

“Like the Phoenix”

an Easter reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

On the cover of your order of service this morning is a drawing that has special significance to me – the image of a phoenix rising out of the flame of a Unitarian Universalist chalice.

As we return now, from our time of prayer and of silence, I invite you to look at that drawing – and take a moment, to consider its meaning.

The mythical phoenix *dies* – it is consumed, in its own fire – only to rise and fly once more, spreading its wings to enact – to embody – the very essence of the perpetually renewing circle of Life.

It is an idea that has survived throughout ages of human history, and pre-history – the symbiotic relationship between life and death – pointing to what Linda Whittenberg calls “that greater Creativity, which uses each *individual* death, for the sake of other life, in an eternal cycle more magnificent than we can even begin to imagine.”

That drawing on front of your bulletin, of course, includes a flaming chalice as well. Consider *that* image, for a moment. Consider the flame we ignite, each Sunday morning, at this altar. Like the ancients, we who follow in their footsteps gather, in community, around a fire – drawn together, by its light; drawn *in* by its mystery, by its power to transform, and to give life.

It is appropriate, too – though perhaps an unintended accident of history – that the symbol of our shared Unitarian Universalist faith is a *chalice* – that sacred drinking vessel used by Christian priests, and pre-Christian priestesses alike, as the very container of life-bestowing Spirit, what Mark Belletini recalls to our collective consciousness when he says, “the prophets’ voices remind us to drink freely of the waters of life, [for] it was to the fountain of *this* hour that they referred.”

And so we come – to the fountain of this hour – to the fire, to the altar – some of us, on a weekly pilgrimage to what has become a source of

renewal, sustenance, and affirmation; others in what might more accurately be called an *annual* ritual – church attendance on Easter Sunday being a habit harkening back to childhood, perhaps, or a simple gesture of support for and solidarity with a loved one for whom church, and spirituality, are somehow more important, at this time of year.

Maybe there are even a few among us this morning who – like me, 26 years ago – for reasons they’re not quite sure of, have taken a leap of faith, simply to pass through the doors of a church, and who are now having their very first experience of Unitarian Universalist worship...

To *each* of you – whatever your background, whatever your story – welcome. Welcome to this community; welcome to this sanctuary of inclusion – on this, my favorite Sunday of the year.

Certainly, it may seem odd, that a Unitarian Universalist minister holds what most consider a distinctly Christian, holy day, in such high regard. But though I do not believe in the literal resurrection of the man named Jesus, on that fateful morning now nearly two millennia ago – I do believe in the rebirth of the Spirit that those who followed him appear to have experienced. I do believe – and deeply – in the greater Creativity of which we are a part – what UU’s have come to call the “interconnected web of existence” – and I do believe that giving ourselves over, to it, coming to terms with the unique, if necessarily limited, role we play in that Creativity – can be so liberating that we might even experience it, as being born again.

And I know, as well, that I do not hesitate to use those words – “born again” – to describe what happened to me, on Easter Sunday in 1982, when I first realized that I was a Unitarian Universalist.

And so, each year on Easter morning, I look forward to sharing with you some version of that very personal story. But sometimes, events in the outside world can change a minister’s plans for his or her Sunday reflection. Today, is such a day. I had not intended to go down this particular path this morning, yet it seems that the conversation, in America, this week, has turned, quite powerfully and profoundly, to race – to that still *deep*, and for far too long unspoken, racial divide which, even now – two thousand years after a prophet from Palestine preached a message of radical equality – prevents the most powerful nation on earth from fulfilling the promise inherent in its power, and from living out the true meaning of its creed – that *all*, are created equal.

Yes, this Easter morning, the conversation, in many a pulpit across America, will be about race. I say, it is a conversation that is long overdue.

So let us return, once again, to that drawing on the cover of your order of service – that depiction of the phoenix, rising from the flame. And let me briefly share with you a bit about what that image means, to me.

Back in the 1980's, when I was one of its members, this was the logo of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta – the church that eventually ordained me to the UU ministry.

Logos change over time, of course, as do people, and institutions. Today, UUCA, as it is called, uses a much more modern, stylized, internet-friendly version of the phoenix rising from the chalice flame – but the image I reproduced for you today, is the one that I remember, the one that I hold dear.

There are many stories I could tell about it – like the time I carried the church banner, with its brilliantly-colored, richly-textured version of the phoenix, in a parade, at General Assembly; or about the T-shirt my mother lovingly made for me with that phoenix painted on it; or about the simple *power* of the large metal sculpture depicting the phoenix rising from the chalice that graces the entrance to the sanctuary at UUCA.

But there is one, overarching story that carries, for me, the true meaning of that image. It is the story of the Unitarian Universalism in Atlanta – a story filled both with pride, and with shame. It is a story that I think bears telling, this Easter morning, in America, 2008.

Shortly after World War II, a black man – a Unitarian from, ironically, Ohio – moved to Atlanta, and started attending the church. Immediately, there were whispers in the pews. Immediately, there was unease.

Nonetheless, the man continued to come to Sunday worship, and – for a time – there were no further repercussions, beyond the whispers, the discomfort, the social awkwardness of being in a place where he wasn't welcome.

No, the real trouble didn't start, until he asked about becoming a member. A special meeting was called. The church *refused to let him join*. It was a decision that tore the congregation apart.

The minister resigned in protest. Powerful emotions – feelings which had been kept quiet, at least in church, erupted – dividing friends and families. Membership dwindled. Within a couple of years, the church had, quite literally, *died*. It was dissolved. Disbanded.

Atlanta – the largest city in the South – was left with no Unitarian or Universalist congregation. All because *one black man* wanted to join a church.

Think about it. As Robert Weston says, “ponder this thing.”

But that, of course, is not the end of the story. There were those who fought to keep the flame of liberal religion alive – those whose own lives had been liberated and transformed by spiritual freedom – those who had taken to heart Jesus’ message of inclusion, and equality, and who believed that, somehow, just maybe, it might apply to *church*, on Sunday morning!

Slowly, ponderously – like the phoenix struggling to unfold its wings – the congregation in Atlanta arose from its ashes. And when a new church was at last created – in its charter, in its constitution, were these words: membership shall be granted to all, “regardless of any distinction such as race, color, nationality, or station in life.”

Thus, what would eventually be known as the UU Congregation of Atlanta, became the first white church in the South, to integrate.

That was January, 1954 – half a year before the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In the crucible of its re-creation, UUCA and its members took a rare and radical stand for equality – and for their trouble, they suffered, and sacrificed, in ways we cannot begin to imagine. Crosses were burned on church members’ lawns. Some lost their jobs. Church leaders were actually arrested, for the “crime” of holding integrated meetings.

Ponder this thing: In the simple act of creating an inclusive church community, these people were engaged in an act of *civil disobedience*.

We may look back on that time now, through the lens of half a century, and marvel that such blatant discrimination and intolerance could exist. We marvel, too, at the courage and conviction of otherwise ordinary people, who sought merely to be able to gather together in community, and include in that community, those who did not look like themselves.

And, perhaps – just perhaps – we look around us, at America today, and wonder as well: How far have we come?

My prayer for our troubled nation, this Easter morning, is that – like the phoenix – we will be able to rise from the flames of our past sins, and those of our present prejudices.

In order to do so, we each may need to die a little. For some, that death may mean having to drop the veneer of polite society, which doesn’t like to talk about such things, in order to hear truths we do not wish to hear. For others, that death may mean having to rethink “what would Jesus do?” And for some, that death may mean taking responsibility for one’s own actions, and one’s own prejudices – because we *all* have them.

And what of America itself? For our society, that death might mean acknowledging that we are not one monolithic culture, but in fact a vast family of *many* cultures. For our nation, that death might mean owning up to

our history – *all* of our history – admitting both the good, and the evil, that we have done.

If a small group of churchgoers in Atlanta, in the days of Joe McCarthy and Jim Crow, had the courage to face the fire, to be consumed, and to be reborn – might we not, as well?

America is being called to greatness, once again. May we rise to the challenge of our time, and – like the phoenix – fly free, and at last fulfill our destiny as a people – *one people*, with liberty and justice for all.

May it be so.

Amen.