

“Flags and Banners: A Different Kind of Pledge”

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“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible,
with liberty and justice for all.”

But wait; turn back the clock, the calendar. It’s 1892, a century plus after the founding of this nation as we know it; 27 years after the end of the Civil War; 16 years after the end of the First Reconstruction. How brief is historical memory. A 37-year-old preacher hailing from Upstate New York was known for his eloquence and oratory, inherited perhaps from his Baptist preacher father. Known in pulpits from Boston to New York, Francis Bellamy felt a mismatch with his profession and took a job in Boston with the promotions department of a family journal known as *The Youth’s Companion*. What a congregation—half a million subscribers in 1892! Bellamy’s first major project? A “patriotic program” for schoolchildren across the country to come to fruition on October 12, 1892—the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in which Euro-centric folks call “the new world.” Bellamy was quite a promoter, successfully lobbying Congress for a holiday—that is, Columbus Day.

A key piece of this commemoration would be a resolution supporting the ceremony and a Presidential proclamation for a pledge to the flag to be recited in unison by the thousands of schoolchildren mobilized for the event.

One historian reports that when Bellamy set to work on said pledge, it was a steamy August night. The Civil War was fresh in common memory. Reconstruction and its end were likely another matter. Yet with “the crisis of loyalty” foremost in his take on the Civil War, a “pledge of allegiance” drove his words:

*I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands—one Nation
indivisible—with liberty and justice for all.*

Not quite what most of us grew up with. He had not written “the flag” or included “of the United States of America,” or inserted “under God.” The first two edits awaited a National Flag Conference, held in 1923 and led by the American Legion and the D.A.R.—Daughters of the American Revolution. My own Grandmother was a proud member of the D.A.R. and quite disappointed when I turned down this hereditary membership. So be it.

At this conference, the sentiment was to change “my flag” to “the flag of the United States of America,” lest poor immigrant children be confused with which flag deserved their allegiance!

Some states actually legislated daily recitation of the pledge by all school children. Enter Jehovah's Witnesses, whose faith prohibited such veneration of any "graven image" (thanks to one of the Ten Commandments!). They challenged this to the level of the Supreme Court, which rendered a freedom of speech decision. The Pledge of Allegiance would no longer be a requirement of this nation's schoolchildren.

Some of us remember the 1950's and Communism as the lightning word that Terrorism is today! In reaction to "the Communist threat," President Dwight D. Eisenhower urged Congress to add the words, "under God." Surely God wasn't a Communist! Ergo, an expanded Pledge of Allegiance came into being, one that Francis Bellamy's daughter protested.

While this congregation and hundreds of other UU congregations hang the U.S. flag on the facades of our buildings, our grounding in covenant over creed resists a pledge to a symbol that has been wielded again and again on behalf of "liberty and justice" for some and blind patriotism for many.

Personally, I have intensely ambivalent feelings about the red, white, and blue and find myself in synch with that little girl who chose turquoise, pink, and purple! [as noted in the story told earlier and adapted from Victoria Safford's "Turquoise Patriot"] Have I ever been inspired by that flag? Definitely. When I saw it planted on the rubbles of Ground Zero, did my throat tighten? Definitely. When I saw power politics wrap itself in the flag, did I cringe? Yes and yes. When I witnessed up close and personal a coffin holding a casualty of yet another outrageous war wrapped in a flag, did I shudder? Intensely—at the manipulation of such a symbol glorifying sacrifice sanctioned by this nation's penchant for war. When I hear the strains of "bombs bursting in air," giving "proof through the night that our flag was still there," does my patriotism bite the dust? It does.

As for God and country, our notions of both are infused with ambiguity and an immense spectrum of perspective.

Are we averse to flags or banners altogether? I hope not. A parade of banners at our denomination's General Assembly? Yes! Rousing music in accompaniment? Yes! A parade of Pride and waving Rainbow flags? Yes! A banner of goldenrod yellow and T-shirts, caps, and more to match, proclaiming where we stand? Yes!

Are we averse to pledges altogether? I hope not. We do after all make pledges of time, talent, and treasure. Are we averse to commitment? I hope not. We do after all sing out about "The Fire of Commitment." Are we averse to allegiance? Blind allegiance, yes. Allegiance to conscience, no.

My guess is that there are in this sanctuary as many different takes on the notion of pledging allegiance as there are individuals present. What do you think? How do you feel? Ponder for a moment how you might conclude, "I pledge allegiance to..." Then Jeff will come around with the mic, so that we might hear the voice of your heart and mind.

Sources:

The Pledge of Allegiance, Historic Documents, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

Jeffrey Owen Jones, “The Man Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2003, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-man-who-wrote-the-pledge-of-allegiance-93907224/>

“Flags and Banners: A Visible Witness”

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Witness! It’s a word we don’t often use. Perhaps we link “witness” with the practice of proselytizing, trying to convert unwitting strangers to a specific system of belief. My two cents is that Unitarian Universalists overcompensate for not proselytizing. I’m not suggesting that we adopt an “Onward Christian Soldiers” stance, but that we realize how we do indeed “bear witness” to facets of our faith that we want to share visibly, audibly, and quite publicly!

Consider the Rainbow Flag. Who knows what promise is born in the heartland! Not everything emerging from the fields of Kansas is tall and straight—Gilbert Baker, for example. Born at mid-century, Gilbert was prime time for the draft when he came of age. At the height of the War in Vietnam, he was among the lucky ones. As a 19-year-old draftee, he headed to San Francisco. Not surprisingly, he stayed on, exalting in the freedom of his newfound home to follow his dreams of becoming an artist. Remember the colorful styles of the early ‘70s? Where could Gilbert purchase such attire? He couldn’t; he simply learned to sew and made them.

A few years later, Gilbert met Harvey Milk, who would make history in the annals of the struggle for LGBT rights. Not long after that, Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the first openly gay person to hold such a visible office in a major American city. Soon after taking office, Harvey asked his friend Gilbert to come up with a symbol of pride for the LGBT community.

Attuned to vibrant colors, Gilbert began to dye fabrics and fashion them into a rainbow design—eight colors, each symbolic: “hot pink” [not just pink, HOT pink] “stood for sexuality, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for nature, turquoise blue for art, indigo for harmony and violet for spirit.” Recall the colors chosen by the young girl I spoke of earlier—the young girl who countered the call of her school principal for all the children to wear red, white, and blue in honor of our country? Try turquoise, pink, and purple! She and Gilbert Baker are just gorgeous birds of a feather!

What was the occasion for the launching of the Rainbow Flag as a symbol of LGBT rights? The first San Francisco Gay Freedom Pride Parade. The year was 1978.

“Raising it up and seeing it there blowing in the wind for everyone to see,” recalls Baker. “It completely astounded me that people just got it, in an instant like a bolt of lightning – that this was their flag. It belonged to all of us.”

The artistry of young Gilbert was a calling to visible witness. Shortly after the original flag and many smaller versions were carried aloft in that parade, he arranged with Paramount Flag Company to reproduce them. Since one of the dye colors wasn't available, the company tapped surplus stock originally used for the Rainbow Girls of America, a Masonic Order. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. As a long ago “Rainbow girl” in a small Iowa town, I can still rattle off the colors. But my current sympathies are with the rainbow as a symbol of LGBT rights. Our lenses change over time.

It was in November of 1978 that Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were assassinated at City Hall. The gay community quickly mobilized; and for the Gay Pride Parade of 1979, the parade committee eliminated the indigo stripe, allowing the remaining six colors to be split into two, so that on alternate sides of Market Street, two versions of three-stripe flags waved from the light poles. For a while, the six-stripe rainbow became the norm.

Gilbert Baker went on to design rainbow flags for events local, national and international. For the 25th anniversary of the rainbow flag in 1993, he designed a 1.25-mile banner, in the *eight* original colors, for its debut in Key West, Florida.

Unitarian Universalism has been in the forefront of faith communities committed to LGBT rights. The rainbow flag flown from our entrances designates a congregation that has moved through the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation—specifically welcoming to those among us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. I love that our rainbow flag is faded, a sign of surviving elements in whatever form they pound away.

Upping the ante in our own faith movement was the launching of the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign. First came Standing on the Side of Love as a rallying refrain in the early days of the inclusive marriage movement in Massachusetts, a refrain that morphed into the song by Jason Shelton. The year was 2004, and I recall marching across the Boston Common with colleagues across faiths, up to the State House on Beacon Hill, banners in hand, buoyed by the enormous banner on the side of 25 Beacon Street, then headquarters of our UUA. Facing out onto the front lawn of the Capitol Building, it held the message: “Equal marriage is a civil right!” The movement took off, and in 2004 Massachusetts became the first state to legalize inclusive marriage. Who knew that in just a few years inclusive marriage would be upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, so powerful was this movement, so relentless was the witness?

How can I forget that mid-summer of 2008 meeting in Houston? Sitting with other members of the Commission on Social Witness, word came of the fatal shootings at the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville, a visibly welcoming congregation. The response was remarkable, a response not of revenge, but of love. It was a response that spread throughout our faith movement and beyond and spurred the Standing on the Side of Love *campaign*. Its mission? To resist oppression wherever it occurs through the transforming power of love. The

logo, visible from a distance when we march, visible from the street when a banner waves in the wind from our buildings, visible in a crowd of thousands, and visible to each of you right now, was designed by my friend and member of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, Fred Garcia. In banner mode, it was central to the public witness on behalf of immigration reform at the 2009 General Assembly in Salt Lake City. The immense banner flown from the exterior of the Convention Center was actually divided into small pieces for those of us present to take home—elements of the love that would spread, reminders of public witness rendered in a sunshine yellow banner bearing a big heart and a bold message.

Flags and banners as a visible witness? What would you design? We're giving each of you a blank paper banner. During the post-service time of our second Sunday dinner, you'll find on your tables some colorful markers. I invite each of you to design a banner to take home, to keep and refer to as a reminder of what you stand for—what calls *you* to conscience, commitment, and witness.

Sources:

“A Brief History of the Rainbow Flag,” <http://www.sanfrancisco.travel/article/brief-history-rainbow-flag>.

<http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/>