

# “Promises, Promises”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Fat chance,” the man said to himself, when he heard his young friend speak of her ambitious plan.

26 year-old Grace, the daughter of friends of his, had announced she was going to ride her bicycle across Canada, in honour of a close friend who had recently died.

Sarah Dubé had lived an independent and highly productive life, despite having muscular dystrophy.

In 2006, she received a Top 20 Under 20 award for her peacemaking work with students in Serbia and Northern Ireland.

Grace McNee missed Sarah, and she wanted to support Independent Living Nova Scotia...the organization that had helped Sarah live so fully.

So...why not cycle across Canada?

“A lovely idea,” the man thought.  
But could she really keep such a promise?

Fat chance.

Meanwhile, Grace continued to make her plans.

A cycling partner had promised to go with her.

He flew over from Ireland to make the trip...

But, once he landed in British Columbia and got a first-hand look at Canada's vast and intimidating terrain...

Let's just say he had second thoughts.

A few days before their ride was set to begin,  
he backed out on his promise.

And some people wondered whether Grace would, too.  
After all, 5500 kilometers is a lot to cover alone.

But as Grace told me yesterday...from her current resting-spot in  
Halifax...it never really occurred to her NOT to keep her promise...

Even when she had to keep it a different way.

## §

Now, I don't know about you. But sometimes talk of covenants and  
promises makes me nervous.

I can think of so many times when I haven't lived up to my own  
expectations.

When I haven't fulfilled promises I made,  
or promises I think I should have made.

The older I get, the more they seem to stack up!  
Funny about that!

Given my occasional discomfort, perhaps it's fitting that I find myself  
a minister in a religious tradition that emphasizes covenant...which is  
our theme for reflection in the month of September.

Now, “covenant” is kind of a fancy word...a word with religious roots...and one with different shades of meaning.

What do Unitarians mean, when we use that word?

Knowing Unitarians, you’ll probably hear a lot of different answers...

But I like the way Alice Blair Wesley put it in a 2001 lecture to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

When we “keep covenant” as a congregation, she says, we enter into “...intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster.”<sup>1</sup>

To live with as much integrity as we can muster.  
What do we mean by *that*?

Well, at the beginning of every worship service,  
we “covenant” to dwell together in peace,  
to seek knowledge in freedom,  
to serve life, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with  
the divine.”

To support ourselves in that intention and agreement,  
all UU congregations covenant to affirm and promote an ever-  
evolving set of Seven Principles.

And as Reverend Meg Barnhouse pointed out in UU World magazine, each of them are no small things—especially if we look at them in the practical context of our own real lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Blair Wesley, Lecture 2 "Thus Do We Covenant..." Minns Lectures, Unitarian Universalist Association (2000-01).

Reverend Meg suggests that we attach “beginning in our homes and congregations” to the end of every Principle.

She says, “Then we’d be faced with affirming things like “the goal of peace, liberty and justice for all...” beginning in our homes and congregations.

Everyone who has raised children knows that peace is often at odds with liberty, and that justice demands a disturbance of the peace.[...]

It’s easier to think about working towards them in a global context than in the context of Cheerios and pyjamas, car keys and cleaning up one’s bedroom.”

She goes on to comment on the Responsive Reading we shared this morning:

“Lao Tse...says that peace in the world begins with peace in the home, which begins with peace in the heart.

If I start with my own heart, the demands of the Principles get even heavier.

Peace and compassion in my heart? Justice too?  
Freedom as well?

Affirming the worth of every person all the time, not only with my words and my behavior but in my secret heart?”

Meg Barnhouse writes, “If we added ‘in the heart’ to the Principles, they might as well just say, “be Jesus [or Gandhi or Buddha] and be done with it. I’m sorry I even brought it up.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Meg Barnhouse, “Who says Unitarian Universalist principles are easy?” UU World, 11/23/09.

As an imperfect promise-keeper, I appreciate the fact that Reverend Barnhouse named this difficulty directly...and with such good humour.

It seems to me a healthy thing to point out that our UU covenants can lead us to some pretty lofty promises.

Frankly, if I met anyone who claimed to live up to the UU Principles perfectly, I think I'd run for the hills!

So, speaking of hills, let's cycle back now to Grace and her ride across Canada.

## §

When I asked Grace what was most difficult about keeping her promise, she acknowledged that it was very physically taxing...

And that adjusting to the new reality of a solo ride was hard at first.

But soon, she appreciated being able to set her own pace and follow her own rhythm. She enjoyed making her own decisions on the road.

Keeping her promise seemed a natural thing to do, although the ride could never be described as "easy."

And then, by the time she'd made it to New Brunswick, the ride got harder.

She received the news that a close friend had been killed on a stretch of Northern Ontario highway that she had crossed just a few weeks earlier.

Chris had been a classmate of hers, and Sarah Dubé's as well, at King's College in Halifax.

Suddenly it was difficult to be on road alone...“having all this time in my head,” as Grace told me.

Once again, it would have been perfectly understandable if she chose to stop there.

She had already raised more than \$5,000 in honour of her friend...surely that was a promise kept?

And yet she kept going.

In fact, she said, it felt perfectly normal to do.

She told me: “It doesn’t feel like as big a deal to me, as everyone thinks it is.”

## §

The Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote:

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Placing that wisdom—re-quoted in many versions—alongside Grace’s matter-of-fact comment that for her, cycling across Canada is “not that big a deal”...

It seems to me that the most important promises may be the ones that “go without saying”...that are simply woven into the fabric of our make-up.

I’m reminded of David Whyte’s reflection in his poem “All the True Vows”<sup>3</sup> that I read earlier:

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<sup>3</sup> David Whyte, “All the True Vows” from *The House of Belonging* (Many Rivers Press, 1997).

“Hold to your own truth  
at the center of the image you were born with.

In [the] place no one can hear you  
you can make a promise it will kill you to break.”

It may be that a central task for us, as seekers of meaning,  
is to foster in ourselves the ability to hear that inner promise...

And to follow it, even when others say “Fat chance!”  
or “What were you thinking?”

## §

In the 2001 Minns Lecture, Alice Blair Wesley observed that:

“In our time a major source of anxiety is that we don’t know what  
matters most to us, what we love most.

Many don’t know what might be worthy of our faithful loyalty, which  
people might deserve our trust, or who are the people - or causes or  
institutions - to whom we might want to be faithful.”

She proposed a group in which a members would ask each other,  
“How could we help a person wanting to be faithful in the ways  
Person X has spoken of?”

How could we help that person keep covenant with the deepest  
commitments they hold?

It seems to me that our Journey Groups, which are modeled on the  
Quaker “circles of trust” often do this, when they’re at their best.

Indeed, I believe that many aspects of life here at First Unitarian hold  
that potential.

When a circle of trust, or a church community, is working well...it can allow us to hear our own deep promises, which are usually, also, promises to people we love.

Our ability to live with integrity in covenanted community—and (why stop there) our ability to live with integrity and courage in the wider world...

So that we might collectively create a world of peace and justice...

Perhaps it all depends on that inner promise that each of us alone has the ability to hear:

*“Through the roar, through the rush,  
Through the throng, through the crush...”*

*Do you hear, in the hush of your soul,  
Of your soul?”<sup>4</sup>*

The promise...to end all promises.

In the poet David Whyte’s case, he heard his soul’s deep promise not to people, but to fish.

More specifically, to salmon.  
And it changed the course of his life.

He stepped away from working busily in an organization dedicated to environmental teaching...

To devote his life to poetry, in service of the earth and its endangered species.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From “Do You Hear” Hymn #112 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Words: Emily L. Thorn.

<sup>5</sup> David Whyte, *The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 123-128.

Today his poetry reaches millions, in communities like this one—  
drawing our attention to the sanctity and the fragility of our planet.

He wrote:

“Seeing my reflection I broke a promise  
and spoke for the first time after all these years  
in my own voice,

Before it was too late to turn my face again.”

## §

David Whyte speaks of breaking a promise to make a promise.

As we promise to live in community, “with all the integrity we can  
together muster...” perhaps this is something we can come to expect.

A making and breaking and re-making of promises  
in the multiple dimensions and spheres of life...

Which together form an interdependent web of existence that  
sometimes goes by the name of God...

Or as Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams once put it,  
“the Love that will not let us go.”

That Love, it seems to me, has a quality of “promise” to it.

A sense of abiding covenant that we can trust...

That promises us the strength and the stamina we need  
to travel toward our own promise keeping...in whatever form it may  
take.

That belief in Life's promise to us is also known by the word "faith"...

And it can carry us forward through times of confusion, loss, anxiety and radical change.

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I'm grateful to Grace McNee for giving me permission to tell you her story today.

She has been a regular participant of our UU outreach project The Bridge, and has other connections with First Unitarian as well.

She was for example a neighbor of our departed friend Bea Ziegert.

Grace has about 1,300 kilometers to go, before finishing her ride in about three weeks time.

A link to her story is found in your Order of Service insert.

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The promise that there are kind people nearby,  
who can provide a safe place to land...when we're tired  
and sore from the journey.

The promise that our abilities are enough...to work alongside others  
in the ongoing work of peace-making, reconciliation and justice.

The promise that our deep hunger has a purpose...  
and that it can lead us, and the world, to a place of  
deep gladness.

This is the promise that may sound too good to be true.  
And yet it is a promise we *know* to be true...

For we find it in the deep peace  
within our heart of hearts...

And we see it in the love  
and in the lives  
of one another.

Amen.

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