

“Centers of Our Worship”

Rev. Annie Holmes

The stories that we bring from our lives are the very center, core of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Just the plain, simple and often awesome stories of our lives. How can our measly, puny, insignificant life stories be a church's center of worship. Well, I hope to let you know what I think at least. Then, hopefully, we'll hear from you.

We seem to have such trouble deciding what is the core of our UU faith. I explain to people, the core of being a Unitarian Universalist for me is like life in my house. I live, create, rest and live in my home. And the home for my faith is the same, it is where I live, create, rest and grow all in this present UU faith. But, my faith house also has a basement. Because this basement is the foundation of my house, literally and figuratively, I keep this foundation, this basement in good condition. And often I go down into the basement and light a fire and get out the old picture albums and mementoes and look at them and smile and remember, and sometimes tell the old stories to anyone who will listen. See me here, that was when I was in a Catholic convent and I learned such and so. And see me here, I say, that was when I was a Lutheran seminary student and this is what I learned. Because it is all good, and all worthy, I don't allow my foundation, my basement to become moldy or rotted, or worse, fall apart for neglect or misuse. Oh no, I keep it clean and neat and ordered and ready for me to use whenever I need it.

Because it will always be my foundation, to deny that would be ludicrous. I never tell people I am an ex-Catholic, or a recovering Catholic, or a former Lutheran. Those pieces are always there in me and there for me. Using terms like that puts it into a light I am not ready to put it. Maybe I could say I am an evolving entity. Being a UU for me has been my psyche is like a sponge. My faith house had to be able to absorb my past religious experiences without throwing them out. Otherwise, it would have been a converting experience rather than an evolving religious experience. And that is what it has been, evolving. So, maybe those two faith systems don't work for me now as they once did, they still have meaning and power. I live now in my faith home, in my UU space and there is the core, the center, nucleus, the heart—the story.

The story goes when I was three years old my family went to our neighborhood Catholic church as usual. During the Mass it seemed to a young Annie, that everything had gotten way too quiet for much too long a period of time. Much too quiet. I guess I had noticed that the priest had had his head bowed for a long time. I got concerned and hollered out in a very loud voice, “Talk Priest, Talk!” As I was harshly rebuked for my outburst, I learned for the first time in my young life the sanctity of the consecration of the host and wine in the Catholic tradition.

The second learning experience of the sanctity of the consecration of the elements of bread and wine came when I was nine. I had learned to love the Mass, and to love it quietly, and, by that time I had learned that I loved to play saying the Mass too. On the lawn in the front of my house I would gather the neighborhood kids, my little congregation and celebrate the Mass. I wore my Mother's cape, used her best table cloth for the altar. I had grape juice and saltine crackers. It was great. I really got into the whole act. I could say all the Latin Alter boy parts as I had listened to my brothers learn it so they could assist at Mass. I would raise my arms at the right time, look heavenward and say my Latin phrases. I guess I knew my little neighborhood flock

was only there for the grape juice and saltines, but I always promised that if they listened through my sermon they would have the treats. I felt such power, even as a little girl playing the priest. One day I had a rather large crowd of kids. The word had passed around that the treats were good at my house, I guess. But my Mom found that her best tablecloth was missing. When she looked outside and saw what I was doing she ran outdoors and grabbed my arm and in front of the all the children seated there, told me in an angry voice that women could not be priests and that it was wrong that I was pretending to bless the bread and wine. My priest, parish days were over, well, at least for the time being.

For Roman Catholics their center of worship is the consecration of the elements of the bread and wine as celebrated within the structure of the Mass, for many their daily form of worship. This consecration of the elements is the perfect symbol of the cross and resurrection story of Christ. The common elements of bread and wine are changed through a mystical and mysterious way into the actual body and blood of Christ through a process, called by the church, transubstantiation. The story goes that these common elements, through the sacred words of a man, ordained in the line of Peter, or in the tradition of the apostolic succession, can literally call God down and substitute the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This is at the center, the core, the very heart of the Catholic tradition. This doctrine of faith is what separates this church from other churches.

To me, the church of my youth, was remembered mostly as a building, a very large cruciform building. There were many stained glass windows and symbols, but also dampness and cold. I picture myself, a very little person trying to look into the church, but it is much too high, much too large, much too opaque. I have felt barriers to entering the building, engaging in the sacraments, but I have in detail remembered the stories. The Bible stories, the stories of the saints, the heroes and heroines, they are forever clear in my memory. In my youth we heard the stories in school and at home, at church. We wrote about them, acted them out, they were an intimate part of our lives. The stories put flesh and blood, a background and a context onto what was the very other worldly center of worship, the sacrifice of the Mass.

The story goes, as an adult, I moved from the Catholic faith to what I considered then, a more liberal faith, the Lutheran church. I felt the power of the Lutheran tradition in two ways. One way was the belief that faith alone could save you. Faith alone, scripture alone. This was a balm for my searching soul. At the time of my life when I was searching for less doctrine, less church directed authority, Lutheranism was a raft on a stormy sea. Here I could read the Bible, translate and interpret it with many other people who were already very familiar with it. It was a joy to feel the center of worship shift from the bread and wine to the word. Lutheranism felt broader and simpler. The second way I felt the power of the Lutheran tradition was, that here was a mainline church ordaining women.

I visited Germany around this time and found the Protestant Cathedrals to be masterpieces of architecture and beauty. The first architectural style you notice as you enter one of these magnificent edifices, is that the pulpit is sometimes as much as twenty feet from the first pew and at least 10 feet up in the air. The pulpits were enormous and very ornate. Some had winding staircases that made you dizzy just to look at them, much less to try to climb them in the dark wearing a long robe. I was very impressed. The pulpits were central to the décor of the chancel. The Biblical word and its interpretation is central to the worship life of a Protestant.

The story goes that Martin Luther, as he was traveling from castle to castle, often running for his life because of the 95 thesis he had nailed to the door at Wittenberg, was asked to preach while he stayed at one particular church. One late night while riding in the carriage he knew he should be preparing a sermon for the next morning. He was very tired and as he started to doze off, he said to himself, "The holy spirit will tell me what to say." Satisfied he fell asleep. The next morning he climbed the pulpit and in the silence that followed as the congregation was seated after the hymn, Luther exclaimed, "Well, holy spirit, what shall I say?" The holy spirit replied, "Martin, you should have prepared!" Such is the importance of the sermon for the Lutherans.

The story goes that to know the story is power. For a Protestant, to feel the holy spirit, to feel the presence of the godhead, it is vital that you know the story. The story is power, the story is truth, the story is life. When Martin Luther was on trial for heresy, he held the Bible and said, "Here I stand and I will not be moved." Again, I look back on my time as a Lutheran and again I see buildings; the church where I was married, the seminary where I studied, the church where I served for a time, the building where the shelter was housed that I help begin. I try to grasp a larger power, I certainly know the story. I had to take a Bible proficiency test to be certified as a Lutheran minister and it took me three tries to pass. But my mind often falls away from the story and what I am left with are the buildings.

The story goes that as my life story caught up with my religious quest, the buildings began to fall away and I was left instead with an unending story. Now, when I close my eyes, I don't see any more buildings. Today, when I picture my spiritual life, I see birds and flowers and trees and a meadow and a lake. I see the sun and the moon, different religious symbols and lots of paths through the woods. The center of worship for we Unitarian Universalists is vast and varied. For some the word worship holds no meaning. For some the center or focal points move with growth of knowledge and life experiences. But in order to maintain any identity, whatever suits the individual, we need to continue to share our stories. The word worship in its oldest ancient understanding meant to literally craft worth from your life. What was of such deep worth to you that you felt you could or would craft your life around it. Find it, find that worth and you would begin to do the work of worship. Not such a scary thing even for religious liberals if you only know the history.

The task of defining and interpreting either our spiritual journey or the world around us cannot be limited to Adult Enrichment classes or religious education. The story telling cannot be something that ends after our youth is long behind us. The heroes and heroines need to be discussed freely, the tradition that we have in our past liberal views that form our foundation and grounding, need to be part of our vocabulary and part of our sharing.

The story goes, that the story will be lost if we do not intentionally share it with our young and continue to refine it with each other. It is of the essence of our faith to tell your story in love, and then, to listen in turn in love to others. Who do we say that we are? Be intentional about the story that we have to say to the world.

We are our own best story. We are the reason and our quest for the holy, the sacred, the true in life that brings us together every Sunday. We are the mystery and the truth of why we are a group that stays together when it is awfully hard to stay together at times. The energy that is raised here is the sustaining bread and wine that sparks us and moves us and allows us to fulfill

our day to day tasks. All our stories of how we got here and why we stay here need to be shaped, renewed and shared with someone this summer.

If story could indeed be a center of our finding the holy, then what about our flaming chalice, which is the symbol of this UU faith? Many Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships start their worship service on Sunday morning by lighting a flame inside a chalice. This flaming chalice is a symbol for Unitarian Universalists just as the cross and the Star of David are symbols for other religious groups. The story of how the flaming chalice became our symbol is an interesting one and it begins during the Second World War.

(The following is taken from the Unitarian Universalist website on the history of our flaming chalice.)

During that war, a lot of people living in Eastern Europe—Unitarians, Jews, and others—were in danger of being put in prison or killed by Nazi soldiers. A group of Unitarians came together in Boston, Massachusetts, to form the Unitarian Service Committee and their plan was to help the people in danger from the Nazis. The director of the Service Committee was the Unitarian minister Charles Joy. Rev. Joy had an office in Portugal so he would be near the people he wanted to help. He was in charge of a whole secret group of agents and messengers who worked hard trying to find safe routes for people to escape.

Rev. Joy and his assistants often needed to ask governments and other organizations for their help to save people who were in danger. They would send messages to anyone in government who might give them money, transportation, or a safe route. Because they were a new organization though, not very many people had heard of them. This made it much harder for Rev. Joy and the people in the Unitarian Service Committee to get the help they needed.

In those days during the war, when danger was everywhere, lots of people were running away from their own countries. Often, people who were escaping and people who wanted to help didn't speak the same language. Rev. Joy decided it would be much better if the Service Committee had an official symbol, or picture, to help identify its members. With a picture or symbol, it wouldn't matter if people couldn't read the language.

It looked like Rev. Joy would need to find an artist. He went to a very talented man named Hans Deutsch for help. Deutsch had escaped from the Nazis in Paris, France, where he was in danger because he drew cartoons showing people how evil the Nazis were. Rev. Joy asked Deutsch to create a symbol to print on Service Committee papers to make them look important. He wanted the symbol to impress governments and police who had the power to help move people to safety.

For his drawing, Deutsch borrowed an old symbol of strength and freedom from Czechoslovakia—a chalice with a flame. Rev. Joy wrote to his friends in Boston that the new symbol seemed to show the real spirit of the Unitarian religion. It showed a chalice, or cup, that was used for giving a healing drink to others. And it showed a flame on top of the chalice because a flame was often used to represent a spirit of helpfulness and sacrifice. And so the flaming chalice became the official symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee.

Many years later, the flaming chalice became the symbol of Unitarian Universalist groups all over the world. By the early 1970s, enough Unitarian Universalists had heard the story of the flaming chalice symbol that they began to light a flaming chalice as part of the worship service in their churches. Over the years, this practice has spread over most of the United States and Canada.

What does it mean to have a symbol like this? Well, one thing it means is that wherever you see a flaming chalice, you know that there are Unitarians and Universalists nearby. Having a symbol also can remind you of what's most important to you—and sometimes a reminder can make a very big difference.

One very old woman told how the flaming chalice of her homeland, Czechoslovakia, helped her while she was in a Nazi prison camp. Printed under the picture of the Czech flaming chalice was the motto "pravda vitezi," which means, in English, "truth overcomes," or "truth prevails." Every single morning in that terrible camp, the old woman said, she traced a picture of a flaming chalice in the sand with her finger. Then she wrote the motto underneath it. "It gave me the strength to live each day," she said. Whenever she drew the chalice in the dirt she was reminded that someday the world would remember the important truth that every single person is important and should be free to think and believe as he or she chooses.

When we see people light the chalice at the beginning of our service every Sunday, we can enjoy it because it is a lovely thing to do. But we can also remember the story of the flaming chalice and the strength it has given people for hundreds of years. We use it to let others know that Unitarian Universalists believe in helping—others. And that is the truth of that story!

Your story is not puny, silly or unnecessary to tell. It is important and needs to be honored. Because you can look and look until your eyes fall out and there will not be a better center of worship than the faith journeys we are all taking.