

**“Symbols of Our Faith”\***

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“Each morning we hold out our chalice of being...” otherwise known as our coffee cup. Isn’t that what distinguishes Unitarian Universalists from other religious people, our passion for coffee? Aren’t we known for remarks such as this one from ‘a first time visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church who asked a long time member during the fellowship hour following the service, ‘what did you think of the sermon?’ and the longtime member said ‘Oh, I the sermon wasn’t that great, but this coffee was sure worth the hour wait!’ Or this one, ‘How does the Unitarian Universalist Association excommunicate naughty members? Take away their coffee mug.’ Or ‘There’s a priest, a rabbi and a UU minister, whose congregations all stood on the same street. One day as they were returning from their weekly interfaith lunch they noticed a fire had started in the Catholic church and so the priest ran into the building returning with the Bible, the altar cross and communion cup; by the time the priest returned the fire had spread to the Synagogue where on the rabbi ran inside returning with two large scrolls shouting, “The Torah has been saved!” By that time the fire continued to spread and engulfed the Unitarian Universalist meeting house and upon seeing this the UU minister hurried inside coming out with the coffeepot.’

Cups are a symbol of faith for many religious traditions; they can be found in ancient manuscripts and on primitive altars. The sharing of a single cup by many is, in several traditions, a means by which many join as one, a sign of becoming a united community. From our Jewish heritage the cup of Shabbat, the cup of the Sabbath, holds the sweetness of life which is taken in as a blessing and a reminder - in Christian ritual the chalice becomes the container for the blood of Jesus honoring his sacrifice and death

on the cross again being taken into one's self as a blessing. Our chalice is not one we drink from - it does not hold wine, but fire (a ancient symbol of transformation, enlightenment and sacrifice).

The flaming chalice has its history rooted in the Second World War, when an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch fled from the Nazi invasion of Paris in 1940. Deutsch eventually found his way to Portugal where he heard of Rev. Charles Joy, who at the time was the executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee (to be later named Unitarian Universalist Service Committee). The Service Committee had been founded to assist Eastern Europeans needing to escape from the Nazi persecution. Joy oversaw a secret network of couriers and agents working to get those fleeing capture to freedom.

Deutsch learned of the work of the Service Committee and, being impressed, wrote to Joy expressing his support and admiration for the sacrifice such work required. After much correspondence Deutsch himself had an opportunity to influence and assist this newly formed organization. Rev. Joy struggled to make known and engender trust in the secret work of the Service Committee to those for whom it was established. He needed a way to surpass the barriers of language, culture, faith and nationality in a time where the crossing of such boundaries could mean life or death. Joy was seeking a way in which to make the counterfeit documents of the Service Committee used by those escaping crossing international borders look both official and at the same time, through symbols and counter symbols, secretly reveal to those needing the papers the origins of the documents. Joy requested from Deutsch a symbol to be stamped on the documents "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time 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.”

*[Information from the UUA website]*

And so Deutsch created an image that not only became the lasting symbol of the Service Committee, but of Unitarian Universalism. In 1941 Hans Deutsch, with pen and ink created a chalice with a flame. So over the past fifteen to twenty years the symbol of the Flaming Chalice has come to be aligned with the tradition of freedom and sacrifice central to both our Unitarian and Universalist heritage.

The chalice, the cup holding the Holy shared by all, available to all. The cup, a symbol of humanity's direct connection to God and to the sacredness of life - possesses within it the flame of sacrifice, martyrdom and illumination. And so in one image we honor our history of service to humanity and the presence of the Holy in the midst of our living. For many Unitarian Universalist the Flaming Chalice has become a powerful symbol of our faith.

But the Flaming Chalice was not the first symbol for the Universalists. In 1946 a group of young Universalist ministers recently graduated from the School of Religion of Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts, was organized, calling themselves The Humiliati. Though they only existed as a cohesive group for just shy of ten years they left a lasting impression on both Universalists and Unitarians. “They saw their denomination [Universalism] as growing moribund, having lost its theological distinction as liberal Protestant churches continued to minimize the threat of hellfire. The Humiliati stressed that human beings are impelled, not compelled, by the power of God to fulfill the good potential of their lives. The impulse toward wholeness in humanity is predisposed to good, though it can be weakened or distorted by chaos and conflict. Authentic worship keeps it alive and restores its integrity. To rekindle the Universalist spirit, the Humiliati

aimed to free their worship services from stale intellectualism and to enrich them with new liturgical forms, vestments and symbols.” It is the symbol they created which remains a symbol of the Universalist Convention to this day and here too, at the Brookfield Unitarian Universalist church we can find it in the wall behind me. “A circle which enclosed an off-centered cross. The symbol was designed to represent an all-inclusive Universalism, rooted-though not centered-in Christianity and freely open to other traditions.” *[Information from the website of the UUA]*.

This openness to other religious traditions is evident in many Unitarian Universalist churches today in sanctuaries that display symbols that represent all the major world religions. The Holden Street church in Worcester is an example, on the back wall of their chancel, above the altar is hung approximately a dozen images symbolizing the religious traditions from around the world and our religious heritage – the circle with an off-center cross, the flaming chalice, the symbol of humanism, a Star of David, the Hindu word Ohm, the Buddhist tree of enlightenment, etc... This exhibition of symbols of the religious traditions of the world is their way to honor the heritage and truth that these traditions offers, which like the flaming chalice is a vital element of our faith.

Tangible symbols are not the only way in which we identify ourselves as Unitarian Universalists, we are known for our beliefs as well...or maybe not. “Oh, I have the greatest respect for the Unitarians.” Robert Cushman is quoted as saying in 1912, “They don’t believe a goddamn thing and they live up to it every day of the week, Sundays included.” “Hey, Unitarian Universalists don’t need a church, they can argue anywhere.” And a personal favorite, “Once a upon a time, at a Sunday service in one of the large Unitarian churches in Boston, a young man was making a ruckus in the back

pew. After every sentence the minister spoke, the young man shouted ‘Amen! Halleluiah!’

One of the ushers approached the man and said to him discreetly. ‘Sir, uh, we just don’t do that here.’

‘But I got religion!’ the young man answered.

‘Well,’ the usher replied, ‘you certainly didn’t get it here.’

We do have a reputation beyond our insulated UU world that we *don’t* believe anything or maybe even worse that we *can* believe *anything*. Neither is accurate. Though our Principles and Purposes are not belief statements, nor are they a creed, they do represent what Unitarian Universalism stands and strives for. Since their adoption in 1985, they have come to play a large role in creating our identity and guiding our policies and actions as a denomination and as individual congregations. Our Principles remind us of our better selves, where we see other human beings as worthy and with dignity; where we take action in the world to make it better a place for generations to come; where we honor diversity and respect difference. The artist Deutsch in his first letter to Rev. Joy regarding the Unitarian Service Committee wrote, “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 social work. And this religion – with or without a heading – is one to which even a ‘godless’ fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, Yes!”

Though I disagree with Deutsch that you don't need to be a believer, I too wholeheartedly say Yes to Unitarian Universalism. We must believe, believe in something. Whether it be in a Divine presence, active in our lives or the power of humanity when acting out of compassion and for justice. And here is where our obsession with coffee and our call to right and responsible action in the world come together. Here is where coffee as a symbol of Unitarian Universalism is no longer a joke but the truth. Offering Fair Trade coffee (tea & chocolate too) for sale is a way of living out our Principles and Purposes. In buying coffee that pays those who provide it to us a living wage and an ability to in turn provide for their families is at the core of what we stand for as Unitarian Universalists.

We do believe and we've got religion; it just happens we don't necessarily all have the same belief. But each one of us who comes here week after week to share in our lives and of ourselves does so not because we hold *nothing* sacred, believe *nothing* to be worthy of our time, but just the opposite. It is my experience that we come because we believe and because of that belief seek a place that will allow for our unique expression and exploration of what we believe and may come to believe.

And in the same way some UU congregations honor other religious traditions by hanging their symbols in a sanctuary, we revere the world's religions through their religious texts, their 'big books' as you might say, through study we learn ways of deepening and expanding our understanding of the world, the Holy and ourselves. Unitarian Universalism understands that religious truth is found in many places and uncovered in many ways. And so we must as our fourth Principle states, participate in "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

The religions of the world have their ‘big books’, and you might be surprised to know we here at the Brookfield Unitarian Universalist Church, have our ‘big books’ too. They may not be recognized across the globe, but they are vital who we are as a congregation and are as much a symbol of our faith as the Universalist Cross, the Principles and Purposes or the Flaming Chalice. The first is our guest book. You may find it funny to think of a book where those who are newly visiting our community write their names, addresses, and how they learned of us as a symbol of faith, but it is. It is a symbol of welcome and that we are making room for others. The guest book is an invitation to get to know us and for us to get to know our visitors, to explore Unitarian Universalism and take a first step in determining if this is someone’s spiritual home.

The second, you might guess, is our membership book. It is a symbol that this faith, this, sometimes difficult, path of self-discovery and religious discernment is the only one for you. In signing the membership book you are claiming (or have already claimed) this place as yours - that you belong here and are committed to what this congregation stands for. Becoming a member offers ownership of your freedom to explore, discover and express your beliefs – it offers an opportunity to share in that journey of discovery with others because it is within community that meaning is found.

Symbols are important. They identify us as belonging somewhere, among a distinct group of people, part of a community. Symbols distinguish us as part of something larger than our individual selves. The Flaming Chalice, our Principles and Purposes, our ‘big books’ and even our coffee identify us as Unitarian Universalist. And so the next time you are sipping the preferred blend of hot java, next to another coffee

connoisseur you might let them know there's a church where drinking coffee's a part of the faith.

*\*This sermon, first preached October 17, 2004 was delivered again October 14, 2007 by a member of the worship committee due to a family emergency resulting in Rev. Sara Ascher's absence.*