

The Joy of Creation

Alison Wohler, March 22, 2009
Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

Bill Everett was a professor of mine at Andover Newton Theological School. He taught ethics, and was a fabulous teacher – taking personal interest in the lives and ministries of his students. He was my advisor for the year I was the campus' Earth Minister. For Earth Day that year Bill gave the school a very special gift of a wooden, round, double drop-leaf, un-dyed maple communion table that he had designed and built himself. It was round as a symbol of equal welcome; that all are worthy. Not the typical chancel rectangle, minister behind, congregation in front, easily hidden away when not convenient. It was a roundtable of invitation. It was a roundtable of opportunity for participation in the work of the world. I was reminded of King Arthur's Court and the story of the power of his roundtable.

Bill Everett's table was wood because wood is of the Earth, and perhaps because Jesus is said to have himself been a carpenter, or at least a carpenter's son. Bill related his own experience working with the not-always-compliant wood for this table to the struggles he imagined Jesus had experienced in his ministry. "Did [Jesus'] experience with wood shape the way he handled the rotten, broken, twisted, and grainy materials of his ministry?" I love the way Bill allowed his creative side to influence his thinking side. He wrote, in fact, "I became increasingly aware of the need to balance my work in words with work in wood. Wordcraft had to be better balanced with woodcraft." There was great joy, and also fulfillment, in his creativity. (www.wisdomstable.net)

I've spoken before of the years I owned an art gallery. I called it my Ministry of Beauty, long before I ever thought of professional ministry. I so strongly believed in the need for beautiful things in everyone's life that I kept that gallery going for almost 20 years even though it did not make much of a profit – at all. Having that gallery, though, and being a framer, allowed me the chance to at least hold other people's art, even if I could neither draw nor paint nor be creative in any of the traditionally thought of media. Sometimes I am still asked if I miss Pastimes Gallery – that's what it was called – and my answer is always no. But if pressed I might admit to missing getting to work with all the colors of the world of art and framing. I used to dream about colors and color combinations. When I was a child my favorite gifts were brand new tablets of colored construction paper and giant boxes of crayons and colored pencils. I discovered this week that Crayola has a web site called The Power of Creativity. When I closed my gallery it was very hard for me to give up the racks of mat board samples and all their beautiful subtleties of hue and tint.

If I didn't have all of you, I might say I missed working with the people who came into my gallery, but I have moved on to a new Ministry. You are my new examples of beauty in all varieties of color and texture and form.

Today we are playing and being creative with the color, texture and form of our Unitarian Universalist Flaming Chalice. The original symbol of a Chalice, with a flame burning

inside it, was designed in 1941, by Hans Deutsch, an Austrian cartoonist, for the Unitarian Service Committee. The Service Committee needed an official looking symbol for the documents they were creating (perhaps the word is forging) to enable the escape of those facing uncertain futures if they could not make it out of Nazi held territories. UU minister, Grace Simons, writes, "At its inception for the Unitarian Service Committee, the flaming chalice was a symbol of compassionate activism, not of belief - a symbol of deeds, not creeds." (sermon "The Flaming Chalice" by the Rev. Grace Simons, UU Fellowship of Stanislaus County)

But it was a fortuitous choice of symbols for our Unitarian faith, and was quickly incorporated into our tradition beyond the Service Committee. In 1967, when I joined my Unitarian Church at the age of 16, I was given a flaming chalice necklace as a gift. It wasn't until the late 1970s or even 80s that chalices began being lit in our churches and fellowships on Sunday mornings. Some speculate that it actually started within our religious education programs and later spread to the "adult" service. (www.uucards.org/middchalice.php)

There is a story about our children and their ability to easily take the chalice as a symbol of their faith. Apparently, "in 1981 two fourth grade girls met in school somewhere around the Washington DC area, and quickly became friends. When Megan visited Lucia and then went through Lucia's button collection, Megan pounced on one from the UUSC that featured a flaming chalice and said, "I didn't know you were a UU, Lucia!" Although the girls attended the same public school, they participated in religious education programs in different churches." (same as above)

We know that *our* children, too, identify strongly with the symbol of the flaming chalice. Our youngest ones often use lessons from a Unitarian Universalist curriculum called Chalice Children.

But, as you may have noticed when they processed in this morning with their hand made chalices, our children's concept of that chalice symbol is quite diverse! As are the images and other chalices some of you have created for this service. Creativity abounds among us!

And you also may have noticed that what we assign, or can assign, that burning flame to represent at any given lighting can be quite creative as well. Was that not abundantly clear in the variety of readings we used for the lighting of our chalices this morning? When I wore my flaming chalice necklace back in my high school days I thought of it as representing my "burning soul," and I was not referring to having descended to hell. It's actually a testament to my UU upbringing, I think, that the concept of a soul burning in eternal punishment never even occurred to me. My chalice was for the passion and the love of life that I felt in my soul.

Today, as a minister, I use the flaming chalice to symbolize many things, on different occasions. Sometimes it is truth, or love, or hope; sometimes the energy of a life, of one of us, that is gone but not forgotten; sometimes I simply hold the flame up as a reminder

of our good intentions. As Rebecca wrote about her quilt, “We light a chalice to bring us together.” Some days it is the chalice part we hold up, sometimes it is the flame. But for me, I will always think of the flaming chalice as a vessel of sorts, one that can receive but also one that can share and give of itself. One that contains the past but is open to the future. Most importantly, my chalice is a vessel that holds something significant and powerful to which it is worth paying attention.

One year when I was at Andover Newton, there was an artist in residence whose specialty was sculpture. His subject was hands. I had never commissioned a piece of artwork before, but I commissioned this artist to make me a chalice in a certain design which you see here. It is a child’s hand, holding on to an adult hand, holding up a candle – holding up the light. The vessel, the chalice, is our lives, but particularly as they are connected through the generations. We are the chalice, containing the past, but part of the future as well. For me, hope abounds in this chalice of family love. I own the original of this sculpture, but it was so popular I let the artist make copies of it for all the other people who wanted one. They’re out there somewhere, and that makes me happy. I would never have been able to create this piece myself, but I was able to create the idea.

I asked our children, and you, to make chalices for this service as an illustration of the joy of being creative. The added benefit of having chosen our chalice for this exercise is that the chalice itself is a symbol of creativity. A chalice is a rather universal symbol of feminine energy and creative potential. A source of abundance. A womb.

I would love to lift up each and every chalice on these tables in order to show you the creative ideas of your UUSA family, but the fact that they have live flames in them that might fall out is making me think you should come up yourselves and take a look after the service instead. We are a creative congregation, but we also want to be a safe congregation!

We create paintings and mosaics and sculptures; music and song and poetry, literature and dance. These are the arts we commonly think of. But we also create gardens, and outfits, and meals and homes to live in. We create children and families and congregations and institutions. The joy is in the creation, in the process, in what we feel as it happens and the joy our creation brings to others when we are done.

I hope you have had fun today – whether the creativity was yours or someone else’s. Just as in last week’s jazz service, there is joy in both the giving and the receiving.

This is the second of three services from which I hope you have found some of your own joy in the creative arts. Whether you are a musician, or a painter, or an amateur flower arranger like myself, our lives (and what I really mean is our spiritual lives) are made more joyful in creative activity. We like to make things and invent things and think new things because we are born to be creative. It is our human nature to create.

Robert Weston wrote:

*Life will not be denied.
Let all hearts swell with glad acceptance,
joyful with the sense of the always becoming,
for out of earth, into the air and sunshine
out of ourselves,
there rises spirit...
It rises irresistible in us.*

It is written in the Bible that human beings were created in the image of God. “And God saw that it was good.” But I believe that God was created in the image of human beings. It is a very handy idea, to pattern a maker after yourselves. Very creative. And we have seen that it is good.

Fulfilling the potential of our human nature: this is the spiritual joy of creation.