

The Flaming Chalice

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, June 8, 2003
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

This spring, we have had the opportunity to meet and welcome many visitors to Heritage Church. Seventeen adult newcomers attended our Newcomer Potluck Dinner last weekend, and 10 people participated in the recent orientation class, "Exploring Unitarian Universalism."

One question newcomers to the church invariably ask is, "What does the chalice mean?"

They have noticed that each week, to begin our worship service, we light a candle contained in a chalice on our altar. They have noticed that the flaming chalice symbol appears on most of the literature about the church. If they've been coming very long, they have noticed that a chalice is lit at the beginning of many meetings and discussions.

It is natural they should ask, "What does it mean?"

But by the time newcomers have attended an orientation session or two, a worship service or two, most are no longer surprised to learn that there is no one right answer to this question, no definitive, doctrinal explanation of what the flaming chalice means. Like Unitarian Universalism itself, our central symbol can be a vessel, a container, embracing many truths, many paths, many faiths.

In our second reading this morning, David Johnson pointed out the irony in the fact that, though we Unitarian Universalists shun most overt religious symbolism, and shy away from liturgical conformity, we have - in the mere 40 years or so since the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist

denominations - eagerly embraced our own distinctive religious symbol. In the process, the chalice has become not only a vital part of our weekly worship, but an integral aspect of much of our daily lives.

Many Unitarian Universalist families - my own included - light a chalice as part of their dinner-table ritual, sort of a UU version of "saying grace." Many of us wear chalice necklaces and pendants; many drink from chalice coffee mugs. I even know a couple of college-age Unitarian Universalists who have chalices tattooed on various parts of their bodies.

But it seems we do this - even the tattooing, in some cases - largely without reflection. It seems we have embraced the flaming chalice precisely because, as one Heritage member told me earlier this week, it "fills a void" - because it satisfies an innate human longing for symbols, an innate human need for ritual. Christians have their cross, Jews have their Star of David - we have our flaming chalice.

But if that's all there is to it, we miss out on the rich depth of meaning that really is contained in our common symbol. So today, I want to give more than a cursory answer to the question that not only newcomers, but many longer-term members, often ask me: "What does the chalice mean?"

Most of us have been taught that the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, when Martin Luther shook the foundations of the Catholic Church by nailing 95 revolutionary theological proposals to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. This, we have learned, is the act that precipitated the great split in western Christianity - and, as far as it goes, such an account of church history is true.

But there were certain churchmen (and churchwomen) who pre-dated Luther by a century or more, people who in their day were labeled heretics, yet in whose footsteps Luther himself followed - thinkers who were among the first to question the same corrupt church practices that Luther later argued against. Among these, the most significant for our discussion this morning was one Jan Hus, a priest of Prague who was at the center of a controversy with Rome in the year 1415.

It seems Hus had been won over to the idea of "the priesthood of all believers" - a phrase you often hear repeated in Unitarian Universalist circles. Simply put, the idea is that all people - clergy and laity, priests,

Popes and common folk - all people have equal access to the divine, equal access to religious experience, to the possibility of spiritual growth and transformation.

Hus, as a priest, was a member of what was then, in the Catholic Church, a higher caste of human being, for you may recall that at that time, a portion of the communion sacrament was reserved for the priests alone. Hus spoke out against the common practice of allowing only priests to partake of the communion wine, while the bread was shared openly with all believers.

As the story goes, eventually, Hus did more than speak out. He began to serve both the bread and the wine to his congregation during communion - a practice that quickly drew the attention of Catholic higher-ups. When he refused to admit this "doctrinal error" - and instead had the audacity to continue offering what was considered "the sacrificial blood of Christ" to his flock - Hus was brought before the Council of Constance, and tried for heresy.

He was, of course, found guilty, and - still steadfast in his belief in the universal availability of salvation, as symbolized in Jesus' own act of sharing the communion chalice at the Last Supper - Hus was sentenced to be burned at the stake. True to his principles to the end, he is said to have held a chalice in his hands as the fire of the stake engulfed him.

His followers, known as Hussites, continued in secret the practice of fully shared communion, and, significantly, adopted as their symbol a chalice with a flame. Over time, this symbol even became the unofficial emblem of the Czech people, and particularly of Czech nationalism - to the point that when, in 1968, Soviet Army tanks rolled into Prague, graffiti featuring chalices with flames spread throughout the town in symbolic resistance.

Now while it's true that today's Unitarian Universalism is a direct descendant of the Protestant Reformation, the historical connection between our current use of the flaming chalice, and the martyrdom of Jan Hus, is a bit more tenuous. Still, it is interesting to note certain similarities between the story of Hus, and that of Hans Deutsch, the 20th century artist and freedom fighter who actually designed what we now know as the Unitarian Universalist chalice - much like the one you see on the cover of your bulletin this morning.

For that story, we must fast-forward from the Middle Ages to World War II, and to the work of the Unitarian Service Committee. Seeking to broaden their worldwide influence in the sphere of justice and human rights, American Unitarians had formed a service committee patterned after the well-known Quaker agency, the American Friends Service Committee. During World War II, the USC became involved in running a secretive network of homes and institutions similar to the Underground Railroad, in this case assisting Jews and others who were fleeing the Nazi occupation in Europe.

The director of the USC, Charles Joy, understood the challenges of language, culture, and religion in those dangerous days, and asked a European artist named Hans Deutsch to develop a symbol for the Service Committee, a sort of quick shorthand that could expedite communication and instill trust at a glance. Deutsch, who had been forced underground after publishing editorial cartoons critical of Hitler, suggested a flaming chalice that harkened back to Jan Hus, and to centuries of Czech resistance.

The design of a stylized chalice, with the flame of freedom burning inside, was adopted by the Unitarian Service Committee, and was used in aiding the escape of countless refugees from Nazi oppression. Safehouses were marked by chalices scratched in the dirt; clandestine notes using the symbol were understood to be trustworthy. We can take pride in the fact that countless lives were saved by the use of this distinctive code.

Now we move ahead another decade or two. The symbol of a flaming chalice in a circle had, following the war, come into common use on the stationery and letterhead of the American Unitarian Association. Coincidentally, the long-standing symbol of the Universalist Church of America - a cross, slightly off-center, in a circle - looked quite similar to the emblem that had been unofficially adopted by the Unitarians. And so, when at last the two progressive religious movements merged, in 1961, a new symbol developed - one with two circles, representing the two religions now joined together, and a slightly off-center chalice (which, you will notice, looks more than a bit like a cross, especially at first glance).

In time, Unitarian Universalist congregations across North America began using not only the chalice symbol on their brochures and letters, but also an actual chalice, with a flame in it, as focal point in their worship services. This grassroots development of an important piece of Sunday liturgy

continued, to the point that today, most - but not, as I will tell you later this morning, all - of our thousand-plus churches light a chalice each week as part of worship services and religious education classes.

Before we leave this history lesson and move on, I want to share with you a passage from a letter written by Hans Deutsch to his friend Charles Joy during World War II, because it sums up - for me - both the significance and the uniqueness of our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion - as witnessed by an outsider who just happens to have bequeathed to us the very symbol of our faith:

"I am not what you might actually call a believer," Deutsch wrote to Joy. "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 [a] confession of practical philosophy, and, (what is more), [leads] to active, truly useful, social [justice] work. And this religion - with or without a [symbol] - is one to which even a "godless" fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly ... yes!"

Deutsch is not alone, I imagine, in such an experience of recognition, of identification - such a feeling of religious liberation. His statement reminds me of my own enthusiasm upon discovering Unitarian Universalism in my mid-twenties, and reflects the comments of countless new members I have had the privilege of working with in now four different Unitarian Universalist congregations.

The surprise, the thrill, of stumbling upon a faith which encourages individual spiritual growth, which calls for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, has indeed moved many of us to a place we never thought we'd go - to a place of commitment to a religious institution, to a place of saying, wholeheartedly and with conviction, "yes!"

In a Unitarian Universalist church, we know that it is only through the personal, the experiential, that any religious symbol comes to have value. The stories of Jan Hus or Hans Deutsch give us a framework with which to understand free religion - and the flaming chalice that represents free religion - but we know it is only through our own individual, ongoing engagement with the chalice that we bring it to life. As Coral Randall has said, it is "because we take from the pages of the past our private faith ... [that] we keep our burning crucible aglow."

Indeed, in Unitarian Universalism, each of us is free - and in fact, each of us is encouraged - to nurture an individual belief system, to build our own theology, to work out our own salvation, following the dictates of our reason and conscience. Here, no creed, no set of words or statement of doctrine drawn up by others has final authority over the individual mind. And so, we each bring our selves and our souls to the work of religion - including the work of interpreting the flaming chalice.

Now, that phrase may strike you as a bit odd - "interpreting the flaming chalice" - but that is exactly what I'd like to encourage you to do today. There are, of course, many meanings in this intentionally open-ended symbol. This coffee mug, for instance, claims, "Our flame is a symbol of transcendence, and truth triumphing over the dark forces of superstition and fear. Our circle proclaims that the earth and all its inhabitants are one. From the common container of this chalice, we share the warmth of our fellowship with all."

Perhaps that description speaks to you; perhaps another does - and that's OK. That's the point. Each of us is free to find our own truth and meaning - in the world around us, in our liturgy, and even in our religious symbols. Just note for a moment the diversity of artistic expression and interpretation of the chalice symbol on the insert in your order of service. There's the official UUA version, in the upper right corner. There's the Heritage Church logo - a single circle, containing a UU with a flame - in the middle of the page. There's the beautiful Canadian chalice within the maple leaf near the bottom. There's even one that, my younger sources tell me, resembles nothing so much as a Power Ranger mask.

And speaking of our younger sources, wait 'til you get out to the Great Room following the service! You'll see a wide variety of interpretations of the chalice - reflecting the wide array of outlooks Unitarian Universalism embraces.

But before we see what the kids have done, before we hear from some of you about your own reflections on the flaming chalice, I'd like to share with you the story behind a little ritual I do up here on Sunday mornings, a personal ritual that grounds and centers my own worship experience.

Some of you may have noticed a habit I have of looking to the chalice, and then beyond, during the singing of "Spirit of Life." It is a practice I developed during my time as the associate minister in Columbus. Initially, I simply loved to look around the sanctuary during the hymn of invocation, making eye contact with people who were obviously moved by the hymn, people who were singing with a smile on their face, or a tear in their eye - or sometimes I would gaze with my own teary eyes at the children who were singing the words without looking at the hymnal, because they knew this portion of their UU tradition by heart. That moment was always very special to me.

Later - I can't remember just how this began; perhaps it was one Sunday when I was particularly nervous - I came to think of the flaming chalice as something that grounded me, something that offered me roots from which I could branch out and grow - as a Unitarian Universalist, as a minister, as a person. And so I started looking to the chalice, and the flame burning within it, as I sang the line "roots hold me close."

But, as the song reminds us - with the grounding of a solid foundation, we are inspired to spread our wings and fly. And so, over time, as I developed the practice of looking to the chalice flame while singing of the roots that hold me close, I also started looking toward the sky as I sang, "wings set me free." The Columbus church has this great skylight, at the top of the arching beams of their sanctuary ceiling - and each week, my eyes would move from the chalice, up to a beautiful view of gently moving clouds, or of sunlight, or of birds flying overhead. There, at the beginning of worship, I would feel, indeed, both grounded and free.

In our sanctuary, of course, we have this wonderful window right behind the chalice - and so, today, I continue my little personal ritual of looking to the chalice, to the "roots that hold me close," and then out the window, toward the natural world - to the "wings [that] set me free."

I encourage you to find your own, unique, personal way of engaging this chalice we light each Sunday morning. Perhaps you already have one - or several - because there are ultimately, of course - as I have already alluded - as many ways of looking at the flaming chalice as there are individual Unitarian Universalists. For some, the chalice is the light of reason amid the darkness of superstition. For others, it is a beacon of hope in times of distress. To some, it represents the warmth of the community we share in our

congregational life, or a reminder that we are neither the first, nor the last, people to gather in this manner. For others, it symbolizes the freedom of belief institutionalized in our Unitarian Universalist churches.

People have told me the chalice reminds them of an eternal flame, such as the ones that commemorate the graves of slain heroes like Martin Luther King Jr. or John F. Kennedy. People have said that they see in it the individual soul, burning deep within the clay of the human frame.

Whatever it means to you, the point I am making this morning is that our Unitarian Universalist chalice is both an ancient symbol, and an amazingly rich, modern symbol - one that comes from a specific historical context, yet one that lives today, in a diverse community of individual religious seekers. Here, on our altar - here, in the 21st century - the flaming chalice calls each of us to reflect - reflect on something that is, in the end, wordless.

In the days and years to come, may its light continue to illuminate our shared spiritual path, as together, we journey on - in community, and in faith.

Blessed be, and amen.