

## **Chalica: A Celebration of the Challenge of Living Our Principles**

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### ***INTRODUCTION TO CHALICA***

Today we celebrate Chalica, a new holiday and one I think that will catch on. I believe that it began at the UU congregation in Ventura, California. I am not sure which Unitarian Universalist originated the holiday, but it began – as every single holiday from all traditions – as the inspiration of one creative person in one creative moment and then spread out. Now you can become a fan of Chalica on Facebook. What is Chalica? Well, like all winter holidays – Hanukkah, Christmas, Yule, Kwanzaa – it is a festival of light, a time to celebrate and hold dear the noblest hopes of humanity. For us, those noblest hopes are expressed in our 7 principles. Chalica is a holiday to especially lift up our principles and find joy in our affirmation of them. It is a young holiday – no more than a few years – but perhaps in time it will have its special foods and special music and particular decorations, or perhaps it will remain the simple and thoughtful holiday it is now. The Facebook page did suggest presents for Chalica, not gifts we'd give to ourselves or to others we already know but gifts that help to further our principles in the world. It could mean, for example, choosing a different organization every day to contribute to – Amnesty international, Habitat for Humanity, Planned Parenthood, The League of Women Voters. It could mean making gifts each day for a week to branches of the Unitarian Universalist Association that also do that work so that it can continue working in the name of our faith – the UU Service Committee, the Welcoming Congregation Department the Liberal Religious Educators Association, The Office for Advocacy and Social Witness. It could mean giving a year-end bonus gift to your own congregation for the work of strengthening our programs – such as Making the Most of Our Money or Living The Welcoming Congregation – or simply to strengthen our budget to make our work in the world easier to accomplish so that we might gather our resources here to be a stronger and stronger presence in our local community and the world.

Chalica begins the first Monday of December – that's tomorrow – and runs until the next Sunday, giving us seven days of celebration. On each day we light a chalice, so if you don't have one at home, you might create one or begin looking for one that would be a part of your home spiritual life from now on. Each day you light the chalice and reflect on one principle in

particular. You do things to honor that principle, even if it just means writing your reflections about it so that it becomes more a part of your life and your living. If you have a family with you, you can do it with your family and read aloud the principle for the night and then take turns reading aloud all the principles. Maybe with time, we will bake chalice-shaped cookies or leave anonymous baskets of blankets or umbrellas or overcoats at homes in need. Or we might sing carols of justice and world healing. Today, we will anticipate the beginning of Chalice by lighting seven chalices during our service. Perhaps as they are lit, we will see the radiance of our tradition.

***READING from an article in the UU World by the Rev. Meg Barnhouse***

Years ago I came into this Unitarian Universalist community of faith. I'm home. I listen to people talk sometimes about liberal religion as if it's a thin gruel, watered down to please everyone. Our Seven Principles, they complain, are either too much like a creed or so general as to be meaningless.

My experience of the Principles is that they are deeply demanding. The first one asks me to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which means that I can no longer subscribe to the cheerful Calvinist doctrine of the total depravity of human nature. It sounds grim, but really, if you are in fact starting with a totally depraved nature, the opportunities for self-congratulation abound: "Hey, I didn't knock over a 7-Eleven this afternoon, even though money's pretty tight. I'm doing well!"

Now I have to struggle with the worth and dignity of people who do unspeakably awful things, whereas the doctrine of total depravity made that one a no-brainer. I'm supposed to value the democratic process, hearing the voice of everyone equally, allowing everyone to have a say. The UU Principles are demanding enough to make me whine.

## A WEEK OF READINGS FOR CHALICA 2009

**Monday:** We light our chalice for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. On this day we are aware that honoring inherent worth and dignity takes practice. Take time to make peace with others, honor differences, celebrate diversity, give gifts and donations to groups that help to bridge differences and resolve conflicts, open a dialogue with someone you have had a disagreement with. Open your mind.

**Tuesday:** We light our chalice for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. On this day take time to be aware of the wealth in your life and share with others. You might make donations to homeless shelters, serve in a soup kitchen, take part in a demonstration for social justice, write letters to support human rights. Meditate on the ways that your work is needed by our world.

**Wednesday:** We light our chalice for acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. On this day reflect upon the way that you participate in your church community that help yourself and others to grow spiritually, you might make a gift of a hymnal to a friend or your congregation, recognize the way that other people's insights help you further along your own journey.

**Thursday:** We light our chalice for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This day is dedicated to awareness of our lifelong ability to grow and expand our minds. Keep on learning, support religious education, stretch your mind, and share books. Stay on the journey.

**Friday:** We light our chalice for the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. This day is dedicated to our healthy and balanced ways of governance. It is a good time to remember the founders of our democracy and to be proud of their connection to our historic movement. On this day, make your voice heard, but even more, find out ways to make the voices of those less powerful heard in the halls of power.

**Saturday:** We light our chalice for the goal of world peace, liberty and justice for all. The world in which we yearn to live is one which we shape and it is far away for most people. On this day, reflect upon the interconnections of all our lives, of our money and the livelihoods of others on the other side of the world. Resolve ways that you can offer your own time and effort to help to further peace, liberty, and justice.

**Sunday:** We light our chalice in respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We are a part of all that is. On this seventh day we remember the fragile web of life in which we live and all the beauty we have inherited in this world. Our world is a stunning gem set in infinite space. No gift wrapped beneath a tree is the equal of this precious world that is ours. Simple things can make our world safe and livable long into the future. May our faith heal our world.

## **SERMON**

The Reverend Barnhouse wrote: “Years ago I came into this Unitarian Universalist community of faith. I’m home.”

I’m home, too. I only found out about it because I met a girl in high school whose family had been Unitarian Universalist for quite a while and she was involved in the same youth program that Greg Sweigert talked about so eloquently three Sundays ago. In LRY, which stood for Liberal Religious Youth, we had weekend conferences, as our youth do now. And we learned important things. I remember one Conference – I think it was in Columbus, Ohio – where we had a workshop on Ecology and came away fired up to save the planet. At the same Conference, we learned how to silkscreen on fabric, and I took a t-shirt I brought for the weekend and silk-screened a woman’s symbol with a fist on the back. All around me, kids were making peace signs and protests against the war. We felt like we had the power to express our passion for justice in our hands; we’d been given the tools. A couple of years later at Rowe Camp, a Unitarian Universalist summer camp in Rowe, Massachusetts, we ran low on water in our cistern and to remind ourselves to conserve water we made two silkscreens – the inevitable “Save Water, Shower with a Friend” worn by the truly bold and, I suspect, practiced by few and those only clandestinely. The other was “Rowe Camp – Good to the Last Drop.” I still have that one somewhere. I loved that we were always finding ways to laugh and make light.

But, over time some of the humor about Unitarian Universalism has worn on me. When Rev. Barnhouse said, “I listen to people talk sometimes about liberal religion as if it’s a thin gruel, watered down to please everyone.” That’s, in part, the thing that irritates me. I listen to Garrison Keillor often; I love *Prairie Home Companion*. When I moved to Atlanta, I used to listen to the show because it made me feel, during the winter, as though somewhere someone was having a real winter.

But some of his and other people’s jokes about our faith leave me even chillier. There was one story he told about a football match between a Baptist team and the U.U.U.U. The Unitarian Universalist United University team. Guy Noire is hired to spy on the UUUUs to see why the betting on the game is so high when the UUUUs haven’t won a game in 86 years. The joke is that UUUUs have a couple of challenges – the Baptist Preacher hiring Guy says: “They don’t care about football at all. They don’t even bother to work up plays. They just stand around arguing in the huddle and then they go and run off in all directions. I want you to go there and see if they have something up their sleeve.”

In all fairness, Keillor takes a crack at the Baptists, too.

Noire goes to spy on the UUUUs practice and says: They looked slender and gentle like soft tendrils. There wasn't much killer instinct. The tackling dummies had flowers wrapped around them. The team was a democracy and everyone got equal playing time.

Guy says: Look, didn't anybody teach you about dominating the line of scrimmage, showing people who's boss? You've got to show these guys that humanists aren't sissies.

And the UUUU team member says "well – some of us are."

Then the team gives its cheer: Give me a U -- if you want to! Give me another U -- if you're comfortable with that! Give me another U -- unless you have to get going! Give me another U -  
- as long as it's approved by committee!

Something about the story really grates. It's not just that there really are sports fans among us. It irritates me that our sense of democracy is ridiculed – yes – it has its foolishness – like congregational meetings to decide if a new sign should be two or five feet off the ground – or if carpeting should be beige or tan -- but Countryside would never such things and besides there's so much more to it and to us than that. Our deep democracy is an antidote to centuries of faith based hierarchies where politics in one city would determine was heretical in another. The Principles, themselves, are a product of our democratic process – the product of congregational conversations, long meetings and votes at our General Assembly.

There's this other joke – not Keillor's -- that gets closer to what grates on me – There's a guy who saves for years to buy his dream car. He finally buys a new, high-powered Lamborghini. He drives to a Catholic Church and knocks on the parsonage door. "Father, I was wondering whether you'd be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini." "Certainly, my son," replies the priest, "but what's a Lamborghini?" "Sorry to have troubled you father - I have a feeling you're not the right man for the job."

So he drives to a synagogue and asks: "Rabbi, I was wondering whether you'd be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini." "Certainly," replies the rabbi, "but what's a Lamborghini." "Gosh, rabbi, maybe you're not the right person for this job either."

So he drives to the local UU meeting house and finds the minister. "I was wondering whether you would be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini." "Certainly," replies the UU minister, "I'd love to have one myself, but what's a 'blessing'?"

There it is – we're somehow materialistic and not quite a religion. Now I'll grant you that we are different from other religions, but we have all the spiritual muscle you could ask for. Our faith evolved from people tough enough to want to pursue ethical living rather than

behaving according to dogmas. How is it that we are so easy to poke fun at? Is it because we're hard to understand? I don't think so. I think we're not so much hard to understand as we are challenging to follow.

From the first time I stepped into a Unitarian Universalist house of worship, I felt at home because it was the sort of place that asked people to act on their faith, not simply by talking about belief but by showing faith through acts of kindness, service, justice and peace making. Saving souls was about saving lives. I saw that on the walls of the church in Pittsburgh; I saw it in the lives of the Unitarian Universalists I met.

Keillor had another joke – from the lives of the cowboys as Lefty and Dusty leave the trail for some time in town... “Lefty Says: I'm going to head back to Chico and look up that Unitarian gal I was dancing with.

Dusty says: How'd you know she was Unitarian?

Lefty Says: By the buttons on her blouse. Stuff about nuclear arms and the third world and recycling and stuff.

Dusty says: Coulda been Lutheran.

Lefty Says: Naw, she talked too much to be Lutheran. I had to kiss her to get her to stop talking about the importance of pre-school education.”

So, yeah, he's pointing out how much we like to talk, but he also points out that the Unitarian can be identified by her social conscience and by her concern for early childhood education. Well, *that* I cleave to – I mean, we have to start young if we're going to raise persons of conscience and courage and not just sheep to follow a flock. What I saw back in the day as I camped in Massachusetts and slept on people's floors in Ohio was that they expected us – we expected each other – to be persons of conscience.

From marches against the war that we all piled into buses to protest, to the grapes we went without for a long time in solidarity with farm workers to the civil rights work that the church as a whole participated in, everyone didn't have the same exact beliefs – I knew that from the kinds of conversations we had, but I also knew that they shared a vital orientation to the world, that we had an obligation to live our lives in such a way that the world was better for the work that we did and the lives we led. But it wasn't only a faith of deeds over creeds; it came from a profound belief in the redeemability of people, that we were good and strong enough to shape a more just world. A faith that there is a precious core, a sacred spark in every person, in our congregations or on the other side of the world in a country far different from our own – a sacred spark that can be cultivated and celebrated.

It didn't seem easy – like Rev. Barnhouse wrote, we aren't perfect nor are we depraved. We're challenged by life and our world; we are up to the challenge if we choose. It is the task of our religious community to encourage and enable us to be strong and courageous enough.

What I've always loved about Unitarian Universalism as a whole – and there may be individual exceptions but I haven't met many – is that we're full of paradoxes. For one, we are skeptics, that is to say that we ask questions and take nothing on faith that we don't test by reason. On the other hand, the UUs I know are some of the most awestruck folks I know – people who weep at art, are moved to transcendental reflection in response to music, and who feel – like a blade through the soul – the sufferings of folks near and far. Though we are skeptics in one rather simple sense, in a much deeper sense we keep faith with the world – a faith that is active. Another Unitarian Universalist paradox is that while we have enormous freedom of belief – you may call yourself a UU Christian, UU Buddhist, UU atheist – in each of these paths, you will find our principles reflected and our common ground held sacred. Whatever unique set of beliefs you bring to this place and our houses of worship, you also believe that your belief is not the final word but is connected in some profound way to the good faith of diverse people around the world. You believe both in the individual search for truth and meaning and in the search and understanding that is shared in religious community.

So, I'm glad that someone decided to try celebrating Chalica because even though we light our chalice every week, we deserve – in fact we need – a time of focused mindfulness when day after day we remember the backbone of our faith. Above all, we see it in our people. I don't know how many of you know Adam Sandler's *Hanukkah Song*, but Evan Austin from the UU congregation in Ventura, California wrote a version of it for Chalica. The song covers only a few of our more illustrious brethren in this faith, people who were Unitarian or Universalist or Unitarian Universalist after the merger in 1961. He mentions Benjamin Franklin, P.T. Barnum, Alexander Bell, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Baldwin who founded the A-C-L-U! he sings:

*Sing "Over the River and Through the Woods" and "Jingle Bells" quick!*

*Universalists wrote 'em, and Unitarians wrote Peter Rabbit and Moby Dick!*

*We've got Charles Dickens, Susan B. Anthony, and Ray Bradbury,*

*Frankenstein was written by a Unitarian named Mary!*

It is humorous but celebratory and makes it clear that this is a faith of remarkable persons. In fact, it'd be great as part of Chalica to go to the website Famous UUs and print out the list and put it by the Chalice you light each night. It'll make you proud and more, it will challenge you to

live this demanding faith as you deserve to live it and as it has called people to live for centuries. It's had its times of tepidness, but it is my fervent prayer for this Chalica that we light the fire in our faith together and make it shine more brightly than ever.

I was in a bleak Advent mood this week, far more dwelling in the long nights than the idea that hope would be born either at Yule or Christmas. I was – I have to come clean – I was troubled by President Obama's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan. It has weighed on my heart. I suspect that it has weighed on many of you. But this faith will carry me through what we will face in the future. It will carry *us* through. Here is what my faith has taught me: that there are times that the right answer is in shadow or even invisible to the naked eye. Though I oppose the use of increased violence in Afghanistan, I do not have a blueprint for a peaceful outcome; I want one but I don't have one. Here is also what my faith has taught me: that we will find a way together to struggle with the path that our nation takes on this matter. We will engage one another, as we all deserve, with respect for our honest differences and a recognition that those differences arise from the best of places, from moral places, places of conscience and honor and good faith. We will not silence our differences and we will not declare our positions shrilly. We will respect one another's free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And we will wrestle as a community with what peace, justice, democracy; what compassion and interconnectedness all mean to us here and now. We will recognize that none of us wants war, that we all hunger for a peaceful world and we have differing ideas and hopes about how to achieve that. I know that, as the Reverend Mark Morrison Reed said in a reading in our own hymnal, my own vision alone is not enough. We need one another for wisdom and insight. Our faith will give us the strength to stand together and divine a wise path; it will enable us to remember that peace begins in our conversations with one another and that our mutual respect must be at the foundation of our faith. As I reflected on Chalica this week, it cheered me up, for in our principles we can be united and as a congregation, we can be of service and we can hold a world of diverse ideas and do this together. I believe that our faith gives us the strength to hear one another to wisdom and walk together toward harmony. I believe in the illumination we share...

The Reverend Meg Barnhouse talked about how as a child she would – in her imagination – tack on the words “in the bathtub” or “between the sheets” to the ends of hymns, so it might be “Silent Night between the sheets.” It made for a light moment. But then she suggests that we might add to the ends of our principles “beginning in our homes and congregations” or even “beginning in our hearts.” It takes the principles to a whole new level.

She says, “If I start with my own heart, the demands of our Principles get even heavier.” She is absolutely right. If we did such a thing, beginning as a reflection during Chalica, it would make our faith even more muscular than it is already. We light our chalice as a symbol of our living tradition, a tradition rich in vision, humanity, and a spirit of healing and justice, a tradition embodied in our people. If we begin in our own hearts, the living tradition is here now, and we are strong enough to carry it on and carry it to new places – beginning in our own hearts, beginning in our own homes, beginning in our congregation.

Have a Meaningful Chalica!