

Flying the Flag
November 8, 2015
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UUMSB

How many of you have traveled to another town and gone to visit a Unitarian Universalist Congregation? (Maybe you are visiting here today!) When I visit other churches, I always look at the chalice and see how they use that symbol. Is there one circle around it, two, none? Do they use a candle or fuel? What does the cup look like? Do they say the same words each week to light it or different words? Who does the lighting? When does it happen in the service? I *am* a church and liturgy geek, there is no getting around that, but what we do when we enter a new space, is we read the symbols around us, consciously and unconsciously. What does the community we are entering place importance on? How do they use their symbols?

Our chalice is a powerful symbol to us, but just as Unitarian Universalism does not trip off the tongue of the average person outside New England, our symbol does not have universal meaning. That said, I have had many strangers come up to talk with me about my chalice necklace. They recognize it as meaningful and want to know more about it. Burning candles, lighting our chalice, means more than converting a wick or fuel into light. The parts of our chalice, the cup, the flame, the circle or circles around it have meaning for each of us, and we have a shared history of it's creation and use for justice work we talked about earlier today. We connect with each other through singing together, being in quiet together, making meaning, using shared symbols and rituals. For many Unitarian Universalists, the chalice is a short hand for all of that. Our chalice is light in the darkness, beauty, prayer, connection with Unitarian Universalists around the world. Starhawk said in our reading this morning:

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands

will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,

voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength

that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

Symbols are incredibly powerful. We communicate with objects, written language, art, pictures, metaphor. From the first cave paintings to computer code, symbols shape us and our society. They have power, some more than others, and they have that power because of the meaning we make with them. A powerful modern symbol, the rainbow flag, has flown for LGBTQ pride since 1978. It was designed by a man named Gilbert Baker when he was asked by Harvey Milk to create something to replace the pink triangle, a symbol left over from Nazi

Germany. Baker said:

“It all goes back to the first moment of the first flag back in 1978 for me. Raising it up and seeing it there blowing in the wind for everyone to see. It completely astounded me that people just got it, in an instant like a bolt of lightening – that this was their flag. It belonged to all of us. It was the most thrilling moment of my life. Because I knew right then that this was the most important thing I would ever do – that my whole life was going to be about the Rainbow Flag.”¹

He also said, “The moment I knew that the flag was beyond my own personal experience – that it wasn’t just something I was making but was something that was happening – was the 1993 March on Washington. From my home in San Francisco I watched the March on C-SPAN and saw hundreds of thousands of people carrying and waving Rainbow Flags on a scale I’d never imagined.... The flag is an action – it’s more than just the cloth and the stripes. When a person puts the Rainbow Flag on his car or his house, they’re not just flying a flag. They’re taking action.”²

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations flying the rainbow flag and becoming certified as a Welcoming Congregation is a symbol signifying that we have done work to look at our personal and community stories, histories, biases, buildings and symbols to be sure we are doing all we can to be a safe community for LGBTQ people. People who have no knowledge of Unitarian Universalism, but know the rainbow flag as a sign of pride can know that they will be welcomed into a community whatever their gender or sexual identity. I am so proud of all the of the work our Welcoming Congregation committee has put in to this process, and the work the congregation has done. I am looking forward to our ongoing conversation and the vote to seek certification in January. Even more I am looking forward in anticipation to the committees and people of this congregation continuing to use the lenses they have developed over the last year to see their work in relationship to a spectrum of sexual and gender identities and how their work can support all members of our community. The rainbow flag is a symbol of pride and safety.

Flags *are* strong symbols, something we raise up high, to show a unity and pride in a community, to announce a point view, beliefs, or boundaries. In the United States especially, we have a cultural attachment to flags, including our national flag and in some regions, the Confederate flag. The Confederate flag is held by some to symbolize Southern pride, but it is a symbol of an insurrection that worked to maintain slavery, and is used by hate groups and freelance bigots across the country, and even into Europe. It's meanings include support of white power and violence against people of color. For African Americans, it is a symbol of a horrific history not only of slavery, but of Jim Crow, lynchings, and ongoing racial profiling and violence. Hear Gilbert Baker’s words in a very different context: “they’re not just flying a flag. They’re taking action.”

After the church shooting in Charleston this summer there was a national conversation about the Confederate flag and it's presence on government property. While other flags would be flying at half-staff while the pastor of that church lay in state at the capital, the Confederate flag was not going to be. Folk singer Peter Mulvey responded with a song called “Take Down Your

1 <http://www.sanfrancisco.travel/article/brief-history-rainbow-flag>

2 Ibid.

Flag.” He wrote it the day he was opening for Ani DiFranco in Northampton this June, sang it that night, posted it on YouTube and offered it up to any other musicians who wanted to cover it and add more verses for the victims of the shooting. Well over 200 musicians took him up on it within a couple weeks. Here is part of the original song and a second verse from Jan's daughter Meg Hutchinson using a quote from Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton's son Chris:

Every flag over Charleston is at half-staff today,
except one, except one.
Every flag over Charleston is at half-staff today,
except one, except one.

Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff

(Meg's Verse) Love is always stronger than hate
'cause if we just loved the way my mom would
then the hate won't be anywhere close to where love is,
oh I wish I was closer to her now.

Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff

It will take all of the love in all of our hearts
It will also take something more
It will take all of the love in all of our hearts
It will also take something more

Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff
Take down your flag to half staff
And then, take it down for good.³

With activism like Bree Newsome's, the woman who climbed a flag pole to remove the Confederate flag, songs, letters, petitions, and maybe even some love and compassion, changes happened on public property in the South this summer. This symbol is still all around us, but change is happening. Symbols are the clues by which we discern where we are. They are an action, a promise, share meaning.

What do we do when symbols change their meaning or are not doing their job anymore? Do we change them? Try to contextualize them? When the Confederate flag was taken down from the South Carolina Statehouse, it was moved immediately to a museum, which

3 Peter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=risegdmMVlg>, Meg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziKWF4cxL5k>

is perfectly appropriate. It is an important part of our history as a country, not only during the Civil War, but because of people's use of that symbol ever since. The issue is not whether the flag exists, but how it continues to be used in the public sphere. If someday the intended meaning of our chalice, or of the rainbow flag, no longer fits with the collective understanding of these symbols, then they will likely need to change. The physical symbol is not what is important, but the action, the understanding, the communication. Symbols help us to communicate with each other at a level not accessible with only words, and that is why we have had to work so hard for our rainbow flag.

Symbols can change people, help them see they are not alone, build community, inspire, challenge, welcome. This is part of why we worship together rather than just talking about stuff. We can't hold all our learning, our questions, in our heads, they are in our bodies, in our unconscious, and symbols help us know ourselves better. Each of us has days when we need help, or someone to listen, and the only way we can find that out, is to communicate with each other. Probably walking into worship, welcoming someone, or a quick conversation after the service will not change or save a life, but it might. You never know when it might be your time to be in service to another person by listening, by being thoughtful about the language you use, the questions you ask, or by being a loving presence. When we raise our rainbow flag this winter it will not be a reward for work well-done, or simply to welcome new people in the door, it is an action, ongoing meaning making, and a promise.⁴

So may it be. Amen.

⁴ Some of this paragraph is taken from my opening Welcoming Congregation sermon – 9/21/14