

The History and Contemporary Importance of Covenant to UU

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I'd like to start my talk today by revisiting some of what Cal discussed last week. You'll recall that he addressed the gap between what is and what could be in a community. Cal noted that he is very familiar with our Seven Principles but not as much with covenant. I suspect that is true for many of us. He discussed how behavioral covenants set the standard for what is permissible and what is not. Behavioral covenants, among other things, help a group to create boundaries and a sense of group identity. Cal also addressed the tension between cherished freedom and individuality versus participating in a covenantal community. This morning I plan to give an historical background to covenant for UU's and also talk about why they are important and some of their key elements. In doing so, I hope to increase our understanding of them and comfort with them. As we become more familiar with covenant we can "unlock its power" to a greater extent to enhance spiritual growth and beloved community.

I am a member of the UUA Commission on Appraisal. The CoA is an independent body of the UUA whose members are appointed by the General Assembly delegates. The CoA has existed since the 1930's and is charged with studying a topic of importance to our faith. The CoA is required to produce a report on a new topic every 3 years that is published as a book and sent to all the member congregations. I have been impressed with the work of the CoA and that is why I sought to become a Commissioner. I was given the honor of an appointment in 2019. The topic the Commission is studying now is "Unlocking the Power of Covenant." One reason for the selection of covenant as a focus of study for our UUA is the awareness that a covenant was breached in the recent past; there was a failure to live up to promises. In particular the UUA promised to become more proactive in support of hiring a diverse and inclusive staff, which it did not do. Since the breach of covenant was declared, our UUA has worked diligently to correct the problem. Several senior staff members, who were white men, resigned and were replaced by others representing the diversity of our faith and our society. This example shows how covenant is supposed to work. Within the UUA, covenants are plentiful; there is a covenant between the UUA and member congregations, and covenants within most UU congregations, covenants among subgroups within congregations (especially larger ones), covenants among cluster congregations within a geographical area, and covenants among interest groups across the UUA, such as ministers groups, musicians, lay leaders, etc.

I will begin by focusing on our American UU history to show that covenant was a founding principle. We owe the origin of American Unitarianism to the Puritans. Puritans of the 17th century became the Congregationalists. American Unitarianism grew out of Congregationalism in the 19th century. Around 1640, a small group of Puritans in Dedham, Massachusetts, decided to build a church community free from the constraints and hierarchy of the Church of England. It was a radically lay-led church gathered by

mutual consent, founded in covenant rather than creed, and governed by the congregation itself rather than a political hierarchy. What they longed for was sincere religious association based in love and founded in freedom. They created what became known as the “Cambridge Platform,” in 1648. Recently, Rev. Alice Blair Wesley reworded^[1] the Puritans’ covenant to language of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Her version is as follows: “We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, as best we know them now, or may learn them in days to come, that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to the world in words and actions of peace and good-will.”

This group of Puritans in Dedham scheduled meetings every Thursday night for a year to develop their covenant: how they were going to be together in worship and otherwise. They had some rules for these meetings. The first rule was that they would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Each week the host of the gathering would begin, and speak only to the agreed upon question, and then everyone else could speak by turns. Each could either choose to speak to that question, or a closely related question. They were supposed to speak their own understandings or doubts. They weren't supposed to argue or nitpick. In addition they didn't talk about dogma or creed. They talked about how they were going to relate to each other and the wider world. As you can see, they were living into covenant even as they were creating it. Love was declared as their highest value. The contemporary focus on covenant in UU comes out of this history.

All UU congregations now are bound in covenant with the UUA. The following language comes from the bylaws of our UUA and appears at the front of our grey hymnal: “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.” Below this statement our Seven Principles are listed.

I turn now to a more contemporary UU understanding of covenant as it has evolved from the Puritans. In their 2010 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 covenant. In the metaphor of a house used throughout the book Buehrens and Parker speak of covenants as the “sheltering walls” that hold the community of faith together. Buehrens and Parker were lifting up our UU heritage as well as demonstrating the importance covenant plays in our congregations and communities now.

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. Scholar of mythology 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 three 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.

Here is a definition of covenant created by the Commission on Appraisal:

A covenant is a mutual sacred promise between individuals or groups, to stay in relationship, care about each other, and work together in good faith. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we seek to raise the "WE" above the "I" -- the community above the individual. As seekers, we willingly CHOOSE to love each other and stay in relationship over and over, again and again. In this way we may break promises, but by leaning into the transformational power of our faith, we can begin again in love.

The oldest covenants that we know of are in the Bible. In Genesis, God asks Abraham to circumcise himself and all the males in his household. In exchange God promises that Abraham's 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 the biblical example 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. Covenants with God are referred to as "vertical." In our own UU faith we of course adhere to no such widely accepted understanding with a heavenly deity. So what does hold UU's together as communities of faith? In place of a covenant with God, members of a congregation have a covenant with each other and with the UUA. Covenants between individuals or among groups are considered "horizontal."

You might ask why a covenant is needed at all for UU congregations? Many UU leaders believe that without a covenant a congregation would not have a spiritual center and might be simply a social club with a forum for ideas. It is a covenant, either implicit or explicitly written, that shared understanding that we honor diversity, promote social justice, agree to work through conflict, and seek to enhance our mutual spiritual growth that really identifies us as communities of faith. The Seven Principles define our values but our covenant outlines how we are to behave towards each other as spiritual beings.

Besides the type of covenant that binds faith communities, vertical versus horizontal, there are additional 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 and creed, 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 or a single sacred

text. 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 a covenant, we don’t know who we are as a congregation and how we should interact faithfully with each other and the world.” UU faith communities do not have a commonly shared dogma, but we do have a common concern with how we treat each other and how we relate to the wider world, much in the way the Puritans of Dedham, MA did.

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, ^[SEP]to freely explore our values and honor our diversity as a source of communal strength, ^[SEP]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 in which they vow to relate to each other and the goals they hope to accomplish. Do you see the spiritual intent in this covenant?

The Rev. Mike Moran of the First Unitarian Church of Denver presented a workshop at the MDD convention a while 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. 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. This means that we have a multitude of beliefs and spiritual experiences. Our fourth UU Principle encourages us on our individual quest for meaning and purpose. We need the safety of a faith community to share our revelations and convictions 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 spiritually incomplete by ourselves. It is covenant that helps us to do this.

I’d like to pause here to review my main points before I continue. What I have said so far is that, horizontal covenant in spiritual community originated in the USA with the Puritans from whom Unitarianism evolved. Also 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 in UU communities. A covenant is what makes us a community of faith rather than just a discussion club.

Next I want to explore some of the features of horizontal covenants. These covenants serve to define the basis of our relationship with each other. Covenants can guide all our activities together including worship services, discussions, fellowship and social action. They also serve to connect to our MDD, PWR, UUA and all UU's. Living into covenant allows us to look beyond ourselves as individuals in order to appreciate the larger opportunity and goal of community. I hope the meditation we did this morning together makes this clearer. When we enter into a covenant we ask ourselves to surrender some of our individuality to achieve the greater need of the congregation or other group within the congregation. Some may find this challenging or undesirable. Paradoxically but also meaningfully, when we give up a part of ourselves in this way we grow spiritually. 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 an 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. Muir among other UU leaders also asserted that covenant is the means to "Beloved Community."

I believe covenants become more real when they are recited, contemplated and taken into the heart. A few years back Bruce shared with 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 tangible 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." Thus the expectation is that covenants will be broken at times. Part of the idea of covenant is that when a breach occurs all will work together to repair and recommit. This is much like a marriage vow. The understanding is to stay together and work through the conflict. This is one very important way a covenant is different from a business contract. Adams added that living into covenant is spiritually transforming regardless of a person's beliefs. 16th century Unitarian Ferenc David said, "We need not think alike to love alike."

Adams also said covenants were intended to lift up the oppressed. This is in keeping with our first Principle regarding the inherent worth and dignity of every person. A covenant is not a legal agreement but rather a declaration of love and faithfulness. Finally, Adams asserted that a covenant makes us accountable to each other for how we behave. This is what Cal emphasized in his talk last week.

The former First Universalist Church of Denver 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. Although many UU members don’t realize this, it is the central tenant of our faith.

According to a CoA report on membership, there are several 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. As covenants evolve, members and community grow.
3. 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. As we abide by the behavioral guidelines, we and our community grow.
4. A covenant offers an opportunity to explore and deepen our spirituality. Promises made to others in a faith community and the relationships that come from such a practice, can strengthen and broaden commitment in deliberate, intentional, and disciplined ways.

I will close with some guidance from John Buehrens whom I mentioned earlier. He wrote about how covenants are the sheltering walls of a faith community. Here is the covenant recited every Sunday where he used to be minister, the First Parish Church in Nedham, Massachusetts:

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.

This covenant is aspirational, meaning it is an ideal that cannot be fully achieved but is still worth striving for.

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 we discussed with last month's theme of 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 faith communities and the wider world. Covenant makes that responsibility explicit.

I hope this has given you a deeper understanding of the role of covenant in UU communities.