

How Shall We Be Together? Exploration of Covenant

3/17/2019 Laura Gossman

The last couple Sundays we've been exploring the concept of covenant – Rev. Kee discussed covenant through a theological and historical lens, and last week Jayne Jacobs shared her personal journey and offered how the idea of covenant, like a rainbow, is unique to each person, seen from their own unique perspective. This morning I'd like to share a more hands-on perspective, how I've come to understand the concept of covenant during my 13 years in Unitarian Universalism.

Some UUs feel discomfort using the actual word “covenant” – for me this comes partly from the theological use implying a “deal” with a higher power. But I also have a “creepy, scary” feeling that came from pop culture: Remember Steve Spielberg's movie Raiders of the Lost Ark? The Ark of the Covenant is said in the Bible to hold the two stone tablets upon which Moses wrote down God's 10 commandments – which Christians hold to be a covenant between God and humankind. There are biblical stories of the ark that are magical and scary – armies took it to battles with them to bring them power, or if the wrong person looked at it or touched it they could suffer horrid and immediate death.

In 587 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, and the Ark of the Covenant was lost, and became part of treasure hunters' lore along with the holy grail, Atlantis, and the fountain of youth. In Raiders of the Lost Ark – remember the Nazi's stole the Ark because they thought it would give them massive power to conquer the world, and they opened it up – angels of death flew out and attacked everyone and people burned up and that one guy's face melted off? Pretty crazy scary special effects for 1981, or at least I thought so. Indiana Jones and Marion survived only because they kept their eyes closed. I have to admit that sometimes the word “covenant” could give me the heebie jeebies, bring melting faces to mind.

But I'm grown up now, sort of... and I've grown more comfortable with what the word covenant means in this church – it has helped that we recite our unison covenant each Sunday: what is our spirit? Love. What is our cause? Service. And what three covenants do we make with each other? To dwell together in peace, seek truth in love, and to help one another. Worthy promises, I think. Though I have far to go, I have traveled a fair distance on my spiritual journey, and I've come to see the concept of the UU covenant as a spiritual practice, one that is absolutely essential for our Unitarian Universalist faith to thrive.

When I attended my first UU service 13 or so years ago, I was one of those we sometimes hear say “I've been a UU all my life, I just didn't know it.” Thinking this might be too good to true, and since this was my first adult experience in a church congregation, It took me a year or so to finally sign the Member book. It was a difficult time in my life, taking care of my Mom who suffered from Alzheimer's while I was also working and raising my daughter. I remember The first time I sang hymn #1, May Nothing Evil Cross this Door, I could hardly get through it for the tears. To me, it was what I was craving in a church, and in my own home. I was looking for refuge, sanctuary, love, and most of all peace. Let's sing it together now – remain seated, and as we sing, let's focus on the words, and feel their meaning and power.

Hymn # 1 – May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.

Thank you all for that gift. I gradually attended church more often as the months went by, and even more so after my mother passed away. I helped out with readings when asked. I think my first volunteer work was treat duty, and it was a couple more years until I first lead a service (which is a whole other story). My Daughter Sam participated in RE. And then ... in 2010 I joined the Board (and that's also a whole other story). But I was not just a board member, I became the “Moderator” which was our word back then for what we now call Board President. Talk about a steep learning curve! Let me say... I was shocked and overwhelmed! I had no idea what I was doing, and I discovered that good people coming together to try to be better people and do good things in the

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coolest church I'd ever found can still have disagreements and conflicts... and they can still hurt each other.

We humans are, after all, perfectly imperfect, ... we come to this church from all directions with our passions and our egos, with our kindness and our quirks, with our good and not-so-good communication skills. With our best intentions and our baggage, our hopes and our fear. We bring love. But, you know, we still hurt people we love. Remember the The Mills Brothers song "You Always Hurt the One You Love.." and it's true, even here.

The good news is that people don't fight over things they don't care about! We were and are a caring, community! And even more good news is that we welcome and celebrate diversity – as we proclaim in our annual Flower communion coming up at the end of April, our diversity allows us to learn, it enriches our spiritual lives, and makes our community vibrant and beautiful! But sometimes we can struggle to negotiate our differences when it comes to making decisions. (I heard Dr. Joyce Brothers speak once here in Casper about marriage – she said that science did support that opposites attract, and then you have to figure out how the heck you're going to live with each other for the rest of your lives.)

Some of us were not so successful in that area. I have always struggled with conflict, and my main strategy has been to avoid it. Don't complain, just go along, pretend, smooth things over, back down, ignore, cry, deflect, leave. Even relatively inconsequential disagreements over my life have been enough to trigger in me strong fear, intense anxiety and a flight response. When I became moderator, my UU sanctuary no longer felt as much like the safe, secure place of peace I had maybe naively imagined I had found. To share honestly, I really struggled with whether or not I would stay. At the end of my two year term I left the board, but I remained involved in other ways – working in RE, helping with services, doing the newsletter. Then almost three years ago I rejoined the Board.

Through all this time I've continued to learn about Unitarian Universalism, and from reading and study and attendance at UU meetings around our region, leadership classes, and through Rev. Kee's professional advice and council, I and others here began to learn and understand more about church conflicts and about the importance of covenant.

Do you know, that no one has ever explained to me how to avoid conflict in our church? That's what I really wanted to know! It causes me anxiety! Even when it's other people that are having disagreements it causes me anxiety. The trainers and the experts have had the nerve to tell me that in UU world, conflict is normal and healthy, and expected and necessary – it is a chance for spiritual growth and an opportunity for faith formation, that we should enter into conflict with questions like "What wonderful thing might come from this? Where might this lead us?"

They say that conflict is an opportunity to build community by examining together what we value most and clarifying our purpose: They say that no church can achieve its mission of transforming lives and transforming the world without it! In one recent class, we learned that good leaders move toward conflict – they're curious and excited for growth, and besides that (and this makes sense) they want to resolve problems while they are small – before they grow into battles with winners and losers, and really everyone loses.

So much for my avoidance strategies. I have learned that avoiding conflict to try to achieve a personal sense of peace in my life won't work, and only causes more anxiety,

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disengagement and isolation. I can't eliminate all the things that have the potential for conflict in my life!

Rather, I must look inward to create peace – I must find within myself the understanding to view conflict as a good and normal thing, an opportunity to put my values into action, and I must develop and practice the skills to better manage and resolve it in positive ways.

And this journey has led me to understand the importance of covenant: it is a promise we make to value each other's voices, and it guide us through normal and healthy conflict to greater spiritual growth and deeper more loving relationships.

So A UU Covenant:

- Is not a vow, or a contract, or a fact or a set of rules
- It Is, As one UU said a "living breathing aspiration made new each day."
- Its a spiritual practice
- its inward and outward focused
- Its a tool for self-reflection and spiritual growth
- It is not a weapon to accuse or blame others
- it recognizes that sometimes there are big challenges in all relationships
- It sets a standard of mutual caretaking.

What has UU Casper been doing to support our covenantal relationship? Over the last few years, the Board and committees have adopted written policies to make it more clear how decision making happens, where authority and responsibility lie, and to make sure decisions we make are inclusive, fair and equitable – you can find these all at uucasper.org under the governance tab. And two years ago we created a leadership covenant which the Board and several committees have adopted to help guide us in our work by more specifically stating our promises to each other. At the beginning of each board meeting we recite our mission statement and this covenant:

We covenant with one another, in a spirit of love and compassion, to

- share honestly
- listen actively
- assume good faith
- act with integrity
- ask for and offer help
- seek and offer forgiveness
- encourage joy and celebration
- express gratitude
- speak directly to one another about our concerns and issues, and
- support decisions in a shared voice.

These are our aspirations and intentions, which we pursue in good faith.

This covenant isn't just for the board or committees, this covenant is for all of us. It calls us individually and collectively to value and improve the way we talk with and behave with each other. It puts our values into action.

Besides reciting the covenant each board meeting and practicing it in our discussions, the board has also incorporated a leadership development session into each board meeting: this next meeting we will be discussing how we can better encourage joy and celebration. And the Board will soon be talking about the possibility of adding funds to next year's budget to allow more people to affordably take advantage of the fantastic leadership development programs our district and region provide.

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Personally, I'm currently taking Marilyn Mullen's class at Casper College on Nonviolent Communication (NVC), the basic premise of NVC is that everything we say and do is ultimately for the purpose of filling some need, and we can have better communications by finding those needs we have in common. I've also been attending leadership development classes offered by our UUA Pacific Western Region – and we've learned about managing conflict, and common mistakes we make: like falling into combat mentality, oversimplifying the problem, lashing out or shutting down, making assumptions about others' intentions, and losing sight of our goal. I've learned about the three "inner voices" of judgment, cynicism, and fear that that block our ability to move from anxiety to wonder, and strategies to acknowledge those voices and then let them go. I've learned that my responsibility is not to try to make everybody happy, but rather to help achieve our church mission. I could go on and on – there's a lot to share and I hope to do that. This learning has become an important new step on my spiritual journey.

I've heard covenant described recently as "How we walk together across disagreements, dissent, and difficult discernments cherishing the way we walk as dearly as any outcome." I agree. How we shall be together, how we make our decisions and do what we do, is as important if not more important than what we do. The HOW differentiates and defines Unitarian Universalism.

One element I would add to our leadership covenant: practice patience. You know the saying that when you pray for patience, God answers by giving you opportunities to practice patience? As we plan for the future, design programs and make decisions, we are constantly working to follow our covenant and attain a healthy balance between inclusion and efficiency. We will continue those efforts, and we will make mistakes, and yes sometimes it seems that it takes a long time for change to happen. But those of you who have been around awhile, put yourself back five years ago – and look and the changes this church community has experienced. It's incredible, really. Practicing patience allows us to drop back, see the bigger picture and gain perspective. Five years ago I'm not sure we could have even visualized where we are today. Here's an interesting and important question: Where will we be in five more years?

When I look back over the last 13 years, it's hard for me to imagine what my life would be like had I not found this place. I was searching for love, support, and peace. And I found it, and so much more that I didn't know I needed. I'm grateful for how much I've learned from all of you, and even for the discomfort I've felt as I been challenged to face my ignorance and question my views and understanding of the world and my place in it. The changes you've inspired me to make in the way I live, and how I treat others. Learning that conflict can be an opportunity and providing the framework of covenant to reduce my fear of it. The friends I've made here, the incredible books I've read in Book Club. The many moments of joy, when I've been inspired and filled with love and gratitude for you and this place. I'm so glad I stayed, and thank you for sharing your journeys with me.

Covenant reminds me that I am here not out of obligation or guilt – I am here because I choose to be – I want to be part of this faith, and I want this faith to be a part of our Casper community. There is no other place like this: open minds and open hearts - radically welcoming and diverse, challenging spiritually and intellectually, emphasizing deeds over creeds. A faith that chooses to come together to work toward a shared purpose – to nurture the spirit, grow in community, and help heal the world.

I'm not saying it's easy, I'm saying it's worth it.