

## **Thoughts About Chalica**

a sermon by

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The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

**These Chalice Lighting Words** - are inspired by Dan Harper

We light this flame for the life and the love within us and among us.

We light it for freedom of choice and responsibility;

We light this flame for healthy boundaries to protect our sacred values and for acceptance of one another as we work to live those values out.

We light this flame for compassion and reason;

And for the hope that, in the web of life, we can again learn to live in harmony.

**Spoken Reflectoin** – adapted from a Zuni Indian Autumn Ritual

When it comes to pass that the Source of Life, the Sun, has reached its left-hand altar –the leader of our people invites us all to come together.

He invites us to remember the water, and the seeds of plants.

He invites to remember the offspring of all the animals and fish and birds.

He invites us to remember our own fathers and our fathers' fathers, our own mothers and our mothers' mothers.

The leader then welcomes us all into our sacred room

We sit there – open to the spirit of all things living and our leader reminds us of the Mystery that brings us into being and supports us even now.

He says: "We humans stand upright and are free to move about, but like plants, we spring from the ground. We stand upright and are free to move about, but our bodies – are nourished by water and soil. We are sons and daughters of earth and sky, of fire and water and of the sea being. Let us always remember that.

Then - together in our sacred room we offer corn meal prayers,  
And our most beautiful turquoise stones,

We break straight young sticks and remember the birth and death of everything.  
We remember wholeness and brokenness. We hold the broken pieces of stick in our warm human hands and sing songs of thanksgiving and of grief, songs of sorrow and of joy.

We remember our place in life, our place in the seasons, our privilege and our obligation.

## Sermon

I want to talk a little about Chalica with you today but more about ritual and the role of ritual in religion. As part of the Radical Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, we Unitarian Universalists along with a number of our radical religious cousins have had trouble with ritual. Historically we have seen it done badly and used as a tool for oppression.

Listen to Michael Servetus the Unitarian who was martyred in 1553. At the coronation of Charles V of France, the Pope was part of the ritual and of that Servetus said: *With these very eyes, I saw the Pope borne with pomp on the shoulders of princes in public streets and adored by crowds of people kneeling to such a point that if they succeeded in kissing his feet or the bottom of his shoe, they felt themselves happy beyond all measure. Oh Beast of Beasts Most Wicked. Most Shameless of Harlots!*

Michael Servetus had trouble with overdone ritual in the face of underdone justice. So did the prophet Isaiah who, speaking for Yahweh in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Before the Current Era said: *Woe unto you people of Ariel, the city where David settled! You add year to year and observe festival after festival. You come near to me with your chanting. You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me.* (adapted)

For religious reformers, ritual is often problematic.

But it is also hard to escape. Ritual activity is part of our human communication.

This spring, just before Edie and I moved to Arcata, we were off loading years of accumulated family stuff. Nestled in with the stuff were several oldshotguns and 22 rifles that I wanted to get rid of. So I called the Fresno Police Department and asked about turning them in. The lady who answered said "I am so glad you called! There is a protocol for how rifle returns have to take place. You can't just walk in here toting guns. It's been done before but please don't do that. Please put the guns in the trunk of your car. Drive down here. Come in. Remind me you called. I'll have an officer go with you to your trunk and then...you and the officer can carry the guns in.

Well – that was that was a helpful reminder to me that ritual is part of nearly all our communication. We can't just ignore it.

Ritual, by definition, is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects performed in particular places and designed to benefit the goals and interests of the persons performing the rituals.

Rituals often are carried out for religious purposes but they are not limited to religious purposes. Have you ever been to a sporting event with a military fly-over to go along with the singing of the National Anthem? Have you ever been part of a jury trial? Have you ever observed what happens in shopping malls around Black Friday?

Among other things, rituals have political, judicial and economic purposes. And like the Jewish prophets and our radical protestant forebears, it behooves us to be aware of rituals, the values they intend to serve and the values they actually do serve.

As rationalists not given much to literal religion, many of us Unitarian Universalists have not paid too much attention to religious ritual, but our children have awakened us to its importance.

Edie's son, my step-son, Josh grew up with few prescribed rituals. We said grace not every day, but at holiday meals we did. We had family pow-wows where we sat in a circle, checked in with one another and worked to come up with respectful, healthy responses to family conflicts. We had rituals (like grounding for a week) for young folks breaking family values – and rituals for re-making family agreements. Josh and I had several ritual ski trips where we bonded with one another despite the fact that we both loved the same woman – his mom. At New Years time – we always spent some time thinking about our lives and then sat together and talked about what we hoped we would do and how we hoped we would grow in the months ahead...

We tried to be mindful and intentional, but we were a little ritual shy.

Josh brought that lack of ritual to Edie's and my attention when he was graduating from high school.

Josh had spent his junior high and high school years in Sanford, a small town in southern Maine. He was in the college prep track in school and had met a number of really bright, sweet, determined kids who wanted to make something of their lives and contribute in positive ways to the world. Almost to a person, his friends were liberal Christians. Many were Catholic. Their priest at Holy Family Catholic Church was Father Lou Berube, a true, open hearted/open minded love and justice bearer. The youth group at Holy Family was open to all the kids in the community and Josh hung out with them, as well as with our small Unitarian Universalist youth group. He really liked Father Lou. He loved his friends, loved their values and was a little envious of their certitude and rituals.

So in April of his graduation year, Josh came to me and said – Bryan, I want to be baptized as a Unitarian Universalist Christian. I'm leaving high school, going off to college and it's a wild world out there. I know I'm going to have a lot of fun – because that's what I do...but I also want to be grounded in something.

I want to promise myself something about the way I'm going to take care of myself and other people as I enter this new world.

I was really impressed and really touched. My own religious formation and Josh's mom's too, had been Christian. In many ways, both of us were and are liberated UU followers of the Christian tradition. I do not try to force Christian forms on people, and certainly not on Josh – but in UU fashion, Josh had chosen this path. And I do have religious agenda around the process of mindful religious choice.

Whatever its form...I want it to be a mindful, intentional choice for life and joy and gratitude and healing and responsibility and love.

And I believe to be effective, it has to be a free choice of the heart – not some superficial exercise.

So, I said to Josh – Wow. I am so pleased and honored that you want to be baptized as a UU Christian – and we'll do that together. But first, let's do a little course of study.

I'll give you some materials to consider – and then we'll talk. I want to know what baptism means to you and what Jesus means to you. I want to know more about why you want to be baptized at this point in your life.

Well...at this point in his life, Josh had experienced 11 years of Unitarian Universalist Religious education. He had visited Jewish synagogues and had met traveling Muslim pilgrims. He had practiced some Buddhist meditation and had experienced some particularly vivid exposure to Hinduism and New Age thought. By nature, Josh was a scientist and philosopher – so I was really interested in what he would say when he talked to me. I was also interested in who he wanted to be in attendance at his baptism.

A week or so later when we talked, he said that he thought that Jesus was one of the greatest teachers the world has ever known. He said he liked Jesus' call to love and the sermon on the mount. He said he liked the notion of doing unto others as you would want done to yourself and that feeding the hungry and taking care of those in need is an imperative.

He said the UU Principles really made sense to him. And he wanted to formally make a commitment to remembering them as he went off to school.

For that formal commitment, he wanted his mom and me and his best friends from high school present.

So on a Sunday afternoon in April of 1992, they were present in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sanford, Maine. Candles were lit. The scriptures and stories Josh had chosen were read. I wore my robes. In front of all of his friends, I asked Josh if he freely chose to dedicate himself to the way of love and justice, to following the way of the teacher Jesus and to the best of his ability, to living out the Principles of Unitarian Universalism.

He said he did. And with water from the Unitarian baptismal font that was in the church - I baptized him with the sign of the cross – because life always contains many challenges – and with a circle – the sign of the open tomb – because love and life rise from the ashes – even of our most painful defeats.

Josh signed the UU baptism certificate I had made for him. I signed, his mom signed. His friends signed. And then we had some punch and cookies in the parlor and talked about what was coming up next for all these young men.

I am not sharing this story with you because I am trying to sell you on UU Christian baptism. I think you get that.

I'm sharing it because religious commitment and religious rituals are important to us – even if we're humanists. Religious processes and religious passages are important to us – even if we are not literal believers in old myths - and marking processes and passages in mindful and beautiful ways is important to us and to our children.

So now we get to Chalice.

Chalice is a new UU Holiday. It was created about 7 or 8 years ago by some seminarians in Vancouver, B C. It's a made up holiday, like Kwanza. It's a made up holiday, like Christmas and Hanukkah are too, though they are several thousand years older. Can we do that? Can we just make up rituals and holidays? Can created rituals and holidays be effective?

In the context of our wonderful and terrifying human freedom, the answer to all those questions is yes. But the holiday and the ritual will only be as effective as we are sincere and dedicated over time.

Our human history with ritual and holidays is that we perennially have trouble – not so much with the ritual activity – but the with both sincerity and dedication.

It's hard to slow down and examine our lives and see how our behaviors match our stated ideals. It's hard to willingly suspend disbelief and open our hearts and minds to a power of love and healing that we hope is there – but is beyond our manipulation and control. It's hard to reveal our vulnerability and the tender, yearning places within us. It's hard to be true to our ideals and our spiritual practices over days and days and years and years.

But like our sisters and brothers in 12 step programs say – It will work if we work it. Chalica will be a real as we make it. So, as it feels right to you, I invite you to light one candle a day this coming week – and think about our Principles one at a time. I invite you to write about them, sing about them and talk about them. I invite you to paint and sculpt and dance about them...

And, as it feels right to you, I invite you to enter this week long ritual with both your heart and mind open to the love and healing our Principles call us to.

Singer/Song Writer Kate Wolf says it this way:

Kind friends all gathered 'round.. There's something I would say:  
That what brings us together here.... has blessed us all today.  
And Love has made this circle that holds us all inside;  
Where strangers are as family....loneliness can't hide.

You must give yourself to love if love is what you're after;  
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter,  
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.

Love is born in fire; it's planted like a seed.  
Love can't give you everything, but it gives you what you need.  
Love comes when you're ready, and it comes when you're afraid;  
It'll be your greatest teacher, the best friend you have made.

So give yourself to if love is what you're after;  
Open up your hearts to the tears and laughter,  
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.

We know we don't have to be baptized to give ourselves to love – and we don't have to come to Sunday gatherings at the UU Fellowship. We don't have to light Chalica lights to give ourselves to love and we don't have to recite the Unitarian Universalist Principles....

But many of our sister and brother human beings have found that being mindful and intentional about rituals and religious practices and principles sure helps when it comes to communicating with power and effectiveness to our own hearts and to other people.

Big religious questions and a desire for powerful, beautiful responses are woven into the DNA for many of us. And if we do not respond with thoughtfulness and love – we might find ourselves feeling lost and our kids might find rituals and practices that don't seem healthy to us at all.

Our attempts at Chalica or other religious practices or rituals might flat at first. We might have work a bit and learn a bit in order to find the substance and depth we're hoping for. But we UU's are Heretics. We are people who ask questions for ourselves and answer for ourselves. And are responsible for our own answers.

So may our questioning and answering in the week and season ahead bring us growth and grounding and peace.

PLEASE STAND NOW AS YOU ARE WILLING AND ABLE – AND JOIN IN SINGING HYMN #146 – Soon the Day Will Arrive.

**Extinguishing the Chalice**  
**Closing Words and Closing Song**

**Closing Words** – From GK Chesterton and John Holmes

O God of Earth and Altar – Rise Up and hear our cry  
Our greedy rulers falter – Our people drift and die.  
The power of wealth entombs us, and swords of scorn divide.  
Take not your thunder from us – But take away our pride.

O God of cloud and mountain, whose rain on rock is art,  
Your plan and care and meaning, renew our heads and hearts  
So may we use your blessing to heal the world of pain  
And may our lives find balance here on this earth again.

O God of root and shading – of boughs above our head  
We breathe in your long breathing – Our spirits, spirited!  
We stop to find our center, we question and we pray  
So may our budding answers bear peace and love each day.

**Closing Song** – And as we go...May we go in peace.

Go from here in peace – Go with love.