

PLAYING WITH FIRE

A service by Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*, with Kathleen Davis, *worship associate*
Sunday, March 12, 2006 – Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

CALL TO WORSHIP

Based on a piece by *Sarah Lammert*, minister of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, NJ.

My friend and colleague Sarah Lammert writes of the importance of worship and community. She suggests that what we are doing here is creating together a web of life. She begins by reminding us that...

This is the time to let go of that crazy notion that we can live separate and aloof from one another. This is the time that we can come home to each other, to our mutual belonging.

The time she speaks of is this time. Now. Here. In *this* place of worship and community. It is in this place that we create a web of life. She continues...

We create a web of life out of which every single one of us can use everything our stories have given us. Every part of our lives...even the cruelty, even the abuse, even the addictions, even the loneliness, even the failures...

Sarah's words are powerful because they are true. Each of us has a story and that story matters. Even the sad and hard parts of our stories matter, for it is often in the difficult moments of life that true healing and growth occurs. So here, into this place where we worship and are together, we can bring our whole selves. Together our separate lives become one. She goes on to say...

A web of life is created within which you can rest. Because out of that you can act. Out of that, all power is yours. Out of that, you travel light. Out of that, you can step forward.

Sarah is speaking of the power of a religious community to change lives. Our lives, yes, but also the lives of everyone we encounter. And thus Sarah ends her wise words...

Let every encounter be a homecoming as we step forward now for the healing of our world. The world is not going to be saved by good people or noble people. The world is going to be healed by ordinary people, like you and me, who are not afraid of pain and who are not afraid of loving each other.

As we worship together in community, may we celebrate the web of life we create together, and the power of that web to heal and hold us. And may the strength we gain from our connections to each other enable us to build a better world. Amen.

Sermon: PLAYING WITH FIRE

Barbara W. ten Hove

One of my most potent memories stems from an experience I had when I was a young child, no more than eight years old. It was Christmas Eve, and at the time my family lived in the parsonage of the Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church in Alexandria, VA. The church property is on a high hill, but we met for worship in a building that was down the hill a bit, although all the cars were parked up the hill. After the service on that Christmas Eve, we all exited the church together carrying our lit candles—something the fire marshal no longer allows!

I remember vividly the experience of that short journey. I was just old enough to carry my own flame. As we began our walk I realized very quickly that if I moved too fast or did not protect the flame from the wind, it would go out. But I also became aware of how dangerous and powerful the flame was. If I moved too slowly, it would eventually burn the paper and my fingers, too. Carefully, I carried the precious candle up the hill. I watched as others did the same. Together, we created incredible beauty and a deep sense of mystery in that moment. It was my earliest memory of truly worshipping and I have never forgotten it.

Many of you know that over the past two years I have been working to complete a Doctor of Ministry degree. The “D.Min.” is a post-professional degree, and in order to even start on such a program I had to have at least three years of professional work under my belt. I began this program in my 18th year of ministry and hope to complete it in my 22nd – that would be June of 2007. My Doctor of Ministry degree will be granted after I complete nine courses and a final, big project. Most of the work I have done has been in the area of worship training, and my project will include a seminary course and a workbook on the topic.

And some of you may remember a sermon I gave a couple of years ago, when I first started this project. It was called “To Celebrate Things of Worth” and in it, I reflected on the movement of UU worship away from the educational model toward a more spiritual and transformational style. Since I wrote that sermon, I have had a chance to test a lot of my theories and ideas, which have mostly confirmed my belief that worship is critical to the growth and health of Unitarian Universalism.

I have also learned a lot about the challenges we face in making our worship life both meaningful and relevant. And occasionally I have been asked to answer perhaps the hardest question of all: *If we are truly a religious people, how does the act of worship*

affirm and support our deeply held beliefs? How can those of a liberal faith, with no creed at its center, do worship in ways that allow people of different beliefs to find themselves welcome? In other words, what is our theology of worship?

This question may seem arcane and unimportant to some of you. Why should theology matter to a creedless faith? Theology means “the study of God,” doesn’t it? How can a faith that is open to many interpretations of God (including the possibility that there is no such thing) agree on such a complicated issue? And even if we could, what kind of theology will speak with potency to our diverse membership?

These are significant questions and to answer them I have had to reflect a lot on my understanding not only of my Unitarian Universalist faith but also on its practices and traditions. I have come to the conclusion that we *do* have a theology of worship, and I hope by the end of this sermon you will understand why I think so. But for the moment, I am going to suggest to you that a familiar symbol may prove to be a powerful metaphor for this theology. That symbol is right here before you: a flame lit within a chalice.

Some of you may be familiar with the history of the Flaming Chalice. It was designed by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutch, at the end of the Second World War, to identify the Unitarian Service Committee. The USC (which later became the UUSC) was sending packages to war-ravaged Europe and needed a visible symbol to put on boxes (like the Red Cross). Letters of safe passage also needed an official logo. Deutch chose to render anew the flaming chalice, a symbol with a long history representing religious freedom in Eastern Europe (particularly among Czechs).

Originally used only by the Service Committee and only as a flat symbol on paper, the flaming chalice at some point jumped from the page and became three-dimensional. I have not been able to find out exactly how and when this happened, but it appears to have first been used in worship sometime in the 1970s, most likely by women and/or youth. By the mid-1980s it was not unusual to find a flaming chalice lit in worship and by 1990 it was common.

Somehow this strange symbol—a cup without water, holding instead a flame—became a regular part of Unitarian Universalist worship. So much that today it is a rare North American UU church that does not light a chalice at services.

I find this history fascinating. Why has this symbol become so important to us? Why is it used in services in congregations as diverse as the First Parish Unitarian Church in Lexington, MA—founded in the 17th century—and the Chalice UU Church of Escondido,

CA—a group less than 20 years old? Why do many leaders light a chalice before starting a church meeting? Why do adults and youth wear flaming chalice jewelry? Why do kids draw chalices in Sunday School? Why has this symbol permeated our faith tradition, barely 50 years after it first made its appearance on a box going to refugees from Nazi Germany?

I think the answer to that question is powerful and important for us to understand. I believe the symbol of the flaming chalice is a metaphor for why our faith matters to people. And I believe this symbol can teach us, both subconsciously and consciously about our faith and our worship.

So let me begin with the symbol of the chalice, the cup that holds up our flame. The chalice is an ancient symbol of community, reminding us that we can trust each other enough to share a common cup. Those of you who grew up in a Christian church may recognize the chalice as one part of the Eucharist, or communion. Jesus, it is written, asked his disciples to remember him by drinking wine from a common cup and eating bread together. Some believe that the wine in the communion cup becomes the blood of Christ when drunk during the mass. Others use it more symbolically, recognizing the power of the shared cup to bring people together in communion.

And this symbol goes far deeper than Christianity. It is also seen in many other religious traditions across the globe. When I web-searched the word “chalice,” the power of this symbol and its wide religious use was immediately apparent. For not only did I see an article from our UUA website about the history of the chalice within our faith, I also found a website for a Celtic/Pagan spiritual group and the home page of The Chalice Press, the publishing wing of the Disciples of Christ denomination. And there were lots more.

Given the chalice’s broad use across religions and time, what meaning can we find in it today, in our worship and life as a religious people? I believe the chalice is a potent symbol of community. When the cup is shared among the people, it says you are welcome. When it is withheld from the non-believer (as it often is in certain faith communities) then it says you are not welcome.

As Unitarian Universalists, the chalice can remind us that our community is a place where everyone is welcome. It can also remind us that community is a religious concept. Let me unpack this a little. Look around you. If you are a long time member, perhaps you see many familiar faces, faces of people who matter deeply to you. If you have been here for a shorter time, perhaps you see the friendly face of someone you’ve talked to at coffee hour

or at a class and wonder if you might be developing a friendship. If you are new here, perhaps you see this group as a place where you are welcome, even if you are still unknown.

But you may also see the face of one with whom you've quarreled, or with whom you disagree strongly about something that matters. Perhaps you wonder if healing between you will ever occur. You may see the face of someone who you think may be in trouble and you wonder if she will find the support and help she needs. Or perhaps you see few faces that look like yours and you wonder if you can feel at home here.

This is what community looks like. It is imperfect. It is also essential. Like my friend Sarah wrote in the reading earlier, in this church we seek to “create a web of life out of which every single one of us can use everything our stories have given us. Every part of our lives... even the cruelty, even the abuse, even the addictions, even the loneliness, even the failures.”

I believe that the chalice symbol is powerful because it speaks directly to the human need to come together in—in loving connection, yes, but also when we are hurting, or when we are scared. It speaks to the religious need for people to trust and respect each other. It speaks of a faith, imperfect as it is, that seeks both to teach and model radical acceptance of one another.

It is a theological symbol because it explains, through metaphor and image, our understanding of human nature, one of the most important of all theological issues. Some religions teach that humans are born depraved. Others teach that only some people will be saved. Our theology teaches us that it is within the human community, embedded in the great web of creation, that we will find meaning, purpose and hope.

When we create loving and welcoming communities, we do what we can to build a better world—a heaven on earth, if you will. Jesus called this the Kingdom of God on Earth. Others have called it the Circle of Life or the Beloved Community. By whatever name we call it, we believe that all people can and should learn to live together as a community. This is a profoundly religious idea, one we can be proud to claim. Our chalice is its symbol.

But for us the chalice without a flame is not complete. What about the other part of this symbol? What does the flame have to teach us about who we are and why we come together?

The flame is, of course, an even more ancient symbol than the chalice. In ancient religions across the globe, fire was understood to be of the Gods, sometimes even God itself. In the Hindu religion for instance, the God Agni is a fire god. It is where our word “ignite” comes from. Zeus and his Roman counterpart Jupiter threw lightning bolts of fire to prove their power and strength. And of course the act of lighting fires in the darkness has been used within many pagan communities to symbolize the re-birth of light in the winter.

Fire is one of four elements used in many rituals, along with air, earth and water. Thus, it is truly elemental. Of these four elements, fire is the fiercest. It burns on contact and unless carefully tended can cause terrible destruction. Those of us who saw our Religious Exploration Building next door after the fire of December 2003 can attest to fire’s destructive power.

Why, then, have we placed fire at the center of a chalice to represent our faith? We cannot drink fire. Even to touch it is a great risk. Why, within the loving chalice of community, do we place the powerful, yet destructive element of fire?

I think that putting fire in the center of our religious symbol is very appropriate. For fire is a symbol of transformation. It burns, yes. But it also warms us and cooks our food and lights our homes. It is dangerous, no doubt. But it is also one of the greatest tools at our disposal. Without fire, there might be no life. Fire reminds us that what is essential is also challenging. Fire is a potent symbol of change and transformation.

Transformation is a religious and spiritual process. And it is an essential element of our faith, Unitarian Universalism. Some of you may have read the latest issue [Spring 2006] of our denominational magazine the *UU World*. In an article describing two “evangelists for evolution” [Barlow and Dowd], author Amy Hassinger points out the transformational reality of life, experienced through evolution.

Hassinger writes, “We have become engines of evolution. If enough of us acknowledge this power, we can decide whether to use it as a creative or destructive force and to determine what will happen to life on our planet. And we can begin to grasp our purpose here.”

She is speaking of evolution—an obviously transformational process—as something that helps us to understand our purpose. That’s what theology does. It helps us to make sense out of life.

Thus it is not surprising that fire would find its way into our worship. But why should we place fire, a potent symbol of transformation, in the chalice? Each element, the chalice and the flame, have a lot of symbolic power. Together, they say something important about our faith.

I'm going to ask you to use your imagination with me for a moment, as I seek to explain something of the power of these two symbols colliding. Imagine first that instead of lighting the flame in the chalice, we instead built a fire on the floor here each week. What would happen? Odds are we would burn the church down. Fire is that powerful.

So what if instead of lighting a fire on the floor, we decided to protect our church and ourselves by lighting a flame inside a closed jar or a steel box. What would happen? Odds are the flame would go out.

What we do is light a flame in a chalice, one that is strong, well made and beautiful. It holds up the fire neatly, providing a strong base as well as lots of air. Most Sundays, the flame in the chalice stays lit until we extinguish it. The balance is usually just right.

I think this says something about us, about our faith and our worship. When we come together here as we do each week, we take the risk of bringing our whole selves into this church, and hope we will be welcomed into its community. We acknowledge that life is messy and imperfect even as we strive to light fires of hope and shine the light of the spirit on both the good and the ugly realities of our shared lives. We embrace change and pray and laugh and sing of the possibility of transformation—of ourselves and our society—toward the good.

We become, in essence, a living flaming chalice where the spirit is kindled and supported in the strong yet open arms of community.

And that's why I think this symbol has become so important to so many of us who worship together in Unitarian Universalist congregations. It's not simply a pretty ritual that adds beauty to our worship, though it is that. It's not simply an interesting historical symbol that has a lot of meaning, though it does. I think it has become something more than the sum of its parts. The Flaming Chalice is a powerful symbol of a community that trusts itself enough to allow the fire of transformation to burn within it.

So when you enter into this room each week, take a moment and think about what it means for us to worship together. We don't worship the same entity, we don't bow down before authority, and we don't insist that all who worship with us believe the same thing.

What do we do? We play with fire and we don't get burned. Because the fires we light here are held in the arms of community. The flames we kindle shine from within our chalice of compassion. The power we invoke here is both within and all around us.

This, my friends, is theology at work. The symbol of the flaming chalice teaches us that the whole earth is our community. All are welcome.

The symbol of the flaming chalice teaches us that transformation is always possible. We can and do change and grow even in the midst of pain and struggle.

Each Sunday in worship, every person on this campus, young and old, is a witness to the power of our religious symbol, the flaming chalice. It is lit in classrooms, in children's chapel, and here in this sacred space. May we all seek to experience its meaning fresh each week as we worship and are together in this community of faith. Amen.

Closing Words

And so each week we light a flame.
It burns so bright we cannot tame
 Its energy, its heat, its passion, its hope.

Within the chalice cup, the fire glows
And in our hearts love and caring grows,
 Creating a church where all belong.

We hold up this symbol to show to all
Our commitment to the blue-green ball
 That is our home, the earth.

In times of joy and times of pain
We come together yet again
 To pray and sing and be as one.

May compassion hold and heal you.
May love bless and always be with you.

And may the deep peace that lives in all creation, be in you, now and for always. Amen.

• • •