

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

**“What Can I Expect? What are the Limits?”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 26, 2017

**Call to Celebration**

We've all had the experience. We walk into a new space with a large group of people we don't know.

And suddenly we're anxious.

And we ask: What might put me at ease?

What sign will show me that I belong here?

One of the reasons we like to warm up our voices before our service starts is to welcome visitors into our space with music and song. The back of our order of service is designed to be welcoming to visitors with important information. It includes our mission statement that helps the visitor know our purpose.

But how do we let everyone know about the warm, friendly and accepting social climate found here?

Hopefully the conversations people have had at the Welcome Table, with the ushers, and with their neighbors communicates that warm welcome. Seeing people known from other groups or from work might also be helpful.

But how will differing opinions be received? What if my identity is very different from the people I see around me? How do I assess whether I will be safe here?

These are the questions on people's minds when they visit our congregation. Many are looking for a religious community where they can be themselves. They don't want to conform to a system of belief or be expected to align with cultural sexual or gender norms. They are looking for a place where their heart can open up and not be threatened by religious and cultural expectations.

We may not be perfect at providing this kind of environment as individuals, but our congregation and Unitarian Universalism is committed to creating this kind of welcoming environment for everyone. We'll be looking at one of the ways we can signal that readiness today using a covenant,

As we join together in the celebration of life.

## Testimonials

Lee Newberg:

Until recently, my only experience with covenants was from teaching religious education here. Class covenants include “don’t interrupt other people” and “keep your hands to yourself.” I didn’t see how these obvious truisms would be of use among adults. We already get this.

However, more recently we made a covenant for the Board of Trustees. This covenant lists aspirations such as honesty, goodwill, taking on responsibilities, and dealing with conflict respectfully. In some sense, these too are obvious truisms, but I do not find the document to be superfluous. It lays a foundation. It provides a centering if you will, that brings us all together as we conduct our work as members of the Board of Trustees.

Even beyond its ability to inspire, I think a covenant might also be of practical day to day use, and I would like to brainstorm some possibilities here. Our covenant could include our personal aspirations, reminding us to seek truth and meaning, reminding us to meet our own desires for social action, and reminding us to seek out community to our own contentment. How often do we forget to think of these important goals for ourselves?

In group settings, our covenant could go beyond saying “be nice” or “apologize for your mistakes” to cover some harder issues. In many situations, acting without malice is not sufficient and our covenant could remind us to act affirmatively, for instance, to go the extra mile with respect to inclusivity. As a practical reminder, the covenant could even enumerate the groups that often get left out. This includes some groups within our congregation that may not always be on the tips of our tongues, such as the theists, the new-comers, the youth, the poor, and those with physical or intellectual challenges. Along those lines, instead of merely responding to the issues at hand, the covenant could remind us to reach out to those who didn’t know that asking right now would be a good idea.

We also have aspirations outside of our congregation. The covenant might remind us of the value of coordinating and synergizing with like-minded organizations such as the Unitarian Universalist Association.

So, those are some recent thoughts of mine. Whether you think a covenant of aspirations should be inspirational, practical, or some other quality, I urge you to come to an upcoming congregational conversation to learn more and to share your thoughts. If you want, you can even join the Congregational Covenant team that will consider all things covenant and will work towards producing a congregational covenant that we can be proud of.

Thank you.

Patti Jo Newell:

Have had privilege of being on both inclusivity and covenant teams –

Easy to see the crossover between these initiatives

Both are about Right relations – a deepening

A deepening of our relations within our congregation

A deepening of our personal growth as religious people.

A deepening of our ministry as a welcoming congregation

There is a UUA statement on inclusivity that ends with the phrase...

ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. It's a perfect expression of what's at the heart of inclusivity work and the heart of UU values we'd expect to imbue in covenant.

Covenant is a public way to proclaim our commitment to one another as a congregation...both to identify us to the broader community and to remind ourselves and each other of that commitment.

It is therefore, a way of being purposeful

As way to keep our commitments uppermost in our hearts and minds

A reminder to see our relationships as a form of ministry.

And regarding our commitment to be a more welcoming and inclusive community, a commitment to be a more justice-seeking congregation, covenant would be a most welcome and necessary reminder of that aspiration.

Inclusivity is a powerful word. Perhaps not always understood. But inclusivity is a response to the experiences of exclusion. Exclusivity.

It is challenging work to identify and address the policies and practice of exclusion.

As touchstone of our aspirations and commitment, covenant reminds us to think beyond our own limited experiences and to speak and act in ways that promote ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect.

But covenant is no mere reminder. Creating covenant is a dynamic exploration and articulation of our values and congregational identity. And once created it beckons us to pursue right relations, to deepen our commitments, to remain engaged within the covenant framework...one in which we ask ourselves, individually and collectively, are we in right relations with each other, with the newcomer to whom we've been introduced, with the one who irritates us just a bit, or maybe a lot...or at the meeting that veers toward conflict, when we're called upon to understand experiences and perspectives that are not familiar to us, when we've been asked to understand how another might have heard our words or experienced our actions.

It beckons us to ask, are we living in right relations, strengthening our congregation, promoting ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect.

## Sermon

Covenants haven't been all that exciting to me in the past. As you heard from Lee Newberg, these statements can seem like common sense ways of being together. As an adult, I think I don't need to be told to keep my hands to myself anymore. And I'm not too challenged by the intention of being accepting, forgiving and respectful even though it can be difficult sometimes.

Some covenants can sound like rulebooks. In legal covenants, what people can and can't do is spelled out in excruciating detail. If you don't know your neighbors in a dense development, having a homeowner association covenant can be a very good thing. It facilitates coexistence when I may not have a relationship with all my neighbors. All I want is for the guy who lives next door not to play loud music late at night, keep his property clean, clear the snow off the sidewalk and refrain from barbequing smelly stuff on his deck.

There is another kind of covenant congregations use called a behavioral covenant. It sets limits and defines acceptable behavior. If there are members of a congregation that do not practice respect and tolerance of difference by yelling at and insulting other members, having such a covenant can be a useful tool to empower the congregation to interrupt such behavior. It can then be used to *exclude* people who don't behave appropriately – which can be both a good thing and a bad thing. We have to reflect on the effect of excluding people who barbeque stinky meat by building fences to keep them out.

Sometimes the somewhat disorderly prophet in the house needs to be heard if they smell smoke.

What gets lost in this view of covenant is the original purpose they were created to serve. I had the opportunity this week to go back and review the [Minns Lectures offered about sixteen years ago](#) by the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley. Long serving minister and covenantal historian, her excellent lectures are a wonderful introduction to the origins of the idea of covenant. And in that history, I found meaning that touched and inspired me.

Looking back at the less than kind and respectful way the early Puritan settlers treated the native peoples they met, their autocratic approach to dissent and their dour view of human nature can set us up to be rather critical of them. Wesley gives us another view of them that is a little more sympathetic. While Unitarians dispensed with Puritan theology, we have almost universally clung to their systems of governance and polity.

What drove these Puritan settlers to leave home, family and friends behind to travel across a dangerous ocean at great expense and settle in what they considered to be an uncivilized wilderness? It wasn't the hope of economic gain that lured the creators of plantations in Virginia. It was the desire to escape religious oppression and worship the way God directed them to worship. It was the desire to live free from the authority of crown and bishop.

To do this, they managed to obtain a charter from the king to take possession of a large tract of land in what would become Massachusetts. These settlers wanted to live under the radar of the king and

the church with minimal interference. It was far enough away that if they were quiet and peaceful, they hoped to self-govern and create a religious and social order of their choosing.

We have detailed historical records from the 1630's of one little group of thirty families that settled in what became Dedham, Massachusetts. After establishing their farms and houses, they set to the work of organizing a church where they could worship together. These families were from all over England but they shared the same desire for a non-authoritarian style of worship. So, like the good Unitarian church they eventually became, they started meeting in each other's houses.

These kinds of house meetings were already familiar to them. It is hard for us to imagine the excitement of getting access to your own Bible in England back in the early 1600's. The church had always been in control of the holy words that were said on Sunday morning. Priests offered their authoritative interpretation of what they meant. With access to the Bible in English, people could read the text, or hear another person read it out loud if they couldn't read, and try to figure out the meaning for themselves. God's Spirit could guide the reader to understand what the text meant, or one could hear University lecturers expound and argue about what it meant. And then people would gather in public houses and people's homes to hash out the arguments and settle on the meanings that made sense to them.

The bishops were not happy with this approach to the holy word. After all, they had the correct answers for every question the people might have. And people then as now would come up with deluded ideas and wacky interpretations. And controversy created instability which threatened public order. So the king and the bishops did everything they could to disrupt any religious gatherings besides the established church. It was this oppression and the desire to practice religion without hierarchical authorities interfering that drove them to the New World.

These settlers read their Bibles to find the answers to their questions about how to organize a free church. They had the examples of covenants between Noah and God after the flood; between Abraham and God establishing a chosen lineage, and Moses and God to define acceptable behavior. They also had the examples in Acts and the letters of Paul of the early churches following Jesus in the first Century. Out of all these models and English common law, they designed the first covenants to organize their churches without any outside authority. Thus was born the Free Church tradition we inherit today.

What Wesley points out in her lectures is the lack of theological discussion documented in this process of forming the Dedham church. They didn't talk about predestination or original sin. The Bible references that concerned them were about the practical aspects of organization and conflict resolution.

Their primary goal in organizing was to support "the spirit of mutual love" rather than set down a rule book. They took inspiration from the Great Commandment to love your neighbor. Those Dedham families were interested in fostering that love as a direct, in the flesh, personal experience. The experiences of ecstatic love for God and for neighbor were conditions for membership in their community. Any institutionalization of that experience of mutual love needed to not interfere with

cultivating it—cultivating it for oneself and also for members of one’s family so they could join the church when they came of age.

When I encountered this understanding of covenant from Wesley’s lectures I was moved. A covenant designed to encourage the spirit of mutual love makes sense to me. It is a purpose that inspires me.

My love of religious community is one of the reasons I so enjoy serving as a minister. It goes back to junior high for me. I remember attending a series of gatherings with junior high school friends that were very enjoyable. I’ve been in many social situations throughout my life – some more enjoyable and others less so. What I remember about those gatherings was a spirit of mutual love in this group had that touched and moved me. It gave me a taste of what community can be that I discovered I could experience in Unitarian Universalist congregations during my young adulthood.

In my late twenties I rediscovered the power of mutual love attending a week-long UU Leadership training for lay people parallel to what we used to have here called Eagles. That experience showed me the potential for religious community that became part of my call to the ministry. I wanted to learn how to offer this kind of experience to our members and friends in a congregational setting.

That was over thirty years ago. I’ve learned a lot about supporting the spirit of mutual love in community over those intervening years. It stimulated my fascination with organizational development (or OD) theory and group process methodology. I’ve honed my listening and facilitation skills to lead groups effectively.

One component of supporting the spirit of mutual love is defining some boundaries that may look like rules. The insert in your order of service has some examples. Knowing that we welcome differences of opinion, we practice the assumption of good will, and we value a wide diversity of ways of being human can create a sense of safety and trust. And the Spirit of mutual love flourishes in a community of safety and trust.

The reason we need to write this down and make a public commitment to these boundaries of relationship is because we aren’t always good at them. The nature of our emotional brains means that we lapse from our best intentions into suspicion, fear, envy, jealousy, hatred, disgust and craving. And even if we do our best to hide and suppress these unsavory parts of our human nature, they often leak out. At times, we need to be called back to our best selves when we are **deluded** and lose the spirit of mutual love. I know it happens to me ... and I invest a lot of energy into cultivating mutual love on a daily basis.

That is why we all need faith. We covenant as Unitarian Universalists that we will assume each person has inherent worth and dignity, whether we recognize it or not. We covenant to honor the interdependent web of existence that connects us even if we don’t feel connected within it. We have faith *that it is possible* to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. The word covenant comes from the word *covenir* which means to travel together. In Patti Jo’s words, “Covenant is a public way to proclaim our commitment to one another as a congregation.”

There is little in my life experience as satisfying and meaningful as being part of congregational life. Yes, I've had powerful experiences at meditation retreats and on mountain tops and even playing chess. But where I experience the most joy and satisfaction is walking together with this congregation as we cultivate the spirit of mutual love together.

And that spirit isn't just available in this building. We experience it walking together with the other Unitarian Universalist congregations near us as we will in four weeks at our joint service. It happens for our youth at Cons and at Unirondack. We experience it when we gather in June for General Assembly.

And that spirit of mutual love isn't just for us. Ultimately the Free Church is a way of being we would like to offer to everyone. And one of the ways to invite people to get over their suspicion and anxiety is to make a promise to them through a covenant. This is who we are and this is how you will be treated and this is how we will behave.

Let the Spirit of Mutual Love be what helps us find language for a covenant that will assist us as we aspire to be our best selves and invite the stranger to join us.

## **Benediction**

As we leave this sanctuary  
dedicated to the spirit of mutual love,  
let us make room for each other.

In our freedom,  
may we be willing to walk together  
be we solid, striped or polka dotted.

May we be held and protected within the boundaries of covenant  
that has room for folk, jazz, classical and hip hop  
as each of us is welcome to sing our own song;

And listen with appreciation to the melodies and rhythms  
we have in common.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at Peace.