

## Our Flaming Chalice

Deborah Mero

February 24, 2008

UFWC

Every once in a while while I am outside of Unitarian Universalist circles, someone will notice the pendant I wear—which ever one I am wearing—around my neck and make some remark about how attractive it is. Sometimes I thank them and let it pass. Other times I tell them that it is the flaming chalice, symbol of my faith. That may or may not result in a continuing conversation. Last week in the small group conversations, someone asked me what the chalice stood for. I urged him to wait for this week because the explanation can be rather long if we really want to delve into history and theology—which we occasionally must because our history is a proud one. And because I want you to be able to answer the question when someone asks you.

We open our worship service with words and the lighting of a candle, an oil lamp, in some places a can of sterno! All of these things are set within a vessel that appears in a variety of sizes but mostly in a bowl-like shape. It is the vessel and the flame that are the two elements of our symbol. The vessel and the flame.

From the time Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to humans, fire has found a way to be used in our ritual traditions. It is primeval. Who here has ever entered a Catholic church and not seen candles burning? In this day and age it is not because of the lack of electricity to provide illumination. The lighting of candles accompanies prayers of special intention. In times of great need or illness, a flame is kindled. Lighting a candle on the anniversary of a death is a tradition shared by Catholics and Jews. You will find in every synagogue and temple the eternal flame called for in Leviticus to be kept burning regularly. On the Sabbath, the Eternal Flame is augmented by two candles signifying remembrance and observance.

In the celebration of Native American pagan rituals, honor is paid to the four directions, the four elements, earth, wind, water and fire. Candles are lit in the four directions when casting a circle to create sacred time and sacred space in the midst of our profane world. Flames abound in all types of rituals and ceremonies.

Every Sunday we come together to give worth to life to creation and to a myriad of things and subjects we find of great importance to us. As we begin our services, we light our flaming chalice. It is a symbol, a symbol that brings us together. It is something that we will find present in almost every Unitarian Universalist congregation on the continent. But it is a new symbol. It has not taken a great deal of time for the flaming chalice to become the standard identifier representing our faith. I am warmed by it's first use, as a sign of safety.

As our pamphlet entitled "The Flaming Chalice" explains, the symbol was conceived in 1941 for the use of the Unitarian Service Committee as they helped refugees fleeing from Nazi Germany. As there were many languages spoken throughout Europe and refugees from many countries, a symbol bridged all language barriers. It was originally an Austrian refugee who designed the emblem for the service committee. Refugees would see this symbol and know that they would find safety where it was displayed.

Over time, the symbol has undergone many graphic transformations and adaptations to serve a number of constituencies. For example, the Canadian Unitarian Council uses the chalice with a maple leaf as its background, the Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, or YRUU has shaped its initials into a chalice, the UU Ministers' Association shaped its letters into the flame above the chalice, and, of course, there

are a myriad of designs that have grown from the creativity of many of our members and congregations. But we must look back almost six hundred years to find the origins of the chalice's historical significance.

The time was the late 1300's to early 1400's in our common era. The Catholic church was still *the* one true church. It was at least a century before the appearance of Luther and Calvin. Jan Hus was born in 1369, the same year that the Bastille was built in Paris. The onset of the Protestant Reformation was not an overnight event. There was a great deal of discussion and dissatisfaction with the way the Catholic church held and used its power, both its taxation power and its political power. John Wycliff, an English scholar and theologian caused a great deal of trouble in the early part of the fourteenth century. He proclaimed and wrote of the decadence of the church. He said that the priesthood should be a ministerium not a dominium. This meant that priests should be servants, attending to the needs of the people rather than ruling or controlling the people. He had strong feelings about the papacy and church hierarchy being unnecessary to the service of God through the church. His analysis of why there was so much power given to the priesthood led him to look at the doctrine of transubstantiation— the actual turning of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This analysis convinced him that in order to loosen the power of the priests he had to battle the doctrine of transubstantiation itself. His other major issue was that of attacking monasticism as it existed in his time. Rather than being an institution of men seeking religious fulfillment through prayer and service, the monastic orders had become the storm troops of the Pope.

Needless to say, Wycliff's writings and teachings gained him much notoriety from all sides of the issue. He was declared a heretic by those in power while he himself preached of the priesthood of all believers.

Jan Hus was a disciple of Wycliffe's although they never met. Hus was from Prague, Czechoslovakia, far away from London. Nevertheless, much of Hus' understandings and teachings were derived from Wycliffe. Hus was a devout Catholic who believed strongly in the supreme model for living embodied in his Lord Jesus Christ. He was also alarmed and angered by the power held and abused by the corrupt papacy and the corrupt priesthood. His agreement with Wycliffe, however, stopped short of denying the doctrine of transubstantiation. To Hus, the bread and wine were actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ, not just symbolic representations.

Hus developed a powerful voice in such matters as he became Rector of Prague University. He was also the preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. It was the one church where the preaching was done in the native Czech language rather than Latin. This was the one place where the word of God was accessible to all the people not just the priests. He was extremely popular with the people drawing huge crowds to hear his words. His fellow clergymen, however were less than pleased to hear his condemnations of their conduct and their office. They banded together and persuaded the archbishop to excommunicate Hus from the church. This, of course, did nothing to stop the bold and popular preacher. In fact, his tirades grew and expanded until he was mocking and criticizing the pope and the secular authorities for their roles in exploiting the people and abusing their positions of power.

The archbishop was so threatened by Hus' words, he threatened to kill every bishop and priest in Prague unless Hus stopped preaching. In 1412, He was forced into exile. Exile, though, was not enough for the authorities. Hus' writings were scrutinized for any signs of heresy. His hymns were banned. His writings were confiscated. The danger was apparent. Hus was writing and teaching that those elected for salvation were chosen for their good and moral lives, not for their indulgences purchased from the church. He proclaimed that all should be welcomed to share in full communion. The practice everywhere else had the common people offered the bread of life but not the cup. The cup, or chalice was reserved for the clergy.

Listed in an article written by Rev. Judith Walker Riggs about the chalice are the four major objections the clergy had to sharing the cup with the people:

"First, some of the precious blood might be spilt by clumsy lay people; second, the blood might become contaminated by coming into contact with the beards of laymen (the beards of priests were OK because priests were consecrated); third, the wine might become frozen as it was passed around a large church on a cold day (the protesters lacked an understanding of the principles of [alcohol as an] anti-freeze); and fourth, to pass both wine and bread might seem to indicate that priests and lay people were equal. This last, was, of course, exactly what Jan Hus intended to indicate. That priests and lay people were equal."<sup>1</sup>

In 1414, while in exile, Hus received news that the Emperor Sigismund was to convene a great ecclesiastical council in Constance. Hus was invited to defend himself and his views before the council. He was granted safe conduct by the emperor to travel to Constance. It was an enticing offer. Hus believed that this was an opportunity to be a part of the great reformation that the council would undertake. For Hus, it was not to be. Despite the safe conduct offered by the emperor, He was taken prisoner by the pope and ordered to recant his heresy. Hus said he would gladly recant if someone could show him what his heresies were. He remained a prisoner, and was moved from cell to cell, from the bishop's palace to one monastery after another.

In June of 1415, the pope, John XXIII later called the anti-pope, was taken prisoner and excommunicated for all of his misdeeds. It was thought that Hus would be freed as he was an enemy of the errant pope, but this was not to be either. The council saw itself as the defender of orthodoxy. Its charge was not to persecute personalities but to defend the faith. Hus was brought before the council and asked to recant his heresies. He again refused maintaining that he was not a heretic. On July 6 he was taken to the cathedral, dressed in his priestly robes which were then torn from his body. His head was shaved erasing the priestly tonsure and a paper crown decorated with demons was put on his head. It was in this state that he was taken to the stake to be burned to death. On a pyre next to him, his writings were burned at the same time. By this act the flame joined the chalice as a symbol of resistance.

This was not the end of the story. Hus had his followers and Hus' death as a martyr galvanized them. The Hussites, Taborites and Horebites were three groups that emerged as the resistance to the council. The Hussites were primarily of the noble and middle classes retaining all the teachings of the church except those rejected by the bible. The Taborites was an apocalyptic group that arose from the lower classes. They rejected everything that was not found in scripture. The Horebites were similar to the Taborites but less apocalyptic and less radical. These three groups came together to formulate the Four Articles that became the basis of Bohemian resistance to the church. These articles stated:

1. The Word of God was to be preached freely throughout the kingdom.
2. Communion would be given in both kinds— that is that both the cup and the bread would be given to the laity.
3. The clergy should be deprived of its wealth and live in "apostolic poverty."
4. Gross and public sin, especially simony (the buying of indulgences), would be properly punished.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways this was really the beginning of the Protestant Reformation which emerged through the next century led by Martin Luther and John Calvin. During the Reformation, the flame of the martyrs burned again in 1553 when John Calvin ordered Michael Servetus to be burned at the stake for insisting

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<sup>1</sup> (Nov. 1987 Quest p. 2 from UU World Nov-Dec 1987)

<sup>2</sup> from Justo Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity Vol. 1 p. 352

that the scriptures proclaimed the unity and not the trinity of God. We proclaim Servetus to be the first real Unitarian martyr because of this. Like Hus, he was burned alive with his written treatise, "On the Unity of God" strapped to his thigh.

So why exactly do we use the chalice? There are a number of possible interpretations of the meaning of this symbol. Our previous pamphlet on the subject suggests:

"The primary object, the chalice is a sacred symbol to many religions for it reflects the virtue of sharing with all the contents of a common container.

Oil from which the flame appears within the chalice has been set aside amongst the elements of the earth to serve as a healing and binding force.

The flame signifies transcendence over superstition and fear. It also is a silent invitation to share the warmth of fellowship.

Furthermore the flame hovering above the chalice suggests the form of a cross, reminding us of our Unitarian and Universalist Christian roots.

An all-encompassing circle, at times used to enclose the chalice, poignantly declares that all the earth and its inhabitants are one."<sup>3</sup>

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, the "all-encompassing circle was enhanced with another circle, that from the Universalist symbol which was the large circle with a small cross offset in the bottom of its diameter. Hence the two circles overlapping one another.

We take a lot for granted when Sunday approaches. We wake up and choose whether or not to go to church. We expect this fellowship to be here for us regardless of our own efforts to keep it going. If we choose to come, we know that we may disagree with what is said from the pulpit and even argue our case. Nothing bad need come of our disagreements. We live in a very different time and place than those whose faith was tested to the limits of their humanity. We live in a very different place from many around the world who must practice their faith in secret or be persecuted. We come and light our chalice in freedom. At least today we do.

As we light our chalice we do so because we are a community of memory and hope. We light our chalice in remembrance of all that went before us to bring us to this day. And we light our chalice in observance of the faith we share which brings people together rather than tearing them apart. And even as we leave our sanctuary, our sacred space and this sacred time, we leave knowing that the flame of truth, that spark of divinity burns within us all. When we wear that chalice around our neck or on our lapel or tie, we do so to proclaim our faith and our freedom. And to remind ourselves of our story. May we deserve the faith and freedom that our forebears bequeathed to us. And may we preserve it to pass on to the generations to come.

May it ever be so.

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<sup>3</sup> By John R.B. Szala