

Introduction of perspectives: LDS and UU

To be honest, this was a rather challenging service to prepare in that it kept changing directions on me. I was originally going to keep it very fact-based, focusing on covenant as it develops and changes with religious perspectives and cultural or historical influences. As many other writers may attest, trying to force a poem, a story, or in this case a service, into a box usually results in the outcome sounding stiff and well, forced. To me, the word, “covenant” connotes such a box, and I associate it with religious rules and obedience. However, I have always loved giving presentations because I learn so much in the process and this time was no different. I feel that my understanding of covenant has gone from being demandingly pointed and specific to diverse and unique.

I perceive the concept of covenant from two very different religious perspectives. Growing up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I understand one definition of covenant to be a sacred promise of service to God which includes keeping the 10 Commandments and living according to the teachings of the church and its prophets. So long as God’s children uphold their terms of the covenant and live righteously, they are promised blessings including the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives. The end reward for fulfilling and keeping all covenants is eternal life in God’s Celestial Kingdom and this is what every LDS member strives for.

Covenant is a *huge* part of LDS practice and belief and the thousands of temples around the world are places where church members go to fulfill covenants.

I told my dad about my presentation today and he was surprised that covenant was even part of what we do here. In Unitarian Universalism, covenant is different in that it doesn’t center around a higher power. At each meeting, we recite: “Love is the spirit of this church and service is its cause. This is our great covenant... to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” When we speak these words, we proclaim our commitment to live according to our principles. Many of the aspects of Christianity are here... such as loving and serving one another. The covenant of the UU community has the ultimate goal of cultivating peace and growth in the world today. In this way, our expectation is not so much God’s blessings upon us, but service instead becomes its own reward.

I remember being a small child and my siblings and I would play outside in the sprinklers on hot summer days. Every now and then, one of us would shout, “Hey, look!” and point to a rainbow created by the spray of the sprinkler. When a person views a rainbow, they are seeing it from a totally unique perspective. Scientifically, a direct beam of light enters a water droplet in which it is refracted and reflected, exiting to create the fan of color we know as a rainbow. Since two people can’t stand in the exact same place at the exact same time, the rainbow you are seeing is completely unique to you.

Likewise, a covenant, a religious practice, or indeed a religion in general does not become invalid simply because we don’t perceive it the same way as another. In Unitarian Universalism, we acknowledge the validity of differing beliefs. Just because we can’t see the same rainbow (or any rainbow at all for that matter) doesn’t mean it’s not there.

As a child raised in the LDS church, one of my favorite songs was called “I Like to Look for Rainbows.” The lyrics describe the symbolism of the rainbow in the story of Noah and the flood and how it relates to baptism. In the story, the flood was necessary to cleanse the earth of extreme wickedness. Similarly, baptism is a renewal or cleansing of a person’s soul. In LDS belief, baptism is one of the things required for an individual to attain the highest degree of eternal salvation. Upon baptism, a person enters into a covenant with God, promising to keep His commandments and to live righteously in the service of Christ.

Eight years old is the age at which children raised in the LDS church are baptized. Latter Day Saints do not believe a small child can sin, and eight is considered to be the age of accountability, or the age when they become responsible before God for their actions. Trying to explain the concept of covenant to a typical 8-year old isn’t easy, but before they are baptized, a child in the LDS church needs to understand that a covenant is more than a promise. We make promises every day. “Yes, I promise I won’t forget to put gas in the car” or “I promise to call you back as soon as I can” or “If I eat this pie, I promise to myself I’ll hit the gym tomorrow.” Depending on our degree of commitment, such promises are easily kept or broken.

A covenant is a promise that often involves practice. Practice will mean something different to different people and across different religions. As UU's, practice is in how we dedicate our time, talents, and resources to humanitarian efforts as well as our personal efforts. For LDS members, practice includes participation in church, temple ordinances, as well as things like personal prayer and scripture study.

Importance of meaning

Many religions emphasize the importance of obedience as the key to keeping covenants, but basic obedience can only go so far. Sure, it has to start somewhere. A friend pointed out to me that spirituality begins by trusting a belief which comes from someone or something outside ourselves. When we are first introduced to life, we are students, learning and practicing as we are instructed. In the bible, Paul described the Law of Moses as being something of a school master, there to direct and guide a student. At some point, the student must graduate to new levels, deciding and discovering for themselves. Spirituality evolves similarly. Covenants are there as guides and rules at first, and we follow them because we are told it's the right thing to do. Of course, rules and structure don't work for everyone, just as organized religion doesn't work for everyone. However, I do believe that for everyone, for every student of life, there comes a point when we begin to live according to our beliefs not from a place of obedience, but from a place deep within our hearts.

I recently started once again attending LDS meetings. Yes, this means I often go to both churches on Sundays, which many people may think absurd. Things change when you start going to church because you *want* to and not because it's the "right thing to do." When I attend the young single adults ward of the LDS church, I often get the feeling that many of my peers are there out of obedience. I'll look around during the meetings and several of them are preoccupied on their phones not really paying much attention. I do hope that they are there to feel inspired and not just out of habit or because they're supposed to come, but even if not, perhaps their attendance serves them in other ways. I do feel that most people coming to UU meetings are here because they want to be. I don't have the testimony of the truth of the LDS church that I did when I was younger, but I have come to the decision that's okay and I can still attend without

having to believe everything there. I'm still developing spiritually, and I attend both churches because they both have something to contribute to my spiritual growth.

I'm bringing this up to introduce the importance of practicing religion not merely because it is what everybody else is doing or because it is the obedient thing to do, but because it really means something to you.

This brings me to my favorite definition of religion which is that "religion is the expression of spirituality." If this is so, then practices and ceremonies are how a person builds a stronger relationship with their spirituality. It is how a person connects with the internal and external energy that contributes to their belief in...whatever they believe in. Those beliefs then have the power to shape their identity, including their perception of themselves and the world around them.

Covenant, belief, and identity

Thus, we see that covenant is powerfully connected to belief, and beliefs shape our identity. A covenant becomes a promise that is so strongly tied to identity that, if broken, the result is inner turmoil or discontent. But what if another aspect of identity is in conflict with a religious covenant? I know that many people here come from various religious backgrounds and for some of you, there was an aspect of a former religion that you disagreed with. Maybe it was simply something you didn't believe, or perhaps it went so far as to go against your identity. When this happens, a person can choose whether to pursue a stronger testimony of that faith or step away and go a different direction entirely.

When I left the LDS church at the age of 20, it was because for several years, I had struggled with the concept of marriage. I was (and still am) completely disinterested in dating and the idea of marriage and children is, frankly, out of line with my identity. Marriage, as I understood it, is essential to God's plan and an eternal family is the very basis of the LDS church. I felt so much shame not knowing what was wrong with me and when I did try to express it, my family reassured me that the feelings would come. They never have. At that point in my life, I hadn't ever heard of the term "asexual," so I was convinced that my lack of romantic desire was a

personal flaw. For a long time, I tried to stay true to what I had been raised with, but the internal conflict became too much to bear, so I left.

After I stopped pretending to see the same rainbow as my peers in the LDS church, my spirituality changed direction for the better. I began to look for my own rainbows. I am so very grateful to have discovered this community where I feel I have been able to expand my mind and my heart and have had the freedom to discover and develop my own spirituality. The acceptance and openness I've found here has helped me let go of shame and replace it with acceptance for myself and where I'm at. All the while maintaining openness for new possibilities for spiritual development.

One form of practice in the LDS church is the sacrament ordinance. Taking of the bread and water of the sacrament is symbolic of taking on the name of Christ and thus renewing the covenant promise to keep his commandments. When I attend LDS meetings, I don't take the sacrament because it is not a part of what I believe at this point in my life. At first, this was difficult for me...arousing feelings of discomfort and un-belonging, particularly since there was a point in my life when Latter Day Saint was a huge part of my identity. I've had to remember that, even if I were to take part in this covenantal ceremony, it would not mean much because I've broken off the beliefs that used to be associated with it. I could pretend for the sake of not standing out from other members of the congregation, but this would be equivalent to telling myself that being accepted by others is more important than expressing acceptance for myself and for the place where I'm at.

I see spirituality as a path, and everyone has their own path. Many religions may take obedience so far as to try to force all their members onto a specific path. Just like the school, there comes a point where a person must begin walking their own path, not someone else's. Sometimes, it goes step-by-step alongside the path of an organized religion; other times, it weaves about incorporating a variety of beliefs and practices.

Yesterday, I shared this presentation with my dad to get his take on it. One of the original reasons I started attending LDS church again is because, with him as the bishop of the young

single adult ward, I know he understands and accepts where I'm at in my life. More than that, I know he values my perspectives in helping other young members who may be struggling. Since I started going, however, I've noticed some changes and I've come to recognize that religion can evolve just as a person's spirituality can evolve. Recently, some changes were made in the LDS church in the interest of encouraging its members to strengthen their spirituality away from church. I'm sure the leaders recognize that keeping covenants is something that can easily be done out of simple obedience, but it is more powerful when it comes from the heart.

Spirituality it is often tied to our heritage. I imagine most Casper residents are familiar with the historical site, Martin's Cove, as well as the harsh story of suffering that accompanies it. In its early days, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints traveled on foot across the country...pioneers in search of Zion, or a place to build a community around their worship. It was a journey wrought with suffering and death. One of my ancestors, Johanna Christina Mallamburg, immigrated with her family from Norway as a Mormon pioneer. One of the first phrases she learned to speak was, "I'm hungry." Why go to all this suffering in the name of religion?

My dad shared a song with me called "Fire of the Covenant." Some of the lyrics read, "Their hope was brighter than the fire of cruel and angry men; their love was deeper than the snow and stronger than the wind. The fire of the covenant they made burned in their hearts like a flame. Unwavering, unquenchable, undimmed by the night. The fire of the covenant burned bright." The legacy of a covenant to build Zion is part of my own heritage. Even if I don't believe everything that they believed, it is undeniable that these pioneers were willing to face unspeakable hardships because their belief in the importance of covenant was so strong. I hope that, as I travel my path of spirituality, I can have such courage and awareness to live according to my beliefs and principles, just as my ancestral pioneers had the courage and faith to face extreme hardship in the name of their covenants.

Spiritual Journey and Perspective

I see spirituality as a path. Remember that spirituality is something personal, so everyone has their own path. It does no good to try to force yourself onto another person's path and when you

do this, you will experience discontent. I have often felt that, in most organized religions, members are told to walk a very narrow and specific path. There's nothing wrong with this if you truly have a testimony of the doctrine and principles of that church's gospel. But if you're following the path out of mere obedience, you're not getting as much out of it as you could. We all have our own spiritual path, our own life path. For some people, that path may run parallel to an organized religion, step for step.

I need to acknowledge, that for myself, my spirituality was only able to grow when I stopped making perfection and obedience my priority. Now, I'm not saying I was right. My journey was difficult and tumultuous and I wouldn't wish what I went through on anyone. The overarching outcome, thankfully, was perspective. I don't regret my scars and my mistakes because those experiences have given me the wisdom and insight to be who and where I am today. I still struggle and I'm still learning. I'm far from the path of the gospel and I'm still not even sure I want to follow it again. I feel that my spirituality is strong, even though my path isn't perfectly parallel to the church I was raised in.

I need to be genuine in my relationship with myself and my spirituality. Musician is a huge part of my identity and, as I've found, is very much tied to my spirituality. I remember learning piano and I was one of those rare students who practiced because I loved the sounds and the music I was making. I remember learning the hymns. One of the first LDS hymns I learned to play was "Come Follow Me." I insisted on playing all six verses because each one said something different and I wanted to match my style of playing—things like phrasing and dynamics—with what the lyrics said. I was unknowingly venturing into a world of musical expression from the soul that many musicians strive to discover. I'd like to make an analogy to playing an instrument. If you'd like, you can substitute something that is important to you...and art or a sport perhaps...something you have a positive relationship with.

When I sit down to play the piano, there is a distinctive difference between practicing to "get it right" and practicing for the joy of making music. A very wise piano teacher told me that I must always be approaching the music from a place of expression from deep within my heart and only switch gears to analytical-technical mind if I need to polish a technique that will enhance the

music itself. Thus, my practice should be balanced in this way. The end goal? To know my piece well enough for the technique to be merely what drives it and the music to come straight from my heart. When I listen to another musician play, I can always tell if they are playing notes with their fingers or if they are playing music with their heart.

Now, this is not something that comes without practice. When you learn an instrument, you need to place your trust in the teacher who will guide you through the process, teaching you the right techniques to develop your musicality. You need to be obedient and go home and practice your instrument, mindfully listening to yourself, tuning into the intricacies of the sound you produce. Likewise, when we first step onto the path of spirituality, we put our faith in the words and testimonies of others. We go home and practice, study, and tune in to the feelings of the soul.

When I sit down at the piano to play a piece I've studied, I don't think notes. I'm not thinking "that note is a D#" or "that's a Cmaj7 chord." I'm not thinking notes. I'm thinking music. Likewise, spirituality can develop to a point where practice of what we believe becomes more innate—more a part of us. We become one with our spirituality just as I become one with my instrument. We can't just go through the motions. If I sit down at the piano and mindlessly play scales up and down the keys...if I just sit and play notes with my fingers...if my heart isn't in it...it's not making me a better musician. If you find yourself just going through the motions in this way, just reading your scriptures while your mind wanders or coming to church and then using the sit-down time to distract yourself on your phone, your spirituality is stagnant.

Spiritual growth is not something that happens passively. It comes from looking deep inside yourself and asking yourself what you truly seek and then practicing what you truly believe. Religion is there as a guide...it is the sheet music you follow...the written notes. The quality of the music you produce from it is up to you.