

**Multi-Cultural & Religious Awareness**  
**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM**  
**October 6, 2004**                      **Mary Hanke, Chaplain**

This month the subject is the Unitarian Universalist Church in the US. The Unitarian and Universalist religions began as movements within Christianity and appeared at different times in different places. People who believed in universal salvation, i.e. God is one being rather than a Trinity, broke off from orthodox groups either because they were deemed to be heretics or when they felt they no longer belonged. Various people arose as leaders of these movements, but no one person can be identified as the “founder” of the religion.

The establishment of Unitarian attitudes often pre-dated the official use of the name which first occurred in Transylvania in the 1600's. While it had Christian roots, Unitarianism was also heavily influenced by the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. Although some Unitarians continue to regard themselves as Christians, the influence of other world faiths is substantial, and adherents from a wide variety of backgrounds continue to come together to build a liberal religious community. In the USA, the merger between the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961 led to the movement being known today as Unitarian Universalist (UU).

It is a comprehensive program for religious reform, rooted in humanism and the radical Reformation, and is as much a spirit as a program, stressing free intellectual inquiry, freedom, tolerance, and ethical living. UU's do not hold rigid, unquestioned, black and white beliefs. They maintain that all beliefs must be open to question and examination, and may then be accepted, modified or rejected. They affirm that beliefs must be subject to the scrutiny and revision of reason and experience. They reject truth with a capital “T” that cannot be questioned or must be considered authoritative. Truth is a function of persons, in every age and every walk of life.

UU's freedom of belief is not considered a license for religious anarchy or irresponsibility, but is an opportunity for careful, hard, honest thought. Every person should develop his or her own capacity for personal judgment so that s/he may, in the words of the apostle Paul, “Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good.” Nor is it all a private matter. UU's believe in sharing personal convictions and beliefs with each other in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect.

The movement has inherited many festivals and holidays from worldwide traditions, particularly those that celebrate the natural rhythms of the year, such as the equinoxes and solstices, the universal aspects of which are emphasized. More recently established festivals, such as United Nations Day, for which Unitarians campaigned, International Women's Day, Human Rights Day, and Earth Day, are also widely celebrated. Most celebrate Christmas and Easter, sometimes a Jewish Seder, and often national Thanksgiving Day.

The one uniquely Unitarian celebration is the Flower Communion, as developed by Karl Capek, a Czech Unitarian who died in the Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Patterned after a Christian communion, the flower communion is marked by the sharing of flowers; each brings a flower to the service, and takes another home. Rites of passage are important to UU's as they are to all religious groups. In child dedications the society joins with the parents in committing themselves to providing the child with a loving and supportive community in which the child can grow.

The flaming chalice is the UU's primary symbol, and many congregations light the chalice at the beginning of their services, as well as on other occasions. It combines the cup (symbolizing sharing, generosity, sustenance and love) and the flame (symbolizing witness, sacrifice, testing, courage, illumination, and spirit).