

# The USHer

*Your guide to the heart of the Unitarian Society of Hartford*



Back issues are located here: [V1 No1](#) [V1 No2](#) Contact the editor, Judy Robbins, at [ushereditor@gmail.com](mailto:ushereditor@gmail.com)

## Our Flaming Chalice

It is fitting that during the cold, dark winter months, our thoughts turn to the warmth of firelight and the glow of candles – perhaps even flaming chalices. Like Unitarian Universalism the meaning of the flaming chalice, the symbol of our faith, is purposely open to interpretation. Harvard University offers a story about its origin. “During the Middle Ages, when only clergy were allowed to drink from the communion cup, a priest from Prague named Jan Hus defied the Catholic Church by serving his congregation *both* the bread and wine, effectively declaring, as UUs do today, that all people have equal access to the divine.” His radical idea gradually caught on and the practice was continued in secret. Jan Hus’ followers adopted a flaming chalice as their symbol of freedom.

During World War II, the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) was conducting a rescue and relief operation, helping Unitarians, Jews and other persecuted groups to escape the Nazis. Since Nazi informers were numerous, Rev. Charles Joy, the Director of the USC, wanted a non-verbal symbol that would signal to refugees they were in good hands. He turned to his friend, Dutch artist, Hans Deutsch, to create a discreet but readily recognizable symbol and Deutsch came up

with an updated version of the old medieval flaming chalice. The USC began printing flaming chalices on their communications to show that we were trustworthy. Sympathizers drew the symbol in the dirt outside their doors to indicate places of refuge -- a light in the darkness.

The Universalists soon established a similar Service Committee and worked in concert with Unitarians. After the war, Unitarians embraced the encircled flaming chalice as their logo. Universalists already used a cross within a circle and when the denominations merged in 1961 they combined the two: the flaming chalice within two circles that we know today.

The popularity of the flaming chalice in print easily transferred to sculptural 3D representations. UU services and meetings began to be punctuated by lighting and extinguishing a variety of chalices from humble candles in saucers to much more ornate vessels.



*Our own USH chalice debuted here in 2015*

Some of you may not know that there is an interesting Hartford connection to this story. Our long-time minister Rev. Nat Lauriat retired to the southwest and served a small congregation in Surprise, AZ. *[Aside: Here in the land of steady habits we are averse to naming towns Surprise. But of course we support Arizonans right to choose.]* In Nat's congregation, there was a retired dentist, Mordecai Roth, who had spent his career fitting dental crowns and bridges. Because Roth missed working with his hands, he took a sculpture class and it opened up a world of possibilities. At the request of a fellow congregant, he tried his hand at making a

chalice in bronze. He said, "The first one looked more like a boat than a chalice." But he persisted until he came up with the design that we see on our chancel today. Nat Lauriat was so impressed with that initial chalice that he took it to General Assembly to show it off and the orders came pouring in. Although Mordecai Roth died in 2013 at the age of 93, a foundry still casts chalices following his original specs.

There's yet another Hartford connection! Nearly 20 years ago, our own Rev. Bob Janis served a summer ministry in Surprise. Lodging was found for Bob but the air conditioning failed and at 110 degrees, the apartment was uninhabitable. So for a few days until it was fixed, Bob stayed with Mordecai Roth and his wife Lenore. Rev. Bob remembers them as wonderful hosts and he was treated to great food and tales of their lifetime of social action, including a trek across the entire USA with an anti-nuclear peace movement.

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*Roth lights his chalice at GA 2013*

## Working For Justice

*Never, never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our souls when we look the other way.*  
~ Martin Luther King, Jr.



Judy Sullivan

Mordecai Roth was a typical UU in his commitment to social action. Here in Hartford, it's impossible to compile a complete list of ways we work for justice. Judy Sullivan, the current board chair of our Social Justice Council, is particularly proud of our status as a founding member of GHIAA, the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance, a social justice organization of diverse faith communities and allied local organizations. The goal of GHIAA is to build a network of clergy and lay leaders across boundaries of race, class, gender identity, religion and geography to address justice issues in the greater Hartford area and beyond. More than a dozen of our own USH members are trained as GHIAA core leaders. In the six years since its founding in 2019, GHIAA's 52 members have succeeded in getting voting rights re-established to those convicted of minor felonies. Another big win was prohibiting liens on Medicaid debt. Currently GHIAA is targeting environmental issues, mental health, racism, educational equity, housing and homelessness, and gun violence.

At USH, we understand that the people we serve know what they need, and food is one of those needs. We have ongoing collection for the Horace Bushnell Children's Food Pantry and several of our members volunteer with the Universalist Church's Fern Street Food Ministry, a large operation that attracts volunteers far beyond UU churches.

We also have a longstanding relationship with our next-door neighbor, The Village for Children and Families, an organization that provides services to support strong, healthy families to insure the protection and nurturance of children. And, congregants know that we divide our Sunday collection 50/50 with worthy local non-profits. These *Good Neighbor Offerings* serve a wide range of non-profits that share our values. If you have a special cause you'd like to nominate for a future Good Neighbor Offering, submit your suggestion to the Social Justice Committee.

Our Youth Group makes 20 gallons of hearty soup once a month and it is delivered to Church Street Eats in Hartford to feed those who are food insecure. Recently we have been collecting clothing, underwear and toiletries for Mother Rose's Boutique, a sister project to Church Street Eats. Donations of men's clothing are most needed, especially large and extra large sizes. Donations can be put in the rose-colored bin in Fellowship Hall.

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## Making A Difference

Even if it's a smile or a phone call, all of us find ways to contribute to the welfare of those around us. Some people are called to make a whole career

*One person can make a difference, and everyone should try.* ~ John F. Kennedy



of it. One of these is Mike Covault, a social worker specializing in hospice work. Mike, a graduate of the UConn School of Social Work, grew up as a fundamental Christian but parted ways when it became apparent that he was gay. His introduction to UU was at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House in Provincetown, MA. Today he and his husband Jon Covault are active members of USH. Mike lives UU values, bringing abundant compassion and acceptance for others into his work, honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all.

Unlike many social workers who serve a range of people before coming to hospice work, Mike knew when he was in his twenties that he wanted to work with the dying. He had been very close to his grandmother and before she died, he had a precognitive dream in which she appeared waving goodbye while flanked by two beings. In the morning he found out that she had died at the approximate time of his dream. Mike acknowledges the non-rational nature of such a dream and he is open to scientific explanations of such phenomena but he keeps an open mind since so many of his patients have had extraordinary experiences. He recalls one widow who, on her deathbed, said, “My husband is sitting right over there. I keep telling him I’m not ready yet.” Even reincarnation does not seem too far-fetched from the perspective of hospice. Mike says, “the universe is a vast mystery and all things are possible. Perhaps I was here before and I came back to do this work.”



*Mike Covault*

Although Mike briefly served as an administrator, he missed direct service and so he has worked for many years directly with the dying and their families. “I meet so many different people. Although we start as strangers, when people know they are dying, they are very authentic. There is no reason for pretension.” And most people are eager to tell Mike their stories. When he was first starting in the field he tried to guide people to do *life reviews*, but over the years he has found that a less formal way of being with the dying works better for most people. “People want to know they are not alone. Our life is a collection of stories and I listen with genuine interest and acceptance. Often this is all that is needed. In my field it is called *narrative therapy*.” He takes his lead from each individual patient. “I used to come to each patient as a blank slate but as I have matured, I sometimes offer different perspectives, especially to patients who have regrets or are judging themselves harshly.”

Mike has found that most elderly people have made their peace with dying whether they have particular religious beliefs or no beliefs at all. But a few, like Mike’s own grandfather, refuse to talk about death, even when death is imminent. Honoring the person’s own wishes, even if they are contrary to your own, is important.

Mike says that the work has changed him in so many ways that it is hard to separate hospice lessons from the natural process of maturing. Like many younger people, Mike finds he is not so much concerned about his own life but he worries about what he'd leave behind: Jon and the dog and all the stuff stored at their house. He laughs, "Our home is a death museum. It seems we have collected all sorts of sentimental things that our dead relatives have left." Mike knows he has a sensitive, intimate vocation and he is concerned that he live up to a standard that he can feel good about. He treasures the things his patients have told him, like one lively 103-year-old who quipped that she was happy to be free of peer pressure. He finds that bringing lightness and a bit of humor helps many people.

Not only will we all face death, we all experience loss. Mike strongly recommends facilitated bereavement support groups. These are a comforting way to help people grieve, grow, and find new ways forward. Look for these groups at any hospice agency and some hospitals.



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Trees  
glitter like castles  
of ribbons, the broad fields  
smolder with light, a passing  
creekbed lies  
heaped with shining hills;

and though the questions  
that have assailed us all day  
remain – not a single  
answer has been found –

walking out now  
into the silence and the light  
under the trees,  
and through the fields,

feels like one.

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From Mary Oliver's *First Snow*  
Contributed by Fred Louis

## Out and About

The USHer loves the many *free admission opportunities* offered as a bonus with your library card. Check your library's website for details.

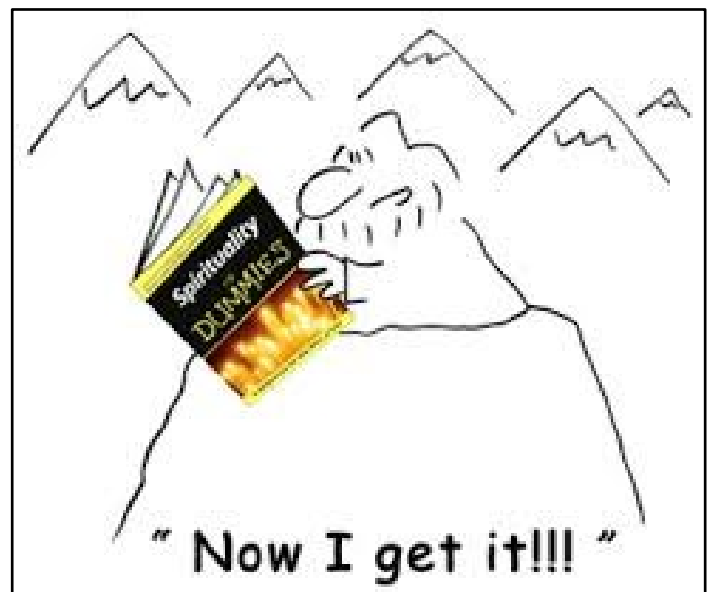
If you are looking for a winter outing, Carolyn Carlson offers these suggestions.

**Outdoors:** White Memorial Preserve, Litchfield CT, hiking on trails and 1.6 mile boardwalk.

**Indoors:** You don't have to gamble to visit a casino. At Foxwoods, see the **Mashantucket Pequot Museum**.

Or how about a walk around the USH ambulatory? Six congregants took a stab, guessing from 4-30 laps equals a mile. It's likely around 20-21, but if anyone knows the actual answer please email [USHerEditor@gmail.com](mailto:USHerEditor@gmail.com).

**Inside and Outdoors:** Essex, charming village, CT River Museum and the famous Griswold Inn, a 247-year-old destination for food and lodging, open for lunch and dinner.



Someone asked me “Aren’t you worried about the state of the world?” I allowed myself to breathe and then I said, “What is most important is not to allow your anxiety about what happens in the world to fill your heart. If your heart is filled with anxiety, you will get sick, and you will not be able to help.”  
~ Thich Nhat Han

## A Message from Rev. Bob

*Here, Rev. Bob addresses the unease many congregants feel about the recent national election.*

For many of us, the coming four years feels like it’s going to be a roller coaster – and for many of us, not in a good way. With this inauguration approaching, feelings of fear and anxiety are bound to be in the mix. There is so much at risk. May we find ways to be there for those most vulnerable: immigrants, the poor, our transgender siblings, and all those caught in the crosshairs of these shifting political winds.

In the sermon I gave at the time of the election, I made a few suggestions for getting through anxious times. I’ll repeat those suggestions here:

- Remember who you are, and whose you are. Don’t lose sight of your values. Connect with yourself - meditate, go for a walk, whatever restores you. Hold close to your spirituality and your friends and family, the people you love.
- Connect with others. Local networks are going to be more important than they ever were. Reach out, for your sake and theirs.
- If you feel like giving up hope, that’s understandable. But if you can, give up hope for hours, not months. Give up hope, turn off the news, have a good cry, or do something fun. And then, when you feel up to it, come on back. We need you. Give up hope for hours, not months.
- And keep singing. Keep that song in your heart. Persevere. You’ve got this. *We’ve got this.*

So goes the sermon. Now comes the practice. We are not alone. We will do what needs to be done together. Amen.

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*Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl wrote that what is important is holding onto hope and finding meaning despite life’s pain, loss and suffering. He encouraged acknowledging, accepting – even expecting – that life will have hardship, and then doing everything we can to move forward with a positive attitude anyway. Frankl reminds us that accepting a situation does not mean we acquiesce to it, only that we see it for what it is.*

~

John Adams, a Unitarian from Braintree, MA, served as our second US president from 1797-1801. He offered these words of wisdom more than 200 years ago, and it is good to hear them again.

*Government is instituted for the common good: for the protection, safety, prosperity and happiness of the people; and not for the profit, honor or private interest of any one man, family or class of men.*





*USH at sunset after the first snow, December 2024. Photo by Kevin Girouard*

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Adapted from Henry David Thoreau's journal, January 1838

*Every twig was covered with a sparkling ice armor. Even the grass was hung with innumerable diamond pendants which jingled merrily when brushed by the foot of the traveler. Such is beauty wherever there is a soul to admire.*



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