

## We Light This Chalice

"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." (Albert Schweitzer as cited in the 'Chalice Lightings' section of the UU Hymnbook).

At the opening of Unitarian Universalist worship services, many congregations light a flame inside a chalice. The flaming chalice combines two archetypes—a drinking vessel and a flame. Some versions surround the chalice and flame with two circles representing the joining of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961. The chalice that we light at UCN includes the two circles while the chalice symbol that we use on our website has the chalice superimposed on a Canadian maple leaf.

As a religious symbol, the chalice and flame can reflect many different meanings. Dan Hotchkiss in his pamphlet "The Flaming Chalice" describes some of the historical meaning associated with the chalice and flame and provides a history of its development as a UU symbol.

"The chalice used by Jesus at his last Passover seder became the Holy Grail sought by the knights of Wales and England. Jan Hus, Czech priest and forerunner of the Reformation, was burned at the stake for proposing, among other things, that the communion chalice be shared with the laity. More recently, feminist writer Riane Eisler has used the chalice as a symbol of the "partnership way" of being in community. Sharing, generosity, sustenance, and love are some of the meanings symbolized by a chalice."

As a sacrificial fire, flame has been a central symbol for the world's oldest scriptures, the Vedic hymns of India. Today, lights shine on Christmas and Hanukkah, eternal flames stand watch at monuments and tombs, and candles flicker in cathedrals, temples, mosques, and meeting houses. A flame can symbolize witness, sacrifice, testing, courage, and illumination.

The chalice and the flame were brought together as a Unitarian symbol by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, in 1941. Living in Paris during the 1930s, Deutsch drew critical cartoons of Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, he abandoned all he had and fled to the South of France, then to Spain, and finally, with an altered passport, into Portugal. There, he met the Reverend Charles Joy, executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). The Service Committee was new, founded in Boston to assist Eastern Europeans, among them Unitarians as well as Jews, who needed to escape Nazi persecution. From his Lisbon headquarters, Joy oversaw a secret network of couriers and agents.

Deutsch was most impressed and soon was working for the USC. . . . The USC was an unknown organization in 1941. This was a special handicap in the cloak-and-dagger world, where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith could mean life instead of death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days. Joy asked Deutsch to create a symbol for their papers "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work.... When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important.

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.

Chalice lightings at most UU congregations are accompanied by a reading which the service leader can select from hundreds available or which the service leaders or ministers compose themselves. Along with the Schweitzer quote above, a favourite at UCN is the following, from the Passover haggadah:

May the light we now kindle

inspire us to use our powers  
to heal and not to harm,  
to help and not to hinder,  
to bless and not to curse,  
to serve you, Spirit of freedom.

And our services are concluded by extinguishing the chalice  
flame, usually with the following by Elizabeth Selle Jones:

We extinguish this flame but not  
the light of truth,  
the warmth of community,  
or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts until  
we are together again.