Covenant

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Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have found the concept of covenant to be challenging, both in theory and practice. Part of the problem is that it has often been used to describe a specific relationship between God and humans, a concept that most Unitarian Universalists have largely either outgrown or set aside.

We've tended to base our identity in our rejection of creeds, collections of beliefs required for membership in a congregation. Our liberal religious tradition, in its openness to a diversity of belief, has rejected the idea that everyone has to share the same exact beliefs to participate. In fact, we encourage each person's quest to find beliefs that make sense to her or to him.

But, as the Rev. Susan Spalding-Gray, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix, Arizona and candidate for the presidency of the Unitarian Universalist Association, pointed out, "We sometimes wrongly say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are [as Unitarian Universalists]. This is wrong. Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community at all. It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world."

Another way to say this is that, since we don't agree on what we believe, we agree on what we will do instead. Belief is in the area of thinking, while covenant is in the area of doing. When we covenant with one another, we create community by sharing how we will be in community, in a healthy way.

The Rev. Victoria Safford wrote about this in the Summer 2013 issue of the *UU World* magazine. She wrote, "The central question for us is not, 'What do we believe?' but more, 'What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we

accountable?' In a tradition so deeply steeped in individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask, not once and for all, but again and again, even over ninety years of life: How do I decide which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold (in the words of one congregation's bond of union) my 'name, hand, and heart'? The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural."

She says, "Seeing ourselves as bound in covenant is an old practice among us. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the *Arabella* toward a new life in New England:

> *Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.*

"It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other's burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their 'superfluities,' for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of foundering, literally, on New England's rocky shore, but of failing in their errand to establish this commonwealth, their 'city on a hill.' The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to 'keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace' – to make and keep a sacred covenant together."

She explains, "A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping or guarded under glass

in a museum. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas. . . . Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up."

Safford concludes, "Someone said to me not long ago, 'Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things.' When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant. . . We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice."

We have a covenant here in this congregation, the main points of which are printed on the back of our order of service, and most of us are familiar with its general themes: We welcome and accept all who enter; communicate with kindness and respect; participate in our church community with generosity and good humor; work together to resolve conflicts; and support each other in times of happiness and sorrow.

We know that a covenant is aspirational in its hopes for community building, and that affirming our covenant doesn't guarantee that we will always behave in accordance with its guidance. Most of us find it hard to live our covenant. One reason for this is that, while positive and hopeful in intent, it's really too long to remember and often too vague to apply to specific situations as they arise.

I'd like to lift up one aspect of our covenant as central: "We communicate with kindness and respect." Now that's something we can hold onto, and even remember. It harks back to the Sufi attitude toward communication. They advised asking one's self three questions before saying anything: Is it true; Is it necessary; and Is it kind; and only speak if you can answer "yes" to all three.

Retreats with the Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hahn tend to be amazingly peaceful affairs. Not that those attending don't experience various

emotional upsets and challenges, but that there are clear guidelines as to what to do with those upsets and challenges, as well as a supportive community that helps deal with them.

It begins with a mindfulness training that says, "Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small."

How differently would we communicate if we were mindful of these thoughts as we went through the days and weeks of our lives? Well, one thing we know for sure: we'd mess up. As James Luther Adams said, "Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promise. The human being as such … is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature."

We all fall short of our aspirations and ideals. That means that we're human. In fact, the original meaning of the word, "sin," came from archery. It simply meant missing the target. And having a target means missing the target. Unless we hit the bulls eye every time, we sin' we miss what we were aiming at.

Unfortunately, we have been influenced by a tradition that reacts to sin with hostility, judgment, and punishment, making it hard to reframe as having simply missed the mark. Again, as Adams said, "The human being . . . is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature."

One thing that tends to bog us down is that we haven't created other healthier ways of reacting to sin, to promise-breaking. We have very few folkways that guide us onto the paths of promise-renewing when a covenant has been broken. And then many congregations have another, unwritten covenant that's often more powerful than the written one: thou shalt not cause offense. We can feel in the wrong just for telling someone that what they did or said was unkind or hurtful to

us. And they can feel in the right and take offense simply because their feelings are hurt by having had this pointed out.

To this I say: You add just as much suffering to the world by taking offense as giving offense. [repeat] A major element of covenantal behavior must be an agreement by each person not to take offense at the words or actions of another. And, of course, we inevitably sin in this regard as well.

So what can we do? We need ways of reconciliation and healing. Our covenant closes with the statement, "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." It may come as no surprise that a series of interviews conducted last year by the Committee on Ministry found this to be the least practiced part of our covenant.

I don't have a definitive answer as to how to do this, but I'd like to share a practice from Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition, called "Beginning Anew," which can be done with either two people or a group. The very first step is to refrain from speaking in anger. We take time to cool down first.

Paul Baranowski describes the next steps. He says, " 'Beginning Anew' is a skilled way to resolve small conflicts with another person. The way it works is as follows: go and speak with that person privately. We do not talk about that person behind their back. Either before we meet or at the time of the meeting, we let them know we would like to do a Beginning Anew with them. If they are not able to at that time then we try to plan a time together when it is possible. We do not push or try to force someone if they are not ready or willing to speak with us.

"When we meet with the person, we try to maintain our mindfulness at all times, and continue to go back to our breathing to maintain our stability. The person with whom we are meeting should try to do the same. Only one person speaks at a time, we do not speak back and forth. Each person will have their chance to speak. The following are the steps to Beginning Anew:

1. Flower Watering – we express something that we appreciate about the other person, acknowledging the wholesome qualities of the other person. Everyone has strong points that can be seen with awareness. We try to express three different things. The more we do this the easier the other steps become.

2. Expressing Regrets – we express our regrets about anything we might have done that could cause that person to feel hurt.
3. Expressing Hurts and Difficulties – we express what has caused the situation from our point of view. We try to speak using mindful communication methods: explain the facts from our point of view, how it made us feel, what needs were not met, and if necessary, make a request.

"The first two steps are extremely important, and usually the hardest to do. But without them, the third step becomes much harder and there is much less of a chance of reconciliation. After we speak, the other person has the opportunity to reply using the same three steps above."

Whether or not we choose to use the steps outlined in the practice of Beginning Anew, just hearing about it underscores how deficient our culture is in teaching and supporting us in repairing relationships and cultivating trust. And we clearly need some kind of new practice that can lead us out of our patterns of resentment, passive aggression, and negative gossip that can prevent reconciliation and undermine the health of our Beloved Community.

The Kingdom of Heaven, the Pure Land, the Beloved Community, the Peaceable Kingdom, all represent visions of a supportive, nurturing community where everyone feels valued, and even loved. It can only be created by people coming together in a caring, compassionate covenant, committed to learning new ways of being and being together. And, as Claude Anshin Thomas said, "I cannot think myself into a new way of living, I have to live myself into a new way of thinking." He sums it up, beautifully, saying, "Peace is not an idea. Peace is not a political movement, not a theory or a dogma. Peace is a way of life: living mindfully in the present moment. . . . We must simply stop the endless wars that rage within. . . Imagine if everyone stopped the war in themselves – there would be no seeds from which war could grow."

A covenant, therefore, is not merely an aspirational statement about some values we think are nice. A covenant is an action plan for the creation of the Beloved Community. Let's find the way, together.

May it be so.