

## **ILLUMINATION**

Unitarian Universalist congregations often celebrate holidays from other traditions such as Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah, Passover, and Samhain, but why don't we have more celebrations that are really our own? At least 2 uniquely UU holidays have been created, one of which we celebrate today.

*According to the UUCLR website: illUUmation is a Unitarian Universalist holiday instituted by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock. Celebrated during the winter season, this observance places a distinctively UU festival on the calendar during a time of the year when many great religious traditions mark the change of seasons. Since 1994 (UUCLR) has celebrated illUUmation, a holiday conceived within one of our member families in response to their children's desire to celebrate not only the special days of other faiths, but a special day of their own. We have developed a weekend of programming including an illUUmation Feast, songs, and a Sunday service for all ages. Based on the enthusiastic response to our celebration both within our congregation and in our district, we seek to expand awareness of illUUmation at Unitarian Universalist congregations across the continent. (uuclr.org)*

I will say more about IllUUmation in a few minutes, but I also want to mention one other UU holiday which was described in the UU World recently:

*Luminescence (adapted from UU World story January 2016)  
Unitarian Universalists recognize that the wisdom of the world's religions inspires them, and Jewish and Christian teachings call to them in particular. In practice, that often means that UUs celebrate, or at least recognize, a lot of religious holidays from other faith traditions.*

*In 2007, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Santa Clarita decided UUs needed their own unique religious holiday—so they created one: Luminescence, a holiday where we can all celebrate the things that make us strong. In February 2007, they celebrated the very first Luminescence, a candlelight worship service that focuses on the cycle of recognition, reflection, refocus, and renewal. The congregation’s minister at the time, the Rev. Rick Hoyt-McDaniels, challenged the worship team “to work on creating a holiday of our own.” They came up with a ritual that incorporates the flaming chalice and five candles that each represent a concept: the source of light, recognition, reflection, refocus, and renewal. The lighting of each one is accompanied by a reading before each member of the congregation joins in by lighting their own candles. They named the holiday Luminescence, because it is representative of the light being generated by members of the UU faith. The congregation typically celebrates the holiday the third Sunday of February when the time spent in daylight is increasing gradually and we’re looking enthusiastically toward spring coming.*

I don’t know if the folks in Santa Clarita had heard anything about IllUUmation before they create Luminescence, but they, like the congregation in Little Rock were recognizing the absence of a uniquely UU holiday amidst the other holidays often celebrated by UUs. Though it should be noted, that as a tradition growing out of Christianity, we do have a claim on all the Judeo-Christian holidays. And as a tradition which has learned the value of our even older pagan roots, and the significance of Eastern wisdom, we really can claim most of the holidays when they are genuinely celebrated!

I know more about the UU Church in Little Rock and IllUUmation, since I celebrated IllUUmation 9 times while I served as Minister of the church in Little Rock. I also know that when it started, it mostly supplanted celebrations of Christmas. As more families came in wanting to also celebrate Christmas, I helped them move IllUUmation to January and then to add an emphasis on our 7 UU Principles.

IllUUmation, started by a question from a youth, has always been intergenerational, with time for children an important part of the service and celebration. It was a time of fellowship and fun with everyone in their Purple and Silver best!

If IllUUmation doesn't take off here, perhaps we will create our own unique holiday to recognize our Unitarian Universalist tradition. I thought I would spend a few minutes pondering some of the ways that we are unique. Whereas Christians appreciate the Chalice as a vessel to share wine or grape juice memorializing the blood of Jesus in Communion, we light a flame in our chalice to honor the spirit of life, the divine spirit, and for some it remembers the martyrs who gave up their lives for their beliefs. Our 7 principles, while neither a creed nor doctrine, do describe things that we believe in common about what is desirable in relationships, religion, and society in general. Our statement of Living Tradition honors the many sources of wisdom from which Unitarian Universalism derives meaning and purpose. Together, the flaming Chalice, UU Principles, and our Living Tradition provide us with symbols from which we can discover, explore, and live out a meaningful faithful life.

Within our tradition, we also recognize that life and faith comprise a journey, not a destination. We believe that revelation is not sealed and that the Universe Force, the Web of Life, and/or the Divine continue to speak to people through many voices and experiences. We believe that we continue to learn about ourselves and the universe throughout our lives and we choose to give time and energy to activities that will help us grow in knowledge and wisdom. No matter how much we know or think we know, we believe that we can always learn more!

We also believe that no single religion holds all truth, so that we need to understand the teachings of many religions to find truth and meaning. Most of us have learned about many religions before we come to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, while others may learn about other religions through classes that we offer for persons of all ages.

We also value the core teachings of many prophets and religious exemplars such as Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Abraham, and others. We may find wisdom in the scriptures of many traditions, including the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the Vedas, and the Quran, as well as in the practices and celebrations of our many Living Traditions. While we do not usually raise up any single source, we affirm and respect those Unitarian Universalists who may also claim the beliefs and practices of a single tradition such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, or Humanism.

In our respect and acceptance of people of many traditions we illustrate how far we are away from being a unified cult! In our democratic processes and tendency to learn from, and often disagree with, a great array of teachers, leaders, and ministers, we further distance ourselves from the monolithic tendencies of cults! Our organization beyond the local congregation consists of our membership in an Association of Congregations to which we pay dues and from which we receive certain services. Decisions of belief, choice of ministers, and internal structure is entirely up to each congregation.

In most of our UU congregations, we also in many ways show our commitment to justice for individuals, groups, nations, and religious communities. In this congregation, we have completed a process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation for LGBTQIA individuals in which we support marriage and relationship equality and civil rights for all persons, specifically including LGBTQIA individuals. We also strive to be aware of white privilege even as we seek to include any and all persons of color who join us. Illumination also stands for justice in these areas.

Further, we affirm that all life is connected within the fabric of the universe so that justice, compassion, and hope and the lack thereof will be felt by all beings with whom we connect, and that we are connected with all things and beings! In our affirmation of the interdependent and interconnected web of all being, we express our belief that we share the

life force with all beings and our commitment to preserve and protect life whenever possible during our lifetimes.

One other part of IllUUmation is worthy of mention. There is an IllUUmation Tree at UUCLR crafted by Bish Williams, a long time member of the UU Church of Little Rock. The tree holds dozens, perhaps hundreds, of tea lights in glass votive holders. During the IllUUmation Feast each year, there is a time for naming and toasting prominent Unitarian Universalists throughout history and up to the present day. It is a great honor to be so toasted. The candles may be lit by the person toasting or a person assigned to that task. Appropriate songs are sung, especially the theme song, This Little Light!

Whether or not we decide to celebrate IllUUmation in future years, I hope that we can appreciate the intent to celebrate our UU religious tradition for itself. Though we clearly come from Christianity, we are not often in line with the loudest parts of that tradition, and for many the connection with Pagan Religion, Buddhism, or Humanism may be stronger. In our current manifestation, we are unique, but historically we are connected most strongly to Christianity and then to other parts of our Living Tradition.

Today we celebrate the unique expression of religious faith by Unitarian Universalists! We celebrate the Flaming Chalice which we light to begin our service. We celebrate the 7 UU Principles which express our shared beliefs and our intentions in the world. We celebrate our Living Tradition which helps to connect us with other faiths around the world. We also celebrate the more than 100 year long history of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton! Most of all, we celebrate Unitarian Universalism and all those persons who helped to shape this movement and this congregation, as well as all who enjoy this movement now, and all those who will shape the future of this movement!

Happy IllUUmation!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!