

## **“The Opposite of Indifference”**

Rev. Laurel Gray

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At the end of last year, I asked during community hour one evening if there were sermon topics that people would like me to think about for this year. Ann Maloney said something to the effect of wanting to hear stories of resilience in hard times. And in a year that has been hard in ways that go beyond our naming or sense of what is normal, resilience has become both crucial and elusive at times.

As a long ago sociology major, I appreciate that Brene Brown’s research gives us some data about how to understand resilience. In the simplest of terms, resilience is made of curiosity - about oneself and each other and the world - and the willingness to feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. It’s the opposite of indifference. It’s a connection to our inner worlds and the outer world - staying present even when it’s hard.

And this is Memorial Day weekend, a holiday when we are to remember those who died in war. A day for remembering the extraordinary toll of war and the sacrifice that so many have made in the hopes of creating a more peaceful and just world.

I wonder about that decision, about the experience of going to war, about the experience of trying to come home after living through the unthinkable. I was named after my grandfather who served in the Canadian Navy in World War II, but have never known war myself. So I hold together my desire for peace, for more of our tax dollars to go to public schools and healthcare, I hold that together with the knowledge that soldiers take on a risk that I have never had to comprehend.

Amidst the complexity and the grief of this holiday, we continue our theme of storytelling this month, today focusing on stories of resilience. One of my favorite stories about Unitarian Universalism is about the origins of our chalice. It is a story of resilience, of creativity, of interfering for justice, a story of extraordinary courage amidst the horrors of war.

It was 1941, two years before Elie Wiesel's family would be taken from their home.

The Rev. Dr. Charles Joy was appointed director of the Unitarian Service Committee. He was stationed in Lisbon, Portugal. It was one of the last European ports that remained open as World War II raged on.

Joy was there to offer aid to refugees, 90% of whom were Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Most of them had no papers. They had fled in the night, lost everything they had. They were refugees hoping to escape to Britain. But without any form of documentation, they were stuck halfway between terror and safety.

Joy had a solution: the Unitarian Service Committee would issue travel documents to refugees.

"It may amuse you a bit to know," he wrote to his home office in Boston, "that we are now issuing navicerts to pass emigrants to the new world through the British blockade. We are certifying that they are politically safe and sound."

But in order to make the documents look official, because they weren't, Joy decided they needed a seal, a stamp of authority. An authority that he had invented. So he commissioned an Austrian refugee named Hans Deutsch to make one.

The result was a flame held in a chalice. As Joy reported to the Boston USC, "It represents, as you see, 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."

Case records from the USC's time in Lisbon suggest that they transported between one and three thousand refugees to safety with these documents.

You see, our chalice was made for interference. It was made to move, to offer safe passage to the most vulnerable, to undermine oppressive power. Our chalice was made by a Jewish refugee and a Christian minister, together, doing whatever they could to interfere. It was born of that agile combination of curiosity, courage and creativity .

It was in 1976, some 35 years after its creation, after the Unitarians and the Universalists had merged into one denomination, that the Unitarian Universalist Association used the chalice symbol on the title page of their annual directory.

It was as if to say: this is who we are.

A few years later, in the early 1980s, the ritual of lighting a chalice in worship became widespread. It became how we begin and end our services.

It was as if to say: this is what we do.

And I find it remarkable, astoundingly so, that Joy was so inventive, almost playful. “It may amuse you a bit to know,” he said. As if forging documents to smuggle Jews out of the Holocaust was a sort of joyful and surprising mischief. He was not indifferent. He was not frozen in fear. He was moved. And he made it up.

There is an agility, a brazenness, to Joy’s particular form of resistance, his doing what he could to resist the staggering violence of that moment in history.

There’s an old Jewish saying that I love, especially in moments when life feels daunting, when the magnitude of struggle lures us towards numbness.

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

We cannot hold ourselves to a standard of perfection, one which encourages complacency with the idea that nothing we do will help. Nor can we act only in retaliation, in disagreement. Because resilience is born of leaning into our discomfort, born of our curiosity and our connection to that spark of life that dwells within us all.

The work of justice is messy. It takes a long time. We must burn on holy oil.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the interdependent web of life. Everything is connected. Every life is tied to the totality of all that is. Some of us call that everything God, some of us don't. Whatever the words, we believe that the way we live in this world matters. What we do and do not do has an impact. And so we are called to participate.

And as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the worth and dignity of every person. It is the first of our seven principles. It is where we begin.

Love of neighbor. Love of stranger. Love of self.

As Weisel said in an interview in 1986, after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."

So then  
The opposite of indifference  
is life,  
Faith,  
Art.

The opposite of indifference and silence and neutrality,  
The opposite is love.

Love that compels action, not as retaliation, but as a holy flame in the very core of our being.

Love is a minister named Joy interfering, amused in the face of deadly persecution, inventing an unlikely solution.

Love is a refugee using his art as a seal of authority, undermining the oppression that he himself was fleeing.

The church that I grew up in ended service every Sunday by singing these words, as we do here at UUCSW:

“Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.”

Because it is worth remembering that our chalice was made to be carried. It was made to move and to be moved. It was, and is, the opposite of indifference, a story of resilience in the hardest of times.

Amen.