

Emily Richards
A Community of Covenant

A Covenant is a set of sacred promises that Unitarian Universalists make with each other to guide and support their communities.

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca adopts this covenant to sustain our commitment to each other, affirm our connections when we struggle, and form the foundation of our respectful relationships with each other and the world.

We covenant to:

Be together in community, guided by love and respect.

Be open, friendly, and welcoming to all.

Be engaged in congregational life.

Communicate compassionately, directly, and honestly.

Listen deeply and kindly to each other.

Believe in others' best intentions.

Support and inspire each other's quest for truth and meaning

Acknowledge, respect, and value our differences.

Work to serve our community's shared goals.

I pulled these words from our website. They're posted under "our beliefs" if you ever want to refer back to them. I find this page is the one I come back to over and over again.

I come back to it because I find myself asking the questions, who am I as a Unitarian Universalist? Who are we that claim this identity and faith?

As we ponder these questions together I think it's important to begin with who we are as human beings.

We are, each one of us, made up of three equal parts of a whole. We are physical beings. We inhabit these bodies, and as much as we might sometimes bemoan the aches and pains that come with them, without them we do not exist as human beings. While we may sometimes want to divorce ourselves from this physical form with its limitations and imperfections, we also cling to it and what it means to be alive.

We are also intellectual beings. We have the ability to think rationally, we are capable of logical thought and we have the ability to reason toward sound conclusions based on facts and evidence. And here in this town filled with college professors, intellectuals, scientists, academics and those who are experts in their fields, this is where we want to stay. This part of ourselves. The rational part of our beings that we like to believe is wholly separate from our other parts.

A colleague of mine made a comment recently that you could tell which UU churches came from a Unitarian background and which from a Universalist background based solely on whether the

congregation lived more in their hearts or their heads. This distinction about the culture differences between the two halves of our faith was new to me and I was unsurprised that our congregation has its roots in the intellectual liberalism of the Unitarian faith as opposed to the radical love of our Universalist side. And I share this, not to belittle the importance of reason and logic, but simply as an observation that gave me insight into this community as well as our larger faith.

Finally, the third part of ourselves.

We are emotional beings. With feelings ranging from joy to sorrow, from love to rage. PAUSE And this is where I think we sometimes struggle. Because these three parts of us are interconnected. PAUSE Even when we don't want them to be. PAUSE When we feel stressed out or upset we can develop physical symptoms from our emotional distress. Headaches, stomachs, shortness of breath, a tightness in our shoulders or chest. If we are tired or hungry our physical needs can manifest as difficulty concentrating, irritation, or in a myriad of other ways. When we have a strong emotional reaction it can sometimes make it a challenge to think clearly and rationally. To behave the way that we would were no emotions involved.

But they are. We are always feeling emotions. To deny this part of ourselves is to deny one third of our being. And for many of us, outpourings of emotions can make us feel uncomfortable. Whether it is our own emotions or someone else's.

And I have observed that this is especially true for those who identify as male in this society and were raised with all of the explicit and implicit messages about what that identity means.

That real men don't cry.

That the only valid negative emotion for a man is anger.

Even intense displays of positive emotions like joy and love are looked at with contempt by some. And to be clear this is an issue that is experienced by everyone to some degree.

I personally hate to cry. I especially hate to cry in front of anyone. And I do mean anyone. The bathrooms of my house have seen more of my tears than any other spaces. Because even as someone who has fully embraced my female identity, even as I rail at the unrealistic expectations, contradictions, and sometimes harmful messages that it brings, intense sadness and the vulnerability that comes with showing it feels too much like weakness and shame.

And so for many of us any display of emotion can bring up these feelings of discomfort. And that leads to situations where people who are displaying their emotions fully are told to

Calm down.

Stop being so loud.

You're being too sensitive.

It's not that big of a deal.

Or they're dismissed altogether.

But when we talk about covenant, because that is what we're talking about, we are talking about connecting in relationship with one another on an emotional level. We're not talking about discussing scientific data or history. We are talking about relationships. And relationships are based on emotional connection.

So, we are beings made up of three equal parts. Our faith is also made up of three equal parts. As Unitarian Universalists we are pluralistic. We believe that all faith traditions and beliefs are equal and valid, that there can be more than one truth at the same time, even when these truths are sometimes contradictory.

We are transformational. We are a faith and a people that is constantly changing. For UUs there is no destination, only the journey that we are all on, individually and together.

And we are covenantal. We are not creedal. We do not come together because we all believe the same thing, we come together because of the promises we make to one another. Promises about how we will be with one another, in relationship.

Lisa Ward has this to say about covenant:

A covenant leaves room for chance and change... It claims: I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming...

A creed creates a static truth, something that does not incorporate new insights and realities.

A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives...

A creed creates an "us" and "them."

A covenant invites relationship.

That last line bears repeating.

A covenant invites relationship.

And covenant is something that I have found more and more is misunderstood. We ask the children and youth in our RE program to help create a classroom covenant each fall, but often this reads as a list of rules. Do this but don't do that. Should we have rules in our classrooms? Of course we should, because safety is important. But that's not covenant.

And who has ever gone to a UU group, class or workshop and the group covenant included things like.... we agree to show up on time, we agree to be prepared.

Again I would argue, this is not covenant. Covenant speaks to how we want to be, it isn't meant to be a weapon for calling someone out for not showing up on time. Covenant is not a tool by which we manipulate others, shut people down, leave people out, or get our own way.

To be in covenant means covenant lives inside you. When it is alive within a community it can bind people together. And when covenant is broken, and I say it that way intentionally, when it is broken, it is an opportunity for us to all reflect together about what happened and how to move back into covenant together.

Rev. Gretchen Haley said

Covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also we become human when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other – even when we think the other isn't doing enough – even when our partner is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done – even then – when we realize right then, that we are still partners, and we can't give up – and so we return, and begin again – it is this beginning again that is what it means to be human.

We sang together this morning the hymn Come, Come Whoever You Are. In case you're not familiar, here is the full text of that poem by Rumi.

Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows
a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.

This is a familiar hymn, one we sing often, and yet one key phrase has been omitted in the version found in our hymnal.

Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.

Christiana McQuain had this to say about it:

It is apparent that Rumi's words intentionally welcome the stranger, regardless of their imperfection. I'd like to invite you to consider a meaning even broader than that:

What if we are welcoming both the friend and the stranger, regardless of our own imperfection.

Our vision statements are declarations of what we strive to be. That we often ourselves fall short of these ideals is almost the point. It is in the continual striving that we live into our covenant, with ourselves and with each other. It is in the implied acknowledgement of imperfection that we find our calling to remain ever vigilant in putting forth the effort to achieve, PAUSE if not perfection, PAUSE then at the very least, our somewhat lofty professed ideals – justice, equality, freedom, peace...

I am imperfect. You are imperfect. Our shared community is imperfect. Not only are we imperfect, we have broken our vows.

Acknowledging our imperfection is not enough – we must address the roots of our inadequacy, honestly face our failure to serve all those we have claimed to represent, and that which we have claimed to support. And we need everyone tending the garden of this truth. Only then can we transform the fruit it bears.

Come, come, whoever you are – though we have broken our vows a thousand times, we still welcome you to become, or to remain, a part of our open-hearted, admittedly imperfect, community, which actively strives to live up to our promises. There is much work to be done...

Come, yet again, come.

To live in covenant means to break covenant. We are all beautiful, broken, imperfect beings. I have broken covenant. And yet I strive to recognize when I do so, even if that break is simply a whisper in my heart, and not an action or behavior. And I will come, yet again come.

So what do we do when covenant is broken? When our own behavior or the behavior of someone in our community causes harm? When it breaks the promises that we made to one another?

We do the work. We do the work because accountability is a part of covenant. We hold ourselves and one another accountable with love and compassion and a spirit of curiosity, not blame. This is what being in relationship with one another means. And what if, just like the questions posed in our reading this morning, we could embrace accountability as sacred and transformational. As an opportunity for deepening relationships, as a skill we all desire to improve upon, instead of meeting accountability with fear and shame?

We do the work. And that starts with ourselves.

That work also includes lifting up our voices, with kindness and respect, as we ask, what led us here? How can we join together to get back to a place where we are all living into this covenant together? Because, as Adrienne Maree Brown said, the harder things are to say, the more necessary they are to say.

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And then we listen. We listen to the voices of those who only seem to whisper, never shout. To the voices of those to whom harm has been done. To the voices that struggle to get the words out because the tears in their eyes are also constricting their throats. We listen through the discomfort of our emotions, messy, loud, and sometimes painful. We listen, truly and deeply.

Because this is how we heal. This is how we invite one another back in. Though we have broken our vows a thousand times.

Another part of that work includes trust. Trust in our leadership, trust in one another, trust in ourselves. If we could figure out how to add trust into this community and faith, how to be trusting and trustworthy, to find our way back to one another when we are broken and separated, we could do anything. We could change the world. We need to bring ourselves into community and commit to being a part of this community, not as observers, not as individuals.

And this community has been through a lot. I have seen the struggles and the losses that we have endured. I have felt their impact. The world is going through a lot right now and we must acknowledge that we are still living in a pandemic, we are living through a time of collective trauma. And it is a hard time to be our best selves. And I know that for many in this community there are still questions unanswered, and feelings that come up around these questions that continue to demand our attention even as we try to move forward.

And I wish I could give you all of the answers. I wish I had all of the answers to give.

Instead I would say to all of you, come. Though we have broken our vows a thousand times, come. We will do the work together. We will face these challenges together and rededicate ourselves to this covenant. To this community.

So on this day I say to each of you:

I covenant to

Be together in community, guided by love and respect.

Be open, friendly, and welcoming to all.

Be engaged in congregational life.

Communicate compassionately, directly, and honestly.

Listen deeply and kindly to each of you.

Believe in your best intentions.

Support and inspire our quest for truth and meaning

Acknowledge, respect, and value our differences.

Work to serve our community's shared goals.

Won't you join me?