

Our Commitments
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, November 20, 2011
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Story for All Ages: *The Welcome Table and the Flaming Chalice*

A few minutes ago we sang about sitting down at the welcome table, all kinds of people, no fancy style at that welcome table. And then we lit our chalice. There have been many people in our Unitarian and Universalist history who have worked to create a welcome table for the whole world, and our flaming chalice is a symbol for that important welcome table work.

There have been many times in the history of the world when some people have decided they are better than all the others, and have tried to rule the world, or even to get rid of all the people who are not like them. We see it all around us, with gangs and cliques in schools and communities, bullying other kids and adults. We see it in politics, we see it in fights between groups in some countries, or with one country going to war against another. It has always happened, and people are always getting hurt by it. And often when we see that bullying and injustice happening, we also see brave people and groups standing up against the injustice, working to make the world a welcome table for everyone.

The Nazi Party was that kind of gang of bullies, in Germany back in the 1930’s. They decided that they were the master race, that they were better than anyone else, and that they were the only ones who deserved to sit at the table. They got a lot of power and took over the government in Germany. Once they were in control of the German government and army, they set about getting rid of everyone who was not like them – the entire country of Poland, the Roma people who we call the Gypsies, gays and lesbians, anyone with a disability, people who were Black or of mixed race, and most especially the Jews. The Nazis made some people slaves, and many others they took from their homes and communities and shipped off to concentration camps and put them to death. It was a terrible time, one of the worst times in human history, and we remember it as the Holocaust.

There was a war against the Nazis, our country and many others fought against them, and eventually they were defeated, but that took many years. In the meantime, there were brave people who worked to help people escape the danger of slavery or death, and the Unitarians and Universalists were among those people who helped. The Unitarian Service Committee was formed in the United States in 1941; it was specifically created to help Jews and other people in danger get to a safe seaport so they could leave Europe and travel to places where they could be out of danger. But the people who were escaping very often had lost everything they had, and they had no identification; to travel out of Europe and go to a different country they needed something like a passport, called a letter of safe passage.

So the Rev. Charles Joy, Director of the Unitarian Service Committee, asked an artist named Hans Deutsch to make a symbol that the Unitarians could use to make identification cards and letters of safe passage, letting everyone know these escaping people were under the care of the Unitarians. The symbol that the artist drew was a flaming chalice – he chose the chalice as an ancient religious symbol, burning the holy oil with the flame of helpfulness and sacrifice. That is the same flaming chalice symbol we use now as the symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith – a religion with our roots in ancient history, still burning brightly with the flame of helpfulness and sacrifice.

Our religion is a religion of the welcome table, with our flame of helpfulness and sacrifice, working to fight injustice wherever it occurs, creating a welcome for all kinds of people, no fancy style at

that welcome table. That is what we are saying every time we light the chalice, and in all the work we do together.

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It seems with every season, there are songs that come in and ring around in my head, mostly songs that I learned as a child and that for me, carry the sounds and sights and smells and feelings of that season. Whether it’s peter cottontail hopping down the bunny trail, or beginning to look a lot like Christmas, the words and tunes take me into the spirit of the holiday.

There is a song in our hymnbook that always sounds like Thanksgiving to me, and it contains the phrase, “With hearts and hands and voices.” And I believe that is how, as Unitarian Universalists, we step forward in all our diverse and individual and collective ways to live our commitments – with hearts that are open to our neighbors, whether around the block or halfway around the globe, with hands that reach out to help, and with voices that advocate for more wholeness, more love and justice for everyone who shares this planet. It has been said that Unitarian Universalists are religious in our deeds rather than our creeds. Our deeds of hearts and hands and voices.

Maybe you have heard, just about three weeks ago the number of us sharing this planet got up to 7 billion, and it seems that we are adding something like 10,000 people to our human family every hour. That is a lot more people sharing a limited space, this precious tiny planet floating in space, and when you combine the population growth with the effects of climate change and regional conflicts, there is a whole lot of pain out there on this precious planet – the pain of children who do not have enough to eat, and of people who cannot get the medical care they need; the pain of parents who work hard but cannot earn enough, or grow enough crops, to support their families. The pain of entire towns and cities that do not have safe water to drink, soil that can no longer grow crops -- so much pain, so much need, so many ways we can bring our hearts and hands and voices to serve this precious world.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee – the UUSC -- is an instrument of our hearts, our hands and our voices, carrying the light of our chalice flame, our commitment and our generosity to people in all corners of this planet. The mission of the UUSC is to advance human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who seek to recreate resources for the lives of children, women and men, to confront unjust power structures and to challenge oppressive policies, envisioning a world free from unnecessary pain and need, free from oppression and injustice, where all can realize their full human rights.

In their work today, the UUSC works with grassroots partners in local communities to build programs that work, provides outreach to members and supporters, and lifts our voices to advocate for public-policy change for more justice and opportunity. There are four primary worldwide UUSC initiatives: Rights in Humanitarian Crises, Civil Liberties, Environmental Justice, and Economic Justice.

Carrying the spirit of the flame of helpfulness and sacrifice, and the principle of the welcome table, they always work in an “eye-to-eye partnership” with local people -- a partnership that offers respect and mutuality joining with partners as equals to do the work of open hearts, caring hands and beautiful, powerful voices.

Sometimes we can put our busy lives aside to follow the urgings of our hearts and act on our commitments, going to work on a UUSC mission in this country or overseas, or taking our hands to work at a local soup kitchen, or to help build or renovate a home with Habitat for Humanity, or bringing our voices to the quest for economic justice at Occupy Buffalo. But when we cannot put our daily lives aside, there are other ways to live our commitments, thanks to organizations of integrity like the UUSC, who carry the flame of our chalice, the work of our hearts, hands and voices around the world for us. That is why we offer the Guest at Your Table opportunity here at church.

Each year during this season of gratitude, abundance and generosity, we offer you the opportunity to invite a guest to your table, to join in being a neighbor to those in the world who are struggling in systems of injustice and oppression. For we all share life on this planet, and all the resources of the planet are the only welcome table we have to nourish us all. We have Guest at Your Table boxes for you if you would like to use a box this year to remind yourself of the principles of the Welcome Table, beginning each meal during this next month by making a donation to help that guest, who might be near or far.

Each box has photos of people who are working with the UUSC to build a better life for themselves and their communities – Chrisanthus in Kenya, Dalia in Egypt, Maria in Northwest Arkansas, and Lionel in Haiti. These activists working in their own communities are symbolic of the “guests” you invite to your own Welcome Table, all those who bring their hearts and hands and voices to the work of the world. We also have envelopes if you would like to honor the Guest at Your Table spirit by making a donation by a check or cash. The UU Congregation at Shelter Rock has a special fund that will match any donation of \$100 or more with an equal donation, doubling your contribution.

Please remember to bring back your boxes or donation envelopes at one of the holiday services later this month, on the morning or evening of December 18, or on Christmas eve or Christmas morning – there are lots of opportunities to celebrate the holidays at church this year, and to make one of your gifts to help the UUSC expand the welcome table all over the world. So as the song rings in my head, in good Unitarian Universalist tradition, I am finding new words to the old hymn: To guests we bring our gifts, our hearts and hands and voices, creating hope and peace, in which our world rejoices . . . well, maybe it needs some work, but you get the idea. The world cries out for our love and action, and we bring the light of our flaming chalice to brighten the world, as we live our commitments in so many ways in this holiday season.

Sources:

Population Growth Over Human History, retrieved 11-19-11 from http://www.globalchange.umich.edu/globalchange2/current/lectures/human_pop/human_pop.html