

## Symbols of Faith

August 29, 2009  
Rev. Victoria Ingram

Over 10 years ago, the symbols which surround our Fellowship's chancel were created by the women of this congregation at a special workshop. Many of those who participated in creating these beautiful symbols of faith are no longer actively involved in the congregation. However, Sharon Graham, Julie Doyle, Jinni Stahl, Katie Rall, and Coralee Linton, who helped with the project, are still active UUFLG members and we continue to benefit from their inspiration and the beauty of all of the participants' handiwork.

These symbols remind us of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to religious plurality; of our faith tradition that embraces the knowledge and insight found in many sources and wisdom traditions. In addition to our Seven Principles, which highlight the values and aspirations we hold in common, our denomination also notes Six Sources from which our faith emerges.

Here are symbols of a variety of the world's religious traditions, enhancing our own sanctuary, reminding us of not only the rich and varied resources from which we draw our faith, but also reminding us to approach life's mysteries and great questions with an open mind and open heart, willing to hear truth wherever we find it and to honor the wisdom found not only in our tradition, but in others, as well.

Symbols represent for us ideas, concepts, or objects. They are an outward representation of an inward relationship or experience. In many ways, they serve as a kind of "idea shorthand," where a simple glyph or visual is linked in our mind to larger sets of concepts, abstract meanings, definitions, beliefs, or references. If you're familiar with the Harry Potter novels, you'll know about "portkeys;" magical objects that, when grasped, transport one physically to another location. Symbols are like mental portkeys – viewing a symbol transports us mentally to a set of meanings, concepts, ideas, or ideals.

Symbols can also have an experiential component, especially in religious practice. Symbols are used to remind the believer of the tenets of the faith, of the experience of engaging in spiritual practice, and can serve as a support in entering into a state of worship. Symbols are often used to mark sacred space, and can help designate when one has crossed over from secular location and worldly time to sacred space and holy time.

Right in the center is our own UU Chalice. This morning's story which Tamara shared told the history of how the chalice became the symbol of Unitarian Universalist and has become a tradition in our congregations. It is a symbol for us that we are among friends who share our values. The flaming chalice is our denominational shorthand, if you will, allowing us to identify UUs wherever we go. You know, if you go somewhere and you see someone wearing a piece of chalice jewelry, that you've just found a person with whom you share a common faith. It's a great way to start a conversation!

I'm going to ask Pauline Stonehill to tell us about our UUFLG chalice.

This symbol is from our brother and sister ROMANIAN UUs. Coralee Linton created this piece of art, and I want to ask her to tell you about her experience. In the Bible, Matthew 10:16, says, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” Jesus is talking about sending the his followers to be ministers in the larger world, and he’s acknowledging the danger this may entail. These words encourage them to be prudent, discreet, and cautious, while being peaceful. As our brothers and sisters in faith have faced the challenges of living in Romania, these words have continued to provide wise council for them, as well.

Jinni Stahl was the artist who created this MAYA WHEEL OF LIFE. Representing the gods, the universe, and the five mysteries of the sacred world directions, this symbol was used by the people of Central America in their religious symbology.

Julie Doyle created this NATIVE AMERICAN COYOTE. Coyote is a common character in many Native American cultures, often playing the role of trickster in wisdom stories. Coyote’s positive characteristics include humor and cleverness, which sometimes allow him to be a helpful and heroic ally.

The EGYTIAN ANKH is commonly seen hieroglyphs being held in the hands of the gods, and is a symbol for “eternal life.” While scholars differ in their interpretations and origins of the symbol, it is seen as conferring the gift of life on a dead person’s mummy by the deities of the afterlife.

Katie Rall made the WHEEL OF LIFE. Its eight spokes represent the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, and represent the path of transformation. It and several other of the symbols around the chancel are associated with Buddhist traditions, including the CAMBODIAN BUDDHA, and the CHINESE XI (“SHE”) or Double Happiness. The Buddha is the symbol of Siddhartha Gautama, the Enlightened One, who founded Buddhism. Double Happiness is not strictly a religious symbol. Legend has it that a young couple, in love as a result of many happy coincidences and fortuitous events, displayed this symbol at their wedding. It has become a custom to display it at weddings. Katie, would you tell us about the WHEEL OF LIFE and your experience of making the symbol.

In Taoist philosophy, the YIN-YANG is used to describe how disjointed or opposing forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, giving rise to each other in turn. The concept of natural dualities, like dark and light, female and male, low and high are expressed in the Chinese concept of yin yang, where they are complementary opposites within a greater whole.

The HINDU OM is comprised of three sacred sounds – “ah” “oo” “mm” – creating OM, which represents a number of sacred triads, including the three worlds (earth, atmosphere, and heaven), three major Hindu gods (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), and three of the sacred Vedic scriptures (Rg, Yajur, and Sama.) OM mystically embodies the essence of

the universe, and Hindus believe that God first created this most sacred sound and from it, the earth and all creation emerged.

Katie Rall also made this SHINTO TORII, or temple gate. Shinto is the oldest surviving religion of Japan, and means “the way of the gods.” Toriis stand at the entrance to a Shinto shrine, noting the place where one leaves the secular world to enter a sacred space.

The STAR AND CRESCENT is perhaps one of the better known symbols of ISLAM, although its origins were not specifically in the Muslim tradition. It was first associated with the Ottoman Turks, not Islam as a religious faith, and therefore, its use is somewhat controversial for modern Muslims, who actually have few traditional symbols of their faith.

The CHRISTIAN CROSS has been portrayed in many forms, this being the Latin or Roman cross, which is the simplest and most common form in use since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The Roman Catholic crucifix, which includes the figure of Jesus, is a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice. The empty cross preferred by Protestants reminds Christians of the resurrection.

The GODDESS represents the feminine principle of the God and Goddess honored by Wicca and other earth-centered faith traditions. The Goddess represents a unity and wholeness that is the birthright and potential for every human being. The Great Goddess reminds us of the cycles of life found in all creation, of which we are a part.

The STAR OF DAVID is named after King David of ancient Israel and became commonly associated with Judaism in the Middle Ages. In traditional blessings, this shield of David is a blessing from God in protection of his people.

Religious symbolism includes various words, stories, acts, texts, artwork, and events as a representation of the underlying faith, belief, values, aspirations, and compelling ideals. We, and other faith traditions, use our symbols as a way to foster solidarity and to bring us closer to the object or objects of our worship.

These symbols in our sanctuary remind us of the many paths to wisdom and gratitude for the gifts of life. They remind us of our UU commitment to religious pluralism, to opening the circle wide and embracing truth in many forms and from many sources. We are blessed by the gift of love, creativity, and commitment of the women who got together 10 years ago and created these symbols for our sanctuary.

Unitarian Universalists don’t worship symbols, as a matter of fact, our tradition has often been highly critical of the symbols of religion. The point is not to worship the symbol, but to engage with our own spiritual experience, faith, and sense of hope through what the symbol represents to us. We come together to worship as a way to express our joy that the Spirit of Life, by whatever name, has us the opportunity to be together to enjoy the gifts of minds that think, hearts that love, bodies that can dance, and voices that can sing. And for this, we are truly grateful. Amen.