

## Covenant at the Heart of it

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Some of you will have participated, as I did when I was younger, in reciting the Apostle's creed. Heck I bet some of you can say it from memory, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary..." It goes on, making clear statements about the nature of Jesus, the manner of his death, his resurrection, the trinity and the path to salvation. I didn't realize it when I sat in the pew of my childhood Presbyterian Church, but what we were doing when we recited that creed, was telling one another who we were. If you were raised in a Muslim community, you'll know the words, "I bear witness that there is no God but God and I bear witness that Muhammad is God's messenger." The Jews among us can recite, the Shema Yisrael, which begins: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." These statements make clear the fundamental and binding beliefs of a religious group. They help the religious tribe identify who is in, and who isn't. They help define membership. Of course there are creedal nuances between Roman Catholic and Lutherans, just as there are between Sunni and Shiite Muslims and between Reform and Hasidic Jews. But it is safe to say that if the Shema Yisrael is being said, the people saying it are Jewish, and they all know it.

So, what is the glue that holds us together? We Unitarian Universalists don't have a statement that defines our collective understanding about the existence, let alone the nature of, a deity. What makes this congregation a people, and what makes the larger community of Unitarian Universalists a people? I once taught a coming of age class in my home congregation, and we asked the students to form personal credo statements. One of the students took great delight in telling us what he *didn't* believe. And, I think, based on my experience and observations that a lot of us, at least a lot of the time, operate in the same way. We're quick to tell you we don't believe in the Trinity, we don't believe in God, we don't believe in one right belief system, we don't believe, we don't believe, we don't believe. And yes, all of those negative statements are, at least to some degree, true. And when I hear them, I often think of that young adolescent, a 13 year-old for whom it was developmentally appropriate, to define himself through negatives. I'm not 13 anymore. And if I'm any judge of age, neither are many of you. So what is the positive, affirming, core of this religious community? And again, what is the glue that holds our beloved community together? How has this congregation and its understanding of itself changed?

In the absence of a creed, a clear statement of belief, we are sometimes a bit adrift, trying to define ourselves. Some of our answers have not helped us with our goal of building strong healthy communities. But I believe that there are things we can do, there are actions we can take, statements we can make that can help us to understand who we are. Remember the words from the reading I shared earlier?

*Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitments, by making promises. The human being, as Martin Buber says, is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature. The human being is the promise-maker, the commitment maker.*

*Uniting in the common bonds of relationship rather than in obedience to a religious dogma is a distinguishing feature of Unitarian Universalism. Most Unitarian Universalists have experienced and know about the level of theological diversity engendered from the absence of creed and dogma—it can be breathtaking. But theological diversity and the absence of dogma and creed are not to be understood as a philosophy of “anything goes.” The gifts and blessings of free inquiry, skepticism, and seeking bring responsibility. Our fourth Principle speaks to this with clarity: “We affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Yet for some, theological free thinking, religious progressivism, and spiritual seeking are translated as acceptance, tolerance, or ignorance of behavior that can undermine, even harm, the religious and spiritual life of others and the well-being of our institutions. While we can take pride in the theological differences that unite us, these differences aren’t always the best foundation for building a strong institution; there must be something more.*

I and others believe that the “something more”, the glue for our communities is covenant. This desire to organize relationally is in our DNA. Rev. Alice Blair Wesley delivered a series of 5 lectures in 2000, exploring how covenant is a long standing part of our tradition. She writes of early New England congregations, where both strands of our tradition first found a home in North America, and how they organized... as free churches. Those early church members had come to North America looking for a place to practice church with freedom, free from government or ecclesiastic authority – they longed for a church in which members were loyal, before all else, to the spirit of love – and in those congregations the covenantal organizational pattern was a clear element of their understanding... it wasn’t creed that held them together and informed their choices, but rather it was their covenant, their explicit understanding that helped them to function. Those spiritual ancestors understood that their covenant, their organization, their ways of being together were an expression of their theology. The overarching theological understanding was that the spirit of love, must and could be at the heart of what they did... And what would that mean for us now, how would we describe

that? Here is my attempt at it: What you may or may not believe about the nature of God, or redemption or any of the other theological questions is secondary to the high level theological aspiration we share – we're trying to be loyal to the spirit of love.

Now, it takes a pretty unusual person to say that they don't want to be loyal to the spirit of love, so this should be easy right? Right! That's why people never leave congregations hurt, that's why there are never any conflicts in our congregations, that's why there are never, never any theological barbs thrown, right? Yep, not so much – it seems that loyalty to the spirit of love isn't quite enough to keep us out of trouble. I'm a big believer in the need to be up front about expectations, and I've come to believe we need to have clear, well communicated expectations in our congregations at least as much as we need them anywhere. The spirit of love is, after all, a broad description, open to interpretation. If we don't spend some time defining what, in our context, in our time, works for us, we are setting people up. What would it mean if we talked about explicit and implicit expectations of the members of this congregation? What would it mean if people weren't left guessing at the norms and expectations that all communities, consciously or unconsciously hold? I believe one goal in congregational life ought to be to help people to understand who we are, what our hopes and expectations are, as soon as possible, so that they can fully and freely engage in the life of the community - without worrying about the misstep that might earn them a raised eyebrows or pursed lips. How would things be different if we had clear expectations of behaviour and the quality of relationships so that people didn't find themselves insulted, or dismissed or mocked, with a 'oh come on, that's just the way we do things here' explanation. By making commitments, or promises to one another about how we want to gather in community together, by making explicit commitments and promises, we agree that we want to spare one another the embarrassment of a misstep, and we agree that we want, truly want, to be loyal to the spirit of love. I don't think we want to be the group that says one thing about diversity and theological richness, and really mean another. We don't want to be the group that says we welcome newcomers and then treat them like aliens.

This work takes a bit of maturity, it takes a loyalty to something greater than our own preferences. I imagine a fair number of you would be happy if you never heard the word God uttered in this room, unless as the joke goes, you heard it when the caretaker fell off the ladder. I imagine others of you feel a bit bereft at the lack of theological language, that you wish there was a way to bring some of the deep and rich theological terms you know into this Unitarian Universalist context. I imagine some of you wish that your services were more reflective and others wish the might be less reflective... But the thing is, I encourage you all to think about this congregation as bigger than you, as more important than you. I would be excited to hear that we had all deliberately begun to talk about this congregation as ours, and that you were doing so

with the clear understanding that this meant that things wouldn't *always* go the way you might personally prefer them to go. I'd be so happy to know that we were all glad, truly glad, that the needs of others were being met, even when our own were, at least some of the time, not. Because when congregations begin to operate in this way, I am reassured that individuals have moved from being consumers of congregational life and instead are claiming their role as co-creators of it, that people are focusing on a loyalty beyond their own preferences and comfort and that they are committed to building a transformative and loving community. I know then that they take seriously the mandate to serve the spirit of love.

And what do we say, weekly when we gather. What is the covenant we recite together?

Love is our doctrine  
The quest for truth is our sacrament  
and service is our prayer  
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 —  
thus do we covenant with each other and with All.

This is a statement of how we want to be together. Here we commit to love, to inquiry, to service and a loyalty to all of creation. This and the individual covenants that your various Journey Groups, committees and other collections are your aspirational statements. They all centre the welfare of the community, rather than the comfort of individuals.

Our congregations are, this congregation is, for the most part, filled with good people. Very good people. But they are, I've learned, sometimes inconveniently, very human... remember the quote early about humans as promise makers. And promise breakers... One of the things we need to learn how to do if we are to join together in congregations is to come back when we've broken promises, when we've failed to meet our commitments. I might aspire to always speak with compassion and honesty when I'm feeling hurt by another, I might promise to do so, but chances are, I will, at least some of the time, not be able to muster the courage and the grace to pull it off. One of the things we need to do is learn how to recommit and how to promise to go forward again, and again and again. The hymn we sang a while ago, Come, come, whoever you are, is based on a poem by the Sufi poet Rumi, it goes like this, Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, (it doesn't matter). Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, come even if you have broken your vows a thousand

times. Come, come yet again, come.” Some versions of the song include a harmony line that speaks to the broken vows, the ones we all, in our humanity, break, sometimes more than we care to admit.... Being human is about making promises and also, even more importantly about how to come back to them, when we fall short. Our work is to have faith, to hope and to love, both others and ourselves, so that we might begin again, and again, and again. In my work with congregations, before I began this role, I heard stories that would break your heart... of people who in their hurt or frustration did or say cruel things. Of people who were a bit careless and who hurt one another. No doubt, no doubt, I've hurt others... and, I know I've been hurt. It would be easy in those moments to grab my coat, my marbles and my pride and leave...but I believe in the covenant, and I know that the covenant is about aspirations, and about the hope we'll do better next time. Making, breaking and remaking promises... that's what we, when we do it well, do in our congregations.

I've come to understand in the 30 + years I've been a UU, that being here is about being much more than some kind of a theological free agent. It isn't about what we believe, it is about how we are, in these communities we are crafting. What a journey this congregation has been on. It has been a complicated few years, and despite the hard work by staff and volunteers there are still unknowns, things are still in process. I know it can be challenging. I wish I had a magic wand I could wave that would make all of our congregational dreams come true. I do not. But I can, perhaps, help us to make our own magic. I urge us to strive to remain true to the spirit of love our early Unitarian ancestors longed for. I urge us to stay in right relationship with one another and with our larger movement. I urge us to do the deep work of asking, and asking again, how do we want to be together? When we do this, we tend the fire of the chalice and work to bring more love, more justice and more understanding to the world. When we, and other congregations do this work, when we ask these questions, when we struggle to bring aspiration and reality closer together we are doing the important work of covenant building, they are being human, making promises. When we do this we fashion congregations that reflect our values, our theology, to the world.

I wish this business of being human were a bit easier. I wish being in community wasn't quite the challenge it so often proves to be... but then again, I'm not so sure. Yes this business of growing healthy Unitarian Universalist congregations is hard and at times, complicated work, but really – what a gift. Here we ask one another to share of ourselves, to be open and to dare to try to grow, in love and compassion. Here we ask one another to live into our promises. And here we commit to supporting one another as companions and witnesses on that journey... Here we give one another permission to promise, to try, to fail, and to try again.

Come, come whoever you are, wanderer worshipper lover of leaving.  
Come, broken vows and all, come, yet again come.

