

“The Flame and the Chalice”
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Meriden, CT

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Imagine! It's close to midnight. You're edging your way through a narrow pass in the Pyrenees with your family. You're a long way from home. It's 1942 and you're Jewish. Through clandestine channels, you've learned that there is a way out. You've never heard of Unitarians, but you did hear that a Rev. Charles Joy headed a group called the Unitarian Service Committee and helped folks like you escape to freedom.

But what a journey! You have a compass and a primitive map with checkpoints where you're supposed to be met by Service Committee escorts. One of these checkpoints is just a few meters up ahead and around a bend. How will you know that the person who awaits you and your family is safe? This is a time to trust no one, but you've been told that your escort will ensure credibility by bearing a badge with the likeness of a “flaming chalice.” From your own faith, you cherish the symbolism of the chalice. You've drunk from one at every Passover Seder your entire life as you gathered around a table to celebrate another flight to freedom. You cherish the symbolism of a flame. Over two thousand years ago, your religious ancestors overthrew their oppressors and sought to rededicate the temple by rekindling a sacred lamp with enough oil to last only a single night. Yet the lamp burned brightly for eight nights! A miracle? You're walking through another miracle. A chalice and a flame you're looking for? Of course.

The flame and the chalice were joined in this icon of sanctuary in the perilous days of the Nazi oppression, when Jews, gays, gypsies, and yes, Unitarians, sought refuge. Rev. Charles Joy was then the leader of the fledgling Unitarian Service Committee. It would be another 20 years before it would be the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Joy headquartered in Lisbon, where he oversaw a covert cadre of escorts who risked their lives to save others. How to ensure that those seeking refuge might trust these escorts? In the late 1930s an artist named Hans Deutsch was living in Paris and producing caricatures of Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, Deutsch fled south and then west to Portugal. Deutsch had never heard of Unitarians, and he was a self-professed atheist; but when he met Charles Joy and learned of his work, he was so moved that he joined the Service Committee and agreed to serve it by designing a symbol of sanctuary, a symbol that could be used as a badge to be worn and an emblem to be stamped on papers to make them look official. Flame and Chalice merged into a design that stood for faith lived in the service of others, whatever the risk to your own life.

You and your family made it across the Pyrenees, guided by ancient icons paired with new meaning.

Roughly half a century earlier, Rev. Lewis B. Fisher, Dean of the Universalist seminary at St. Lawrence University in upstate New York, observed that “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer...is that we do not stand at all, we move.”

How could he have known then the myriad ways in which Universalism and now Unitarian Universalism does move—through the First World War with Unitarians and Universalists who fought, who served as conscientious objectors, and who resisted war altogether; through the Great Depression; through the labor movements and women’s rights movements; and across the Pyrenees as the nascent symbol of our faith became a beacon to freedom and new life.

Today we join with hundreds of other Unitarian Universalist Congregations in responding to the call to celebrate “Join the Move Sunday.” While far less harrowing and historically pivotal as the moves that took the form of flights to freedom, campaigns for dignity, and resistance to tyranny in whatever form, this particular move is of import to many who share this faith.

Over the past year, plans have been underway and are now being realized to move the physical headquarters of our Unitarian Universalist Association from Boston’s 25 Beacon Street to Boston’s 24 Farnsworth Street, from the iconic site high on Beacon Hill to a neighborhood called the Innovation District, just steps from Boston Harbor. Some of us grieve the departure from the historic ambience of 25 Beacon. It breathes much of our denominational history, but it is not quite our Parthenon.

Unitarian Universalist minister John Marsh explains in a sermon given this past June:

When the American Unitarian Association moved into the first 25 Beacon Street headquarters in 1886, it was on the other side of the State House. When they moved the headquarters in 1927, they had enough pull with the Massachusetts legislature that a bill was passed to allow them to take their address with them: confusing people looking for nearby buildings for generations to follow. Its being out of normal numerical sequence added to its allure as a portal into the extraordinary, like Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ in Harry Potter’s Wizarding World.

So 25 Beacon Street has not always been 25 Beacon Street and isn’t really so now. Perhaps this helps some of us to wince less, as we look forward to our Coming of Age youth visiting 24 Farnsworth rather than 25 Beacon. It’s 25 minus one, but with lots of pluses—environmental integrity, open workspaces, technological flexibility, natural light throughout, inclusive accessibility, and a Heritage and Vision Center ensuring a denominational home that, in the words of the familiar hymn, “reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more.”

What does this mean for us in this congregation and for more than a thousand congregations that form the UU world? A greater capacity for our Unitarian Universalist Association to create and issue resources on which we rely for inspiring and imaginative worship; for ever innovative religious education curricula; for media relations; for accessibility across congregations through advanced technology; and for visits to a denominational home that is more livable, workable, and welcoming.

The move from old to new, from cherished to hopeful, is core to the history of this congregation. It was barely a decade ago that those of you who formed this church at that time courageously let go of the iconic brownstone building on Norwood Street. It was no longer serving you, and its energy demands prevented you from effectively serving this community. For two years you “lived” in the Masonic Hall, all the while searching for a new site. Once you found it, you rolled up your sleeves and opened your checkbooks to design and renovate the space in which we reside today.

In so many ways the flaming chalice embodies the dynamics of faith on the move—from peril to freedom; from symbol of sanctuary to symbol of this faith; from Norwood Street to Paddock Avenue; from Beacon Hill to a district called Innovation; and from what you have experienced in your own life that renders you fluid and calls you into a new habitat for your soul, a community of covenant grounded in all the love we can muster.

As our youngsters showed as earlier, when we extend ourselves in the service of another, we find ourselves joyous and going to bed happy. As the prophetic women and men of all ages have shown us, we cannot travel perilous passages alone. As the teller of the Sufi parable revealed through the journey of the stream across the desert, when we hold fast to our identity as we know it, we cannot be who we truly are; when we allow ourselves to be absorbed in the wind—that is, the spirit—we can cross the seemingly un-crossable. As the move from 25 to 24 is demonstrating, ours is a faith that is only alive when it is on the move.

May the flaming chalice and all for which it stands lead us across passages perilous into harbors that welcome and sanctuaries that abound with possibilities we never imagined.

Amen.

Sources:

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