

## **House of Celebration and Sharing**

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered May 20, 2018*

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As many of you are aware, this past winter and spring I delivered the first two sermons in a series of three on this congregation's Healthy Relations Covenant, which reads: (in OOS)

We promise to:

Treat each other with kindness

Celebrate each other's spiritual growth

Listen deeply to others

Speak with courage and humility

Share the ministry of this congregation.

Now we are well into May, and today I hope to complete this trifecta by speaking specifically about the two remaining points in this covenant, which are "celebrating each other's spiritual growth" and "sharing the ministry of this congregation." Underlying all the reflections I've offered about what it means to strive to live by the ideals in this covenant, I am trying to emphasize that even though these words may sound simple and easy, living by them can be hard. Indeed, I believe that this Healthy Relations Covenant, as is, is more of a doorway into a larger covenant; the covenant that articulates *why* it is we want to be together in the first place. This existential covenant of "why" is not something we have written down, and maybe it shouldn't be written down, because it may be a little different for everyone here. As I've said many times, Unitarian Universalism is at

heart a covenantal community – it exists solely on the basis and strength of the people’s agreement to come together for some common purpose.

This Healthy Relations Covenant, by contrast, articulates not so much the *why* but the *how* we are to be together. Together with our Mission statement, which articulates the *what* we do together, these address the what and the how; what I hope to inspire for this congregation is a deeper reflection on the *why*. I think of this covenant as being sort of like our congregational Hippocratic Oath: first, do no harm. Let’s take care that our being together doesn’t actually cause more upset and strife in our lives than we’d find just staying home on Sunday mornings, and we’re off to a pretty good start. But my purpose in delving deeper into these promises is to tease out a little of the why. Why we’re here, why we should care.

So first, a bit of a review.

The first sermon I delivered in this series focused on the first promise: to treat each other with kindness. We talked about how kindness is not the same as “niceness,” and as such it prompts us to be honest and true to others every bit as much as being polite. Indeed, true kindness means we value authenticity over politesse pretty much all the time. I also shared a lesson from Brené Brown, in which she emphasized the value of being generous with others; to assume, unless and until it is proven otherwise, that others are acting from a place of good intentions and a true heart. So even when we are in sharp disagreement with someone else, or they are acting in a way we find challenging, we should make every effort to find that place in our own hearts that can see the good intentions of the other. It is a bit like the Indian greeting *namasté*, as it is often translated as the divine in me bows to or greets the divine in you.

I also spoke about the most important sort of kindness – the ability to be kind to ourselves. Indeed, that is a point I’d make with all these promises – that the most important way to practice them is not necessarily with “others,” but with ourselves.

So too we strive to practice the two communication-oriented promises I dealt with in my second sermon – to listen deeply and speak with humility and courage. Another way to say this is to be honest with ourselves; to listen deeply to what is in our hearts, and to have both the courage and humility to admit to ourselves when we are wrong, when our egos get in the way of us being open and appropriately vulnerable for true relationship.

On this point of speaking with courage and humility, I clarified that the promise – in the case of how we practice it with others – is not actually that we be both courageous and humble at the same time. Rather, I said it is about recognizing our own default natures and adjusting our tendencies in conversation accordingly. *If you happen to be a person that is by nature very vocal and rarely has a problem mustering up the courage to speak, then you should aim to employ some humility at times so that your voice doesn’t drown out others. And, if you happen to be a person who tends to stay quiet and not speak up when there’s something important on your mind, then you should aim to develop more courage so that your voice is heard.*

I also, in the second sermon in this series, invoked a practice that I’ve used frequently in my life called *Nonviolent Communication*, the hallmark of which is that each of us is responsible to express our own needs and feelings and not expect others to do that for us. Furthermore, I stressed that the wish that others may somehow sense our needs and try to fulfill

them without our asking is problematic. It often leads to communication “triangles” and divisiveness in community. Most importantly, I reflected on how these communication values of listening deeply, and speaking with courage and humility are by themselves practices for deep spiritual growth, not just tools by which we get along better.

So that brings me to the two of these promises I wish to highlight today: Celebrating each other’s spiritual growth and sharing the ministry of this congregation.

The term “Shared Ministry,” or “sharing the ministry” became popular in Unitarian Universalist circles about twenty years ago, spurred largely by the seminal book by Rev. Roy Phillips called “Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium” and also through the work of people like former Pacific Northwest District Executive Rev. Anne Odin Heller. In this conception, the term was an attempt to modernize some of our thinking and language to reflect more truthfully what our congregations actually were (and are.) In the past, in many people’s eyes, congregations revolved around the life of a central figure – a charismatic pastor. People often decided whether or not they attended the church based on whether or not they liked the Minister, and pretty much everything the congregation did stemmed from the initiative of the Minister. (Lucky for us we don’t rely on a charismatic Minister here at UUCY.) “Sharing the Ministry” meant that the congregation is broader and more diverse than any one person could represent, and the “ministry” was not just the preacher preaching or the teacher teaching, but was pretty much everything the congregation did. From social engagements to coffee hour, from casual gatherings to nursery rooms, from the congregation’s kitchen to its front office, everything

constitutes the “ministry” of the congregation. So sharing this ministry meant a shared responsibility and ownership – all of us here make this congregation what it is, and we all shape its future.

That may be helpful information to know if you happen to be one who hears the promise to “share the ministry of this congregation” as a nice way to say “Hey bub, there’s work to do, and you’ve got to do it.” I like to hold up this principle not as a way to guilt-trip people into bringing snacks or volunteering to serve on a committee, but rather as a reminder that all of us here do engage in ministry and do shape the nature of this congregation’s life. “The Ministry” is not just about doing, it’s about being.

To illustrate this shift that has occurred over the last couple decades, consider the committee of this congregation we now know as the “Committee on Shared Ministry,” which we’ll hear from at our upcoming Congregational Meeting on June 3. This committee, which is charged with evaluating and reflecting how we are doing fulfilling our mission, is essentially a re-boot of what a couple of decades ago was called a “Ministerial Relations Committee.” In that earlier era, these committees’ main focus was being a conduit for communication between the Minister and the congregation. That may, in this new form, still sometimes be a function of the COSM, but we’ve incorporated a much broader view of what “ministry” means. Also heeding what I said before about avoiding triangles and not expecting others to speak for us, the COSM today is not intended to be a “conduit” at all, but rather a place for bringing forth ideas and concerns that involve the whole congregation – the whole ministry we share.

And so when we say “Share the ministry of this congregation,” we’re not simply saying “share the work,” although that might be one implication. What we’re saying is for each of us to own responsibility to shape this congregation, to speak up when you see something amiss, to celebrate and praise when things seem right, and to take seriously the mission of this congregation as an important aspect of your life.

And speaking of celebrating, we also have this morning the promise that we will “celebrate” each other’s spiritual growth. Hallelujah! We are here to celebrate! I love this injunction, because to me celebrating is at the heart of why we are here as a liberal religious community. It’s part of our mission statement, too – to celebrate – and is the key word in what I think is the closest phrase we have to a tag line (which is marketing speak for a simple declaration of who we are) which is emblazoned on our sign out on the street corner: “Celebrating community and the spirit of life.” I think that celebrating is essentially the liberal version of praise and worship – two other words that we usually avoid because of negative associations. To celebrate is relatively harmless, and holds tremendous potential as a spiritual practice that is best done in community. Together, we celebrate.

It is also tremendously important that we acknowledge one of the other main reasons *why* we’re here – for spiritual growth. Yes, we’re a spiritual community, so to “grow” spiritually – whether that means deepening our practices and commitments or changing our minds altogether is absolutely key to why we’re here. I talked at length about spirituality last fall in reflection of our recent visioning process and the four key areas we identified: community, spirituality, justice and learning. As people who value questions as much as or even more than answers, and

who are more likely to bow to the mystery than to any historic depictions of the divine, spiritual growth means just that: that we are willing and eager to be shaped by our experiences both in and out of religious community and to integrate what we learn from them into our lives as spiritual seekers.

So in this one promise alone we have hit on two key factors that address the question of why we're here: celebration and spiritual growth. Why, then, did I start off this morning saying that this Healthy Relations Covenant doesn't really address the question of *why* we're here?

What a good question. I think it reveals that in this promise alone the deeper work of engaging in a more holistic covenant with our religious community emerges. The problem, as I see it, is these two very critical activities are lumped together in a passive way. To *celebrate* each other's spiritual growth is not the same as to *encourage* spiritual growth both in ourselves and with others within this community and without. Again, the emphasis here seems to be on the word "others" as if spiritual growth was something that happens only to individual people while the rest of us merely "celebrate" it happening when we happen to witness it. I think it would be far more helpful for us to think of this promise as two uniquely different activities: one, we celebrate with each other the fact that we are alive and together as a religious community; two, we each make a commitment to work on our own spiritual growth and to support each other in this work. The former is communal; the latter, deeply personal – even if the community facilitates it happening. But the community can't force it – true spiritual growth only happens when we allow and encourage it within our own hearts.

This point reminds me of something I say to people when they are thinking of joining this congregation. It's contained on a one-page handout (which I know is way too wordy for some of you!) called "Membership and Commitment." On it, I talk about membership as being a commitment to engage in as many of these aspects of congregational life as feasible:

- Attend church regularly.
- Work on your spiritual development.
- Serve the church with joy. (Sharing the ministry, not w/guilt.)
- Contribute as best you can.
- Be involved in service to others.
- Connect to Unitarian Universalism. (Identity.)
- Be open to getting to know new people, and to let people know you.

It is the second of these points that I think is relevant here: to work on your spiritual development. A covenant, in the broad sense, is something that applies not just to people contemplating signing our membership book. It is something we think about, reconsider, and do every time we come to church – or at least frequently. One of the assumptions I make as Minister is that all of you – no exceptions – are here at least in part to work on your own spiritual development. To "grow" spiritually, to use the language of our Healthy Relations Covenant. If you think you've got everything pretty much figured out as far as life and death and God and love and justice are concerned, I'll be tempted to ask you, somewhat rhetorically: what are you doing here, then? I don't want to hear an answer that is limited to celebrating other people's spiritual growth; I'll look for an openness in your



heart and mind that maybe *you* will be prompted to grow spiritually as you interact with this community. This, in my mind, is the single most important requirement for membership in this congregation – not to sign the book or pledge a dollar amount or serve on a committee, but to be open to learning new things, to having your opinion changed, to grow alongside the rest of us in this spiritual community.

Doing this series on our Healthy Relations Covenant has been helpful to me, even if not for many of you. Some of you do know that when I set out to do this series, I was hoping that we'd wade a little deeper into the *why* part of the covenant, as in "Why are we here?" That is what the word "covenant" often refers to in Unitarian Universalist congregations. We don't have a creed, we have a covenant that defines our purpose. But I see better now that this Healthy Relations Covenant is precisely that – a covenant about our relations, not our purpose. And it is a fine covenant for that purpose, one that I could devote a dozen more sermons to if I had the inclination, and one that each of us can continually strive to live up to day after day, year after year. And not just in the church, but in our families, our workplaces, and any other community in which we relate to others.

In the end, it is perhaps foolhardy to try to write down a few words that capture the essence of why we're here, or even just a few words that guide how it is we are to be together. It seems likely that no matter what concise few sentences we craft to try to articulate some common understanding, that someone – maybe someone like me – will begin unpacking them and adding more words to them to make them more complicated. I've been accused of being "so very 'UU'" in my tendency to want to do this, and that's a healthy criticism on one level because it is

likely true that we Unitarian Universalists tend to get really wordy at times and try to think things through too much. I'm thinking of the time a few years ago when we were developing our mission statement and it almost came to be that we formed a subcommittee to determine whether or not the Oxford Comma belonged in that statement. Indeed, as I talked about last week one challenge for us UUs is to learn to go "beyond words" sometimes in order to truly understand what is important.

But I also respond to that accusation by saying "what's wrong with being 'so UU'?" We are a religion based largely on reason and discourse, after all, and to go beyond words does not mean that we ignore or gloss over words to begin with; words *are* important. Besides, the caricature of UUs being needlessly wordy is in many ways unfair. Compared to most other religions, which have entire books filled with words that they spend their lifetimes reading, re-reading and trying to understand, we UUs have remarkably few words that bind us together as a community. Lacking anything else, our foundational covenants are our sacred texts, and it takes a lot of thinking and reflecting and re-reading to figure out how to translate them into our daily lives.

So, like I said, maybe in the end it's foolhardy to try. Maybe it works better if we understand that our covenant to be together is simply too sublime or ephemeral to be put into words. It is a complex interplay between our heart's deep desires and the world's great needs, affected as it is by the millions of stories and experiences that each of us bring here every time we gather. Like we say when we welcome people into worship, we welcome you with both your heavy hearts and your joy-filled spirits. And whatever it is that you bring, we accept and embrace your experiences

as authentic and true, and together, in love, walk the walk of our covenant to be together.

If that's not complicated, I don't know what is.



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