p>Create a ritual that uses stillness to inspire mystery, awe, and wonder in the natural world.</p>	<p>Research</p> <p>...cautions us to not get lost in the details or what has worked elsewhere.</p> <p>Research and reate a ritual that modifies an already existing ritual from another community to be unique to your location, needs, and context.</p>
<p>Criticism</p> <p>...asks what we can do differently.</p> <p>Create a ritual that has an evaluative component built into it, assessing if it addresses a religious naturalist perspective effectively.</p>	

### **Appendix III: Ritual Lab & Ritual Experience Evaluation Form**

**Context:**

Share any important basic contextual information such as who, what, when, where, why.

**What happened?:**

Describe the ritual, offering more contextual details as well as the content of the experience.

**Emotions, Attitudes, and Closeness:**

What was the tone of the ritual? Did you observe people reacting in a specific way or did they share that with you? Was there a sense of community (closeness) in the ritual?

**Leadership and Growth:**

How well prepared did you [or the leaders] feel? Was there rapport among those involved? Did the leaders and participants grasp the theme of the ritual? Was a shared vision evident? What else could improve the leadership of a ritual like this in the future?

**Covenant / Relationships:**

What was the quality of relationship between leaders and participants? Among leaders? Among participants? Was there tension present in the ritual or community?

**Shared Values:**

What were the shared values of this ritual? What was this ritual actively working on from the ritual lab curriculum? Were there stated values or principles from a specific tradition? What values did participants share, if any? How did this ritual meet the needs of the community?

**Concluding Thoughts:**

Share anything else relevant to the ritual experience that was positive, identified a growing edge, or is generative for the next ritual lab workshop and eventual ritual experience.

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