

Walking Together: Going Deeper

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For the UU Fellowship of Silver City

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Today we go deeper into covenant. This is the third and last part in the series. As I said at the beginning, this is an exploration. We are not deciding anything today, but we will look deeper.

With the election results this exploration might be even more important. Racism, sexism, anti-immigrant and anti LGBTQ sentiments are on the rise. America is changing in ways we might not have imagined last time I was here a month ago. It is up to the members and leaders of this fellowship to decide how you will move forward. Or not.

Being in covenant means walking together, perhaps with agreements and disagreements, but with heartfelt promises, integrity, and character. A covenant may be a written agreement, but more importantly it is our relationship to each other, in community. It is long term. It is action, how we are together.

Being in covenant, in Fellowship, might be in response to what we are given as human beings: our wonderful earth, our bodies, the beautiful variety of humankind, and life itself.

We are also given our own Unitarian Universalist tradition. We did not create it.

It has come to us from centuries of love and struggle. A gift from the people who were committed to keeping the flame alive. It is up to us to carry it on.

To build a diverse community, it means not letting words, usually religious words that feel loaded to you, trigger your hurt or anger. Your anger can block good communication. It means you taking responsibility to translate those triggers into equivalent words that enable you to stay engaged in the conversation, and not become disrupted, or disruptive.

Covenant means holding good faith and trust. It is speaking for “WE”, not only “I.” It means speaking up in love and compassion directly to one who forgets themselves, or loses their way. And it means staying engaged constructively until a conflict is really resolved. It means maintaining a safe community.

Covenant means really valuing the well-being of the whole community, as a balance to the radical individualism inherent in Unitarian Universalism. We need to practice intentional inclusiveness. All of us need a fellowship that is strong, safe and kind.

So these are some of the ideas about covenant we have explored. Only you together as a Fellowship can decide who you will be.

You have created a lovely home here where you meet each week. It took years to find the right building. You were determined and passionate! Together you raised a significant amount of money. Slowly you have shaped this metal building into a warm, welcoming meetinghouse, complete with a sophisticated sound and media system. This is a hard-won major accomplishment. You did it together.

Being in covenant means coming together and agreeing how you will be together. And then living that agreement and holding every member, in love, accountable to that promise.

You have an active core of members; you reach out for social justice.

Yet there is a persistent yearning to go deeper, to be spiritually more alive.

To feel a vital unity together.

I'd like to share these words of the poet...

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—

a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength
that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

~from *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* by Starhawk

Covenants speak to something greater than ourselves. They hold us. It might be hope, love, a greater good, or for some it might be God. We could be bound by gratitude for our amazing planet, for friends and family and for our very lives, and for love.

Intentional or spontaneous covenants support a mission-centered community of strength and resilience. Your mission matters, and your entire Fellowship truly and passionately embracing your mission matters, a lot.

Missions are not goals. Missions are something we aspire to but may not reach in our lifetime. Missions stretch us, show us what we value and what we can do together that we could never do alone.

Out of a life-enriching mission you together can create a covenant. You need to hear from each other what you and the whole Fellowship need from each other to move toward your mission, to do the work that needs to be done.

Your mission was written over twenty years ago. Recently few people knew what it was. Are you the same group? Is this the same time as the 90's? And your covenant was written about the same time, it was never engaged in the Fellowship's hard times. Today no one knew it even existed. Both of these were valiant efforts. But the nature of our times calls for missions and covenants to be reviewed and changes every few years.

So what do you need from each other now to be in Fellowship? Respect? Compassion? Safety? Forgiveness? Being heard? Commitment? Forgiveness? Acceptance? Humor? Forgiveness? Love.

Let's take a look at three missions that might inspire passion, just as examples.

The first mission PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, has brought suffering to thousands of war veterans. Battlefield combat pain seems to reverberate long after some soldiers return to home to civilian life. Treatment can last months. Relief can be elusive.

Veteran and author Sebastian Junger offers another perspective. He questions the root cause of PTSD. Undoubtedly violence and brutality in war are traumatic. But the most damaging part of the experience, as he sees it, is going from the extremely tight bond of the Army unit in a war zone to the isolated often lonely American life. As hard as war is, many soldiers look back on living with their Army unit as

one of the most meaningful times of their lives. It is coming home to the fractured, radical individualism of everyday American life that does not support healing. There are subcultures in our country where their culture actually helps soldiers heal.

One group that has a significantly lower incidence of PTSD is American Indians. The warrior role recognizes the importance of recovering from the violence and returning home. The combination of strong close cultural communities, long-held rituals (especially healing rituals), recognition and honor for warrior service and the expectation to help heal others upon return. These practices prove to help many soldiers adjust to being home.

I am not proposing adopting Indian rituals, but a deeply committed UU fellowship could be a truly healing community for soldiers and others who have been traumatized. Your labyrinth, this calming room, and the people with many skills in the Fellowship and community have much promise. Raising money is something you have done. You also have access to regional and national resources of our Unitarian Universalist Association that has helped many congregations develop meaningful programs.

As Starhawk wrote,

“Voices will celebrate us whenever we come into our own power. . . . Arms to hold us when we falter, a circle of healing, a circle of friends.”

A second mission might be to be a refuge and defender in hard times. Unitarian Universalism has endured centuries of surviving religious persecution and suffering. In 17th century England Unitarianism began as a threat to the Church of England and Unitarians were imprisoned and killed. A hundred years earlier, a Unitarian King, John Sigismund ruled for less than a decade before he died in a carriage accident. For the last 450 years, Unitarians have had their churches seized, been jailed and executed. They suffered under Catholic persecution, Turks, Nazis and the worst of Communist dictators. The Unitarians were at the whim of

the ever-changing political turmoil of Eastern Europe in the last four centuries. Yet Unitarianism survived.

In Transylvania, just over fifty years ago the communists seized all church buildings. Unitarians were not even allowed to go in to fix leaking roofs or crumbling walls. (Can you imagine watching this Fellowship building fall apart and you're being prohibited from just taking care of it?) On Sundays, in defiance, they piled up on horse-driven wagons with picnics and went up into the woods to hold worship services. Even worshipping was illegal, but they found ways to stay together as a congregation. Since the fall of communism, they mostly have their buildings back. But they are still treated as a religious, language and ethnic minority in their native homeland. But they persist and somehow have hope.

The Unitarian Church in Transylvania has a coat of arms that tells their story.

At the top is a crown, recognizing the short reign of King John Sigismond. Beneath the crown is a white dove, encircled by a snake. The words are "Be wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove." These are telling words for people who have endured centuries of hardship.

The Unitarians in England and Transylvania have survived stages of persecution and tolerance. In America, in contrast, we have had two centuries of religious freedom. Although it is hard to imagine, our Unitarian sisters and brothers in England and Transylvania know how fragile religious freedom can be. With the rise of the far right in America and the call for a Christian America, UU places of religious refuge and vigilance are needed. Today, Unitarianism is seen by some religious Christian fundamentalists as heresy. In the past, when our government has made much milder shifts to the right, open-minded people flocked to UU congregations to find people of similar values. We might see more visitors soon. We might be under threat in a way unknown in American history.

Will you be prepared to defend and protect religious freedom if the threat arises in these troubling times? Might your mission include this important work?

The third mission area you could consider is offering Unitarian Universalism to the whole Silver City community- families, teens, singles, babies, parents, young adults, and grandparents, now and in the future. I was here a few weeks ago when you reached out to a young family with twin girls who were recently connected to the Fellowship. You had sent love and support and cash when they were in the hospital in Albuquerque. I watched your eyes light up as they walked in here with their covered baby carriers. When their parents lifted them out to bring them forward for the naming ceremony, your faces were beaming. As Azima spoke the words, there was a shift in the entire Fellowship toward the young family as we all leaned into the beautiful moment. Warmth and love filled this room.

Do you want to have a practice of “Intentional Inclusion” so that folks of any age or ethnic group are directly included in the life of the Fellowship? Or will visitors look around and say, there is no one here like me?

You could, over time and with great commitment, reach out to many families seeking a liberal faith community. You could offer Our Whole Lives programs, a highly regarded UU curriculum to help young teens learn about healthy decision-making and sexuality. You might celebrate when children learn to read. You might have a Coming of Age ceremony for teens as they enter adulthood. These and more are not only exciting for youth and their families, but also for the whole congregation. Like the baby naming, rites of passage remind folks of all ages why we are here as a spiritual community, just as weddings and memorial services do.

Somewhere a circle of hands
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength
that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Here are three Unitarian Universalist mission ideas: healing and compassion, a refuge and protector for religious freedom, and a Fellowship serving the whole multigenerational Silver City community. I offer them to you only to provoke your thinking together about who you want to be. Do you want to make sure that Unitarian Universalism will be alive here in 20 years? Does your current mission speak to who you want to be now, and going into the future? Hopefully, you will think about some of these possibilities. Some of them are already part of who you are.

Together you may choose the path of least resistance, avoid change. It is easy to do. Or you may move together, and go deeper into your faith and passion, into a meaningful and challenging future.

Sacrifice and generosity

Unfortunately, the lack of explicit acknowledgment of sinfulness, sacrifice, and surrender in the current Principles has added to a UU culture that is similar to the way T.S. Eliot once described his Unitarian relatives. [To be a Unitarian] was to be noble, upright, and superior to all other human beings . . . Unitarians believed that they were already enlightened, the enlightenment for them was an intellectual achievement. . . . Unitarians were put on earth to better the lot of humanity, to be a good and inspiring example. . . . Unitarians were expected to be dutiful, benevolent, cheerful, self-restrained and unemotional. . . . They attended church to set a good example to others. (Interdependence, Sec. 5) In an attempt to rectify the strict Calvinist's overemphasis on original sin, UUs have come to downplay the concept of human sinfulness to a fault. The reality is that UU churches are filled with people who in the course of their lives, or in the past week, have missed the mark, hurt others or themselves, made mistakes, feel ashamed and guilty, and are in other ways in need of succor as well as in need of modes and tools of redemption. UU worship and theology need to be able to meet this deep human reality of sinfulness and need to stop covering it over with a happy face.

Here is something I read that seems to capture the importance of covenanting. It also ties into what we said Sunday about how the 1st Principle seems to be all about individuals, etc & seems to give less emphasis to cong.

In his article “How the Principles and Purposes are Leading Us Astray” (reprinted in the book *Reverend X- How Generation X Ministers Are Shaping Unitarian Universalism*), UU minister Rev. Marlin Lavanhar argues that a widespread misunderstanding of the roles and purposes of the Principles has resulted in their misuse in ways that are negatively impacting UU identity and theology. According to Lavanhar, congregations often adopt the Principles as “an easy substitute for doing the formative work of developing a covenant or theological identity or mission that is specific to them.” While the Principles are an affirmation of “the least that UUs hold in common,” Lavanhar suggests what is lacking: “Missing ingredients include a sense of sacrifice and human sinfulness and human vulnerability, an articulation of the human need to surrender to something larger than oneself, and a commitment to spiritual practice.” Lavanhar calls for the creation of a “clear and binding covenant as a movement, and especially within individual congregations, that inspires true sacrifice and surrender and that includes powerful ways for people to enter the covenant.”

p.s. I don't get his phrase "human sinfulness" but then, the word "sin" is a trigger word for me :-)

The other article I read at www.uua.org is called "Covenanting: A Process for your Spiritual Mission Statement" which gives very concrete ideas about moving a congregation toward covenanting and what to look for in a covenant.