

Carrying the Light
a Sermon on the Unitarian Universalist Flaming
Chalice and
the Meaning of Membership

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Sometimes you get so familiar with things that you just forget that they look different to other people. Several years ago I was in my pottery class, trying to figure out how to make a flaming chalice similar to one I had seen at General Assembly. [That one] The bowl of the chalice is composed of many small bits overlapping one another in a lacy pattern. I'm not sure what the intent of the first potter was, but to me it meant a quote from D. H. Lawrence: "No one has a religion "who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it." (Cited in Buehrens & church, *Our Chosen Faith* p. 10) Here is a chalice composed of those bits and pieces, slowly and painfully gathered together, a faith unique to each person. So I asked Annie about how to mold all the pieces to make a smooth well shaped bowl.

Now Annie is the world's kindest and most supportive teacher of anything. Many times I have experienced her coming to see what I was doing – and you should know I'm usually the least accomplished potter in my class. She looks carefully, figures out what I am doing and says, "So that's how you're doing it. . . . that'll work!" This time she looked perplexed. "What are you making?" "A chalice." "Well that won't work" she said. "Why not?" I asked. I knew it would work, the question was how. "Well, all the wine will drain out." "Oh." Of course. That's what chalice means to most

people, normal people you might say, a vessel for holy wine. So I told her about the Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice, and that I would put a candle in the bowl and that the lace would surely support it. A chalice of light, not wine.

More recently, at this fellowship, when we were deciding what to call our small groups, I suggested “Chalice Circles.” There was some resistance to the idea. I wondered why. “It seems too churchy” came the answer, “too holy.” Oh, again. That’s what most people would think of, the Christian communion vessel. Why would we use that? Why indeed. So I told them a little of the history of our use of the flaming chalice, and then it seemed a good name, as obvious to the others as to me. And then they said I should do a sermon on the subject. So here we are, on a Sunday in which we are recognizing new members, and learning a bit of Unitarian Universalist history. And a most suitable Sunday this is. I got an email from Stephen Smith on Monday of this week, February 11: “On this day in history, 1951 Fayetteville Unitarian Fellowship holds first Sunday meeting in Game Room of UA Student Union. Organizers included David Durst, Sylvia Schwartz, M/M Harold Hantz, M/M W H Pryor, M/M Ralph Barnhart.” Of those founders, Katie Hantz is still with us, living at Butterfield Trail Village, where Dave and I see her often. So congratulations to our

new members, you have joined in a long and distinguished line of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists.

Back to the Flaming Chalice. (*This section comes largely from the UUA web site and the Dan Hotchkiss pamphlet *The Flaming Chalice**) There are two strands to its history, one recent and well documented, the other old and legendary, perhaps a bit fanciful. The historical beginning of the chalice as a symbol of Unitarianism goes back to World War II. Unitarians had a tiny but dedicated Service Committee in Europe, helping people – Unitarians and Jews and others – escape from Nazism as doing other kinds of refugee work. Dr. Charles Joy managed a secret network of couriers and agents. Many of the people they worked with were undocumented, and so they began issuing travel documents in the name of the Unitarian Service Committee. (*UU World*, May/June 2005, “Wartime Origins of the Flaming Chalice”). One of the people they helped was an Austrian artist and musician by the name of Hans Deutsch, who had been living in Paris and drawing sharply critical cartoons of Hitler. As the Nazis approached Paris, it got too hot for him to stay. He escaped and made his way to Portugal where he met up with the Unitarian Service Committee which gave him employment for a time. Here’s what Deutsch wrote to Charles Joy:

"There is something that urges me to tell you... how much I admire your utter self denial [and] readiness to serve, to sacrifice all, your time, your health, your well being, to help, help, help.

"I am not what you may actually call a believer. But if your kind of life is the profession of your faith---as it is, I feel sure---then religion, ceasing to be magic and mysticism, becomes confession to practical philosophy and---what is more---to active, really useful social work. And this religion, is one to which even a 'godless' fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, Yes!"

Joy was no doubt pleased to receive this letter. But he had practical matters on his mind – those self issued travel documents, the couriers, the agents, the world of cloak and dagger. They needed something "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work.... When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important."

So he asked Deutsch to create a logo for the Unitarian Service Committee, something impressive and convincing. Deutsch responded with the first Unitarian

flaming chalice. Here's what Joy wrote about it:

a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice....

You can see that original chalice on the front cover of the order of service today, along with other designs.

Now here comes the legendary part, and a bit of my own fancy. Where did Deutsch get the idea of putting a flame in a chalice? None of the books or web sites I've read has anything definitive to say about it. But, he came from Austria. That's right next door to the former Czechoslovakia. And in Czechoslovakia, Jan Hus was an important historical figure. He deserves his own sermon, but briefly, let me say that he was a faithful Roman Catholic priest, who was neither a Unitarian nor a Universalist in his theology. But he did promote what we might call democracy in religion – he translated the Bible into Czech so people could read it for themselves. He preached in Czech so people could understand the sermon. He supported the Communion practice of his followers who shared the wine as well as the bread with the people. At that time and place the church only the priest was allowed to drink the wine. Thus the “lay

chalice” became an important symbol to Hus’ followers. And Hus himself? The authorities didn’t like his views. It seems inevitable. He was burned at the stake in part for that forbidden lay chalice. And the story – a bit of the oral lore, not supported by academic books – is that after his death, his followers embroidered badges for their robes, a symbol of the flames of his martyrdom in that democratic chalice. And so, though we Unitarian Universalists have no institutional or theological claim on Hus – his spiritual descendants are the Moravians – we do have that thread of connection to some of his ideas. And perhaps Hans Deutsch made that same connection.

So our flaming chalice may go back almost six hundred years, or maybe it really started only in 1941. But oddly enough, even though I grew up in the 1950's in a Unitarian Sunday school, I never saw a flaming chalice until I returned to church in the late 1970's, and even then it was just an occasional picture. It took thirty years or more for that pen and paper logo to become a three dimensional object with a live flame in it, and for that picture to become a living symbol in our Sunday services. I don’t know the whole history of that evolution, but I saw bits of it in my own experience. When Dave and I joined the Unitarian Church of Arlington, Virginia, we had candles in the front of the sanctuary, 14 of them on a modern wrought iron candelabra designed for the space

and hung on the wall, all pre-lit before the service. Nothing like a chalice. Except on the Sundays that the children joined us for the first part of the service. Then the minister would ceremoniously light one of those candles with special words. My daughter says she never knew that the adults didn't do that when the children weren't there, that maybe they lit a chalice weekly in the Children's Chapel, but that the flaming chalice had always seemed familiar to her.

Sometime in the 80's, with a new assistant minister at the Arlington church, we acquired a physical chalice and began lighting it at every service. To me it just seemed natural, but I don't know what went on behind the scenes. Maybe there were heated discussions. By the time I was regularly leading worship in the 90's, most of our congregations were beginning their services with the lighting of the chalice. Though some were uneasy about it. Too churchy? Too holy? Too ritualistic? One person in another congregation complained that anything we did three weeks running had to be an "empty ritual." But others found it comforting. Nowadays, wherever you go to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, the service is likely to begin with a lighting of the chalice. It's good to know that we are connected with others across the world. And sometimes we need a physical token of our connection. Here's a letter from an unnamed woman to

Rev. Kim Beach. It is in his book *If Yes is the Answer*.

Last month I had need for special emotional help. At an earlier time in my life I might have had a small New Testament tucked in my purse. Or if I were a Catholic, maybe I would have had a rosary. As I now deepen my commitment to Unitarian Universalism, I became aware that at a time of need for support, I did not have a symbol of my faith to hold to my bosom.

If Yes is the Answer, George Kimmich
Beach p. 118.

Such small symbols are easily available now – jewelry, bumper stickers, pottery or metal chalices for your home, refrigerator magnets, T-shirts, teddy bears. Whatever you might think of, it's probably available. And you can always just carry a stone from our Joys and Sorrows bowl. I've had members who had one in their pocket during important job interviews, or tucked in a bedside table in a hospital or offered to a troubled relative. They're not spooky. They don't emit magic rays. They don't change the universe. But they do change us, and help us to feel connected. And that's what the chalice is about.

But what does it *mean* you might ask? Unlike the

Cross or the Star of David, the Flaming Chalice doesn't have one official orthodox meaning. You may find a reflection of your own theology in it. Those who follow a nature spirituality may see the chalice as the physical symbol of the feminine divine. Christians may see its resemblance to a cross, a connection to our ancestral roots. Humanists may see the light of knowledge and it may be a lamp for Buddhists, an echo of the menorah for Jews. The flaming chalice holds all of these and more. The chalice itself has its history, and it functions as a container – a cradle for our thoughts and beliefs, a home for our community, a bowl for carrying the light. And what does that light mean?

In the reading from *The Road*, the father speaks of “carrying the fire” where this seems to mean holding on to human values in a stark and dire situation. I didn't want to leave you with the grimness of that initial reading. A little further on, next to his father's cooling body, the boy finds a small band of people who seem to be both survivors and still committed to decency and human empathy. The man offers to take him in:

Look, he said. You got two choices here. There was some discussion about whether to even come after you at all. You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me.

If you stay you need to keep out of the road. I don't know how you made it this far. But you should go with me. You'll be all right.

How do I know you're one of the good guys?

You don't. You'll have to take a shot.

Are you carrying the fire?

Am I what?

Carrying the fire.

You're kind of weirded out, aren't you?

No.

Just a little.

Yeah.

That's okay.

So *are* you?

What, carrying the fire?

Yes.

Yeah. We are.

The Road Cormac McCarthy P. 283 F.

Carrying the fire. On the Road in a post destruction world, it means to reject banditry and the worst kind of slavery and cannibalism, to carry a weapon only defensively, to foster a child who will otherwise die, matters of life and death and ultimate human values.

Carrying the fire. We who live in somewhat gentler times can afford to call it carrying the light. What is required of us is perhaps less dramatic. But to carry the light is still a challenge, a call to live up to our deepest values of integrity and hospitality.

To carry the light as a member of this fellowship is to live by our principles, to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, to live from and work for justice equity and compassion, to care for the whole of the interdependent web. It is to recognize that there is religious wisdom to be found in many sources: In prophetic words and acts, in the wonder of nature, in the truths of the full spectrum of human faiths and the truths of science and reason. To carry the light is to be engaged with this congregation and the wider community of

Unitarian Universalism.

In meeting with our newest members, I told them of six elements of membership. These aren't rules. No one will check up on you. And while I called them responsibilities, they are also opportunities, embodiments, ways in which your membership can come alive and be most meaningful to you. Let me thank the Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove, from whom I got these many years ago. I've made a display of chalices on the table below. Two I made – the lacy one and the seven petals representing the six named “sources” and the additional sources we have not yet named. Some were gifts, some are repurposed inherited candy dishes. One of the great discoveries I made as I began seminary was that these symbols are sacred and serious, but they are not solemn. You can use a candy dish or a martini glass or a bird bath. They won't all hold wine, but they will lift up the light.

I've asked some of our newest members to light a chalice as I remind us all of those six elements of membership:

1. **Regular attendance.** It's hard to be part of a community unless you are here. We don't take attendance and we don't give Sunday school attendance pins. But each week, you may find something of value

here, even if you don't like the sermon – or think you won't like it. And somebody here needs you.

2. Work on your own spiritual life. There are many ways to do this, from personal reading to a spiritual practice to adult classes, and of course our Chalice Circles. What you believe is yours to define and refine and rework and live by. But stay engaged, stay on the road, stay on the quest.

3. Help the fellowship to do the things it does internally. Make coffee, serve on a committee, be a greeter, teach, plant bulbs, fold the newsletter, create a new activity or group. Being involved will help you to know your community better, and make it a better place.

4. Help the fellowship reach out to bless the world. Write letters to the editor, lobby your legislator, live your Unitarian Universalist values by volunteering in the community, support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which lives out our values across the world. Help us take that step beyond our walls.

5. Pledge to the fellowship at a stewardship level. It takes money to keep this congregation going, money for just compensation for staff money for supplies and insurance and utilities and equipment, for stamps and

music and. . . everything. Only you fully know your circumstances. Only you know what “generous” means in your life. But everyone needs to be generous, though generosity may mean little money – or a lot. Here is our only actual rule about maintaining your membership: it requires a yearly “contribution of record.” A check or a dollar bill in an envelope with your name on it, or even a penny, just something so we know you are still with us. Needless to say, if everyone made only a token gift, we would have to shut our doors. But that’s the only rule. Generosity is another matter – it comes from the heart, not from rules.

6. Connect to Unitarian Universalism beyond this congregation. As a member you receive a denominational magazine, the *Unitarian Universalist World*. Read it, see what’s going on in the denomination, read the insert to your children, express your opinions to the editor. Attend workshops and trainings and conferences, summer camps and institutes. Check out UUA.org. Go to General Assembly. We few we happy few, we band of siblings – sorry Shakespeare, we have to acknowledge the women these days – we 195 here in Fayetteville are not alone. Our chalice connects us to thousands of others across the globe. We can celebrate that connection and live it out in many ways. The Little Rock congregation has created a special Illumination

celebration a whole weekend of flaming chalice related events – there's a challenge to our newest members, adapting that celebration to our congregation.

When we light the flaming chalice here or at home, it is not an empty ritual. It is a full ritual, full of the history of our movement, reaching back to Jan Hus and real religion for the people, back to our national founding elders and their dedication to religious liberty, back to the Unitarian Service Committee and its heroic work for people fleeing Nazism. The flaming chalice reaches beyond the walls of this fellowship, enabling us to connect in justice, equity and compassion to people everywhere, those like us and those who are not like us. It reaches every person in this fellowship to every child, every adult to every gender and every race, to gays and straights and Lesbians and bisexuals and transgendered persons to persons of every belief and outlook. It is peace walking softly throughout our home, til every casual corner blooms, into a shrine. And the flaming chalice reaches inward to the heart of each of us so that every day we may be reminded and inspired and enabled to carry the light. Amen, Shalom and Blessed Be.