

GENESIS OF THE SPIRAL SYMBOL

by Pat Winter

Charter Sunday, February 3, 2008

It began in 1989, the first official year of the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists. The occasion was our first annual fund campaign. Bill Geary, the president, asked me if I would make something that would show our progress toward our goal. I said okay, and then proceeded to elaborate, as is my usual maddening process. No cardboard thermometer for us, thought I! I was going to make something better. Something that would say who we are and what we want to do. Something that would show our connection to life and its meaning. Something that would last and have import.

I dreamed on, expanding the time and experimenting with ideas and materials. The time for the annual fund campaign came and went. I don't remember what they used for a measure of progress – probably . . . a cardboard thermometer. Who cares, thought I, spinning in my cocoon like Karl Rove. I settled on the spiral.

To me, the spiral represented growth. It is the essence of biological development and has been used for millennia as a symbol – a sacred symbol as is seen in the Neolithic remains at Catyl Hyuck in southern Turkey. It enlivens, makes holy, and has given visual delight and symbolic meaning from the time of early man's pottery and religious relics onward. These days, everyone is aware of the importance and meaning of a three-dimensional spiral, the double helix. It is our humanity, encoded for eternity.

What then, asked my creative genii? What then? I could etch my favorite pattern on the surface. A network pattern found everywhere in nature -- from old river beds to dry caking mud flats, trees, our own blood vessels, cracked cement and asphalt and the placental network that joins mother to fetus for the first nine months of life. It is proclaimed in our UU principles as respect for the interdependent web of life. And so I painted the pattern on the surface of the copper with asphalt and dipped it into an acid bath. That bit the pattern into what would become a raised, smooth and shiny network pattern against a rough, colored background.

Fine, but it needed more. But what? What if I drilled holes, making a secondary spiral of negative shapes? That was interesting, but it looked kind of dumb without a reason for being there. How could I make it function in the whole? Eureka! Bolts! I had a collection of three-inch bolts I had bought at the annual Virginia state excess inventory sale. I cut each one down and threaded it. Couldn't we begin a ritual of putting a bolt into the succeeding hole every year on Charter Sunday? It would celebrate our accomplishments. A bolt, and the action of bolting, seemed like very strong symbols. It made material our resolve as WUUs. It would be a spiral evolving in time as we WUU's were.

I don't know what Bill Geary's real response was to my artwork. He was too polite to say anything negative or to point out how long it had taken, or how I had let my ego take over. The annual fund campaign had come and gone several times when I finished it.

The spiral itself took on a life of its own. John Benzel made an acrylic stand for it, so it would appear to float in space, and the congregation gradually bonded with it. It is now used as the name and symbol for our weekly news bulletins.

And last year, it was used as . . . guess what? The "thermometer" symbol for our annual fund campaign. The circle is complete. The spiral continues forever.