

Can Covenanting Enhance Our Spiritual Life?

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In their book, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*, UU Reverends Buehrens and Parker each devote a chapter to covenanting. In the metaphor of a house used throughout the book Buehrens and Parker speak of covenanting as the “sheltering walls” that hold the community of faith together.

The question I want to explore with you this morning is this: Would a shared covenant help us as members of this fellowship to enhance our mutual spiritual growth? I will begin by exploring what a covenant is. Then I will provide examples of covenants and highlight some of the positive value in them that I see.

So what exactly are covenants? Covenants are sacred vows between or among individuals, or between a group and a deity. Marriage is an example of a covenant between individuals. Joseph Campbell said that marriage involves a sacrifice of a part of the self to the relationship. “When you make the sacrifice in marriage, you're sacrificing not to each other but to unity in a relationship.” Thus there are 3 components to a marriage covenant, each spouse and the marriage itself. I think all covenants have this quality in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The entity created by the covenant has a sacred or spiritual aspect. We actually become more whole or complete by participating in a covenant. “Marriage is a spiritual unity,” Campbell said.

There are many examples of covenants in the Bible. In Genesis, God asks Abraham to circumcise himself and all the males in his household. In exchange God promises that his heirs will become a great nation. The covenant in Exodus occurs during the revelation at Mt. Sinai where God promises to make the Israelites a holy people and to care for them if they agree to follow his laws. The “New” or Christian Covenant promises salvation offered by God through Christ to humans individually, based on grace rather than the law given to Moses that Jews were to obey. The reason this is important is that in churches and synagogues the covenant between people and God is the basis of the doctrine that binds those faith communities together. In our own UU faith we of course adhere to no such widely accepted understanding with a deity. So what does hold us together as a community of faith? In place of a covenant with God we have a covenant with each other and with the UUA.

Here is the language of the national covenant for UU congregations:
“Grateful for the religious pluralism, which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free

congregations, we enter into this covenant, promising one another our mutual trust and support.”

You might ask why a covenant is needed at all for UU congregations? The belief is that without a covenant a congregation would not have a spiritual center and might be nothing more than a social club with a forum for ideas. So it is a covenant, either implicit or explicit, that shared understanding that we honor diversity, promote social justice and seek to enhance our spiritual growth that really promotes us as communities of faith. In some ways our Fellowship is doing this already, but could we do it more intentionally if we actually did make our covenant explicit?

Besides the type of the covenant that binds faith communities there are other differences that distinguish the UU's from other denominations I think we need to consider. In more traditional faith communities, adhering to a central doctrine, for example the Trinity, or salvation, or the divinity of the Koran, is also what binds the members together. But we don't have a doctrine. So what binds us together are values, including an acceptance of "pluralism" and an agreement or covenant to work for mutual trust and support. According to a UUA publication, "Without it, we don't know who we are as a congregation and how we should interact faithfully with each other and the world." Some of you may recall the talk UUA President Morales gave us on, "Religion Beyond Belief." UU faith communities do not have a commonly shared dogma he said, but we do have a common concern with how we treat each other and how we relate to the wider world.

Here is the covenant shared by Rev. Deborah Mero, Interim Minister (2000-2002), All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Brattleboro, VT:
 "We build our church on a foundation of love and covenant with one another,
 □to freely explore our values and honor our diversity as a source of communal strength, □to accept responsibility for our individual acts and promote justice and peace, □to celebrate the joys of discovery, embracing the fullest measure of our humanity, to communicate with kindness and support, to serve with compassion and commitment, □to openly share our laughter and tears and, to show reverence for the divine in all that it is."
 This covenant defines to the members the deeply trusting and reverent manner they vow to relate to each other and the goals they hope to accomplish.

The Rev. Mike Moran of the First Unitarian Church of Denver presented a workshop at the MDD convention a year ago in which he pointed out that unlike most religions that place authority for beliefs in an external entity such as "God" or "The Church" UU's say that authority for matters of faith rests with each of us as individuals. UU's say that revelation is not confined to great religious figures such as Mohamed, or Buddha but rather is open to all of us to experience. Also we believe "revelation" is not something that happened only in Biblical times but is instead "ongoing." Revelation is happening right now and we need to learn to be open to it. In her splendid

article in last summer's *UU World*, the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons spoke of "Primal Reverence." Gibbons said these moments of revelation or reverence occur commonly in settings of natural beauty or when we are moved by the courage and dedication of other people. Because we respect that each of us comes to her or his own understanding of the sacred individually, we are necessarily a pluralistic faith community, meaning that we have a multitude of beliefs and spiritual experiences. Gibbons asserts that we need to share our revelations with one another in order to explore their meaning and make them tangible. We need to be in community to become whole spiritually because we are psychologically and spiritually incomplete by ourselves. Ronn made the same point in his September talk.

What I have said so far is that we UU's don't have a covenant with a deity, nor a shared dogma nor do we accept an external authority for our religious convictions. A covenant with each other fills some of that void.

The covenant serves to define the basis of our ties together as a commitment to treat each other in ways that promote spiritual growth. Our covenant can serve to guide all our activities together including our worship services, discussions, fellowship and social action. Our covenant also can help connect us to our district, the UUA and all UU's. Covenanting allows us to look beyond ourselves as individuals in order to appreciate the larger goal of community. When we enter into a covenant we ask ourselves to surrender some of our individualism to achieve the greater need of the congregation. Paradoxically when we give up a part of ourselves in this way we grow spiritually. Again I quote from a UUA publication: "Covenant calls us to be in right relationship with each other, and when these relationships become frayed, as they inevitably will, to repair them." UU Minister Fredrick Muir, in the winter issue of *UU World*, stated that moving beyond individualism into covenant is the path to a future of our faith and without it we will cease to exist as a national religion.

I believe covenants become more real when they are recited, contemplated and taken into the heart. Bruce Andrews sent me an anonymous quotation that speaks to the value of covenant in creating and maintaining intentional community: "Living in community is an earned blessing. It does not just happen. Communities are formed when people recognize that they share a common vision and move toward one another to see that vision more clearly. Community is maintained when people have the integrity to be honest, patient, accountable and forgiving with one another. Spiritual community does not require that every member believes the same thing. It does require that what they believe allows them to respect and work with those who believe differently. Community is love made visible by intention." It is a covenant that makes that intention explicit and real in my opinion.

For the 20th century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams making such promises was simply the human thing to do. He wrote: "Human beings,

individually and collectively, become human by making commitments, by making promises. The human being as such, as Martin Buber says, is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature. The human being is the promise-maker, the commitment maker.”

In a handout created by the First Universalist Church of Denver the Rev. Loadman-Copeland compared the covenant of a UU congregation to the Torah of Judaism, the Pillars of Islam, the Eightfold Path of Buddhism and “The Way” of Taoism. It is the central tenant of our faith.

According to the UUA manual on membership there are at least five ways that a covenant can support and facilitate clear expectations and deepening of relationships in a congregation:

1. A covenant is a statement of agreement about how congregants choose to be in relationship with each other. When they live by these statements, they are modeling their Unitarian Universalist values for each other, their children, and the wider community.
2. A covenant includes compromises and promises, not rules. Unlike rules, promises are discussed, lived, broken, and renewed. Promises and commitments describe how we wish to live together as a faith community, knowing that if these promises don't work, the congregation may choose to rewrite them.
3. A covenant is a framework of expectations. Virtually every context we enter has behavioral expectations. Our congregations should be no different; in fact, given the reason that we come together—to create a Beloved Community—clear expectations are vital.
4. A covenant is about behavior, not personality. Behavior that encourages, nurtures, and supports our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is important to the life of the faith community. A covenant is not about the qualities that have shaped and show a person's character.
5. A covenant offers an opportunity to explore and deepen our spirituality. Promises made to others in a faith community and the relationships that can come from such a practice, can strengthen and broaden commitment in deliberate, intentional, and disciplined ways.

I believe that our fellowship has an implicitly understood covenant that is in part based on our 7 principles. I also believe it would be worthwhile to develop an explicit covenant. In some UU congregations the covenant is recited at each worship service meeting. I wonder if this is something we ought to consider also. While the 7 principles are values we affirm, a covenant shows how a congregation intends to put these principles into action.

Here is the covenant recited every Sunday at the First Parish Church in Needham, Massachusetts where John Buehrens is minister: "Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge, of love and compassion ever exceeding our practice, reverently we covenant together, beginning with ourselves as we are, to share strength, integrity and the heritage of the spirit, in humanity's unending quest for reality, justice and love."

Buehrens says that hope is the key to every covenant because it points to a better future based on keeping promises. He asks, "What spiritual hopes do we share? What shall we promise to one another... as we try to live together towards our hopes? How shall we then treat one another?"

As is always the case with freedom, our precious religious freedom to believe as we wish also comes with a built in responsibility in terms of how we relate to our fellowship community and the wider world.

Early in the 1990's several members of the Sheridan Fellowship gathered to craft our statement of purpose that we recited this morning for the Chalice Lighting. In it there are a number of statements that look and sound like a covenant to me. I would like you to consider for yourself what parts of our Statement of Purpose are covenantal for you.

There are many UU congregations that have adopted an explicit covenant and many more are considering it now. This is part of a larger movement within the UUA to explore and return to the roots of our faith. After the New Year all of the members of the Fellowship will be invited to participate in small group. Each group will be facilitated by a member of our Fellowship Board approved Covenant Workgroup. Beside myself, the other Covenant Workgroup members are: JoLynn, Cal, Harriet and Michelle. There will be an opportunity next Sunday during our discussion to discuss the merits of a covenant for the fellowship as well. The Board agreed that we take a formal vote on a proposed covenant at our annual meeting in May, if a consensus to do so comes out of the small group meetings. My hope is that whether or not we adopt a covenant, the process can be an opportunity for all to explore our values and hopes in our Fellowship. If the Fellowship decided to adopt a covenant, it would only make sense if all the membership had an opportunity to provide input into the process.

So now that I have shared what I think, I want to leave you with these questions: Do you think it would be helpful to our spiritual growth as a faith community to adopt an explicit covenant? If the answer is yes, what would you like it to include and how would you see us best use it? If you don't think we need a covenant, why not?

Thank you for listening and for your input into this process.