

Saying Yes to Renewal

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A few weeks, or so, ago, when I began to think about the possibility of preaching today, I realized that we *were* about $\frac{3}{4}$ the way through the process of calling a settled minister. Not only that, but Tracey and Diane were starting to direct those, "It will soon be your responsibility," noises at the rest of us.

However, the search committee was still going strong, I was very busy, and my bad angel was saying, "Well, you've got the right people on the committee – you gave them the tools they need – let them do their job of selecting someone - and affirm their selection."

As we got closer to today, it became clear that the ball was being passed to us, whether we wanted it to be or not. And this big cartoon balloon popped up in my mind saying, "Yikes!" Very soon, some human person would be asked to partner with us, maybe even to lead us, on our journey. Which begged the questions: Journey to where? Journey to do what? How?

It's important to think about these questions because, (as my good angel said!) 1. They are central to who we are as a faith community, and 2. If we take no part in the process, and the new minister doesn't work out, we'll all be miserable but have no basis to complain. Frankly, I always like to leave the complaint option open.

I also needed to think about why I'm here in this church. I decided that the main reason I choose to be an active member of our church, is that I am encouraged to live a covenant life here - individually and in community. And I have experienced mystery and wonder and gift.

I was happy with that for awhile but then got to analyzing a bit more, as is my usual mode of operation. Which caused me to ask myself, "Now just what the *heck* does all that really mean?" So, I started to ponder what a covenant was all about. Parenthetically, for me that turned out to have less to do with the UU principles than I thought it would.

Given that we're entering the spring season *and* calling a new minister, I also started wondering what 'renewing' a covenant might mean. Does it mean re-affirming what we have determined, or re-determining what we affirm? Down deep, what do I prefer? Is it mine to prefer? What would a new minister think and do? I knew I would have to explore these issues before meeting, getting to know, and voting on a candidate for settled minister. And, I must confess, I got a little agita over the whole responsibility thing and I ate though an entire bag of chips-ahoy cookies before adventuring forth and exploring the territory.

When, finally, I began, I decided to use the UUA's definition of "*Covenant*," - as in Latin for "*come together*" - and meaning: a "*solemn agreement*" regarding a course of action, between parties.

The parsing here is important because a Covenant is not just a promise made by one person to another – which while probably heartfelt, is a singular movement or moment, none-the-less. Covenant demands more than "one." It demands reciprocity. Especially reciprocity. Without reciprocity and mutuality, there is *no* covenant. But it's also not just a business contract or a peace treaty – it's personal; it's relational; it's "a vow from the heart" between parties.

Now, I looked at the Old Testament Covenants – and all 6 or 7 were sacred agreements between a great and fearsome god who was and is and remains forever separate from the people. Mere mortals could never look on his face and live. The Truth (capital T) was veiled and there was no direct contact except through a priest or prophet.

The rules governing all the OT covenants were pretty clear and *not* open to negotiation. Through his intermediaries, God said - Conform to the laws and make sacrificial gifts at the temple, aaaand I will smite your enemies! On the one hand, Obey Me and your society will be stable, your fields will thrive, your people will prosper, and all will be well. On the other hand, forego religious observance and all will not be well - forgiveness and salvation will be withheld, as will the people's ability to flourish, and you will not maintain nation status. Not my thing. We've had enough of that kind of thinking.

I was also not terribly interested in renewing the New Testament Covenant. It is also a vow between god and man as two separate and unequal parties. Except now, god took human form in Jesus Christ. Jesus is presented in the NT as the way to connect with a dimension we cannot ever reach by ourselves. He IS the covenant, personified, and *it's all in or all out*.

Accept Jesus Christ as lord and you will experience god's love. Accept Jesus as the Christ and God will free you from your sins and guarantee your eternal salvation. Jesus was the once and final sacrifice; no need for more on our part. Jesus was the one true godly presence and the way to that presence was through hierarchical, authoritarian churches. Poor Jesus – he got turned into dogma. Again, not my thing.

Of course, by rejecting the old and new testament forms of covenant, I was left with having to define what I think a *Unitarian Universalist* covenant is.

I believe, as I'm sure you do, that ours is a new paradigm, a relational, not a creedal, covenant. It's about how we will *strive to be*: individually, together, and in the world. It doesn't matter if you believe there is a creative power and presence in this evolving universe which started all life. We can discuss that in a dozen ways. I think we all believe we live in an evolving universe and, wherever it came from, that power and presence is now us and is ours to manage.

As UU's, we commit to an ever evolving religious understanding and spiritual growth, which is a creation journey for each of us. I believe we covenant, we make a sacred

agreement, not to define the where or why or how of that journey, but to simply walk with each other on the way. *Maybe* even to allow ourselves to be led along the way - sometimes through mysterious or dark places. *Maybe* trusting in pleasant surprises. (I do believe in being led and in gifts. I only emphasize "maybe" because, personally, I have control issues!)

I believe that all good people, if they are not burdened with survival issues, seek the "Truth" in their lives. However, it's us UU's who are willing to commit to the belief that there won't ever be one definition of Truth and that diversity is actually our strength in the search.

Our UU faith grants final authority to the individual seeker. We're called to make commitments within our deepest selves first. But seeking is hard, and only a beginning, and no one is ever very happy or successful in isolation. So we join together in community and become co-creators of the values we espouse. And we want to see those values at work in larger groups and even the universal community. If we don't renew our covenant to be and become together, that expansion out to the larger world is impeded. We're human and we have a lot more courage and confidence when we travel with others as opposed to traveling alone.

I also know from talking to so many of you, that we're tired of being the best kept secret in town anymore. As members, we take the integration of our values into our lives and world very seriously *and* successfully. Sometimes we just aren't sure how to go about presenting our faith, along with those values; and we miss the opportunity to invite others to join us on this path.

So....here we are. And, if you want my opinion, I would suggest that our best guidance for how to covenant well, how to be a support and share the road includes, not only abiding by our UU principles and practices, but by calling someone as a settled minister who, in faith and with some trepidation on both our parts, we hope can help us, as T.S.Eliot said, be, "....still and still moving, into another intensity, for a further union, a deeper communion."

But we need to be very careful here, because through this whole process, I haven't heard a single person state that they simply want to hire someone. We all keep saying we want to CALL someone. There's a big difference between someone hired to do a job and someone called to ministry. Anyone we *call* will get to know us better and better as we go along, but even just on the starting block,

Someone who feels called is a person who likely believes their very presence is meant to not only encourage, but to challenge us - in ways we maybe haven't even thought of yet.

That Someone we call will likely believe she or he should stand above, as well as with us, to ensure that trust, respect, diversity and democracy not only exist but thrive in this community.

That Someone will likely be watching so that we don't just sit in complacent comfort on Sundays.

A "called" Someone will likely challenge our perspectives, and actually *ask* whether our promises are being kept.

We are tasked here today with calling Someone who will lead us in reaffirming our covenant every week and *then* send us out the same doors we come through, to model what we hope for in the larger world.

Adding any new person to a mix changes the dynamics of that mix. As individuals and as a community, we are opting to be *open* to that change – to embrace and support renewal - becoming new again.

Rev. Stewart has been called to the ministry. We also have a calling. It's time now to explore each other a bit and determine if this match might open us to each other in faith and trust and grow us together in covenant. If it can, then we may just continue to be blessed with experiencing mystery and wonder and gift along the path.

We will all come to the table in this process with strengths and weaknesses. Our search committee has done a wonderful job of getting us here today. It's now our responsibility to determine whether this joining has the potential to keep our vision fresh and new, to energize us, and to transform us so that our UU Truth becomes a life-giving voice in our lives and in our world. *And that's on us.*