

The Story of the Flaming Chalice: The Cup and the Flame

In 1941, almost seventy years ago—before many of you were born, before I was born—World War II was beginning in Europe. The Nazis were invading and occupying more and more countries, and the people who were able to get out were leaving their homes, moving to places not yet occupied by the Germans, trying to get out of harm's way. Many of these refugees were people who were being persecuted by the Nazis: Jews, gypsies, gay people, and artists, intellectuals, politicians, freedom fighters who opposed the Nazi rise to power. It was a very dangerous time.

The Unitarian Service Committee (USC) had set up an office in Lisbon, in Portugal, where the port was still open, because they wanted to help people escape. “Disguises, signs, and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means to freedom in those days” (Hotchkiss, “The Flaming Chalice” UUA pamphlet).

USC was a new organization, not well known. They needed a logo, some official-looking symbol, to stamp on the documents they were providing so that the refugees would know who they were. Eventually, as their reputation grew, this symbol became recognized as a sign that whoever carried it could be trusted.

Charlie Clemens, the president of the UUSC, explained how the first USC logo came about: “The flaming chalice was first seen in April 1941 in the refugee camps in France as the symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee. It was designed by a Jewish refugee, Hans Deutsch, and commissioned by Rev. Charles Joy, who believed the refugees we served in the midst of Nazi and Vichy informers needed a symbol to know that they were in safe hands. Rev. Joy believed they needed a symbol of hope...” ([uusc.org/about our logo](http://uusc.org/about_our_logo)).

Hans Deutsch was an artist from Austria who had lived in Paris in the 1930's and drawn cartoons critical of Adolf Hitler. When Paris fell to the Nazis, he fled to the South of France, then to Spain, and finally to Lisbon. There he met Rev. Joy, who was overseeing a secret network of agents and couriers. Soon Deutsch was working for the USC.

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 the police, it is important that it look important" (Hotchkiss).

Deutsch drew a chalice with a flame. Later he wrote to Joy, "There is something that urges me to tell you...how much I admire your utter self-denial [and] readiness to serve, to sacrifice all, your time, your health, your well being, to help, help, help. 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...active, really useful social work...

"The story of Hans Deutsch reminds us that the symbol of the flaming chalice stood in the beginning for a life of service. When Deutsch designed the chalice, he had never seen a Unitarian or 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" (Hotchkiss).

Today the flaming chalice is the official logo of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. This morning many of the more than one thousand UU congregations in the United States will light a flaming chalice, symbol of our religion, to begin their worship services.

Last summer when I was unpacking some of the boxes from my days in seminary, I found the green chalice stand you see on our table today. I brought it to the Worship Associates Committee and invited them to consider incorporating this symbol of our faith into our worship services.

How many flaming chalices can you count in this room? [We counted eleven different images of the chalice, and we told each other some stories about these images.]

The stained glass chalice in the window was made by the Rev. David Grimm, the first minister at the UU Fellowship of Northern Westchester in Mount Kisco, where my husband Paul and I signed the book 25 years ago.

The quilt that hangs in our meetinghouse includes a square with a flaming chalice. In the front of the worship room is a mosaic which dates from the time the building was purchased and first renovated. It is made from local stones and chips of tile and includes the shape of a flaming chalice. In the stairwell that looks out over the front of the building, a small window has a flaming chalice design made by some of our young people.

The minister's stole has a chalice design, and it is also on the hymnals and on the order of service. Our newsletter's new logo is a chalice in the shape of a cup with a question mark for a flame.

Whenever you light the chalice, remember that it is a symbol of your religion, just as the cross is a symbol of the Christian religion and the Star of David is a symbol of the Jewish religion. Ask your parents and teachers here to help you answer the question, "What is Unitarian Universalism?" so when someone asks you what your religion is, you can say that you are a Unitarian Universalist and you can say what it means to you. [Ask their parents to stand. Ask their teachers and the RE co-directors to stand.]

There is another flaming chalice story, much older. It is also a story of sacrifice and hope. In the early 1400's, a Czech Catholic priest named Jan Hus began to read the Bible to his congregation in the vernacular and to offer them the cup of communion wine, the chalice, as well as the bread during communion. The church was rich and arrogant, and her priests were jealous of their power. They alone could read the Latin Bible, which was the sanctioned translation. They alone could receive the cup as well as the bread. Hus was a reformer and an egalitarian. He believed that the common people were as holy as the priests, that God did not intend for the priesthood to be a special, elevated class. Eventually Hus was declared a heretic, and when he refused to recant, he was burned at the stake.

His followers combined the chalice he wanted to share and the fire that was the price he paid into a symbol, a flaming chalice, and continued his practices. Eventually they helped launch a rebellion against the Catholic Church that lasted more than a hundred years. "Through the intervening centuries, the symbol has persisted with the Czechs, and in 1968, when the Soviet Army entered Prague, flaming chalices appeared as graffiti throughout the city. They were a symbol of freedom and equality" (Grace H. Simons, "The Flaming Chalice," sermon, August 26, 2007).

No one can say whether Hans Deutsch knew of this earlier flaming chalice or not (ibid).

The meaning of the flaming chalice, the symbolism it evokes, is different for every Unitarian Universalist. In keeping with our tradition of openness to new truth and to each individual's understanding and interpretation, there is no official doctrine about what the logo means. It is not required by anyone. Our use of the flaming chalice here is intended to unite us with other Unitarian Universalists and to provide us with a ritual that acknowledges that connection.

Each person creates his and her own meaning, and for me the meanings are fluid. Today I want to share some of those meanings with you and invite you to share your associations with me and the rest of the congregation. So. The cup is a container, a vessel for food or drink. You can make a cup with your hands. It holds something precious, something you don't want to escape through your fingers. Water when you're thirsty. Food when you're hungry. Hands offer sustenance to those we love and also to the stranger at our gates. Here. Help yourself to this nourishment.

Chalice is an elevated word, ancient, sacred. I value the resonance with Christianity and with Roman and Greek practice. And it's just a cup. Something to carry water and bread, the food of life. Handed around a table, passed among the guests. Here, take this.

For me the chalice is a symbol of hospitality and of abundance. We have something precious here, something worthy to give away, to share with the starving world.

Someone asked me recently what we can do to change the hearts of the right wing politicians, the radio talk show hosts, the mobs at the town meetings. "How do you counter such irrationality, such hate?" Build up trust. Be trustworthy. Build up civility. Be civil. Build up love. Be loving. Offer the cup of your faith to the world.

For me, the fire is warmth. It is passion. It is wisdom and strength, knowledge and power. Fire breaks through, consumes, burns clean. It is commitment and compassion. The ultimate fire is the fire of love.

The cup contains the fire. It burns steady and bright, a beacon of hope. Without the cup the fire could flare out of control. Without the fire, the cup is just a container, a vessel. Together they hold each other in balance. The cup lifts up the fire. The fire settles into the cup. Fire of commitment. Cup of hospitality. Fire of compassion. Cup of community. Fire of wisdom. Cup of universal sharing.

As we set out together on another year of our congregational journey, let us remember the day we first came to this place and honor the meanings of the flaming chalice, a symbol of our religious faith.

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For the Fourth Unitarian Society of Westchester

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