



**By Our Symbols Ye Shall Know Us
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Chalice Lighting Words

This is a season of many lights:

Today is the second Sunday of Advent,
A time when our Christian friends and neighbors might kindle
candles on a wreath or tree
as symbol of the coming of the Holy Child,
a symbol of God's love for humanity.

Hanukkah begins at sundown on December 19,
and is the time when our Jewish friends and neighbors might
kindle the candles of the Hanukkah menorah,
A symbol of heritage, of religious freedom,
and of a miracle that affirmed them.

Later this month the Winter Solstice,
A time when our more earth-centered friends and neighbors
might kindle
Lights or the Yule log in celebration of the return of the sun,
A symbol of rebirth and life,
of our deep connection with the cycles of nature.

And as December turns to January comes Kwanzaa,
a time when our African American friends and neighbors
might kindle the candles of the Kinara not in honor of religion,
but to honor the cultural values that make their people strong.

Today, we kindle the flame in our chalice,
bringing to life the symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith.
A symbol of our search for truth and meaning,
a symbol of our openness and community,
a symbol of our hope and love.

Readings

From Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, in “Man and His Symbols:”

"What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotation in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us. . .

A word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider ‘unconscious’ aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason. The wheel may lead our thoughts toward the concept of a ‘divine’ sun, but at this point reason must admit its incompetence; man is unable to define a ‘divine’ being. When, with all our intellectual limitations, we call something ‘divine,’ we have merely given it a name, which may be based on a creed, but never on factual evidence.”

“Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend.”
(20 – 21)

From Henri J.M. Nouwen in “Here and Now”

In my home country, the Netherlands, you still see many large wagon wheels, not on wagons, but as decorations at the entrances of farms or on the walls of restaurants. I have always been fascinated by these wagon wheels: with their wide rims, strong wooden spokes, and big hubs. These wheels help me to understand the importance of a life lived from the center. When I move along the rim, I can reach one spoke after the other, but when I stay at the hub, I am in touch with all the spokes at once.

To pray is to move to the center of all life and all love. the closer I come to the hub of life, the closer I come to all that receives its strength and energy from there. . . . What does the hub represent? I think of it as my own heart, the heart of God, and the heart of the world.

SERMON

The holiday season is a rich time for symbols. Everywhere we turn these days there are Christmas trees, manger scenes, angels, stars, menorahs, and, of course, Santa Claus. Last year a friend introduced me to a holiday symbol that was new to me: “the Kneeling Santa,” which shows the jolly man in the red suit communing with the Christ child. Most of the symbols associated with the holidays have layers of meaning that date back into the far reaches of time – and they have been variously interpreted over time. But as anyone who’s read the popular book “The DaVinci Code” knows, the process of interpretation and speculation about symbols continues to interest many people who respond to the process with scholarship and creativity.

I read The DaVinci Code last weekend, but that’s not the reason for this sermon. I simply thought that at this symbol-laden time of year, as we see for the first time how we will navigate the holidays together, it might be useful for us to explore the topic of symbols together.

Symbols are powerful.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung’s theories tell us that symbols evoke in us a real experience of something we may have never experienced personally. And because of this, symbols can be

used to manipulate us. Marketers know this. They know that by exposing us repeatedly to their “highly visible, easy-to-digest symbols and images” their message will actually begin to take precedence in our minds over our own direct experience, and thus we’ll make decisions not based in what we really know, but based in what they want us to think we know. It’s important to keep this in mind during the holidays, when many of us feel so much pressure to do more, buy more, and make the holidays somehow perfect.

Part of why symbols are so potent for us is because human brains favor images over most other sensory input. And symbols are a kind of image that is densely packed with meaning, an image that refers to a larger universe of meaning.

It’s also important for us to develop our awareness of symbols so that we can take advantage of the guidance they offer for our inner journey. For as the eminent religious scholar Mircea Eliade wrote, “Symbols myths and images are the very substance of the spiritual life; they are bridges between the world as we experience it and inner meaning.” And as German poet and philosopher (Johann Wolfgang von) Goethe wrote “In the symbol, the particular represents the general, not as a dream, not as a shadow, but as a living and momentary revelation of the unscrutable.” (quoted in J. E. Cirlot’s “A Dictionary of Symbols,” 1971, p. xxx) With these powers, symbols connect us to sources of understanding within us and between us. They also connect us to our religious history, and help us pass our spiritual heritage from generation to generation.

So what are the symbols in our lives?

Last month, we passed the fortieth anniversary of the death of President John F. Kennedy. I don’t know how it is

for you, but I have heard that most Americans of my generation and older, can, at the very mention of Kennedy’s name, call forth the image of where we were and what was happening when we heard he’d been shot. Despite all the unsavory truths about his personal behavior that have emerged in recent years, Kennedy’s death persists as a symbol for the end of the era when the majority of Americans had faith in their government. It’s a symbol for an end to innocence.

Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day is another symbol of this kind. Annually renewed by Presidential Proclamation on today’s date, December 7th, it calls us to remember the attack that began World War II, and the end of the last “good war,” – if, indeed, any war can be called good.

If you think about it, we’re surrounded by symbols every waking moment. We even wear them. Take this, for example (holding up wedding ring). Wedding rings are typically a symbol of the vows made on the day that two people marry, or, if our laws refuse to allow them marriage rights, on the day that they celebrate their committed partnership. Long after the celebration is over, the rings are a lasting reminder of the promises made.

I was impressed by the power of this symbol when my husband lost his wedding ring a few years ago. It was an accident – the ring had always been too big for him and one afternoon it simply fell off and dropped into deep water as he was out on a pier at a state park near our home in Washington. But even though I understood this, I was amazed by how angry and betrayed I felt. By the time we had a new ring made, the loss of this symbol had inspired some very powerful conversations about our marriage.

Where do symbols come from? According to Carl Jung, true symbols cannot simply be thought up – they appear when there is a need to express what thought cannot think of or what is only divined or felt.” (Anthony Storr, Oxford professor of psychiatry, in “The Essential Jung,” Princeton Univ Press, 1999) But even thought symbols can’t be fabricated, they do always have multiple meanings, and they can be appropriated, and their meanings changed.

Take the rainbow, for example. In the Biblical story of Noah and his ark, the rainbow is alluded to as a symbol of God’s covenant with Noah. The rainbow was sort of like God’s signature on the deal that gave humanity another chance. Today the symbol has another meaning: since about 1979, the rainbow has been used to represent gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community pride. I love this. I love it that the rainbow – God’s signature, if you will -- has become a symbol of human wholeness and acceptance of diversity.

The swastika is another symbol that’s been appropriated. It is an ancient, positive symbol used in many religions and cultures worldwide – for example, it is the symbol of Ganesha, the Hindu god with the head of an elephant, who is the god of luck and “opening the way.” Unfortunately, most of us know the swastika as a Nazi symbol.

In our recent UU Orientation class, I was asked about the symbol of the Flaming Chalice – which is a widely-accepted symbol of Unitarian Universalism. We, like many UU congregations, use it as a logo on our letterhead, and we also light the chalice as a part of our Sunday service ritual. On the cover of your hymnal you can see the version of the symbol used by our denomination, with the chalice set off-center inside two overlapping circles.

But this symbol was not always so familiar. Prior to the 1961 merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists, the Universalist symbol was a cross within a circle, and the Unitarians had had no common symbol. And when the newly-merged group published a hymnal in 1964, it had a tree symbol on its cover. So where did the Flaming Chalice come from? Remembering Carl Jung’s wisdom that new symbols only appear “when there is a need to express what thought cannot think of or what is only divined or felt,” we can intuit that something powerful was stirring when the Flaming Chalice was created.

And indeed, it was. *World War II and the Unitarian Service Committee’s tireless work to rescue refugees fleeing the Nazis are what brought the flaming chalice into being. Here’s what happened. Hans Deutsch was an Austrian artist who lived in Paris during the 1930’s. Deutsch’s critical cartoons of Adolph Hitler were widely distributed, and thus when the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, Deutsch abandoned all he had and fled.

He took refuge in Portugal and there he met the Reverend Charles Joy, executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). The Service Committee was new then, and its mission was to assist Eastern Europeans who needed to escape Nazi persecution. Charles Joy oversaw a secret network of couriers and agents.

Being a new and unknown organization was a special handicap in a world where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith was a matter of life and death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days. Joy asked Hans Deutsch to create a symbol for the Service Committee’s papers “to make them look official,” he

said. "to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work....."

And thus Hans Deutsch brought together the chalice and the flame into one symbol. Charles Joy described it as: a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice . . . This was in the mind of the artist. The fact, however, that it remotely suggests a cross . . . also has its merit. We do not limit our work to Christians. Indeed, at the present moment, our work is nine-tenths for the Jews, yet we do stem from the Christian tradition, and the cross does symbolize Christianity and its central theme of sacrificial love." (From *, source is www.uua.org/chalice.html)

So that's where the symbol came from. But for many years, it was only used by the Service Committee. Churches didn't use it in print or kindle its flame on Sundays. According to UU minister and scholar Mark Belletini, it wasn't until 1980 that the flaming chalice emerged into our worship life. That year it was used at the Service of the Living Tradition at our UU General Assembly, which is a big and solemn event each year, a service that honors our ministers. And even though each UU congregation is self-governing, and no one encouraged us to adopt the practice of chalice-lighting, the ritual spread like a house afire – if you'll pardon the pun -- and today, most UU congregations light a chalice during their services.

So what need for meaning was emerging among Unitarian Universalists during the 1980s? What did we need to express that our minds could not think of, that we felt but could not articulate?

Well, back at the time of merger the Unitarians had unveiled a study called *The Free Church in a Changing World*, which revealed an enormous and increasing diversity of theology among us. The 60s and 70s with their war protests and civil rights actions, and the rise of feminist theology in the 70s and early 80s, gave rise to even more pluralism, and also to conflict within our congregations and our wider association. And in the mid-80s we began, along with the culture at large, to focus more on spirituality, an area we had long neglected.

Thus the Flaming Chalice symbol in print and in worship emerged from a context of pluralism, change and conflict. It arose to aid us in expressing our commonality, our unity, and our spirituality.

Ironically, the Flaming Chalice, like all symbols, has multiple meanings. It is a screen upon which we may project our needs and impressions. It's made up of two ancient symbols – the chalice and the flame – and, if you are interpreting the version of it that's on our hymnal, two more ancient symbols appear: the circle, and the mandorla – which is the almond-shaped area created when two circles overlap.

The flame has, over time, symbolized transcendence, and transformation, and a lamp has signified intelligence and the spirit. (Cirlot pp. 105, 108, 176) The chalice . . . is also a symbol of transcendence – it frequently takes the form of two halves of a sphere placed back-to-back. In this, the lower part of the sphere opens to the spiritual powers, while the upper part of the sphere closes over and symbolizes the earth. (Cirlot p. 43)

The chalice can represent the Christian chalice of communion wine, or the loving cup shared amongst all

members of a community. It is also a symbol of receptivity – as is the Buddhist monk’s begging bowl.

I often think of the flame as the divine spark present in each of us, that burns most brightly and fully when supported by and giving its light and warmth within the chalice of community -- but other interpretations are equally valid. That’s the gift of the Flaming Chalice – it offers itself to our religious imagination, even when we don’t have clear words to describe what it means to us.

That is, after all, the purpose of symbols – they rise up in our awareness to help us with concepts that are beyond the range of our human understanding, and to grasp meanings that we cannot articulate.

Like during the holidays, for example, which can be a time not only packed with symbols, but also with stress, memories both joyful and sad, and with that vague sense that we really ought to feel jollier, more generous, and more at peace than we actually do.

Paying attention to the symbols that are catching our attention at this time of year is a practice that can help us both deepen our self-understanding, and stay grounded. For example, there was a wonderful older man in my previous congregation who’s favorite holiday symbol was Scrooge. Truly, this man was a bit curmudgeonly, and he loved saying, “Bah, humbug!” but he also was one of the kindest and most generous people I’ve ever known. Scrooge was, I believe, his reminder to balance his life.

I also know many UUs love the symbol of the Christmas tree, because it seems more secular than other symbols of this season. But it has deeper meanings as well.

Listen to what Hans Biederman’s Dictionary of Symbolism says about trees:

Rooted in the Earth but with their branches pointing to the Heavens, trees are, like humans themselves, creatures of two worlds, intermediaries between ABOVE AND BELOW. Not only were specific trees or an ENTIRE GROVE revered in many ancient civilizations as the abodes of supernatural beings, but also the tree was widely seen as the AXIS MUNDI around which the cosmos is organized. . . (Dictionary of Symbolism Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them. p. 351)

Biederman goes on to talk about the tree in Christian iconography, including the Cross as World Tree and Virgin Mary the “tree of life.” He does mention the evergreen tree as a symbol of rebirth in the midst of midwinter, too. But as you can see, there are multiple spiritual and religious meanings available if you find yourself drawn to the symbol of the Christmas tree.

Personally, in recent years, the holiday symbol that has drawn my attention is the reindeer. Part of this is, I believe, because I know that reindeer are native to Finland, and my ethnic heritage is, in part, Finnish. But researching reindeer symbolism on the Internet turned up a whole host of meanings that spoke to me, including the reindeer as a symbol of persistence, and resoluteness, and an interpretation from a teacher in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition who wrote, “Deer are shy by nature, and their presence in a landscape represents a dimension where fear is unknown.” I also love the playfulness of Santa’s reindeer and their magic ability to be in many places at once (otherwise, how would Santa deliver all those toys??). I need that at this time of year!

What are the symbols that are emerging into your awareness these days? Which ones are catching your attention? Is it the lights of Christmas that draw you? The candles of the Hanukkah menorah? The evergreens and holly? The Holy Child?

Symbols are powerful; they connect us to our religious history, to deep sources of meaning within us and between us, and help us pass our spiritual heritage from generation to generation. When I was a child I used to take my mother's silver Service Committee pin, the one with the flaming chalice pin, and hold it up to the mirror. I don't remember what I thought it meant, but I knew it was a real and concrete symbol of something to do with my very hard-to-describe religion. And I longed to wear it the way my friends wore their crosses and Stars of David.

Symbols like the Flaming Chalice, like the symbols of the holiday season, offer themselves to our religious imagination. May we pay attention to the symbols rising up in our awareness this season, and every season, and may they help us find our way on our spiritual journeys, inspire us all to deeper encounters with our faith, and guide us as we seek to truly live our faith.

Amen.