

THE FLAME AND THE CHALICE

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
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The symbol can sometimes seem strange to newcomers in our midst.

A friend of my wife Gwen, for example, once wrote to her, saying that she was impatient with the Quaker meeting she had been attending – forming complete consensus on everything was so frustrating. Could I recommend a Unitarian church in her West Coast city? So I did. The following week she emailed us that she had thoroughly enjoyed her visit on Sunday. The service had been spiritually satisfying, the fine music uplifting, the people warm and friendly, the sermon intelligent, stimulating, the diversity and lack of dogma refreshing. There was only one thing she had been puzzled over: could I please explain the significance of the wooden sculpture up front that seemed to be of a polliwog attempting to drown himself in a martini glass?

Someone else once spoke of “that burning birdbath you guys are always lighting.”

Representations of the Flaming Chalice as a symbol of Unitarian Universalism certainly come in varied forms. Interpretations of its meaning are not entirely uniform among us either. But there is a story behind this symbol of our faith that bears repeating.

Somehow I’m reminded of the Hasidic tale of the great rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov. When he saw misfortune threatening the Jews, he’d go to a clearing in the forest to pray. There he would light a fire and say a special prayer. And the miracle was accomplished; the misfortune was averted. Later, after he died, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, felt the need to intercede with heaven. Finding his way to the same clearing in the forest, he began, “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the sacred fire, but I still know the words to my teachers’ prayer. Hear me!” And it was enough; the danger was averted. In the next generation it fell to his disciple, Rabbi Moshe-Lieb of Sasov, to go to the clearing and say: ‘I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.’ And it was. But then his follower, Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, facing dangers, sat in his study, his head in his hands, saying to God, “I’m unable to light the fire; I don’t know the prayer; I don’t even know the place to go. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was.

But in Elie Wiesel's re-telling of this legend, the implication is that there came a time when even the story was forgotten. And that is when disaster came. And it is when the story of the Flaming Chalice begins.

During the 1930s, the largest Unitarian congregation in the world was in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Its 4,000 members included people of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and secular backgrounds. The minister, Norbert Capek, was an outspoken anti-Nazi leader. When the Nazis invaded in 1938, he was soon taken to Dachau. Here in the Boston-area, the Rev. Waitsill Sharp took a leave of absence from serving the Unitarian congregation in Wellesley Hills. He and his wife Martha came to Prague just as the Nazis marched in. At considerable risk, they arranged the rescue of hundreds of Jewish children, Unitarians, and other anti-Nazis. This was the first project of the new Unitarian Service Committee.

By 1940, it had been formally organized. It's first director, the Rev. Charles Joy, operated from Portugal. Among the refugees who had come to Lisbon was an Austrian-born artist named Hans Deutsch. Living in Paris in the '30s, he had drawn caricatures of Adolph Hitler. Now had come to Lisbon using an altered passport. After meeting the American minister he wrote him a note:

"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--- with or without a heading---is one to which even a 'godless' fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, Yes!"

Joy asked him to design a logo that would give dignity and importance to the documents being produced by the Unitarian Service Committee -- something that would convey to people of many different nationalities and religions something of its ideals. And with pencil and ink Deutsch drew a chalice with a flame. "The kind the Greeks and Romans put on their altars," he explained to Joy. "The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice."

Others saw in it other meanings, however: Jews, the Eternal Flame in the Temple, or the bush in Exodus that burned but without being consumed. Christians, that it was

roughly in the shape of a cross. Humanists, that it suggested the lamp of learning or even outstretched human arms. People from Prague thought of Jan Hus, an early Czech religious reformer, who had wanted laypeople not just priests, to be able to drink from the communion chalice; who had been burned at the stake as a ‘heretic,’ back in 1415.

Typically, no single interpretation was taken to be ‘official’ or in any way final. But by the time that the Unitarian movement in America combined with the Universalists the early 1960s, advocates of humanistic universalism like Kenneth Patton were pointing out that the fire sermon of the Buddha, or the role of fire in the Hindu Vedas, or in almost any religious tradition, could also be seen in it as well.

Many Universalists had used as their symbol a circle around an off-center cross – representing both a liberal Christian heritage and a humble recognition that the circle of spiritual truth is so expansive that no one tradition can rightly claim to be at its center. When they consolidated with the Unitarians, the new Unitarian Universalist Association took that logo, and put an off-center flaming chalice, still rather cruciform, and with all its humanist, Jewish, and universalistic overtones, within two overlapping circles, to represent the two combined denominations.

If you visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where another eternal flame burns, you approach the memorial down an avenue of trees dedicated to ‘the righteous among the nations’ – non-Jews who risked their lives to save others from the Shoah, the Holocaust. Recently the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has been informed that Martha and Waitsill Sharp and Charles Joy are to be honored there, as only one other American has been previously.

But when I ponder this story, I sometimes worry that we Unitarian Universalists are tempted to focus on the courage and faith of individuals, the flame, as it were, without considering the chalice necessary to contain the flame. It even shows up in the way that Beacon Press chose to represent our chosen faith on the cover of the little book I co-authored: two tongues of flame, but no chalice!

Which brings to mind another story the Hasids told, to explain how a particular family came to produce children who glowed with integrity, faith and courage

According to this version, their parents were poor, but honest. One day the mother learned that a neighbor had gone bankrupt and was selling his house at a bargain price.

Her husband went around to their friends, borrowing money to make the investment. Because they were honest, people knew that they would be paid back in time. But then, on the way to make the purchase, the couple saw a powerful landowner with a young boy and girl, chained to the sides of his wagon. “What’s going on?” they inquired.

“Their father, my tenant, hasn’t paid me the rent their family owes. So I’m taking the children to sell them as slaves.”

The couple gave the landlord all the money they had borrowed to buy the house. They freed the children to return to their family. But then they realized that they were going to end up in debtor’s jail or Siberia themselves, if they didn’t pay back their debt. What to do? The husband went to the *beit midrash*, the house of study, to ponder & pray. There he found a wealthy looking man who gently coaxed him why he looked so worried.

“Tell you what,” said the man, “I’ll give you all the money you owe if you will sell me that *mitzvah*, that good deed of buying those two children out of slavery.”

“What? Sell you my *mitzvah*? I can’t do that!

“How about half of it then. For all the money you owe.”

“No.”

“A fourth.”

“I know you want to help but I can’t accept.”

“Just one percent. You will keep 99% per cent of the good you have done.”

Again the poor man refused.

“I want you to know,” said the stranger, “that you have shown great courage. When you gave up your chance for fortune to save those children, a storm struck heaven. Brother Satan claimed that you were a fake. I am Elijah the Prophet, and you have shown that your integrity is real. For giving up your hope of worldly riches to save another’s children, and for not selling your *mitzvah*, I promise you children who will also bring light and warmth to a troubled world.”

We can’t live off the good deeds of our forebears. But Dr. Schweitzer was wrong. The spark of faith is passed not only from person to person. True spirituality lies in the relationship between the compassion burning in every soul and the limits of its mortal container. It also needs communities of faith, communities that teach and remember. Communities that transcend the generations, and that pass on the stories.

All communal institutions are flawed and imperfect. “We have these treasures in earthen vessels,” wrote Paul to the early followers of Jesus at Corinth (II Cor. 4:7). Because people, including ourselves, are also flawed and imperfect. But just as we dare not neglect to take care of our bodies as we cultivate our minds and our souls, so we should not neglect to care for the chalice that holds the flame of our faith. This year, as we set about to renew and renovate the physical structure of this old parish church, not for our own sake alone, but for the sake of better serving as a religious center with a civic circumference, let’s bear that in mind. “The church exists by mission,” said one theologian, “the way a fire exists by burning.” But let us not despise the fragile containers that transmit our faith.

The chalice we lit at the beginning of today’s service is perhaps the most fragile I’ve ever known – and yet the most precious to me. It is not made of metal, or glass, or even pottery, but of mere *papier mache*. It was made for me by the *banghi* women of Ahmedabad in India. Now *banghis* are those who in the villages of India earn their living cleaning out the latrines of people of higher caste. When they come to cities, by gathering up refuse in the streets, as so-called paper-pickers. With help from our Unitarian Universalist Holdeen India Program, 17,000 of these women in Ahmedabad were organized into a union. And won a contract with the city, to provide its recycling service. Bringing them dignity, and a living wage.

May the flame that burns within its fragile confines remind us of what is possible. And help us to keep the faith, and pass it on, from person to person, from chalice to chalice, from generation to generation. Amen, and amen.