

## *the Chalice & the Flame*

Rev. Paul Beckel  
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
April 3, 2016

I don't know what I may seem to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

*Isaac Newton (1643-1727)*

### **WELCOME**

This morning as we bring flame to this chalice...each of us also brings *meaning* to this effortless act. Perhaps the meaning you bring is connected to the time you or your child lit the chalice. Or perhaps each time we do this you feel connected to the thousands of other Unitarian Universalists coming together for this simple ritual.

Maybe it's the poetry, or the history in this act that comes to mind... or maybe for you it is the wonder of combustion. Whatever meaning you bring, I thank you. Because by bringing your focus, all together, here and now, you join in—you create—beloved community. And you thereby ignite the possibility in this moment.

### **LIGHTING THE CHALICE**

**GATHERING SONG**      *Bring Many Names*      #23

Singing out these images of god, these metaphors for the ineffable, maybe this stretched your theological comfort zone. Today I'm going to ask you to do this a couple more times, to metaphorically take just a taste or dance just a few steps into the unfamiliar.

After the children's story we'll sing them out with "Go now in peace..." which is written in the hymnal with the line "May the love of God surround you..." but is sung in some of our gatherings as, "May the spirit of Love surround you...." Happily we *can* sing both at the same time and it still sounds terrific. We can even do this as a 1, 2, 3, or 4 part round, spontaneously switching from one part or one phrase to another. It all works.

Then at the end of the service today, our benediction is a prayer by neopagan ecofeminist Starhawk. I welcome you to read it with me...or not; this is a place of nonjudgment. But first, to get us warmed up to the beautiful flexibility and symbolism floating and dancing in our words, I invite the children forward for a story.

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**

*The Dance*, Evans/Linton

**CHILDREN'S BLESSING**

*Go Now in Peace*      #413

**WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE**

*Spirit of Life*      arr. FitzGerald

## **MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)**

### **MESSAGE**

The chalice and the flame. Are they just symbols? By “just symbols” I could mean, Are they *merely* symbols? Or, are they *apt* symbols...for a people who work for peace and honor all creation?

Symbols, of course, are representations. A symbol is something that stands for, or brings to mind, something else. Symbols often represent countless layers of meaning, as well as private nuance, which varies for every person who encounters the symbol.

Consider symbolic hand gestures. There’s the thumbs-up, the a-ok, and another one so electrifyingly negative that it would only distract from this conversation if I were to physically represent it right now. Or consider the visual symbolism of the American flag. In my previous congregation the American flag flew in the sanctuary, bringing significant significance to some, and uneasiness to others. There was enough meaning in that symbol in that particular context to stir up serious trouble when I suggested we remove it. So simple symbols can evoke deep responses... as well as contrasting interpretations.

Music contains a complex set of audible symbols. Familiar music carries forward its historical roots, along with markers of ethnicity and class. Even unfamiliar music can convey movement and depth and indications of who is playing, who may be listening, and the nature of the occasion.

If Melanie played a wedding march right now you might envision a generic bride walking down the aisle. Or more likely, you’d conjure memories of actual brides...and then myriad associations would spring from those memories.

Of course if we add words to the music, or if we hear words even without music ... and even when we see words, we interpret the words as much more than ink on paper, much more than colored light emitted from a desktop screen. When we hear a word, see a word, even think a word our minds are flooded with associations.

Here are some words: Green. Tarantula. Love. Wall Street. Whether highly abstract or fairly specific, these words bring thoughts, memories, or reactions into our consciousness, and depending upon their emotional resonance, these might quickly pass by, or they might be very difficult to shake off.

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Religions, of course, use many and various symbols: images, words, music... and touch, movement, smells and tastes. Religious rituals weave diverse symbolic forms together and create within us multi-layered experiences. These experiences can be visceral, and compelling. They can give rise to passion, understanding, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope.

Rituals, even though they are symbolic, can help us to change the way we see ourselves: our past, present, or future. And rituals—something as simple as a child dedication or a new member

welcoming ceremony—these can help us to change the way we see ourselves in relationship with one another.

And there, in that immense power, lies potential for both the wondrous and the dreadful. So we may be justifiably cautious of the power within symbol and ritual. We may be justifiably skeptical and resistant. We know that symbols can be superficial. We know that they can deceive. We don't want to be swayed by corporate logos, political slogans, or religious hocus pocus. We don't want to be deceived into buying, or voting, or believing something that could harm us.

So skepticism, I think, is a component of reverence. Skepticism is, after all, a form of resistance to idolatry. Skepticism helps us to ensure that symbols do not become idols.

Jesus hanging on a cross can be a symbol of resistance to fascist subjugation. But worshiping that symbol would be idolatry.

The word, "God," is a symbol for many things: emotions, ideals, powers. Still, the word, "God," is not God. Getting stuck on that word would be idolatry.

The hymn "Bring Many Names" conjures in our minds multiple rich images: Strong Mother God, Warm Father God, Young Growing God, Old Aching God, Great Living God. Brian Wren, a minister in the British Reform tradition who wrote the song, says:

"If we draw on a variety of God images, and let them balance, enrich, and clash with one another, we shall be following the instincts of biblical faith.... Allowing God images to clash is important, because it reminds us that we are approaching that which is beyond all images."

In this way, by reveling in the juxtaposition of awkward metaphors, the skeptic, the poet, and the believer can find common ground. We can all appreciate that our experience of the infinite is partial—often glorious, but always limited, human, experience.

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During the Protestant Reformation, leading up to the Age of Enlightenment, with the rise of reason and an emphasis upon empirical evidence, the Christian notion of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ went through a seismic shift—such that those receiving the sacrament could now acknowledge that this was a symbolic activity. Sophisticated modern minds would not make the mistake of believing that bread and wine could be magically transformed into the REAL body and REAL blood of Christ. And yet the Eucharistic ritual remains extraordinarily powerful for many Protestants.

And over time the rationalist tendency was taken further and further. In the 1800s, Unitarians began to reject the notion of biblical miracles, seeing miracles instead as symbolic, metaphorical stories. And then in the 1900s the Humanists carried all of this to its logical conclusion by rejecting supernaturalism altogether.

I say this, of course, as a Unitarian, and a humanist. A cold-eyed scientific materialist. And, in my highest aspirations, an idealist, a poet, and a lover.

How can I have it both ways? How can I hold both the cautious detachment of knowing that my understanding of everything is metaphorical...AND at the same time experience the bitterness and the ecstasy of being connected—REALLY, intimately connected—with all that is?

How can I simultaneously hold these contrasting perspectives? Because I cannot do otherwise. I believe that I need both to be whole, and to survive.

So I recognize that the lenses of human experience remove me one step from what is real. And I affirm the ancient pre-enlightenment impulse which says by God, the bread and the wine are truly the body and blood of Christ. And so are you. And so are we. And our ever-expanding network of consciousness—we are as real as it gets.

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The symbols that survive, over the centuries, are those that are outwardly simple, but have an uncanny capacity for complexity. Unified and simultaneously complex, they can adapt to changing circumstances. Just like the survival of species, it is part accident, part depth and breadth of character. Symbols that survive are those that are well-suited to multiple interpretations, so that they can continue to be useful even as their environment changes.

So then, what is this flaming chalice, this goblet of fire? Well, like many parts of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, there are fairly simple institutional origins—and then philosophical underpinnings much like underground streams that emerge and disappear in too many ways to count.

Institutionally, the symbol of the flaming chalice was designed in WWII Europe for a particular purpose. The Unitarian Service Committee was attempting to assist Jews and other refugees fleeing the Nazis. In order to look official, they came up with a logo for their documents. They also used the flaming chalice as a somewhat covert symbol to identify someone who could be trusted.

So, to put it bluntly, someone just made it up. And we could accept this with chagrin. The flaming chalice wasn't a miracle. It wasn't scorched into a tortilla, or left behind by aliens. No. Just like the religions from ancient days, it was made up. Someone took what was at hand, and with high principle and purpose, improvised. And in that improvisation was salvation.

In the following decades, the symbol spread, adapted, and was reinvented. Somewhere a congregation displayed the logo on a banner. Someone started making flaming chalice jewelry. Eventually a few congregations started bringing real fire to real cups as a way to begin their gatherings.

How did the flaming chalice come to widespread use in our congregations? The history is obscure and speculative (fertile ground for its development into the stuff of legend some day). Does this diminish its symbolic value? I don't think so. On the contrary, something made of

eclectic bits and pieces, pulled together and adapted to its environment is a highly appropriate symbol for our movement, and no less significant for the fact that we are not afraid to admit that this is what we are. We are the stuff of the universe. Assembled and re-assembled to be here. Now.

And the words, the symbols, these are transient inadequate human artifacts that change...while the permanent, which we cannot name, travels with us and through us into ever new forms.

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As you look around at older Unitarian and Universalist buildings, which are often full of customary church imagery, it's easy to see that our tradition is deeply rooted in Christianity. But even back when those buildings were built, Unitarians and Universalists understood their vision to be one among a vast array of human attempts to understand their place in the world.

In the early 20th century, the Universalists began to use a symbol with a circle—to represent all that is—and in the corner of the circle, a small cross—to acknowledge their own relative position in the grand scheme of things.

In the 1950s and 60s, the Universalist and Unitarian denominations came together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which we are a part. A symbol of two circles, intertwined, came to represent the merger. And then came other variations with circles and flaming chalices, crosses, and stylized fragments of all of the above.

So what's this all about? To me, the flame can represent testing, courage, sacrifice, and illumination. The chalice can represent both our giving and receiving of life-sustaining gifts. Together they contain activity and stillness; change and constancy; destruction and regeneration.

Some see the combination as a Unitarian fire atop a Universalist base, or vice versa. For example you could argue that Unitarian rationalism is the solid base while Universalist enthusiasm is the dancing fire.

Conversely, you could argue that Universalism is the base, with its steady confidence in an ever-loving God ... while Unitarianism is the cleansing fire of critical thought.

Or, taken all together, they can represent the light of individual freedom held aloft by a solid caring community.

And if all this namby pamby unofficial “maybe it's this, maybe it's that” stuff is too much for you, you can take comfort in this: at least the U.S. military recognizes the flaming chalice as the official symbol for UU cemetery markers.

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Of course many religious traditions include chalice and flame iconography. Chalices recall the Christian tradition of Holy Communion—a re-enactment of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. And there's the medieval legend of the Holy Grail: the original cup somehow secreted away from that mythic meal.

Other interpretations associate the chalice with religious freedom. Such a connection can be made, for example, in the story of the 14th century reformer Jan Hus (of Bohemia, now The Czech Republic), who stood up to the church hierarchy of the time by reading the Bible to people in a language they could understand, rather than in the official Latin. Hus was also known for sharing wine from the consecrated chalice with his congregation—when this ritual was officially restricted to the priests. So you might associate our ideal of religious freedom with the chalice—and the flame—since Hus was eventually burned at the stake.

And as our ideal of religious freedom has expanded over time, our symbolic chalices have grown outrageously broad—almost to the point of not being like a cup at all—probably to reinforce the notion that the holy is overflowing, available, and within reach of anyone who seeks.

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The flame also has deep and diverse roots in human culture and religions. In Christian terms, the flame is most closely associated with Pentecost, the moment following the death and resurrection of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit came to the apostles in the form of flame, reminding them that God's spirit would forever be present.

Of course there is flame imagery wherever there are people surviving the elements—from ancient Olympic flames to the Phoenix rising from ashes.

But what is flame? Flame is light energy which becomes visible within a highly exothermic chemical reaction. There are many sizes, shapes, and colors of flames, depending upon the fuel type, the oxygen mix, and other factors.

Flames are dynamic moments of creation and destruction—intense forming and reforming of matter and energy as these tear each other apart, react, and recombine, releasing excess energy with more or less light and more or less heat.

And even if we don't know all the chemical details, we know a flame when we see it. And we are awed or afraid or appreciative when we see that dancing teardrop.

Might it represent cosmic eternity? Maybe not as we conceive it today, because in recent years NASA has discovered that in microgravity, flame can take on a different shape—more spherical than what we expect where there is gravity. So someday our images of this symbol may have to change again.

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The flaming chalice, set off-center within two circles, is for me a symbol of balance. Not balance like inertia, but a dynamic, shifting, dancing balance. Just as the flame itself depends upon a balance of fuel and oxygen, neither starving for fuel nor burning itself out.

The base, of course, has to be balanced to hold the fuel and the flame. Its beauty is a function of shapeliness without excessive delicacy, sturdiness without stolidity.

It is movement and constancy,  
transience and permanence,  
a living tradition:  
things we hold tight,  
and things that we hope for  
a reflection of the unchanging laws of nature from which arise perpetual novelty.

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Within this balance there is disruption and resilience.  
volatility  
adjustment,  
and loving arms to embrace it all.

And for every bit of irrefutable reality, a touch too of that which cannot be contained  
in our loftiest imaginations.

**SENDING SONG**                      *Let it Be a Dance*                      #311

**BENEDICTION**

Earth mother, star mother,  
You who are called by  
a thousand names,  
May all remember  
we are cells in your body  
and dance together.  
You are the grain and the loaf  
that sustains us each day,  
And as you are patient  
with our struggles to learn  
So shall we be patient  
with ourselves and each other.  
We are radiant light  
and sacred dark – the balance –  
You are the embrace that heartens  
And the freedom beyond fear.  
Within you we are born,  
we grow, live, and die –  
You bring us around the circle to rebirth  
Within us you dance  
Forever.

- Starhawk, *Singing the Living Tradition* #524