



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

# The chalice flame

Alix Geard © 18 August 2024

Why do we light a chalice in our services? It's a strange concept, when you think about it. If it's a cup, then ceremonial cups are usually for water or wine, not flame. How did it get started?

Today I'm splitting my musing into 2 parts. One, now, is about what we know of the history of the flaming chalice. Later, I'll talk through an interpretation of the lit chalice, using some of the imagery associated with it. I invite you to explore with me and find what resonates for you. This is a little long, so settle in.

First for some history. When I asked myself about the history of the chalice lighting and set out to find some answers, I didn't expect to learn that the Unitarian Universalist practice of chalice lighting was probably introduced during my lifetime.

The Unitarian Universalist Association based in the United States publishes a pamphlet called "[The Flaming Chalice](#)". It says "*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*".

I took this at face value when I found it. Unitarians in the United Kingdom, however, have assured me that, although that might be correct for US Unitarian Universalists, it doesn't match their experiences in the UK. They remember chalice lightings in their congregations in the 1970s, a decade earlier.

Before that, the flaming chalice seems to have been a 2-dimensional image. It was the symbol the Unitarians brought to the merger with Universalists that formed the North American UUs. How did the Unitarians get it?

That goes back to World War 2, when a refugee artist called Hans Deutsch - in some accounts described as having drawn unflattering cartoons of Adolf Hitler - made the emblem for the newly-formed Unitarian Service Committee. The Unitarian Service Committee was founded in mid-1940 to assist European refugees endangered by Nazi persecution. If you remember the opening sequence of the film "Casablanca", the open port that refugees tried to reach so they could leave for America was Lisbon, in Portugal. The Unitarian Service Committee - the USC - had people in Lisbon.

I'll read here from an article in UUWorld by Dan Hotchkiss titled "[Wartime origins of the flaming chalice](#)":

*Many of the refugees fled without the identification papers they needed to cross borders, so the Lisbon office concentrated especially on helping them obtain replacement papers. [USC director the Rev Charles] Joy introduced an innovation: travel documents issued by the USC itself. "It may amuse you a bit," he wrote to the Boston office of the USC, "to know that we are now issuing navicerts to pass emigrants to the new world through the British blockade. We are certifying that they are politically safe and sound."*

*Joy believed these documents needed a seal. He asked Hans Deutsch, an Austrian refugee artist working in Lisbon, to create one. The result was essentially the flaming chalice as we know it now.*

*What did the flaming chalice mean to its creator? We have only Joy's report to Boston, January 31, 1941:*

*'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. In ancient and medieval art this chalice is frequently found, and the design itself, modernized and stylized, though it is, reminds one of the signs seen on the old monastic manuscripts. This was in the mind of the artist.'*



There's another account of this in an essay called "[The Flaming Chalice](#)", from Harvard University's Pluralism Project. This telling calls back to the Hussite Unitarians in Bohemia and draws parallels with the Underground Railroad that helped enslaved people in America escape to freedom:

*The flaming chalice officially became a Unitarian symbol during World War II, but it had long been a symbol of religious liberty and political resistance in the face of*

*oppression throughout Europe. During the Middle Ages, when only clergy were allowed to drink from the communion cup, a priest from Prague named Jan Hus defied the Catholic Church by serving his congregation both the bread and the wine, effectively declaring, as Unitarian Universalists do today, that all people have equal access to the divine. After his death, Hus' followers continued to share the full Communion with one another in secret and took up a flaming chalice as their symbol.*

*During World War II, the Reverend Charles Joy, Director of the Unitarian Service Committee, asked his friend Hans Deutsch to create a symbol that would represent the spirit of their work. At the time, the Unitarian Service Committee, a rescue and relief operation, was helping Unitarians, Jews, and other persecuted groups escape the Nazis. Since Nazi informers were numerous, Reverend Joy felt refugees needed "a symbol of hope" to assure them they were in good hands as they traveled to safety in a network much like the Underground Railroad. The organization began using the symbol in French refugee camps and soon it was understood that anyone carrying a note with a flaming chalice could be trusted. Sympathizers would draw the symbol in the dirt outside their home as a signal to those in need of a place to stay: a light in the darkness.*

*Near the end of the war, the Universalist Service Committee was established and the two organizations began working together on joint Unitarian-Universalist relief programs. After the war, the flaming chalice, ensconced in a circle, became the emblem of Unitarianism. At the time, the traditional Universalist logo was similar: a cross within a circle. When the two denominations merged in 1961, they symbolized their union by combining the symbols of their faith: the flaming chalice, in the shape of a cross, standing tall within both circles.*

*The official symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association was designed to be a "visual representation of a modern and dynamic faith" and intentionally open to interpretation. As its history reveals, it can be seen as a communion cup available to all, a symbol of religious freedom, or light in the darkness. For Reverend Joy, it was "a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice."*

The UUA website goes on to say that "*Unitarian Universalists today have many different interpretations of the flaming chalice,*" - surprise, surprise - "*including the light of reason, the warmth of community, and the flame of hope.*"

And finally, 2 of the theories about how the image became an object and how we started lighting those objects are that the minister of a mid-century Unitarian community had an actual antique lamp that he used in services, and that children's classes run alongside services had them making representations of the flaming chalice in clay or other materials, which then moved into the service itself.

In my search for the history of the practice of chalice lighting I found several stories and different possibilities. The chalice might be a cup we share, or it might be a lamp from antiquity. The flame might be real illumination, or something more metaphorical. The

symbols might call back to the origins of the Unitarian movement, or look forward to the shared work of building community and setting aside time to reflect. All of these images can be meaningful. Whichever meanings speak most clearly to you, the process of lighting and extinguishing our chalice marks the beginning and end of a special kind of sacred space we set aside.

[Susan J Ritchie wrote that:](#)

*“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.”*

## Part 2

Friends, may the light of truth guide our hearts, the warmth of community embrace our souls, and the fire of commitment inspire our actions. Today, we gather around the symbolic flame of the chalice, a sacred vessel that represents the core values of Unitarian Universalism - the light of truth, the warmth of community, and the fire of commitment.

The Chalice flame holds profound symbolism that resonates with the essence of who we are as Unitarian Universalists.

First and foremost, it represents the light of truth, a guiding force that encourages us to seek understanding and wisdom in our individual journeys and collective endeavors. In a world often clouded by misinformation and half-truths, the light of truth serves as a beacon drawing us to engage in continuous exploration and discovery. Just as the chalice flame illuminates our sacred space, so too does the pursuit of truth illuminate our minds and spirits. As Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, we are called to be seekers of knowledge: to question, to challenge, and to embrace the ever-evolving nature of truth.

The chalice flame also embodies the warmth of community. As we gather around this shared symbol, we recognize the interconnectedness that binds us together. In a world that can be cold and indifferent, the warmth of community provided by the chalice reminds us that we are not alone. We are a diverse tapestry of individuals, each contributing our unique threads to the rich fabric of our beloved community.

Our second principle, the affirmation of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, is reflected in the warmth of the chalice flame. It invites us to extend our hands in compassion, to build bridges of understanding, and to create a community where the inherent worth and dignity of every person are honored.

Lastly, the chalice flame signifies the fire of commitment. In the dance of its flickering light, we see the passion and dedication that drive us to action. Our faith calls us not only to believe

in our principles and values but to embody them through our deeds. The fire of commitment inspires us to be agents of change and transformation, to advocate for justice, and to work toward creating a world where love and compassion reign.

Each time we kindle the chalice flame, let us reflect on our own commitment to the principles that define us. Are we actively engaging in the pursuit of truth? Are we fostering a community where everyone feels the warmth of belonging? Are we letting the fire of commitment propel us towards a more just and compassionate world?

The chalice flame also reminds us of our interconnectedness with the wider world. The flame that burns within our sacred space is connected to the flames of justice and love kindled by Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the globe. Our shared commitment to the principles and values of Unitarian Universalism unites us in a common purpose. Together, our collective fire has the power to transform the world.

Friends, as we leave this sacred space, let us carry the light of truth in our hearts, the warmth of community in our actions, and the fire of commitment in our endeavors. May the chalice flame continue to guide us on our spiritual journey, reminding us of the values that bind us together. May our commitment to truth, community, and justice shine brightly, illuminating the path towards a world where love prevails.

Blessed be.

### Meditation / Conversation starter

- What meanings do you find in the lighting of the chalice in our services?