

Votive Lights

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When my middle son was about four years old, my father and stepmother came to stay with us and watch our children while Leslie and I went away for a week to the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Before we left for the meeting, we had a few days together. My stepmother had a small flash light on her key chain that my son became fascinated with it. So she gave it to him. He played with it for a couple of days until it came time for Leslie and me to leave for the airport. We explained that we would be back in a few days and that grandmother and granddad would take care of him. He gave us each a hug and then impulsively gave me the little flash light. "Bring it back to me," he said. I kept it in my pocket and thought of my son the five days we were away.

Although the four-year-old did not know the word votive, he was giving me a votive light. The word "votive" describes something given in fulfillment of a wish. A votive offering is an object left in a sacred place. It can take any form, such as a collection of flowers, a small statue, a stuffed animal, a letter or a flashlight. One of the most common votive offerings is a small lit candle.

In the Roman Catholic Church, candles are often placed before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Often the statue will be in a side altar. The type of candles used vary from long, taper candles to tea-light candles. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, long, thin votive candles

are lit before icons. These candles are placed in round containers, having either sockets to hold the candles, or in containers filled with sand, which hold up the long candles. Some Anglican and Episcopal churches also have votive candles.

Four hundred years ago Puritans eliminated votive candles. The Puritans believed that churches had become corrupted by contact with pagan civilizations (particularly that of Rome), and by the impositions of kings and popes. They argued for a restructuring and "purifying" of church practice. Puritans objected to ornaments and rituals in churches (vestments, musical organs, genuflection) as idolatrous, denouncing them as "popish pomp and rags." Puritans believed in a minimum of ritual and decoration so they built simple white meeting houses in which to worship.

We American Unitarians are originally New England Puritans. We rejected the trinity and argued that Jesus was a great human being but not God. Two centuries later you can still see many of our Puritan roots in Unitarianism. For example, this room, our worship space, is still plain and simple. On the other hand, over time we have abandoned many Puritan traditions and added particles from other religious traditions.

One example is the lighting of votive candles. In the past thirty years this has become a popular practice in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Unitarian votive candles started with the lighting of one candle in a chalice, a practice that became popular in Unitarian Universalist churches in the late 1970s. Not everyone liked the idea. In 1981 I became the minister of the First Unitarian Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The previous minister, a colorful extravert named Farley Wheelwright, had started the practice of inviting one person to light the candle in the chalice at the beginning of the worship service. The first person to volunteer would come forward and say whatever they wanted, such as "I light this candle to celebrate the birth of my son twenty-one years

ago today.”

Back in 1981 so many Unitarians in this New England congregation told me that they hated lighting the chalice as part of worship that I suggested that we vote on whether to continue the practice at the church’s annual meeting. The week before the meeting, a beloved member of the congregation got up with his adult daughter and said as he lit the chalice how thankful he was to her, because she had saved his life by donating one of her kidneys to him. Many of the sixty people in the small congregation were in tears. I thought: “Everyone will vote to keep the chalice lighting as part of the worship service.”

The next week, in June of 1982 they voted. In the discussion before the vote, members of the congregation who spoke said that Catholics light candles. They said they had bad experiences with the Catholic church in the past. Lighting the chalice reminded them of those bad experiences. The vote was not even close—something like thirteen in support of chalice lighting and twenty-seven opposed.

However, this New England congregation turned out to be the exception. In the 1980s and early 1990s the practice of lighting a chalice became wide spread in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Here we have lit a chalice every Sunday for many years.

At the same time, another ritual became popular in our congregations commonly called “sharing of joys and concerns.” In this ritual anyone who wants to can stand and say whatever they want and light a candle.

Some people love this. Like the man in New Bedford who publically thanked his daughter for donating one of her kidneys to him, some statements that people make while lighting a candle are

so poignant and powerful that they move many in the congregation to tears. In a religious community it is important to provide a ritual way for people to express these feelings of intimate sharing. For some, telling the congregation something important to them on Sunday morning while lighting a candle is a way to do this. For some this sharing produces a moved, touched, uplifting, warm spiritual feeling. Those who speak may feel encouragement and support. They may even feel loved. For some, sharing news of significant life events are important reminders of what is going on in people’s lives and in the life of the congregation. Those who like the sharing of joys and concerns say “How can community happen if people do not know and care about what is going on each other’s lives?” Those who like joys and concerns say visitors get the message that “If you become a part of this community, you will be a part of a supportive community that cares about monumental events and passages in your life.”

This is not just a small church activity. A Unitarian Universalist congregation with more than fourteen hundred adult members invites individuals to share their joys and sorrows orally or silently by lighting a candle. The ministers only offer the opportunity on the first weekend of the month. That part of the service always starts with instructions to keep it within a reasonable time-frame and emphasize that only personal matters of our lives are appropriate. One of their ministers tells me that they have been doing this for fifteen years. People look forward to it and honor the rules. He could only recall a handful of instances where someone ignored the stated instructions.

On the other hand, some people hate joys and concerns. They point out that sometimes people use joys and concerns to make political statements that sucked the wind out of a carefully prepared worship service. Once I was a visiting minister in a church in southern Illinois. A man stood up and began to share his joy at the arrival of a refugee family from southeast Asia. He introduced

each of the five refugees and told their stories. After five minutes the regular minister of the church, walked over to the man and told him he had used up all of his time. He said to her “I am not finished. This is important and I am not going to stop until I am finished.” He continued for another ten minutes taking a total of fifteen minutes in what was supposed to be a one hour service.

People who hate joys and concerns say that the speakers violate boundaries by publicly sharing private information that most of us prefer to keep quite. Once, when I was serving as a minister in Kentucky, a woman stood up during the service and said that her joy was that she had met the man sitting next to her at a party the night before. They had spent the night together and she was happy that he had agreed to come with her to church this morning. This was more information than I wanted.

People who hate joys and concerns say that with no control over what people say, we can move quickly from the profound to the trivial. So a woman lights a candle for her mother who, she tells the congregation, died in her arms the week before. Next a man lights a candle and says his concern is that he cannot find someone to buy his car, which is in the church parking lot in case anyone would like to look at it after the service.

As the result of such problems, many Unitarian Universalist churches have looked for compromises. For example, that fourteen hundred member church that I mentioned earlier only has joys and concerns one Sunday a month. Another compromise that several churches have tried is to replace joys and concerns with a silent meditation time, during which people are invited to speak the name of someone. So if you have a new grandchild, you could just say the name of the grandchild and nothing else. Or if a parent has died, you just say the name of the parent and nothing else.

One church has set up a television set in their social hall with a closed-circuit broadcast of the worship service. Tables are set up and coffee and tea are available for people who prefer a coffee house style of worship in the social hall instead of the sanctuary. When the choir is singing or the organ is playing during the service, a worship leader gives the people in the social hall an opportunity to share joys and concerns and light candles. So the set-up gives the people who find this element of worship important an opportunity to continue to share joys and concerns while watching the minister on television.

Perhaps the most common alternative in Unitarian Universalist churches to joys and concerns is to invite people to light a votive candle during, or before, or after the worship service, but not to say anything. Those who wish to talk about personal experiences in their lives are encouraged to join a support group in the church such as a covenant group.

I have put votive candles out this morning to show all of you how this is done in other Unitarian Universalist congregations as part of their worship. For me the biggest problem when it comes to doing this at Cedar Lane is the architecture of this room. I am not a visual artist nor am I an architect, but I am sensitive to how space looks. I do not want to add something to this space that will detract from the beauty of its original design. One possibility would be a sculpture on wheels so that we could move it out of the way when we are using the room for other purposes. The Annapolis Unitarian Universalist Church has such a sculpture that combines a fountain along with metal flowers in which small votive lights are placed. A television monitor is set up this morning in the back of our sanctuary showing still photographs of the Annapolis votive light sculpture. The fact that water surrounds the candles increases the safety of the sculpture. Perhaps something like it would work in our space. I invite all of you who have opinions about lighting votive lights as part of our worship

service to join me for a discussion in the library after the service.

In my experience as a minister the lighting of candles can be powerful and comforting and even healing. I remember an experience about fifteen years ago when I was serving as a minister in Evanston, Illinois. A couple in the church suffered a miscarriage, and came to me and the minister of religious education in the church and asked us to work with them to plan a memorial service for this miscarriage. We held the service on a snowy Sunday in January at five in the evening. We had the service in their home. The home itself was very interesting architecturally. It had originally been the private library of the man who owned the main house. When he died developers put in a separate driveway to the library, added a kitchen and the bathroom and sold it as a house. But it was still mostly one big room with a vaulted ceiling and wooden bookshelves along the walls.

Frank and I, the two ministers, got to the house just as the sun was setting, and we joined the couple's friends sitting together in a circle around their coffee table. I found a comfortable place on the floor. We placed sixteen candles on the coffee table, along with the chalice from the church. One of us did opening words and lit the chalice. I remember that I read a prayer I found in a book that was written by a woman who had a miscarriage. Then I lit one candle from the chalice. We invited the others in the room to say whatever they wanted or if they wished to just remain silent and light a candle.

I, at least, was not making a wish that I thought would be magically granted if I lit the candle. I was just trying to say to this grieving couple "I care about you. I take your grief and your loss seriously. It is important that we not ignore it, that before we move on with our lives we acknowledge this miscarriage." That is what I was trying to express with my votive light.

It took about an hour, and the lights were low in that library living room. Each time someone spoke they lit a candle, and gradually over that hour the space in the middle of where we all sat got brighter and brighter and brighter. It felt to me like the growing light of the candles offered the promise that the future held hope and joy and love for this young family, and for all of us in the room, who were thinking about our own experiences of loss that evening.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience of lighting a candle as a symbol of hope or a symbol of joy or a symbol of love. When I light a candle I am trying to say that life is worth all that goes into it. If you feel sorrows today, you are not alone, and if you feel joy today you are not alone. Life is always a mixture of sorrow and joy. Let us not deny the sorrow, but let us not forget the joy. Let us hug and weep but let us also count our blessings and celebrate them.