

We Light This Chalice – Meadville Chalice Dedication

March 29, 2026 Alison Wohler
The Unitarian Universalist Church of Meadville

Prelude

Welcome and Introduction of the Speaker Joyce Milberg

Good Morning and Welcome to this home of the free-thinking and the brave-hearted, those who need support, those with support to give, those seeking inspiration or shelter in the storm. We each have the stories of our lives that make us who we are in this moment and with these people. Everyone is welcome.

*With gratitude in our hearts we have come together this morning
to celebrate the beauty of the day,
to bask in the warmth of this community,
to share with friends the tides of our lives,
to ask eternal questions, and wonder at possibility,
to entertain, perennially, our hopes and plans for a better future.*

Written by Alison Wohler

Introduction to the Service

The Rev. Alison Wohler

When I was here to help us celebrate this church's 200th anniversary, I decided I wanted to donate something significant to this congregation because of the powerful transformation this place and you brought to my life in the years I was here. And I didn't want to just give you a check. I wanted to give you something that you would use all the time, something that was beautiful, and that symbolizes important things. Ahah! (No, not a coffee pot.) A Chalice! I did ask if this would be appropriate, and might be something you wanted, and received an enthusiastic yes. A group of people and I got together and found an artist (his name is Ryan Schmit, and his metal shop is in Kansas City, Missouri). Ryan made this Chalice, to our order, and in time for this service.

A Chalice does not, and never did, symbolize only one thing. Originally it was a made-up logo (by a cartoon artist, no less) to put on stationary so correspondence would look more official and thus help in the work of the Unitarian Service Committee to get people out of Nazi territories.

Decades later lighting the Chalice was adopted as a ritual in Unitarian Universalist services, yet still its meaning was and remained open to interpretation and the moment. Today Chalices are stylized in many forms and materials. We use them in our services as well as in our meetings and discussion groups. They help set the tone and intention of the gathering. What is it we want to hold up in front of us as we listen, or discuss, or experience?

Today I intend to let this service, of many Chalice Lightings – or re-lightings – be a “baptism by immersion” that dedicates this particular Chalice to this particular congregation.

Joyce will light this new Chalice, for the first time, with the words you regularly say on Sunday mornings.

Chalice Lighting One

May the light we now kindle inspire us to use our powers
to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder,
to bless and not to curse, to serve you, Spirit of Life. Passover Haggadah

Hymn No. 123 Spirit of Life

Affirmation of Covenant, Mission, and Vision

Greeting Each Other

Words of Inspiration and Renewal

Josh Searle-White

Chalice Lighting Two “Nothing is Static” by Manish Mishra-Marzetti

*The ground shifts, sometimes slowly,
sometimes like an earthquake,
reminding us that the solidity
we often love and seek
is an illusion.*

*The crumbling dust of the desert plains,
the moist fertility of farmlands,
the eroding coastline of tidal shores,*

are all changing.

*Committees dissolve or are created,
leaders retire or step away,
ministers come and go,
by-laws are amended.*

*New experiences,
lead to new truths,
which foster
evolution;*

*the natural course of life
always pushing us
toward greater understandings
of what it means
to be human.*

*Everything about our existence
points toward change,
flexibility, and
dynamic re-creation.*

*And it's hard because
change involves loss.*

*Can we hold the losses well,
while not holding ourselves back?*

*The ground shifts, sometimes slowly,
sometimes like an earthquake;
nothing is static.*

The Light of Truth

Often part of the symbolism to which we ascribe the Chalice flame is what we broadly call the "light of truth." But as we know, in our Unitarian Universalist understanding of things, truth is something we spend our lifetimes searching for. In addition, we also hold in our particular faith that revelation is not sealed. There is no absolute big Truth to be discovered and then that's that. There will ever be more discoveries in the sciences, more

experiences to have, more reading and new interpretations of the ancient texts that will help shape our thinking along the way.

At the bottom of all my emails is a quote from "The Night Manager" by John Le Carre. It reads: *"No one's got the whole picture so no one knows there isn't one."*

Jane Ellen will offer Chalice Lighting Three. This Chalice Lighting was written by my father many years ago. He turned 100 just last Sunday.

Chalice Lighting Three by Robert Adams

We light this flame to illuminate, if ever so briefly, our friends and neighbors as they join us in the ever-lasting search for temporary answers to eternal questions.

The Warmth of Community

One of the reasons for gathering in religious community is to extend our human family in order that we might have all the support and encouragement we need to traverse the stages of our lives. Sometimes we celebrate, sometimes we mourn, sometimes we just need the simple companionship of someone who cares. The hospitality the congregation extends to its visitors, and to each other, is an important part of the effectiveness of a community. You might not always think so, but Coffee Hour can be a time that either makes or breaks a new person's interest in coming back again.

Deb Lehman will offer our next Chalice Lighting, on the importance of religious community and just plain being together.

Chalice Lighting Four

By Kenneth L. Patton

We arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets.
We come to be assured that brothers and sisters surround us, to restore their images on our eyes.

We enlarge our voices in common speaking and singing.

We try again that solitude found in the midst of those who with us seek their hidden reckonings.

Our eyes reclaim the remembered faces; their voices stir the surrounding air.

The warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names.

This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship.
It is good to be with one another.

Joys and Sorrows

Offering Offertory

The Fire of Commitment

Boy, this one, the fire of commitment, is surely an important reason for the existence of this religious community these days. On so many fronts – the environment, health care, war and its destruction and loss of life and livelihood, voting rights, defunding of the sciences and the arts, racism and white supremacy, and overarching it all are the insidious and dangerous attacks on our democratic way of life. How would a person prioritize where to extend themselves first? The only realistic answer is that we can only do what we can do – one thing and one day at a time.

Here in this community we learn that our voices and our actions are multiplied when practiced together. Meadville was part of a nation-wide No Kings protest yesterday that included over 3000 separate organized events. Many of us were in Diamond Park with our signs and our voices, and our music. We are in precarious times – and we need each other to help ourselves remain defiant.

I often remind my family, and myself, that living our values – really living lives that reflect the society we wish to continue to maintain – is also a strong form of resistance. I will not succumb.

Listen to these words of UU minister A. Powell Davies, in his book Without Apology, written almost 30 years ago. Sometimes being reminded of how it is supposed to be, can be inspiring.

The American commitment is to universal justice, the rights of all people, not the special interests of some. It is a commitment to fair play, to patience, to tolerance, to neighborliness. It is a commitment to the common good. It protects liberty with unity, the opportunity of each with the good of all. It is compassionate, humanitarian. It believes in humanity and in its future. It is the Golden Rule. It is based upon the

claim of conscience and the faith in goodness. It begins not in a system but within the heart.

It battles prejudice and false opinion. It seeks the truth. It is opposed to barriers of exclusiveness. Its principles are universal. It despises cowardice, including moral cowardice. But it also has no use for obstinacy, inflexibility, and intolerance. It prefers honesty to cleverness, kindness to self-sufficiency, goodwill to narrow-minded aims. It is a way of life now and a faith, a vision of the future. It is a purpose to be served.

If anyone tells me that these characteristics are more than American, that they are universal, I will reply that that is why they are American. Because this nation was not founded on the divisive and the separate, but upon the rights of all people. Can we restore these standards? Can we seek again the touch of greatness?

The future will depend upon the answer. Upon what takes place in heart and conscience. A nation, like an individual, must have a soul.

We of course understand and know too well the failings, throughout our history, of the American ideal of democracy and equality for all. But the ideal remains, and is yet worthy.

I grew up UU, and as a milestone gift when we graduated from a certain level of religious education (maybe it was Junior High), we were given Flaming Chalice necklaces. I wore mine every minute of every day. It was, to me, a symbol of my flaming soul. It is visible in my senior photograph in my High School year book, under which it unfortunately says “A Flaming What?” The next unfortunate thing is that I gave my chalice necklace to some boy in college – and never got it back.

But husband and partner Milt Harris got me another one about 26 years ago now. I’m wearing it today because of this Chalice I have gifted to you. I still have a flaming soul and wish I could do more to affect the quality of the day for all the people I see suffering in our world, in this country, and in this room. I know we all wish the same thing. That we could do more.

Carol and Rick Holmgren will offer two readings for our Chalice Lighting Five.

Chalice Lighting Five “The Homes of our Neighbors Are Burning” by Michael F. Dubois

*I've started removing qualifiers
from the things I read and hear –*

*a school in Iran bombed (a school bombed),
a child of immigrants detained (a child detained),
Palestinian girl left without
limbs or parents (girl left without limbs or parents) –*

*and it has torn the curtains
clean off my fragile windows.*

*Here, take it,
my false, self-righteous, security;
I do not want it anymore.*

*The homes of my neighbors
are burning, and no amount
of smoke can trick my eyes away.*

*Friends, please, I call to you:
grab a bucket or a pail.
Gather every drop
of compassion you can find.
The embers have taken
to the wind and we must
douse these flames together –
together or not at all.*

The second reading for Chalice Lighting Five is by UU minister Mark Belletini. It is slightly adapted.

*When evil darkens our world, let us find some remaining light.
When despair numbs our souls, please let us find some hope.
When we falter and fear, look for the beauty surrounding us.
When nothing seems sure, there must be trust somewhere. Right?
When we lose our way, may the light be our guide.*

*We gather to light our Chalice to openly declare that love is greater than hate, and truth is greater than cowardice, deception, dishonesty.
This we do that we might shape our lives to greatness, as a weaver might take beautiful threads to make a still more beautiful weaving.
Or a musician will strike many splendid notes to make an even more splendid song.
Come embracing fountain of love and truth. Thrive in our reason and passion. Fire our lives, our faith, our community.*

Bless the Imperfect

Does it make you chuckle to tell jokes about Unitarian Universalism and its quirks?

Like: What is a Unitarian Universalist? Someone who faces all questions with an open mouth.

Or: UUs are notoriously poor singers, because they're always reading two lines ahead, to make sure they agree with the words.

William Schulz wrote this prayer for leaders:

O God.

I am a leader. O God!

Teach me to practice patience and forbearance in the wake of every comment, no matter how inane.

Sustain me in the face of hidden motives, manipulation, passive aggressiveness, and aggressive passivity.

Grace me with the knowledge that progress is halting and resistance is to be expected.

Make me a person of integrity and align our collective vision with our organizational health.

Remind me regularly of our long-term mission and larger faith.

Help me to worry less about my legacy and more about whether I make glad the paths of those who journey with me.

Insist that I laugh.

Let me never forget that "this too shall pass."

Grace me with gratitude.

I am a leader. O God!

Amen.

Nothing about organized religion is ever really perfect. Sometimes it's not even organized. But it is a place of ideals, principles, values, acceptance,

compassion, love. It's like we are a place to practice being in community – to learn how to love better – in a forgiving environment in case we don't always get it right.

And the church is a place to serve. “I don't know what your destiny will be,” Albert Schweitzer said, “but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” (Bless the Imperfect, p. 38)

And our imperfections are not limited to how we manage the church and the parish house, or the books, or organizing the next potluck. Sometimes our imperfections lie in our inability to fathom what the larger world needs of us. Where, among the many problems in society, should our priorities lie? We know our voices are amplified by our numbers, but what exactly should we be saying?

Jed Miller will offer a reading called “Letter to the People of the Future” by John Cummins for Chalice Lighting Six. (Bless the Imperfect, p. 98)

Chalice Lighting Six

My Distant Children:

You will look back on us with astonishment at the truths that stared us in the face, and which we did not see. You will look with wonder at the bright toys we created, and used only for the rape of the planet, and one another.

It will seem strange beyond believing that we reached for the stars, and did not know the simplest principles of living well together.

But know this also, you of the future, you with your libraries and fountains, you in your star cities. Know that even in our slumbers, we dreamed. In our fumbling, shadowed search for mistaken glories, even in our clumsy cruelties, it was for you that we dreamed!

Beneath the piled-up centuries, below the lost and ruined rubble of all our striving, it was you who lay safe, enfolded in the womb of our dreaming. You, the first cause of all our daring! Even now, it brings comfort to know that it shall one day be as the wise among us have foretold.

In that far age, in the chrysalis of time, it will be your source of pride that your ancestors, born into a universe without justice or mercy, bethought themselves of justice and mercy, and put them there!

Remember us for this.

A Theology of Accompaniment

I really like the idea of a theology of accompaniment. The practice of being in partnership. The term comes from the Cuban-American theologian Roberto Goizueta. It is more than the English word accompany, which can be as mundane as going to the grocery store with your mother. The Spanish word, *acompanar*, is more like “being joined at the hip.” (this is all from a piece in *Bless the Imperfect*, by Janice Marie Johnson, p. 86)

One writer on this subject, Janice Marie Johnson, says that the theology of accompaniment has many implications, including the recognition of the value of a human being regardless of any other of their identifying adjectives. It is our task to walk with someone, being aware of the conditions of their body, mind, spirit, hope, future – and offer a strengthening of those from whom identity and acknowledgement is often stolen or ignored by our Western culture.

A theology of accompaniment is a partnership that strives to empower the community and its individuals at the same time. It builds bridges. It does not burn them. It is akin to the difference between providing services to the disenfranchised and breaking bread with people who are, in fact, our siblings on this earth. Think Soup on Saturday...

“A theology of accompaniment calls us to move beyond “othering,” beyond tolerating, beyond mere embracing. It calls us to honor each other. Accompaniment is a choice. One that can resonate profoundly as a spiritual practice of being in partnership.” (*Bless the Imperfect*, p. 86)

I really do like this. I hope that it resonates with you as well, and that this Chalice may remind you of the many possibilities that lie ahead for this congregation.

Todd Fox will offer Chalice Lighting Seven. As she reads this, remember: we are all ministers in our own capacities.

Chalice Lighting Seven

“A Blessing for Those Who Minister” by Elea Kemler (*Bless the Imperfect*, p. 99)

Blessed are those who minister.

Blessed are those who welcome the quirky, the lost, and the unwanted, the ones whose sweetness usually goes unseen.

Blessed are those who treat the fearful with gentleness and can see the face of the child in the one who is unkind.

Blessed are those who do not use sarcasm as a weapon when their feelings are hurt and who tell hard truths with the intent to heal and not to wound.

Blessed are those who hold in their keeping whole books of stories that can never be told, stories of betrayal and shame and sorrow, stories of how life shatters into pieces like glass.

Blessed are those who offer comfort and hope in the face of the wreckage, who show up as soon as the news goes out, who meet the police on the doorstep, who hold out their hands.

Blessed are those who sit with the upwelling of grief and the aching emptiness, who do not flinch back from pain, especially when it is raw and angry and new.

Blessed are those who dare to find words to speak of such fleet, shimmering things as hope and grace and who know how to speak of faith quietly and mostly in poems.

Blessed are those who hold such stillness in their spirits that it radiates outward for others to rest in.

Blessed are those who minister.

Hymn No. 402 From You I Receive, To You I Give

Extinguishing the Chalice

The words we use, every week, to extinguish our Chalice, really do have a lot of meaning written into these short lines. As I extinguish the flame, for now, please join me in reciting the words found in your order of service.

By Elizabeth Selle Jones

*We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of truth, the warmth of community,
or the fire of commitment.*

These we carry in our hearts until we meet again.

Closing Words

I think that by now the new Chalice has successfully survived its baptism by immersion, or we could even say “by fire.” I hope the many examples of what a Chalice might do for a service have shown you its diversity and many symbolled meaning.

It has been a joy to be with you today to dedicate this Chalice to your use.

My Closing Words are by Emily Balch.

Let us strive to learn to live together.

*Let us be patient with one another
and even patient with ourselves.*

*We have a long, long way to go
so let us hasten along the road -*

the road of human tenderness and generosity.

*Groping, [perhaps with the light of this Chalice] we may find one another's
hands in the dark.*

Blessed Be.

Postlude

Invitation to Coffee Hour