

What Keeps Us Here?

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

April 28, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes

I love the symbolism of the flaming chalice. A burning beacon of light to cut through the dark, a light that allows us to see truth, to find each other and to brighten a path that is sometimes drenched in darkness. That represented darkness can come in so many different forms and it creeps in over and over again, for as long as we walk this path of life. In my own life I have experienced this darkness many times over. Four years ago, my whole world crumbled around me and I faced losing not only some of what I considered the most important parts of my life but also a huge piece of my own identity, even as we struggled in the midst of a pandemic that had already brought devastation and overwhelm. I faced a darkness that was so complete it thoroughly covered any path forward. I wasn't sure it would lift and I wasn't sure I would be there even if it ever did. I felt lost and I was so steeped in the darkness, I couldn't see to find my way home.

Here's the thing about darkness though. It always yields to light. Never do you open a door from a brightly lit room to a dark closet and have the darkness creep out to cover up the light in your space. It is the light that always, always banishes the darkness. Our flaming chalice is a symbol of that light to me. The light of love. The light of hope. The light of a community that can help you to find your true path even when the darkness tries to hide it. It's the worth and the dignity we believe resides within each person, their very own light. Even when that light is so small we can barely see it. Maybe especially then. It's important to remember as well that even the smallest spark can ignite into a raging inferno.

It took me a year and a half into my trauma to finally reach for a light. My own spark was so small I wasn't really even sure it was still there. It was love that was my key to restoring my flame, building my light into something easy to see and find. Love and deciding to let go when I realized that the darkness was still so thick in part because I was wrapping it around myself like a blanket. I was holding on to hurt and pain that I felt like I deserved, partly because I didn't think I was worthy of more and partly because my trauma was so great that I had chosen pain and anger as an identity, rather than remembering it was just what I was feeling and feelings are supposed to be temporary, not a place to make a home. My light was still there though and love, both given and received, was the spark that finally called me back to my true home.

I'm reminded when I look at our chalice that the light represents everything good in this world and in the people who inhabit her. It represents love and hope, courage and faith, compassion and kindness. It represents all the things, both tangible and intangible, that keep each of us working towards a brighter future, a more loving community and our own personal growth. The light is why we are still here and why we feel blessed to have the opportunity to live at all. And it is a blessing. I couldn't see that for a while and I cherish the ability to see it now because I know what it feels like on the other side, bathing in an endless sea of night, without hope. I'm grateful I'm still here, still feeding the light and still looking for it in others. It is this light, this hope, this love, that keeps me showing up. It is the light that allows me now to look at the world as a place worth living in. Whether a small spark or a forest fire of flame, there will always be hope for a world in which people are willing to do the work and willing to make a difference. Hope is dressed in work boots and asks us to be the physical manifestation of that beautiful symbol we look to each week. It asks us to be the light in a world that needs our illumination.

What Keeps Us Here?© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

The Beatitudes is the name we give this lesson Jesus gave to his followers about how to treat other people. It's at the beginning of a long passage of teaching by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel known as the Sermon on the Mount. Unitarian and Universalists have over the years valued greatly this Sermon on the Mount and in particular the teachings about how to treat other people. We have always valued right treatment over right belief. How we treat one another matters more to us than what we believe about God or Heaven or Jesus.

Blessing is our theme this month, but we've deviated from the pattern these last several weeks. This is the third in a series of four sermons leading up to the vote at General Assembly on updating the language in our Unitarian Universalist bylaws. I began with my own spiritual journey, then moved on to history and this morning will talk about theology. History and theology sort of get intertwined in our story – because the history of our faith movement is a history of theological ideas. Last week I talked about early church strands of universal reconciliation and Unitarianism, citing Origen who was Egyptian and Arius who was African, both of Alexandria. Ours is not a creedal tradition, that is, we don't all have the same beliefs, but rather we find common ground in the way we treat one another, or try to be with one another. Many of us find this stance entirely compatible with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Why, then, might you ask, am I concerning myself this morning with theology, if our ties are not based on our beliefs?

Theology is not the same as belief. Theology comes from Greek and means the study of God – *theo*, God, and *logy* – study. I think of it as the study of the mystery or the outer reaches of our understanding. For some, the word God describes that mystery, for others, it misses the mark. I'm an agnostic when it comes to the *term* God – sometimes the word works for me to describe a mystery beyond my knowing, and sometimes it falls short. There was a time in our history when theology and science were the same thing. It's not until the 14th century, that they have diverged and become separate strands of study – but at first, it was all the same.

As a person who loves to study and learn, I'm aware that knowledge is a moving target. As soon as I begin to think I understand something, a new fact or experience arises which challenges or expands or contradicts that understanding. It is a never-ending process and not a fixed mark. We are “doing theology” when we are examining our values and measuring our actions against them.

The blessing of our theology is that it is ongoing – “revelation is not sealed” we say. We learn and grow and discover and change over time. Our faith holds us in love, in our capacity to love and be loved. It keeps us going when times get tough because we are not alone, ever, we are *connected, in mystery and miracle to the universe, to this community and to each other.*

Lacey's theology is made evident in her reflection this morning. She believes in the light of love and hope, the light of community and the value of each person. These beliefs helped her hold on to hope even when it seemed remote: love and hope, courage and faith, compassion and kindness, are qualities she finds in the symbol of this flaming chalice. Her examination of the chalice reminds me of a bit of history that I wanted to share with you as we recited this morning the April chalice lighting words for the last time. Some of you know that history and the theology behind it, but some of the new folks may not.

We've said each Sunday this month that the symbol of the flaming chalice was crafted a generation ago out of chaos, fear, and horror. It was during World War II when the Unitarian Service Committee needed an official looking logo to stamp on their paperwork as a secret group of agents tried to find safe

routes for people in Eastern Europe – Unitarians, Jews, and many others - to escape the Nazis. Because they needed to ask governments and other organizations for help, they wanted their correspondence to look official. The Director of the Service Committee, Rev. Charles Joy, commissioned artist Hans Deutsch to fashion a symbol that would serve like the cross for Christians and the star of David for Jews, but symbolize Unitarianism and specifically their organization that sought help from other organizations to help fleeing refugees. Furthermore, the symbol would cross language barriers because the refugees wouldn't have to read words in any single language to understand a symbol to become associated with the help they were trying to get. Deutsch himself had escaped from the Nazis in Paris where he was in danger for drawing cartoons to draw attention to the evil of the Nazi regime. Deutsch was said to have borrowed this symbol of strength and freedom from Czechoslovakia – a chalice with a flame. In the 40's and 50's it's just a flat image on paper and it isn't until the 70's that people start to put a candle in a chalice cup and begin lighting that flame in worship. I'm pretty sure I remember in the 80's when we first started lighting a chalice in worship at the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City. Though most congregations have such a ritual, because we have congregational polity and are free to create our own rituals, it is not universal. But it's very common. If this is the only Unitarian Universalist church you have ever visited, I highly recommend you go visit others – we have five in the Portland Metro area. The closest to us is First Unitarian Church of Portland.

The theology behind this symbol is this unitarian understanding that we are one people – children of God, if you will – and this universalist principle that we have a single destiny – ultimate reconciliation with God. That's an historical articulation of the theology – a more current description of the theology might be that we are interdependent and that the wellbeing of one affects the wellbeing of all. Nazi beliefs in a supremacy that value some people over others runs directly counter to Unitarian and Universalist theologies and it is those theologies that led and lead us to take action in the world.

Action such as the Unitarian Service Committee took during and following World War II to help refugees at risk and displaced by the Nazi regime. Actions we take now, such as providing a community garden – Maplewood Moseley Community Garden - for our neighbors who don't have yards where they can grow vegetables, and housing the homeless through the Family Promise program. In our Story for All Ages, the butterfly cares for the flowers, the horse for the open field, the fish, water, etc. that's theology informing our actions.

The way I've come to understand my own worldview is as an embodied theology of relation. *Embodied* because we have bodies, and because it is through our bodies that we take action in the world. And *relational*, because our bodies don't exist in isolation. We are an embodiment of our relations – our ancestors that came before, the people we relate to in the same time and space, the descendants that will follow, and the rest of life as well, the plant life and animal life with whom we are interrelated, and the mystery – the mystery which some name as God. To understand all these connections, to really understand that we are connected, compels us to act in ways that is counter to the culture at large: The culture which rewards rugged or extreme individualism in its social structures that isolate us and keep us separated, resulting in suffering alone.

Loneliness and isolation have become an epidemic, according to the US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, in his 2023 report on the *Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Totalitarianism as 'organized loneliness' helps explain the rise of both totalitarianism and loneliness in our country and our world.

Said Erika Hewitt in that reading, "resisting the isolation that breeds loneliness is not just an emotional, psychological, or even spiritual act, but also a political one. The blogger and critic Maria Popova puts it

this way: ‘Our insistence on belonging, community, and human connection is one of the greatest acts of courage and resistance in the face of oppression.’”

This extreme individualism also leads to false expectations – that one can pull oneself up by the bootstrap when communal forces are working against them. Or that it is the fault of the poor or the homeless that they are poor and homeless, and not the fault of a society that doesn’t have enough housing and doesn’t pay working people a living wage. How many of you, as you’ve aged, I’m speaking to the elders in the room, have felt less valued by society because you are no longer as independent as you used to be and you don’t contribute in the same ways you used to contribute? That feeling of not being enough is a result of these unhealthy messages promoted by our culture. Our resistance to those messages is crucial and helped by a theology that reminds us of our connections – as it says in one of our readings in the hymnal – *we are connected in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other*. It was an illusion that we ever really took care of ourselves – we were always a part of a network that helped support us, and some of us inherited so much more support than others. In an unequal society, it is ironically those with the most support – inherited wealth, access to education, etc. who have the luxury of believing in an extreme form of individualism because the ways in which they rely on others is not as visible to them. If you need your neighbor to watch your child so you can go to work, you are more aware of your dependencies....

“If pain and suffering tempt us to become isolated and apathetic, Söelle argues, we must instead give voice to our suffering by creating ‘a language of lament’ that might draw us into solidarity.” I think that’s what we try to do here on Sunday mornings, but my colleague, the Rev. Mary Gear, in Olympia, has taken this charge even further. She began a practice during the pandemic of howling with her congregation – expressing pain collectively as wolves do. I think that works as a language of lament. Want to try it?

Embodied theology of relation is how I describe my own theology. The seeds of which come from my unitarian ancestors – that we come from a single source – and my universalist ancestors – and share a single destiny. I wore this stole this morning, the same stole I wore when I shared my personal spiritual journey. It’s a stole that my sister made for me based on my theology. My sister did most of the embroidery, but my mother and other women in my family contributed to the stitching. On the bottom right – my right – are images of the sea, starfish and seaweed, then flowers on the land, with wild blackberries around my shoulders, and the sun above it on my left, with clouds and a rainbow – an important symbol of diversity, and finally the night sky and planets – images of the natural world in which we live and grow and breathe. Our lives and the natural world are interconnected. We come from a single source and share a single destiny.

I think Unitarian Universalism today lives at that intersection of theology and science. Perhaps it’s a return to ancient times when they were a single science, seeking to explain life’s mysteries. It is theology, however, and not fixed belief – it is an ongoing study and learning we engage daily as we measure our actions against our values and seek better and better alignment with them.

We embody our values in action by coming together each week, to lament and to celebrate, to support each other, and take collective action.

Today it is a congregational meeting in which you will elect members to the Leadership Discovery and Development Committee, Endowment Board and UUCV Board of Trustees. It’s a short meeting. We hold a longer congregational meeting on June 2nd with much more business, including adopting a budget based on the results of our pledge campaign. You’re welcome to join us even if you’re not a member. Only members can vote, however.

The blessing of our theology is that it is ongoing – “revelation is not sealed” we say. We learn and grow and discover and change over time. Our faith holds us in love, in our capacity to love and be loved. It keeps us going when times get tough because we are not alone, ever, we are *connected, in mystery and miracle to the universe, to this community and to each other.*