

The Flaming Chalice

The flaming chalice is the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. Most Unitarian Universalist congregations begin their worship on Sunday mornings by lighting one in the form of a lamp or candle cradled within a wide-lipped vessel. But you will also find them out in the world, sometimes as three-dimensional objects, sometimes as two-dimensional artistic renderings. Many people wear chalice jewelry, some as a cue to prompt others to ask about Unitarian Universalism, some as a reminder to make their actions reflect their highest values. And some people mark their faith boldly with a chalice tattoo.

At its most literal level of meaning, the flaming chalice signals Unitarian Universalist identity. But it has other registers of meaning as well. It suggests the transformations that take place when we are held within religious community. When we light the chalice in worship, we illuminate a world that we feel called upon to serve with love and a sense of justice. The flame is what one of our beloved congregational hymns terms “The Fire of Commitment.”

Thus you will see the flaming chalice on stoles and banners at demonstrations against injustice. We also often light the chalice whenever we gather, be it at worship services, committee meetings, or board retreats. We appreciate the reminder that even the most basic work serves the larger mission.

In its setting in worship, lighting the chalice signals the entry of the gathered community into a sacred space. As a minister, when I light the flame, I like to think of the thousand or more congregations doing so at the same time. This helps me to enter the spirit of worship, which is intended to break down apparent barriers of time and place so that we, the congregation, can establish larger connections to the sacred, and to all other people of liberal religious faith who are gathering in the present, have gathered in the past, and will gather in the future. The rhythms and concerns of our everyday life remain, but they come to be held in a much larger context.

Sometimes readings or other words are used to connect the lighting of the chalice to the theme of worship, and often, the lighting of the chalice accompanies the reading of a congregation’s covenant. Our church covenants are the promises we make to each other that hold us together, across a diversity of beliefs, in our shared commitment to each other. The cup of the chalice is like the cradle that holds us in covenant.

Many congregations extinguish their chalice at the close of worship, sometimes with a reminder that those who have gathered together now carry the warmth of human community and the light of truth with them throughout the week. The fire is not so much extinguished as borne in the heart of each person, a new expression of what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “divine spark”—the manifestation of divine possibility within each human soul.

Many people are surprised to learn that lighting a chalice as a part of worship only found its way into Unitarian Universalist congregations in the early 1980s. But the path it took to reach the sanctuary is a very Unitarian Universalist one, a story that begins with Nazi resisters and ends with children in the religious education program.

Originally, the flaming chalice was a two-dimensional image stamped on documents created by the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) to help Jewish refugees escape Nazi persecution on the eve of World War II. The design had been hastily put together by the artist Hans Deutsch, himself a refugee. Deutsch was working at the direction of the USC’s director, Rev. Charles Joy, who believed that such a logo would make their paperwork look more official. Rev. Joy would later claim that the design was reminiscent of the lamps of holy oil used by the ancient Greeks and Romans on their altars, and that

the flame itself represented a spirit of helpfulness and sacrifice. There has always been a lack of clarity regarding Deutsch's original intentions, which were quite possibly not highly developed.

Eventually the chalice design formed the basis for the American Unitarian Association's official logo. After Universalism and Unitarianism merged in 1961, the symbol acquired two overlapping circles, to represent each of the two traditions. Many renditions of the chalice from the time of the merger display the chalice off-centered, a design copied from one popular among many Universalists in the 1950s. That symbol featured a large, open circle with a very small, off-centered cross inside. This signified how Universalism had grown out of the Christian tradition but was still held open to a world of other possibilities and even unanswered questions.

Interestingly, we aren't sure how the chalice as a two-dimensional artistic rendering transformed itself into the three-dimensional object used in worship. All evidence, though, suggests that the path leads through our children's religious education programs. Curricula used in the late seventies stressed the meaning of the chalice and encouraged the children to make chalices in different media. Eventually, those chalices morphed into objects that could be lit. The first documented uses of chalices in the main sanctuary are from Sundays on which the children and youth led worship and demonstrated their practice to the adult congregation. How wonderful that a children's church craft captured the imagination of an entire denomination.

I enjoy the chalice's lack of predetermined meaning. One way to understand Unitarian Universalism's distinctive character is to see it as an orthopraxy. Orthopraxy stresses that the most important religious bonds are formed out of justice actions and loving practice. This contrasts with orthodoxy, more common in the Christian traditions, which stresses correct and often homogeneous beliefs as the most important aspect of religion. The chalice was a symbol invented to represent courageous deeds that were already taking place, which was then developed by children in the cradle of love.

Questions for Reflection

What is the symbolism of the flaming chalice for you personally? If you have not reflected on this before, think about what the cup or bowl might mean, what the flame might mean, and what the two could mean together.

In what ways does the flaming chalice serve to illuminate your faith community's collective identity? How about your personal identity?

Do you have a personal practice that involves the flaming chalice? Do you have a personal representation of it that is important to you, such as jewelry or a tattoo or a chalice you use at home? What makes it special to you? What memories and values are associated with it?

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Resources

"Chalice Capers, Volume 1, 2, and 3" on *The Pamphlet: A Podcast Uncovering Unitarian Universalism's Hidden Histories*, pamphletpodcast.org/archive/

Pamela Baxter, *A Cup of Light: All About the Flaming Chalice*. Illustrated by Terry Stafford. A picture book for children. Skinner House Books, 2011.

Illuminations, a Unitarian Universalist app, uua.org/beliefs/illuminations. Illuminations has more than 350 chalice lighting readings, a virtual chalice lighter with several chalice options, and a Seven Principles Guide in English and Spanish, along with examples of the Principles in action.

Chalice art, logos, and other graphics, uua.org/communications/graphics

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