

The Base, the Bowl, and the Transforming, Dancing Flame

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Revs Paul Beckel and Barbara ten Hove

November 24, 2019

Gathering Hymns #349 *We Gather Together*
#21 *For the Beauty of the Earth*

Welcome - Paul

We've been speaking throughout November about different aspects of memory. Today we'll be considering a way to organize our memories in such a way as to give them deeper meaning than nostalgia or regret. A way to recognize the patterns that have shaped our understandings of what grounds us, holds us, and warms us even through our ongoing, sometimes chaotic, personal transformations.

This morning, I am joined by Rev. Dr. Barbara Wells ten Hove. Many recognize Barbara as a BUF member who sings in our choir; she is also a retired minister with long service to our faith tradition. Last year she served as Consulting Minister at the North Shore Unitarian Church in West Vancouver, BC and before that she and her husband Jaco (also a stalwart choir member) retired as Emeritus Ministers of Cedars UU Church on Bainbridge Island. Barbara has taught courses, primarily on worship, at churches and seminaries throughout the US and Canada.

I have invited Barbara to help me to develop a program this coming winter for training and support of celebrants, who assist in leading Sunday services. This will be a small group who meet regularly for training and support. Please contact me if you're interested in applying to be a part of this program. Paul@buf.org or minister@buf.org.

Flaming Chalice Dedication - Barbara

Each Sunday, in almost every UU congregation across the globe, a flame is lit inside a chalice, sign and symbol of our unique faith. You may not realize that the ritual of lighting the flaming chalice in church is pretty new, emerging sometime in the second half of the last century. What started as a flat symbol, placed on boxes going to refugees at the end of the Second World War, took on physical and ritual life, likely in the late 1960's, when women and youth, hungry for something more than words to connect them during worship, started placing candles inside bowls and lighting them when they gathered. I believe the hunger for ritual was so great within our faith that the flaming chalice took off like wildfire. By the mid-1980's it had become common. Now it is rare for a UU congregation not to light a chalice at the beginning of worship.

When I look at the flaming chalice, I see three meaningful metaphors that speak powerfully to our way of doing religion. First, notice that the flaming chalice is supported by a strong base. I think of this as our tradition and history. Like all religions, cultures and communities, we stand on the backs of those who have gone before.

On this base of tradition stands the chalice itself. The chalice is a beautiful symbol of community, a cup that is shared amongst all the people. It represents the many ways we try, as best we can, to build a religious home for all who enter here. Though we fail at this task again and again, the chalice still invites us to welcome all who come through our doors in search of a liberal faith.

Yet, in the chalice we do not place wine or even water. Our chalice holds the flame, symbol of transformation, burning bright for all to see. The flame reminds us that it is within the loving arms of community, held on the complicated but powerful base of our tradition, that we may be transformed, becoming who we are truly meant to be.

Lighting the Chalice Henry Ohana

Message - Barbara

As Paul and I talked about this month's theme of memory, and how our memories shape who we are, I found myself reflecting on a brief but incredibly impactful time in my life. As Paul and I spoke, I realized my metaphorical understanding of our flaming chalice gives shape to these memories and helps me to see them through a meaningful lens.

In 1968, when I was eight years old, my family moved to Lexington, MA for my father to become the minister at First Parish, Unitarian. While I had grown up UU in a much newer congregation in Northern Virginia, I had never been a part of such an old and historic church. The parsonage, where we lived, was built in 1690 and the Revolutionary War literally started outside our front door. The church building, though not as old as our house, was the kind with a big white steeple standing tall on the town green. Inside the church I went to Sunday School with dozens of other baby boomers and we learned Bible stories and our enormous children's choir wore bright red robes when we sang during what was called Children's Church. It was tradition with a capital T.

While the flaming chalice was present as a flat image in 1968, it had not become a ritual in that church. And yet the ways I've come to understand its meaning were powerfully present during the short two and a half years my family spent in Lexington. If you remember, I think of the base of the chalice as our Unitarian and Universalist tradition upon which we stand. Tradition is good stuff, in its way, but complicated, too.

The congregation in Lexington was deeply traditional and there was much about that to love. Next door to the church was a graveyard filled with the many beloved dead who had graced that church including the forebears of Theodore Parker, one of the most famous Unitarians of the 19th c, who was born and raised in Lexington. My sister and I played in the cemetery almost every day, and it helped us understand that time passes and everyone dies.

The congregation had a large brass plaque listing the names of all the ministers who had served there since the church was founded in the 17th c. I was proud to see my dad's name among them and didn't think to wonder why there weren't any women listed. And I loved that at my school

all the kids knew my church and no one wondered aloud what a Unitarian was, like they did in Virginia.

It seemed like a strong base to grow on but it had its shadow side. I remember my father decided to unbolt the pulpit (can you imagine a pulpit bolted to the floor!) so the youth and kids in the church could put on a play in the sanctuary. That raised an enormous stink! The beautiful old building was completely inaccessible to our neighbor who was in a wheelchair. And though there was a wonderful new hymnal (*Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, published in 1964) many people refused to use it. Most folks didn't want anything to change because it was, well, "tradition" to sing the old hymns and keep the pulpit bolted to the floor. While there was beauty in the ways that church had been around for generations in that elderly building it came at a cost. Even the best of traditions are sometimes a shakier base to stand on than we're willing to admit.

Moving to the chalice itself, let's look at the church community. The congregation, like its tradition, was similarly complicated. Like all Unitarian Universalist congregations in the late 1960s it was dealing with the challenges brought on by the baby boom and the impact of the Civil Rights and anti-War movements. The church was one of the few in town that supported the young men who resisted the draft and our congregation hosted the Moratorium against the Vietnam War on the Lexington Green. Folks there were kind and caring in support of those less fortunate and worked with other churches in the town to run a clothing and food bank.

And, this mostly white, New England congregation made fun of my parents' southern accents and were shocked when my father invited colleagues of his from Howard Divinity School (the almost entirely black theological school from which he'd graduated) to preach. The chalice of community was not always as welcoming as you might imagine.

Yet, standing on its complicated base of tradition and held in the imperfect arms of this community I, and my family, were still transformed by the flame of love and hope that burned there. Despite lasting in that stodgy New England pulpit for only two and a half years, my Dad always spoke so fondly of how being there pushed and challenged him to do the justice work his heart longed for. My mother became a more outspoken feminist amongst the lovely (and surprisingly tough) blue-haired Yankee ladies who pretty much ran that church. And I, as a child, grew into myself among those people standing on top of so much history and tradition. I learned that there were kids like me who had been going to Unitarian churches for generations. I learned that adults were kind and caring and sometimes blind and unforgiving. I learned that I could change and become a better person if I kept my heart and my mind open as my faith taught me to do. And I learned I would make mistakes, try again, fail, and go forward step by step.

The memories I carry from that period in my life are powerful. And, using the metaphor of the flaming chalice, I have been able to understand what religious tradition and community can mean in mine and others' lives. What about you? What religious tradition do you stand on? How do you experience spiritual community and how do you offer it to others? And how have you been transformed by being a part of this congregation? What memories will you carry from this time in your life? I invite you to reflect on that a bit today.

The words to this hymn were written by the great Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore and speak movingly to his memories of his childhood. Please join in singing with us now.

Hymn #191 *Now I Recall My Childhood*

Message, Part 2 - Paul

The difference between autobiography and memoir is that in a memoir an author reflects upon just a fraction of their life—some combination of anecdotes and meditations that develop a theme into a larger story.

It's not just a string of unrelated facts. At their best, memoirs take us on a journey with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is why some authors are able to write many personal memoirs, all true, deeply meaningful, and inspiring.

The stories that Barbara and I share today are meant to encourage you to reflect upon—and then piece together—some fraction of your larger story. Some fractured pieces, perhaps. Why? Because, separately, all of those pieces could be reduced to nostalgia which, if we spend too much time with, can become trivial. At the other extreme, memories without context can become paralyzing regret, which keeps us from acknowledging pieces of our lives that are important, even if they're painful.

As you consider what might become for you a mini-memoir (and by mini I mean it might be just a few sentences) maybe you'll be looking at distinct period of time. Or instead you might choose one of the many threads woven through the countless events of your life, which otherwise appear disconnected, maybe even meaningless.

To find such a thread within the jumble of events, it might be helpful to have a framework on which to build. The frame of base, bowl, and dancing, transforming flame is just one possibility, but a useful one for those of us who wish to deepen our relationship to the simple rituals through which we routinely engage with these seemingly ordinary symbols.

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I will begin my story today with the bowl, which is where I began to recognize my base, which I will describe later. In 1990, I found the UU young adult group in Minneapolis. Young adult groups are notoriously difficult to form and sustain because they are inherently in flux. Although this group met at the First Unitarian Society, it was an amalgam of young adults loosely affiliated with any of the dozen or so UU congregations in the Twin Cities. It didn't matter much where we came from; the bowl was wide and open. And yet somehow, once I was drawn in, I didn't rattle around in its spaciousness; I felt embraced. There was room in there for expansiveness, but at that point in my life I needed something else.

Within that bowl, I still remained part of the larger world, where I was newly unsettled as a parent, and unsure of my career path. There was no hiding from the intense emotional distress of getting divorced. Still, by being a part of this supportive community most weekends, I somehow felt less exposed — even though, most of the week, I was facing the world alone. So the external

burdens were always there, but now I felt less vulnerable, because unconditional love and acceptance were always there too.

This was my first encounter with Unitarian Universalism. I spent three years at the First Unitarian Society, teaching religious education, singing in the choir, and sharing leadership within the young adult group. I say “sharing leadership,” but in truth this group of about 25 regulars needed very little of that. We traveled to meet with young adult groups in surrounding states, and we hosted a national week-long UU young adult conference, but rather than tasks, it was the relationship itself that we were tending. And I do mean relationship-singular. I formed strong one-on-one relationships, but there was, more profoundly, a sense that who we were for one another, as a whole, was essentially our reason for being.

The biggest challenge we faced, ironically, turned out to be a result of our closeness. When our beloved Vicki was killed on her bicycle, we pulled together for mutual support in our grief. We were so together—so mutually trusting—that the group that had existed up to that moment pulled away together to one side of the bowl. New people came in, but many of us, being on the verge of aging out of the group or moving on with our careers or families, just let the next wave of newcomers become their own community.

I was fortunate to be able to hang on to the sense of unconditional love that pervaded the group I knew. It was like a bit of flame that could be taken with me wherever I would go. Jane and I were both a part of the group, and even as we moved to Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Washington, we’ve kept in touch with several of these friends. And fortunately, though unsurprisingly, I understand that the Twin Cities UU young adult group, which had evolved, of course, from something that had existed before us, continued to evolve into something well beyond us. It continued to evolve, actually, into several new things. Our little circle splashed about and eventually overflowed the bowl, so that love touched new families, workplaces, and organizations of every kind. Five from the group became UU ministers.

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That was the Bowl. Within the Base, I have gradually come to recognize an impure amalgam of three elements: christianity, privilege, and the First Amendment.

Christianity: I was raised within a dutiful christian household, so I heard the stories of Jesus over and over and over. But I was never told to take them literally. So I eventually began to focus on patterns that I saw, such as Jesus’ hanging out with those who society found sinful ... and his condemnation of the hypocrisy of those who followed the letter of the law while missing the spirit of the law ... and in the counterintuitive ethical lessons of his parables.

Second, regarding privilege, I was able to believe, through my experience, the words of the Gospel of Matthew: “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened to you.” This is how I experienced life for a long time, so I also believed in the next line, “What father among you, when your child asked for a fish, would give him a snake?” I believed in this because I had received proper nutrition since before I was born. And I continued

to get fish while I needed them; then I was taught to fish. But even more important: I always had access to the lake.

And the third component of my base, the First Amendment. Rev. Khoren Arisian, who led the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, was deeply into American history and the ideals of the founders. This has not been the explicit focus of the Unitarian Universalism that I've encountered anywhere else, but I still believe that the insights embedded in freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, forged in the crucible of the eighteenth century when Unitarianism was discovering itself (Barbara ten Hove's congregation in Lexington, Massachusetts was just slightly ahead of the times) ... I believe that these first amendment principles are inextricable from what has evolved into the UU principles we affirm and promote now 300 years later.

I also believe that the hope for our future (both for Unitarian Universalism and for the wellbeing of our country) lies in the intersection of our UU principles and the First Amendment. I have this hope because I believe that the vast majority of Americans (documented and undocumented) and countless other people of goodwill around the globe are fully in synch with our Unitarian Universalist principles, if not spiritually, then pragmatically.

Finally, regarding these three elements: I'll paraphrase G. K. Chesterton: It's not that christianity doesn't work, it just hasn't been tried yet. Just so, it's not that democracy doesn't work, it just hasn't been tried yet. And it's not that equality doesn't work, it just hasn't been tried yet. Still, for me, these form a base for the bowl of beloved community.

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And so, my flame:

How do you describe a flame? It takes highly sophisticated equipment and deep knowledge of chemistry to get even a clue about what flame is. And even then, it frustrates explanation. It's a tornado and a volcano packed into something the size of a pea. Except that it's not a thing.

For me it's the ongoing transformative dance of constantly reassessing my call, my sense of purpose. Rediscovering what I am and what I have, and how I can best put it all to use. How do I best use my insights into the wisdom and the humanity of Jesus? How do I best use my citizenship of a nation that isn't doing very well at it, but still has to grapple with the ideals of the First Amendment? How do I best use my access to the lake, granted to me by my race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and physical and financial well-being? And since I've known love, how do I best use my ability, much of the time, to recognize when I am, and when I am not, acting with love?

I guess that all sounds pretty intense, more like a rave than a waltz. So maybe all of the above is the roiling center of the flame, which is very real. But flickering above and about that transformative turmoil—what I experience in the day to day—is my spirit dancing with Jane and my kids, my congregation, books, and ideas, and with the ever present beauty of our natural surroundings: the dancing birds, wind-whipped trees, and crashing waves.