

Living Our Covenant

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Delivered November 2, 2014 at

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

The piece we just sang, Schubert's "To Music," is more than just a song, it's a hymn, a prayer of gratitude to music. "Thou Holy Art, how oft in hours of sadness, when life's encircling storms about me whirled, hast thou renewed warm love in me and gladness, hast thou conveyed me to a better world. Oft hath a sigh that from thy harp strings sounded, about me breathing sacred harmony, revealed a joy, a heavenly bliss unbounded; thou holy Art, for this my thanks to thee, Thou holy Art, for this my thanks to thee."

This is an interesting, what some would call a secular, expression of sentiments usually reserved for a religious context. In fact, Schubert honors the broadest sense of humanism not by diminishing the sense of the holy, but by lifting a dimension of human experience up to the level of divinity. "Thou holy Art, for this my thanks to thee."

A masterful musician himself, as both composer and performer, Schubert's heart was open to the blessed gifts which music offered him. Its transcendent voice brought peace, calm, joy, and even a better world. It is truly a wonderful thing to have something like this as part of one's life, to be able to turn from the midst of turmoil and sadness, to soothe and calm the most challenging and painful feelings of one's heart.

Does music do this for you? When you are overwhelmed with sadness, anger, disappointment or shame does music have the power to calm your raging waters? If not music, what does work for you?

I know that music has played an important role in my life. It started earlier than I can remember, maybe with my mother singing "Rock-a-bye Baby" at bedtime. In any case, I was sufficiently immersed in music's tender gifts that when my parents' marriage turned toxic and radiated its conflict throughout the family home, music was there.

You'd think that maybe having seven children might minimize the damage parental conflict could inflict on any one child, but that wasn't the case in my home; every one of us suffered. As a teenager, I didn't understand much of what was going on, but I felt it deeply, it radiated throughout the family, the atmosphere crackling with hostility and anger.

I remember one night when my parents went out to dinner and I stayed up to watch a movie on TV. I heard the car pull in and their argument spilling out into the garage. I expected them to come in but they stayed out there. Suddenly there was silence . . . followed by the sound of milk bottles shattering. This was back in the day when dairies still did home delivery. Our big family drank a lot of milk. I heard one bottle shatter on the concrete floor and then another and then another . . . I counted eleven one-quart glass milk bottles. Then silence again. My parents came in silently, their faces contorted in anger. They passed by without a word.

There was no solace in that home. I'd moved to a new school and didn't have any friends. I was painfully alone in the midst of a crowd. But I did have my music. I would go into the basement and play for hours and hours. I'd play the clarinet until I hyperventilated. I'd play my guitar and sing and sing and sing. Music brought me a peace that wasn't available anywhere else in my life. I believe that music saved me.

And I found an emotionally supportive community in high school band and choir. The relationships weren't really personal ones, and that's probably a good thing. We came together for a musical purpose beyond ourselves, lending our instruments and voices to create a beauty that transcended all of our personal issues and lifted us up into a blissful unity of harmony in the moment. I was incredibly lucky to have had such excellent choir and band leaders during those years. This experience of a truly transcendent nurturing musical community gave me the background from which I've worked toward the creation of Beloved Community in my life and in my ministerial calling.

Somewhere in the midst of all this turmoil, my mother had an experience that both startled and transformed her – she had a vision of Jesus. She hadn't been seeking any kind of religious solution to her troubles; it just came to her. But she felt that Jesus had come to save her, personally, in her life, at that time. And the

experience was so deep that she really did change. She began to live from a center of peace, calm, and joy. It gave her the strength to live from her center in the midst of a conflicted marriage. And it gave her the strength and courage to face and overcome her alcoholism.

What Schubert got from music, my mother got from Jesus. She didn't become judgmental or preachy; she became devout.

Which brings me to what I believe to be the true purpose of religion. It's not about God or gods or good and evil. It's about whatever it takes to find respite in the midst of the storms of the human predicament, whatever it takes. It's religion's job to provide the kind of deep peace, calm, and joy that can seem so far beyond our grasp so much of the time. So far beyond our grasp that, in fact, many think that it's delusional to believe that such a thing could even exist.

The progressive Christian writer, Brian McLaren, wrote a book entitled *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*. He points out that Jesus' message of peace, love, and forgiveness was so profoundly countercultural that it was almost immediately distorted into a hierarchical structure of sin, guilt and dominance that played on people's fears and anxieties rather than ameliorating them.

Religion's true role is to help us understand and deal with our strong emotions, to find a way to be in the world, a way of being that respects our feelings but is not dominated or controlled by them. Remember, our strong emotions are the evolutionary legacy of what we sometimes call the lizard brain. You know, the four F's: fight, flight, food, and . . . reproduction. But humanity has evolved into a different kind of species, one that can transcend the dominance of these feelings, however strong. But they are, indeed, very, very strong. So strong, in fact, that they can influence our thinking – subtly or not so subtly – and come to dominate our understanding of the world.

Take Maslow's famous needs hierarchy, for example. In a 1943 paper, he described a ranking of human needs that has been widely accepted as fact. It is founded on the assumption that hunger, thirst, physical comfort and survival are the most basic of human needs. This echoes the four F's of the lizard brain. But more

recent research has revealed that, for humans, there is something even more important than survival – it is attachment, affiliation: connection. THE most fundamental human need is the need for relationship. And when we overlook this our worldviews become adventures in missing the point.

We may strain at processing claims like, “God is love,” but when we realize that love is the basis of human connection and that connection is the most important thing, it begins to take on new significance: because if God is the name we use for that which is most important, and we come to understand that connection is the most important thing, then God *is* love, just like Jesus said! It just took more than two thousand years for science to catch up with him.

Developmental neuroscience has established that we rarely experience new emotions as adults. Can you remember how intensely you felt everything as a child? We felt everything completely, without buffers or defenses. We’d be completely given over to anger, resentment, fear, or shame; but also to excitement, happiness and joy.

During our first five years of life, we create the neural pathways that become our lifelong emotional experience. Whenever we experience a strong emotion, those early neural pathways are being activated. Then, subsequently, they can be activated by a number of influences, many of which are social, derived from our most fundamental need for attachment and connection.

And when those childhood neural pathways are activated we are flooded with strong feelings that we tend to believe were caused by people other than ourselves. The formulas for this are well known: “He made me mad.” “She hurt me.” and so on. Part of the journey of emotional maturity is realizing that, while others may activate our internal triggers for emotion, all our emotions come from within ourselves; we are replaying those strong, often very difficult, emotions we felt as small children.

And this brings us back to the true purpose of religion. Ideally, it would give us the tools to understand and deal with the emotional responses we experience as children. It would give us the tools to calm ourselves like Schubert did with his music, or my mother did with Jesus. Of course, in practice, more often than not, we

get messages about dominance and misbehavior instead, telling us to suppress or invalidate our emotional experience.

But there are real tools embedded in religious practices. Believing that one is loved and saved by an all-powerful being can provide a basis for feeling calm and safe enough to be able to put one's emotions into a larger perspective and to act with more generosity and kindness than might otherwise have been the case. Thoughts of heaven can help us ease the existential dread that comes with our knowledge of death. Even confession can help free us from feelings of shame, guilt or anxiety that otherwise might have clouded our thoughts, motivations or judgments.

These elements are present in all religions, in one way or another, tools to help us transcend the limbic tyranny of the lizard brain. Of course, sometimes they work too well, and some religious zealots come to the conclusion that the four F's are evil and must be suppressed. But the goal of emotional maturity is not to eliminate these feelings but to understand them so we can use them without disrupting the precious bonds that connect us to one another.

As enlightened Unitarian Universalists, most of us are skilled at identifying the dysfunctions of traditional religions – and there are plenty. Many of us disagree with the truth claims that underlie their systems of doctrine and belief. All well and good, but once we've done that, we've also discarded a treasure trove of valuable tools that might have helped us cultivate emotional maturity. What's left? Many might claim that we can rely on our reason, our intellect to do the job. But what do we have that can stand between the domination of the intellect by the lizard brain's primitive emotional agenda? When you feel anxiety, when you feel anger, when you feel strong emotions, you tend to think of a different world. You see the world differently.

We're often left with a community of strong and brainy egos, driven by certainty, anger, hurt feelings and resentment. Where's the love in that?

We as a community have acknowledged the shortcomings of mere intellect recently in adopting our congregational covenant, a set of agreements designed to help us stay civil and kind with one another, to help us to build a community that is

strong and connected enough to resist the temptations to engage in contentious conflict. Here it is:

In holding our relationships sacred, we the people of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley make promises about how we treat each other as we pursue our religious journey together. In this spirit, we affirm and covenant that –

We welcome and accept all who enter.

- ◆ Greet all warmly
- ◆ Treat our differences as opportunities for greater understanding

We communicate with kindness and respect.

- ◆ Assume all have good intentions
- ◆ Listen with an open mind
- ◆ Honor boundaries
- ◆ Disagree without criticism or judgment

We participate in our church community with generosity and good humor.

- ◆ Freely share our time, talent, treasure and energy
- ◆ Welcome others to join in our activities while honoring their right to decline
- ◆ Honor all levels of service to the church

We work together to resolve conflicts.

- ◆ Give people the benefit of the doubt
- ◆ Stay engaged even in the midst of difficult issues
- ◆ Assume responsibility for our own feelings and actions
- ◆ Be slow to anger and quick to forgive
- ◆ Gently call each other to account for hurtful behavior

We support each other in times of happiness and sorrow.

- ◆ Recognize talents and nurture spiritual and personal growth
- ◆ Be open to accept help and give help when needed
- ◆ Practice gratitude and appreciation
- ◆ Celebrate the joy of being together

Acknowledging that this covenant represents lofty goals toward which we strive, we empower one another to remind us when our actions fall short of our ideals.

Lofty goals, indeed! How long did it take for your eyes to glaze over, though? It's a long list of good stuff. This covenant contains many wonderful ideas and sentiments for us to embody, but it tends to sound like a long list of new rules to obey without giving us the resources to live up to them. And most of us can remember our childhood response to lists of rules we're supposed to obey: anger and resentment. Some covenant!

If we are really going to embrace and live our covenant, we need to appreciate it in a truly religious context, in the context of an agenda designed to help free us from the tyranny of the lizard brain's control of our thoughts and emotions. And central to our ability to truly accept and abide by our covenant is the need to discover the facts hidden within the depths of religious myths and find a way to make those facts our truths: the fact that other people are not the cause of our difficult feelings; that we need to accept that our emotions are our own and that we are responsible for finding ways to deal with them that don't involve demanding that others behave differently than they do; and we need to stop projecting our inner anxieties, conflicts, and unmet needs onto those around us.

This is tough, challenging work, but we can take heart from the Universalist side of our heritage. They called it "universal salvation," but from our modern perspective it means that, with understanding and practice, everyone – absolutely everyone – has the potential to be free of the compulsions of lizard brain thinking and enter into what has been called "the kingdom of heaven," where love, joy, and contentment abound along with unconflicted wholeness and the peace that is beyond understanding.

Tough work? Sure! But every sage of every age has agreed that it is possible. And there are thousands of tools to help us, tools we discarded along with those out-of-date dogmas and doctrines as we threw the baby out with the bathwater. Others have been developed more recently. And I'm here as a resource to help you find the

ones that can work for you. We already have two thriving groups in our church that are practicing these very skills: Mindfulness Practice meeting Tuesday evenings and Nonviolent Communication meets on Wednesdays. If you don't feel comfortable with those two – don't worry; there are plenty of others.

It's like the old joke about the violin-carrying student, confused about directions in Manhattan, who asked someone on the sidewalk, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer was, of course, "Practice, practice, practice!"

How do we get to the Beloved Community? Practice, practice, practice! Let's do it!

May it be so.