

Lighting the Flame

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(c) Sylvia Stocker

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

“[We light] a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice...”

– the Rev. Charles Joy

Opening Words *Prayer Song from Ghana*, trad.; translator unknown

Journeying god,
pitch your tent with mine
so that I may not become deterred
by hardship, strangeness, doubt.
Show me the movement I must make
toward a wealth not dependent on possessions,
toward a wisdom not based on books,
toward a strength not bolstered by might,
toward a god not confined to heaven.
Help me to find myself as I walk in other's shoes.

Sermon

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On December 25, 1939, members of the Wellesley, Massachusetts, Unitarian church gathered for the Christmas morning service. Their minister, the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, stepped into the pulpit with an important message, one he hoped the congregation would take to heart and act upon. But, let's back up, and set the stage a bit.

Waitstill Sharp, and his wife, Martha, had recently returned from a dangerous mission to Czechoslovakia, where they had journeyed at the behest of the American Unitarian Association to help refugees escape an increasingly Nazi-controlled and war-embroiled Europe. You may recognize their names – among other things, PBS aired a documentary about them last year.

We know a lot about the Sharps, but we can't know everything – and one has to read between the lines a bit to imagine what things might have been like for them. On that Christmas morning, for instance, Waitstill and Martha Sharp might have felt odd in their well-heeled and safe congregation. After all, they had seen things their congregation could perhaps only barely apprehend. The Sharps had been in Prague when Germany overtook it. They witnessed the tanks rolling through the streets, felt the fear induced by arrests and curfews, and experienced the vulnerability of living in conditions where betrayals were commonplace and one often did not know whom to trust. They knew what it was to live in terror.

By the time they headed back stateside, the Nazis were on their trail. With luck, grit, and ingenuity, they managed – just barely, and with the Germans in hot pursuit – to escape eastern Europe with their lives. But they returned home knowing that through their work – much of it clandestine – they had managed to help some people escape certain death. That Christmas morning, I imagine they harbored the memory of – and worry about – people they hadn't been able to help.

What must it have been like for the Wellesley congregation to welcome Waitstill and Martha back? How did Waitstill preach about what he saw and experienced? How did either one of them attempt to communicate the magnitude of the evil they had encountered? How did they draw on the roots and wings of their faith to frame their calling going forward and to help the congregation understand their own calling as well?

In the late 1930s, it was pretty easy for Americans to minimize or ignore the threat of Naziism in Europe. Unless your family was trapped behind Nazi lines, it was easy not to see what was happening. Unless you were Jewish, you could easily ignore the threat.

And let's not forget the mid-20th century, especially leading up to the war years, was a virulently anti-Semitic time in the States, too. Those were the times of Catholic priest Father Coughlin's hateful radio broadcasts. Those were the times when Henry Ford received the Grand Cross of the German Eagle from the Nazis, a reward for his dogged work in widely spreading anti-Semitic tracts in America. Those were times when Americans lived steeped in a culture of anti-Semitism – so it was easy to turn a blind eye to what was happening to Europe's Jews. So, in addition to showing enormous courage for their mission, Waitstill and Martha Sharp had

bucked the tide of American sentiment to undertake their work.

From the pulpit that Christmas morning in 1939 – as his parishioners may have contemplated trees and feasts and caroling – Waitstill made a special request: *Just this morning, I received word that a ship carrying refugees will be docking in Boston within the next few days, he told the parishioners. The refugees will need temporary homes. Would you take them in?*¹

The story of that Christmas morning request lies buried in a dusty volume of *the Christian Register* shelved at the Harvard Divinity School library. Only some sketchy details survive:

The ship churning toward Boston carried 87 refugees, all but one or two of them Jewish. “Almost all the men [aboard] had spent some time in concentration camps.”

The ship navigated dangerous waters. At night, they sailed without lights, relying on the safety of black skies to protect them from detection.

Off the coast of Nova Scotia, the ship nearly collided with another unlighted ship, sailing ghost-like through the dark.

We might *imagine* cold waves rocking the ship, the deep darkness with only moon and stars to guide them. We might wonder about the people aboard ... who they were, what they lived through and left behind, what emotions rocked their hearts as they journeyed, not knowing the reception awaiting them. Would they be welcomed? Or turned away?

As it turned out, several Boston-area organizations provided asylum for all of the refugees. Wellesley Unitarians sheltered thirty-four of them. Thirty-four – or even eighty-seven – seems a minuscule number of rescued refugees in the face of millions who perished during the Holocaust. One might say the tiny drop in the bucket of suffering barely meant anything at all. But to those refugees, it meant everything.

Would you take them in? Waitstill asked his congregation. Would I? Would you?

For the Wellesley parishioners, that docking ship presented the opportunity to open not only

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their homes, but also their hearts.

This month, the children are studying our symbol, the flaming chalice, which has its genesis in those troubled times. The American Unitarian Association and then, later, the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) continued their work in Europe throughout the war. The Sharps – especially Martha – continued their work as well. As time went on, the USC discovered the need to make their documents look official enough to be able to smuggle refugees out. They needed a logo, they felt, to give their organization credibility, so they contracted artist Hans Deutsch to create one. The flaming chalice was Deutsch's creation.

The Reverend Charles Joy, who was head of the Unitarian Service Committee when the symbol was commissioned, called the flame holy and said it stood for helpfulness and sacrifice. Over the years, the symbol came to represent Unitarian Universalism. Through the years, the flame, *our flame*, has stood for many things:

the search for truth
the light of love
openness and welcome
generosity of spirit

No matter how you characterize the symbol, it has always stood for our deepest calling. This chalice is not just a little candle we light each week to make our space pretty. This chalice represents the flame that burns in our hearts and at the heart of our faith, the flame that calls us forward. The Holy, however you name it.

Kathleen Norris says *“At its Greek root, 'to believe' simply means 'to give one's heart to.' Thus, if we can determine what it is we give our heart to, then we will know what it is we believe.”*

Take a moment to close your eyes (if you feel comfortable doing so) and take some breaths right into the heart of your faith. Right into the place where you find your truth and guidance.

What do you give your heart to?
What is the ground that hold you up, on which you rest?
What spark lights the way for you?

Can you hold onto that feeling, your felt sense of your words, and imagine how they call you to be in the world? That is what our flaming chalice asks us to do – to find our spark and let it call us into the world.

Here is what I give my heart to; this is where I find the Holy: the spirit of love and compassion I see wafting through our world, even amidst the pain and sorrow, amidst terrible failing, even amidst evil.

And here is another thing I give my heart to: moments of transformation, the in-breaking of truth, the lifting of fog that obscures my vision.

Last week I spoke of how hard it was for me not to be here in August when Nazis and white supremacists brought their hate-filled march to Charlottesville, Virginia. I promised I would preach about it. In truth, I will probably be preaching about it in one way or another for a long time to come. Today I want to say just this:

I was renting a cabin in the heart of the Maine woods when Charlottesville happened. For the most part, I was off the grid and away from email and news. So Charlottesville had already happened before I knew anything about it. But once I heard about it, I couldn't stop using the camp's wifi to check the news. I was horrified by the Nazis and white supremacists, repelled by their rhetoric and physical violence, aghast at Donald Trump's response. I was angry. Even fearful for our country. My insides felt like they were going to explode.

But, there I was in the heart of the Maine woods with no opportunity for me to act. No vigils or rallies to attend. No signs to create and carry. Not even a sermon I could deliver. So I had to sit with my *feelings*.

Immediately upon returning to Brunswick, I left for something called the Better Selves Fellowship at Knoll Farm, an organic farm in Vermont. I'll be telling you more about Knoll Farm at some point. For now, I'll just say the fellowship was intended (mostly) for leaders of nonprofits, people doing interesting, world changing work.



My fellowship colleagues were an impressive bunch of people – their work ran the gamut from organic farming, to teaching, to mitigating poverty, to addressing racism and white supremacy, to working on food insecurity, to climate change science, and more.

And then there was me. The whole thing was very humbling.

Interestingly, I was a diversity token – the only old person in the bunch. That's not the first time I have been a token of some kind, but, let's face it, most of the time I am part of the normative culture, at least here: white, middle class, educated. At Knoll Farm, I was viscerally reminded of how hard it is to be the only one of any category.

Well one day, I was talking to my food insecurity colleague, who is a Mexican immigrant. Our conversation drifted to Charlottesville. My colleague said to me, “White people were shocked by Charlottesville because they didn't know how virulent and blatant white supremacy is. But people of color already knew things were shitty.” Those words were an in-breaking of truth. They went right into my heart. Because my little

white world so easily keeps me protected from knowing the *full* truth – just as the Wellesley congregation's world of privilege doubtless protected them from knowing the full truth about what was happening in Europe in the late 1930s.

Yes, of course, I knew about racism and white supremacy, but what is harder for a white person to take in is a *visceral* understanding of the quotidian, daily experience of a person of color who always, already knows things are shitty. Whose very baseline knowledge is such that the events in Charlottesville were not shocking – just a manifestation of the same old, same old.

So on the one hand, me: shocked. And on the other people of color: same old, same old. That's a pretty big difference in experiencing and understanding.

I imagined the kind of anger I was feeling as the experience of an entire people, every day, every week, every year, across lifetimes, across generations. My colleague's comment was an in-breaking of the holy, because now I know. And now that I know, I can't *unknow*. And – for my own soul's true healing and strength – *I need to know*. For me, it's a spiritual issue, because, in addition to continuously harming my siblings of color, the insidious stain of white supremacy eats away at my own true growing.

For me, those in-breaking moments of truth and enlightenment are holy, sacred moments. The whole world needs to know, just as the whole world needed to know what was happening in Europe ...or what has happened in holocausts before and since: Bosnia, Rwanda, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, other living life forms on our planet ... to name just a few holocausts.

Would you take the refugees in? Waitstill asked his congregation. Would I? Would you?

This little chalice flame represents so much. Love, compassion, in-breaking moments of truth and transformation, sacrifice, God, openness of spirit and heart. Use your own words to describe what you give your heart to, knowing that, ultimately, words fall short of the mark. But even when words fail, the flame still burns. Even when the world seems an impossibly sorry and tragic mess, the light calls us forward, nourishing our hearts and guiding our journey. Into the unknown. Sometimes into places where we are vulnerable and afraid. Sometimes into moments of transformation. Always to the heart of our faith. Always to the heart itself.

