

Growing Our Flame

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Growing our flame. . . What is this flame? How do we grow it? And why would we want to anyway?

The flame I speak of is, of course, symbolic. And it is many-faceted. We have before us, as we do every Sunday during worship, this literal flame. This little flame carries within it a great deal of meaning. Meaning that represents many of our deepest values and commitments.

As we light the chalice each Sunday, we often speak a few words touching on one or more aspects of that implicit meaning that it carries, as Lauren did this morning. One of the most concise and wide-ranging sets of words that I've encountered, which I have used occasionally in lighting the chalice, goes like this: "We light this chalice for the light of truth, for the warmth of love, and for the energy of action." The light of truth. The warmth of love. The energy of action.

Those three correspond roughly with three aspects of the flame of our free faith that I'd like to touch on this morning. Namely, the individual flame of the spirit that lives within each of us; the flame of our shared community, in which we express and live our love for one another; and the flame that we carry out into the world, providing a beacon of love, hope, and justice for those beyond our walls.

All of these, and more, are encompassed within this symbolic flame of our chalice. Many of you have heard, before, the story of the origins of the flaming chalice as a symbol of our faith. For those who haven't, I'd like to share a bit of it with you now. If you want to read more about it yourself, you can find the story in this pamphlet called "The Flaming Chalice" by Daniel Hotchkiss. There are copies available in the pamphlet rack in the foyer.

The chalice and the flame were brought together as a Unitarian symbol by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, in 1941. After fleeing the Nazi invasion of Paris in 1940, Deutsch settled in Portugal and met the Rev. Charles Joy, executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee. The USC was a new organization founded to assist Eastern European Unitarians, and especially Jews, who needed to escape Nazi persecution.

Joy asked Deutsch to create a symbol for the organization to use on its papers, "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of [the] work."

Thus, Hans Deutsch made his lasting contribution to the USC and, as it turned out, to Unitarian Universalism. With pencil and ink, he drew a chalice with a flame. The flaming chalice design was made into a seal for papers and a badge for agents moving refugees to freedom. In time it became a symbol of Unitarian Universalism all around the world.

This story reminds us that the symbol of a flaming chalice stood in the beginning for a life of service. Deutsch had never seen a Unitarian or a Universalist church or heard a sermon. What he had seen was faith in action – people who were willing to risk all for others in a time of urgent need.

And now, the flaming chalice, like our faith, stands open to receive new truths and meaning that pass the tests of reason, justice, and compassion.

So let me talk a little bit now about that individual flame or spark that each of us carries within our own heart. This is the flame of our individual spirit, representing the inherent worth and dignity that we each carry with us. This is the flame that we tend carefully, to keep it burning so that it can illuminate the spiritual path that we pursue. So it can illuminate the wisdom and truth and meaning that we encounter along the way.

There's a song in our hymnal, whose words are attributed to Gautama, the Buddha. It goes like this: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves; be your own confidence; hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp." [#184]

Each of us must seek out ways to tend that internal flame, to keep it alive, and burning brightly. That's what individual spiritual practice is about. It may mean meditating on a regular basis. It may mean journaling as a means of reflecting on the inner life. It may mean devotional reading. It may mean intentional service to others. We must each determine what fuel is most effective to keep our own flame blazing.

But simply focusing on ourselves, on our own individual flame, is not enough. That brings me to the flame of community. Albert Schweitzer once wrote, "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."

A caring community can do that. I have my flame. You have your flame. But this [the chalice] is our flame. It burns with the collective wisdom, warmth, and energy of all of us. It represents the renewal of spiritual health and grounding that is possible when we share of ourselves with one another. And it can be magical. I often remark at Christmas Eve, when we do our candle-lighting ritual, that igniting another's flame does not diminish our own. Caring begets caring. Love begets love. From you I receive. To you I give. Together we share, and from this we – all of us – live.

Just as there are many forms of individual spiritual practice, there are many ways to have our flames fed by the flame of our community. It may come through our regular practice of worship – whether it is words from a speaker that resonate, or a moving musical performance, or a touching experience shared during Joys and Sorrows. It may come through participating in our Small Group Ministry program, or Religious Education offerings. Or it may simply come through a smile or a kind word from a fellow member of the community.

Looked at in this way, participation in, and support of your religious community can be likened to investing in an insurance policy. When your light goes out and needs rekindling, there may be someone there to do that for you. But if you have pooled your resources of time, talent, and treasure with those of a whole community of people, and have nurtured and tended the flame of that community so that it is healthy, robust, blazing with spiritual vigor, then it will be there when you need it.

But it doesn't end there. We are not here merely to serve ourselves, either individually, or collectively as a community. I hope we have a larger commitment. A commitment to the world around us. To share the illumination, the warmth and love of our communal flame. To use its energy of action to carry the message and the reality of love, hope, and justice into the larger community beyond our walls.

There's a hymn in our new, blue hymnal supplement, called "The Fire of Commitment." We're not going to sing it this morning, but I would like to share one verse of it and the chorus:

From the dreams of youthful vision
comes a new prophetic voice.
Which demands a deeper justice
Built by our courageous choice.

When the fire of commitment
Sets our mind and soul ablaze
When our hunger and our passion
Meet to call us on our way

When we live with deep assurance
Of the flame that burns within
Then our promise finds fulfillment
And our future can begin.

As we look to the future, our purpose and our commitment are not simply to serve ourselves individually, or our nice little safe and insulated community. Our real, deeper, purpose and commitment are to serve the world and its future. To be a blessing to the world. In order to do that, we must kindle our individual flames, and the flame of our beloved community, oh yes. But not as ends in themselves, but as means to the larger purpose.

By nurturing our individual and communal flames, we generate the energy of action that can then be put to work for love and justice.

Unitarian Universalist minister David Domina, in a 1995 sermon, pointed out that the energy of action has a long history in our liberal religious tradition. Michael Servetus, way back in the sixteenth century, was so committed to furthering social justice and challenging the Roman Church's dogmatic presence that he was burned at the stake for alleged heresy. He *died* for what he believed. That's commitment.

It was *our* faith, through the likes of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, that fanned the flames of the American Revolution. Our Universalist forebears ordained Olympia Brown as minister in 1863, sixty years before women could vote in this country. In nineteenth century San Francisco, Thomas Starr King led local Unitarians in advocating adoption of the 14th and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution [granting full citizenship and voting rights to black people (at least the men!)] before their passage looked possible. And he invited black people to worship with white people, declaring nearly a century before the Supreme Court would do so, that separate is *not* equal. That is fire. That is action.

Since Rev. Domina expressed himself better than I ever could, I'd like to share some excerpts from his sermon on "The Energy of Action":

So what does *the energy of action* mean? Well, it means we have a heritage of doing and giving, not just saying or hearing. It

means an active open-mindedness, a respect for humankind, and a fervent, fiery confidence that we can make a difference through what we do.

In short, *the energy of action* means we, as Unitarian Universalists, have a deep, deep, duty. Our obligation is to keep the fire burning and to light it where it doesn't burn, always . . . Ours is a duty . . . to make a real difference in the lives of those around us. It is a duty to have an impact and to enrich the evolving history of all people, not to detract from it. . .

How do we fuel the Unitarian heritage and feed the flame? What must we do to pass on the candescence of our faith? How can we ensure that the best and most historical moments of our religion lie before us and not in our heritage, behind us?

Well, first we must commit. Nothing short of commitment will work. Ours is not a religion of comfort, nor is it a practice of ivory-tower idealism. . .

Second, we must share. We must pass on the dream of our faith and the heat of our passion for it. . .

How can we hope to pass on the fire of this ancestry by letting our buildings suffer from lack of attention or letting our children go with a little less than is needed for their religious instruction? How can we pass on the Unitarian Universalist dream if we have a bit too little money for the quality of worship we need to strengthen our togetherness in the cause of social justice? . . .

So we must share sacrificially. Money and time. Goals and ambitions. Ideas and actions. We must share, constantly, with each other and with others. If we stop, or if we share too little, the fire of our faith grows a bit dimmer. And untended, after a time, the fire dies to cold embers, waiting to be sparked and fanned again by someone else, having been left to die by each of us. . .

We must give time, talents, and treasures. We must give freely. We must be Unitarian Universalists to be agents of action, not to be *different*, or comfortable, and not just to belong. For us, this is a moral imperative. It is the thing for which we light our chalice each week. It is the energy of action.

So may it be.