

# “The Making and Meaning of Covenant”

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## **Meditation:**

When I was very young, I cried loudly and thought my mother was God. They said, ‘can we hold him?’ and ‘you are welcome here.’

When I was four I believed that the rest of the world was stuck in slow motion and I worshipped Batman and pro-wrestling. They said, “he’s quite a handful, isn’t he?” and “we’ll find ways to help him feel at home.”

When I was seven, and my parents divorced, I believed the world was untrustworthy. I tried putting my faith in solitude. They said, “you don’t have to be alone” and “you belong here with us.”

When I was 12 and I was growing up, I believed the world had too many rules. The Gods I believed in were all extremely cool. They said, “Man, you sure are cool” and “mind if we hang out with you?”

When I was 16 and I needed a place to go, I believed in escape. They said, “if you are ever in trouble, come here” and “we will give you sanctuary”

When I was twenty and I moved away, I prayed that I would never have to go back. They said, “take us with you” and “no matter where you go, we’ll be there.”

When I was twenty-five and I didn’t like the choices I had made, I searched my soul for another way. They said, “don’t give up” and “we believe you have something great to do.”

When I was thirty and I said I wanted to go into ministry, I began to believe in a God that cared for everyone – the lost as well as the found. They said, “we always saw that in you” and “welcome back.”

When I was thirty-six and looking for my own community, I struggled to know a God big enough to share with others. They said, “come, bring who you are” and “we will find our way together.”

Now I am forty-one. I have believed in many Gods and no Gods at all. I have prayed for many things, worshipped at many alters. And I know that what has given me faith, offered me hope, given me courage and showed me love was never found in shared beliefs. But in a shared commitment that my questions and convictions were part of a covenant larger than I ever imagined. A covenant that stayed with me. That reminded me always, ‘come, bring who you are’ and “we will find our way together.”

## **Sermon:**

This morning I want to talk a little bit about the notion of ‘covenant.’ I confess, I have a little trepidation about this. The idea of covenant is not an easy thing to explain.

Explaining covenant is made more difficult by several thousand years of superstitious ritual that has complicated and distorted the meaning of the word. I recognize that some of the stuff that surrounded the making of covenant in olden times is strange to our modern day rational minds. But it’s worth examining.

Our ancestors, the ancient Hebrews, understood the invocation of covenant as quite a production. It has been described as necessary to take a young bull, sacrifice it, split it in half, remove the entrails, and then walk through the entrails to seal the promise. Often, a young bull is called a ‘bullock’ and, well, you can see this is not easy to explain to UUs.

When Moses wanted to enter into covenant with God on behalf of the Israelites, he had to get the priests and the elders to climb a mountain. Then build an ark to hold the covenant, an alter to hold the ark, a tabernacle for the alter, a special table for the tabernacle, curtains for the tabernacle, a court, vestaments, a breastplate... Quite an ordeal. Then, it says he needed to sacrifice several oxen, seal the covenant with blood, throw some blood on the alter, read the book to the people and throw some blood on the people.

Much later on, the notion of covenant got very tied into the practice of circumcision. Suffice it to say that even if I could accept that any of this was in my job description, I didn’t think you would go for it.

I want to talk to you about covenant today, not because I like a good challenge, or because high falutin' religious lingo is something I enjoy (although it is). Not because it is easy to explain – because it isn't. But because it is the bedrock of our movement as Unitarian Universalists. And if we don't understand covenant, chances are we won't understand very much about the religion we are part of.

To understand the concept of 'covenant' and how it came to be in our movement, it is important to start a little later in our history. Specifically, our roots in England.

During the early 1600's it was required by law in England that every person attend church services in their parish (neighborhood) each Sunday. Church services consisted mostly of outdated, irrelevant liturgy which most considered, 'dull as dishwater.' It was largely conducted by under educated, ill-trained, poorly paid assistant ministers and overseen by bishops.

But when the printing press came, things began to change. The press meant that the Bible fell into the hands of the universities and the educated lay people. Suddenly, what had been mere edicts, creeds and doctrines started to come to life as drama, biography and stories of how imperfect, complex people tried to make choices about how to live out their faith in God. More and more, newer ministers and professors - especially those coming out of Oxford and Cambridge - were testing the authority of a state enforced church system. They were challenging people with examples of free thinking. And the people liked it.

This led to 'gadding,' a term used to describe people who left their own parish/neighborhoods to attend the parishes where new ideas and new systems of church were being offered. Moreover, the people were going to discuss their new ideas with one another. Not just on Sundays, but all during the week. They gathered in one another's houses for interpretation and conversation. They were not plotting or scheming to overthrow the Church of England. They just wanted to hear good preaching. And to talk and talk and talk (which is one of the reasons we count them as our early ancestors).

In essence, this system was defying the hierarchical authority of the bishops, the church system and the crown that supported it all. Under

orders of the English Protestant Kings and Queen Elizabeth, the bishops began shutting down this gadding. Any preachers whose sermons the laypeople liked to talk about were apt to be removed from their pulpits. This led to the lawyers and notable townspeople to establish 'lectureships' on market days during the week outside of the churches. Eventually, these too, were shut down. But not before laypeople in wide sections of England had worked out, in considerable detail, what a free church would look like, and how authority would be delegated in free churches. The kind of free churches the people had heard about in the Bible stories. Churches without bishops.

It was at this point, during the reign of King Charles I, that the situation got so bad for the free church wanna-bes, that a little group of laypeople got together to plan a solution. They formed themselves into a new business corporation, called the Massachusetts Bay Company, for which they got a charter from the king. By law, if they had a charter from the king to run a business corporation, the officers of the corporate board could run it as they saw fit, as long as they didn't do anything illegal. And such officers could both determine its own membership and elect its own governor. This was by English law which stated that a corporation board was both self governing and self-electing.

With charter in hand from King Charles I, these lawyers and businessmen also got a royal grant of land in North America. The grant, it turned out, was much bigger than they – or the king – realized since nobody in England had any clue, in the 1600's, how big the North American continent was.

Of course, the Mass Bay Company was really no ordinary corporation. What these lay corporate board members did – and intended to do all along – was to set up a colony, actually an independent government, only nominally under the king's jurisdiction, and far enough away from London to live beyond the King's - or the Church of England's – interference. What they ultimately wanted was to establish a New England community of free churches without bishops. Instigators of the plan considered this “a charter – not from the king – but from the Holy Spirit of Love” – to gather themselves into corporate bodies of faith and form free religious societies.

Once this took place word spread fast into the underground gadding circles of England offering encouragement for others to make the journey. But it

managed to spread this word quietly enough that it took a few years before the king figured out the scheme.

Next comes the most intriguing part. Not too long after the Mass Bay Company got the colony in North America established, the board of the corporation simply made every man in the church – and some years later, ever owner of a piece of land in the area – a member of the Company board, and so eligible to vote in annual elections choosing their governor. By these acts, they made the government of this royal colony, New England, a proto-democracy.

By the 1630's the colony – and the company structure – was well established. A very clever maneuver had succeeded. And yet, it left all who were associated with the company – especially the original investors – very nervous. For they knew that the king could, at any time and without reason, revoke the Mass Bay Company's charter.

For this reason the colonists dreaded armed English ships sailing into Massachusetts Bay just as much as the native Indians did. Colonists feared the crown would seize control of their costly experiment. And since many within this enterprise not only left family and friends to do this, they put forth every shilling they owned. No doubt they would be permanently separated from both if the king ever decided to declare all deeds to New England property invalid.

So, as you can well understand, the people of this enterprise were quite obsessed with having an orderly, quiet society. They didn't want any scandalous disputes that might end up in the courts back in England and thus attract government attention. That's why they worked so hard to involve many people, for example, in setting up their town councils and forms of representation so that everyone had a voice. They wanted laws and agreements that everyone could agree on and willingly obey so that all of New England would be – not contentious or argumentative – but orderly, civil and autonomous.

Eventually, King Charles II demanded to examine the charter's legitimacy and, even more importantly, rule on the future faith and structure of the church. Parliament and church authorities met at Winchester Hall for two years to deliberate. The result was a document called the Winchester Confession. It affirmed Calvinism as the essential theology of the church and Presbyterianism as its structure.

It may be surprising to some of us today, but even though Calvinism espoused the depravity of man [sic] and the punishment of hell for sinners, our New England ancestors had very little trouble with the theology of the Winchester Confession. Our theological departure and the stance that we would take defining our place in the religious spectrum was, still, at least a hundred years away.

But the part these ancestors had so much trouble with was the form of church governance cited. Although Presbyterianism was slightly less hierarchical than the former Episcopal Church of England, it was far from the congregational model New Englanders were fighting for.

The response was an assembly of lay and ordained church leaders at Harvard College in 1648 and a document that became known as the Cambridge Platform. This one document has set the stage for much of what has happened for Unitarians and Universalists ever since.

The Cambridge Platform is important to us for many reasons. It helped us establish the right of congregations to govern themselves, call their own ministers, elect and appoint their own lay leaders and officers, establish their own rules of membership, but also because it set forth the notion of the separation of church and state which was later written into the Constitution. Our theology has changed radically since that time. The causes for which we have fought have changed. Ministers, members and even some of our churches have come and gone. Our beliefs in all matters have been tested and transformed by our progressive nature. But the one thing we have maintained in a staunchly conservative fashion is our congregational polity – how we maintain our individual autonomy and communal integrity. How our congregational independence is coupled to the interdependence by which we are in relationship with our denomination. How 'we walk together.' This, over our many years, has remained remarkably the same. It is the fundamental ground of how we function. It is what largely defines us as a religious movement. It is our understanding of covenant.

This understanding is contained in my response whenever I am asked by people unfamiliar with our religion, 'what is Unitarian Universalism?' I tell them – and many of you have heard this as well – 'we are communities who are not united by a common belief, but instead, united by a common practice of bringing our individual beliefs into one place that we may learn

and teach and grow from one another.’ What I am describing is our covenant.

Daniel Breslauer, author of the book *Covenant and Community in Modern Judaism*, points out that making covenant serves two purposes in the Jewish tradition - two purposes that we share. One is the bestowing of identity, the other is the creation of community. In other words, knowing who we are as individuals and who we are as a community and forging a responsible relationship between the two. Knowing that each is tied to the other.

Unitarian Universalists often have difficulty bringing these two together. Because our demographics are that we are generally very smart, relatively powerful people accustomed to having many choices and exercising our freedoms, we tend to lean toward protecting our individualism. We sometimes get confused with the notion of covenant as a restriction of our freedom. It has been said that a Unitarian Universalist is someone who defines "autonomy" to mean, "I do things my way", and covenant to mean, "You do things my way." But true community – the kind of community we value here – cannot flourish under such conditions. Covenant – ‘walking together,’ implies much more than the preservation of our precious individualism. It means being part of something for which we are called to extend our care beyond our own concerns.

The central premise of our history to this point, our desire for autonomy and refusal to be governed by a hierarchy of authority is the notion of covenant. But if we don’t have someone else telling us how to believe, how to act, how to be in relationship with one another, it is incumbent upon us to determine that for ourselves.

Our notion of covenant has changed a great deal over the years. We have come a long way since the days where the invocation of covenant required blood to be spilled and splattered upon those who would take up the covenant. Today our notion of covenant is to avoid blood being spilled.

Our notion of covenant is for us each, as governors of our own community, to determine how we will contribute to and find solace in the care that has the power to transform our lives. It requires the forbearance to ‘bear others in love’ even in their most unlovable moments knowing that there will times when others are asked to bear us in love as well. It is compassionate

commitment to call others to their best selves and trust that, in so doing, we are rising to our own best selves as well.

Consider these words by the late minister of All Souls in Washington DC, A. Powell Davies: “Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church – and would whether I was a preacher or not – because I constantly fall below my own standards and need to be brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent and my church – my church of the free spirit – brings me back to where I want to be.”

Or these words by the Rev. Diane Finkelstein: “I am asked every once in a while if I always practice what I preach. "Of course I do," I always reply. "Except when I don't." What I preach, and what we promise to each other at various times in our lives - these are statements of the ideal we would like to live towards. It is true of marriage vows, of ordination vows, of covenants of all kinds. We make the promise knowing that at times we will fall short of the ideal. When we do fall short, it is the existence of the covenant that helps us to recognize our stumbling, and helps us to figure out how to make amends for our broken promises.”

This afternoon, at 4:00 p.m., we will gather in this room to talk about what kind of covenant can best help us become the community we most want to be. The kind of community that will offer us each ways of becoming the people we hope to become. There will be no authority to dictate what that will be other than our own collective wisdom. There will be no entrails to walk through. No blood spilled. And whatever covenant we create it will be one we can live with. One that is understanding of our differences and partial to our unity. And one that will tell us, “Come, bring who you are and we will find our way together.”

To the Glory of Life.

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