

Rise Up O Flame

Readings: 'The Country' by Billy Collins

'Afraid of the Dark' by Andrew Pakula

Today we'll be journeying through time as I tell you the history of the chalice. Let's climb into our time machine and set the dial for the early years of the fifteenth century. Our destination is Prague, Central Europe in what was then Bohemia.

We step out of our time machine and onto the campus of Prague University. We wander into a lecture hall. The lecturer that day is Jan Hus, a Catholic priest and the Dean of the Philosophy Faculty. He was speaking about his ideas for reforming the church. This was before the Reformation, so the Roman Catholic Church was the church in Western Europe. Father Hus thought it should be doing things differently. Somehow, Hus had come across a banned book written by an English dissenter who challenged the practices of the Catholic Church. This was before the printing press, so books, especially books about dissenting theological views, were scarce. Hus read this book and adopted many of the ideas it contained.

Hus was inspired and called the church to reform. He believed that the mass should be said in local language, in Czech, not the Latin that few people understood as was done then. He also believed that the congregation should eat the bread and drink from the chalice full of wine during the communion ritual. At that time, the congregation ate only the bread. Only the priest drank the wine. Hus argued that the church was everyone who attended and practiced; in his day, many thought that the church was just the clergy. He opposed religious crusades of his day and the selling of indulgences to pay for them. Indulgences, in Catholic practice, are a way to reduce the punishment for sins. Indulgences can include saying prayers and acts of service. In the era of Hus, indulgences fueled corruption – the rich were able to buy indulgences and purchase their way out of punishment and purgatory. Selling indulgences enriched the church and their favored monarchs. The practice of selling indulgences angered many of the early reformers, including Jan Hus and Martin Luther. Perhaps Hus was attacking one of these practices in the lecture we hear.

When we leave the lecture hall and speak to others, we learned that Hus is wildly popular among the Czech people. His proposed reforms, uniting them across class divisions and add to a growing nationalist movement. The chalice became the symbol of those who supported Hus. It was not a chalice with a flame in it, just a chalice.

As those of you who know a bit about the history of religious dissent can guess, the story of Jan Hus does not end well. In 1413, a church council ordered that his writings be burned. The following year, he was imprisoned. Several months later, he was tried for heresy. He told his accusers that he would recant

his beliefs if they could show him proof in the Bible that his beliefs were wrong. They did not engage that line of argument. He died for his beliefs. He was burned at the stake in 1415.¹

Eventually, in some cases centuries after his death, Hus won his arguments. About fifty years after his death, the Church reinstated the practice of laity drinking from the chalice filled with wine during communion.² A century after that, the church abolished the selling of indulgences. The Roman Catholic Church started saying mass in the local language in the 1960s.

Now, we're stepping back in our time machine to jump a few centuries into the future. As we speed across time, we see Hus's legacy unfold in fast forward before us. We see that Hus's martyrdom led his followers to form their own church, known as the Hussites or the Chalice People. They were among the first Protestants before that was the word used for religious reformers. They opposed violence, political repression, the death penalty, and refused conscription into the military. They opposed transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ at Communion. When they served communion, the congregation ate the bread and drank wine from the chalice.

As the centuries speed along, we see the Hussites factionalize and splinter. Hus's religious heirs call themselves the Utraquists, the Union of Bohemian Brethren, Taborites, Oberites, and many other names. There are inter-group fights, religious wars, and antagonisms and agreements with the Roman Church. Many of these groups fade away because of poor alliances and religious repression. As we travel across the centuries, we see that the only Hussite group that survives until the present is the Moravian Brethren Church, a small Protestant church with about 750,000 followers globally. Their church motto, might speak to all of us today. It is "In Essentials, Unity; In Nonessentials, Liberty; In All Things, Love."³

Notice, that we as Unitarian Universalists are the descendants of the Hussites. Jan Hus is not our spiritual ancestor. So how did we end up with his symbol as our own?

For that we will need to jump back into our time machine. Now, we are arriving in Portugal in 1941. We are all crowded into the Lisbon office of the Reverend Charles Joy, a Unitarian minister who was serving as the European commissioner of the Unitarian Service Committee. He was tasked with assisting refugees and other victims of the Second World War, these included Czech Unitarians, Jews, artists, dissidents, and others. Dan Hotchiss describes the context and the challenge, "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

¹ My source for the history of Jan Huss and the Hussites is MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *The Reformation: A History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Pages 36-38.

² 'Communion under Both Kinds.' *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1914. Retrieved from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04175a.htm>

³ *Moravian Church in North America*. Retrieved from <http://www.moravian.org/>

days." The USC issued travel documents to those fleeing the war who had lost their documents along the way. These travel papers certified that the refugees were safe for resettlement. They needed to look trustworthy. They needed to look official. They needed a logo.

Joy needed a logo, so he asked the artist Hans Deutsch to design one. Deutsch was born in Austria and had been living in Paris during Hitler's rise to power. He had published cartoons critical of Hitler, so when France was invaded, he fled to neutral Portugal. There, he began working with the Unitarian Service Committee.

A while later, we watch Hans Deutsch return with his proposed logo. He borrowed that old Czech chalice, a symbol of resistance and freedom, and adapted it for this new era and new challenge. He added a flame to the chalice. The symbol that Deutsch designed was a flaming chalice logo, not dissimilar from the one on the front of your order of service.

Reflecting later, Joy said that he 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."

Communication was poor in those days. It would have taken too long for Joy to get official approval of the new logo from the American headquarters of the Unitarian Service Committee. He decided to seek forgiveness rather than permission. Joy approved of Deutsch's logo and started using the symbol on official documents. He wrote back to headquarters, "I have had it made up into a seal, not because I have any idea of forcing this upon the committee without consulting them, but because these things cost very little here, and at least it will serve as temporarily expedient." He then went on to explain the symbolism, "Personally I like it very much. It is simple, chaste and distinctive. I think it might well become the sign of our work everywhere. It represents, as you see, 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."

Joy hoped that the Unitarian Service Committee might make the chalice the symbol of their work. That hope proved to be too modest. That flaming chalice logo became a symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee, and then, after consolidation, the Unitarian Universalist Association.

There are a few ironies in this story. First, Deutsch, the man who gave us the flaming chalice logo, was not a Unitarian. There is no record that he ever attended a Unitarian service. And yet, he gave us our symbol. He admired our religious commitment to save refugees and other victims of the Second World War. He wrote, "I am not what you may actually call a believer. But if your kind of life is the profession of your faith—as it is, I feel sure—then religion, ceasing to be magic and mysticism, becomes confession to

practical philosophy and—what is more—to active, really useful social work. And this religion—with or without a heading—is one to which even a ‘godless’ fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, Yes!”⁴

Now, let us climb back into our time machine and return to the present day, as we journey back to the present we see the flaming chalice turn from a logo into a ritual. The Unitarian Service Committee and then later the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee had the chalice logo for decades before kindling a chalice flame became a common practice in worship. Children’s classes, youth groups, and women’s small groups were lighting a chalice flame by the early 1960s. The first time that a chalice was lit in worship was in 1965, by youth at the Christmas Eve service at West Shore Unitarian Church outside Cleveland, Ohio.⁵ From there, the practice spread, usually starting in children’s religious education classes or women’s groups before migrating into the sanctuary and becoming a ritual for the whole congregation. It is appropriate that most Sundays it is our children and youth who lead this ritual for us.

From our time machine, we see that by the 1970s, the chalice was becoming widely understood as a symbol of our faith. The first time the chalice was lit at a General Assembly was in 1984. General Assembly is the national gathering of Unitarian Universalists held annually. This June, it will be in Columbus, Ohio. I hope you consider attending – there is something so powerful about gathering with thousands of other Unitarian Universalists. I also hope you consider supporting our youth group who are furiously fundraising to attend. I attended a General Assembly when I was 16. It was a transformative experience for me and quite literally changed the trajectory of my life. One of the youth group’s fundraisers is the second Sunday lunch. In return for washing the dishes, the keep any profits once the lunch makers are reimbursed. If you are able, please consider donating as you make your way through the lunch line in a few minutes.

And now, our time machine makes its way back to 2016. Welcome back to the present. That was quite a journey. What have we learned on our journey?

While we learned that the history of the chalice as a religious symbol is long, lighting a chalice at the beginning of worship and other gatherings is relatively new among us. Why did it catch on so quickly? That is a testament to the power of ritual and the power of symbol. Lighting a chalice at the beginning of worship, the beginning of classes, the beginning of meetings is a uniquely Unitarian Universalist practice.

⁴ My sources for the World War Two history of the chalice are:

Hotchkiss, Dan. ‘The Flaming Chalice.’ *Unitarian Universalist Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/chalice/flaming-chalice>

Hotchkiss, Dan. ‘Wartime Origins of the Flaming Chalice.’ *UU World*. May/June 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/wartime-origins-the-flaming-chalice>

Kimball, Noreen. ‘The Healing Cup: The Story of the Flaming Chalice.’ *Unitarian Universalist Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/5963.shtml>.

Ross, Warren R. *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001. Pages 87-90.

⁵ Roberts, Ralph Yeager. ‘December 24.’ *Unitarian Universalist Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/image/december-24>

No one else does this—and nearly every Unitarian Universalist community does this. I have visited about a dozen congregations over the last decade and a chalice has always been lit at the beginning of the service. It is the only weekly ritual we have that is only ours.

Lighting a chalice is something that binds us together, across geographic distances and divisions and across all of the diversity and divisions within each congregation. The flaming chalice binds us together, becomes the symbol on the front of our order of service, an insignia on our jewelry, the design on our coloring pages because it is a rich symbol. The cup and fire are rich symbols.

The chalice cup is brimming with meanings. What does it mean to you? The chalice can be the Christian communion cup of Jan Hus, a cup that everyone can drink from and share. It can be the cup placed on Greek and Roman alters, as Charles Joy writes. It can be the cup of community, the cup of connection, the cup of compassion. The chalice cup could mean so many things.

The flame of the chalice is also full of meaning. What does it mean to you? It could represent helpfulness and sacrifice. That's what Charles Joy believed. It can symbolize the light of truth, the warmth of community, and the fire of commitment. Those words were said by the last congregation I served every Sunday when they lit the chalice. The flame could represent the religious martyrs, Jan Hus and so many others, whose commitment to the truth as they understand it led to their death, often by being burned alive for heresy. It could be the beacon of hope that guided refugees and now guides us toward justice and radical hospitality. It could mean intellectual and religious freedom, the torch we carry to light our way as we seek the truth. The chalice flame can mean so many things.

And one of the beautiful things about a symbol worth having is that it can mean all of those things at once. The chalice cup and flame can hold everything that we wish it to mean. As we lit the chalice this morning, what did it mean to you? Whatever meaning it holds for you, I would imagine that it's a different meaning for the person sitting beside you or behind you. That is the sign of a good symbol, a good ritual. It holds complexity. It doesn't mean one thing and it won't mean one thing. We don't have to agree on what it means before we light the chalice, we do it – and revel in the reality that it can hold as many meanings as we want to give it.

As we close, let us take a moment to look at our chalice flame. What does it mean for you? What might it grow into meaning if we jump ahead in our time machine and see Unitarian Universalists lighting the chalice decades from now?

May the flame be a beacon of truth and freedom.

May we always know the warmth of community.

May we carry forward our legacy of resistance and compassion.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.