

## **Covenant: Cross My Heart**

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse  
18 May 2008  
Chip Roush

RE COVENANT #1 As our service this morning is about covenants, we have asked our religious education groups to share the covenants that they wrote. All of our groups are named after famous UU educators; the first group we'll hear from is the Bronson Alcott group.

Bronson Alcott Group Covenant How we will treat each other:

We will remember that every person on a baseball team is important!!

We promise: to use words like "please" not to hit, kill, or murder not to call names not to use abusive language not to make fun of anyone

OPENING WORDS Ours is not a creedal faith; none of the newer members here this morning—none of *\*any\** of us—were required to say "I believe *this*" or "I believe *that*" in order to join our congregation. Rather, ours is a covenantal church; we make a promise to walk together, to share the good and bad times of our lives.

We did not join because we were commanded to, by a supernatural being; nor because we were afraid we'd go to hell, if we did not; we joined because we *\*chose\** to; and we stay because of the promises we made, and because of the promises made to us.

May those promises feel thick and strong and sustaining, in this and every moment of our lives.

RE COVENANT #2 Sophia Lyon Fahs Group Covenant We will treat each other: Responsibly Respectfully and Equally Resourcefully like Reconcilers

RE COVENANT #3 John Murray Atwood Group Covenant

Our Covenant Treat each other with respect. Have fun. Have yummy snacks. One person talks at a time. Be quiet and listen! No put-downs!

FIRST READING This is the congregational covenant recited every week by the Unitarian Universalist Society of Geneva, written as part of their Declaration of Purpose, in 1842:

Being desirous of promoting practical goodness in the world, and of aiding each other in our moral and religious improvement, we have associated ourselves together – not as agreeing in opinion, not as having attained universal truth in belief or perfection in character— but as seekers after truth and goodness.

SECOND READING The Reverend Ms. Alice Blair Wesley writes often on the ministers' email chat, and in other, more scholarly places, on the importance of our covenantal faith. This is an email she wrote to the ministers last week, used with her permission:

Dear People,

ALL institutions are alike in some ways. E.g., a free church is SOMETHING LIKE a school, a museum, a non-profit do-good, a political party, a theater, an army, a co-op . . . The list could go on and on. If you cannot say what DISTINGUISHES the free and liberal church from other institutions, you have no doctrine of the church.

Tom thinks we have a "Co-Op" vision of membership. . . [where] an organization . . . provides services to . . . members of the organization, who share the expenses . . . Members get to vote . . . [They have] shared services, shared expenses, [and] shared power. . ."

What "Co-Op" has ever been organized because its members vow[ed] to help each other live in ways [pursuing] those realities most worthy of their love and devotion? If we have a "Co-Op" vision of church membership, it's because we have [for] far too long focused on issues of considerably less than ultimate worth.

Under those circumstances, people come to be part of "nice" community, to hear "interesting" addresses, to belong to "something" larger than themselves. And sure, all those "reasons" will eventually lose out to some equivalent of Sunday soccer games if that's really all the church is for.

Tom wrote, ". . . NPR and Public Broadcasting offer a different, post-membership model of an organization. The organization provides services to everyone in the community who wants it – those people who are especially committed to the dissemination of those services become financial supporters. They use the language of membership, but they obviously mean something different when they ask you to 'join NPR' than when you are asked to 'join First Parish of East Overshoe.'

[There is] nothing novel whatsoever about that. This is how all non-profits, [which were] modeled after the late 18th century British Bible Society, operate, including the UUA. "Members" –really just financial contributors –play NO role in the organization's governance (unless you count filling out an opinion survey as participation in "governance"). Basically, "members" are just consumers of programs some hierarchical, self-selecting board "sells." So why call them members? For purposes of propaganda. "Belonging" is a basic human need. So, make contributors feel good by calling them "members."

The above is not AT ALL to disparage the good work of many non-profit corporations. It is merely to say they are NOT free churches.

It is one thing to set aside membership as a "metric." It's something else entirely to become a "post-membership" church. Set this down as a law: Declining organizations and societies LOWER their standards and make it easier to "join." Like, "just sign the book." Or, don't even do that. Just come and donate, if we put on a good show. You can [even] "belong" ... without ever coming or giving money! ... Right? Wrong, big time.

The freely entered and profoundly MEANINGFUL covenant is the root idea of the free church and ultimately of the free society. Unless it starts to mean MUCH MORE to enter the covenant of our local churches and our Association, liberally religious churches ... will stay on the skids and soon die off. What will replace us? Dictatorship.

Thine, Alice Blair Wesley

HOMILY How many of you have ever broken a promise? How many have ever \*made\* a promise, that you knew you were going to break? How many have \*never\* promised something that you knew, at the time, you could not deliver?

We humans are a tricky lot. Why else would we need a word like "promise"? If we meant what we said, we could just say "I will do it" and not find it necessary to say "I \*promise\* I will do it" or "I \*swear\* I will do it" or "I solemnly swear"...Were we not so willing to lie, or at least, "tell the truth to fit the case," as my in-laws would say, we would not have invented the "pinkie swear," where the two parties hook their little fingers as they make their vows. We would not say things like "cross my heart" or any of its grotesque add-ons involving death and needles and eyes. We might not have bibles in courtrooms, or have special gestures, like this one for the Boy Scout oath: "on my honor, I will do my best: to do my duty" and so on, which is what the cute dog on our order of worship is doing.

On the other hand, as I wrote in my column in our weekly email, the *Flash*, many animals also bend the truth a bit. Some researchers believe the reason our brains got so large is from learning to tell better lies. Whether or not lies have driven evolution and increased our brain size, they have certainly increased our human vocabulary.

The word "covenant" dates back to 2,000 years BCE, before our common era. The Hittite people called their kings "suzerains," and they drew up suzerainty covenants, or suzerainty treaties, with the various kings they conquered. These covenants were created by the Hittite victors, and \*imposed\* on their subjugated vassal kings. The vassal was forced to swear allegiance, fidelity and exclusive loyalty to the suzerain. In return, the suzerain pledged that he would help and protect his faithful vassal. The conquered king might accept or reject the covenant, but he could not alter the terms and conditions. They drew up lots of these covenants, and usually buried one copy under a giant pile of rocks which provided both a safe place to keep the treaty, and a convenient thing to point to, and remind everyone of their covenant.

As the Hebrews were telling their sacred stories, the word "covenant" perfectly described the relationship they had with their god. However generous the provisions were, there was still a huge power difference, between humans and their god. And the people had no say in the covenant, the terms were all dictated to them.

Depending upon how you count them, there are approximately seven covenants in the Hebrew Bible; the three most important are the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic. In the first, god told Abraham, "leave your country and your family and go where I tell you, and I will give you lots of land, and more

children and descendents than you can count, a whole nation of descendents.” Abraham did go where his god told him, and he is considered the father of all three of the major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is why Jewish baby boys are circumcised, because it is the sign that they are heirs to the Abrahamic covenant.

Later, as many of Abraham’s descendents were proving to be, well, human and fallible, their god delivered them out of slavery and then laid down some rules: “follow these commandments, and I will make you a great and holy nation.” Now, by “these commandments,” he meant the top ten, which Moses carried out on two stone tablets, and over six hundred more, which took about three books, and 150 pages, of the Hebrew Bible, to spell out. The Sabbath, the day of rest, in which humans can take a break from their toil, and reconnect with the divine energy inside us all, is the sign of the Mosaic covenant.

The Davidic covenant re-affirms the promises of the other two, and specifically states that the Messiah will come from the lineage of King David, and that his kingdom will last forever. This is why the early Christians made sure to demonstrate that Jesus \*was\* a descendent of David; and it is why the Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah— he did not deliver them from their troubles, and he didn’t even have a kingdom, not even for a day, much less one that lasted forever.

Now, flash forward a few thousand years. When people are trying to find language, like “I promise” and “cross my heart” to indicate “this time, I really, really mean it,” they used the word “covenant.” They probably hadn’t heard of the Hittite suzerains, they just knew it was biblical. The word “covenant” had an aura of religious power, a lot more “oomph” than a mere promise.

Professor David Bumbaugh described a covenant as a triangle. There are two parties at the bottom corners of the triangle; and the promise between them is the base; and the vertical component, the peak of the triangle, makes it a covenant. At one time, that vertical component may have been the punishing and vengeful god, who would smite you if you broke your covenant; I prefer to think of the vertical piece as my highest values, a deep love and sense of connection that compels me to \*want\* to keep my covenant with another.

So, that’s how we describe it to our children and youth: a covenant is a promise with “oomph.” And speaking of our children, have you noticed anything about the covenants that they wrote, the ones they’ve been reading all morning?

When you compare our RE group covenants with the covenant from the UU Society of Geneva, for example, you might notice that our kids’ covenants are all internally focused, while the UUSG covenant has both an internal and a strong external focus.

Now, you might think that this is because the children and youth who wrote these are still morally undeveloped, still pretty ego-centric. And you might be right, and that would be developmentally appropriate, for their ages.

And there is another component. Our group covenants lack much external focus because the children and youth *lack the freedom to pursue those aspects*. They cannot say how they will behave in the world, because they cannot get out into the world, without help from a parent or caregiver.

This is how our modern understanding of covenant is exactly opposite the biblical and ancient Hittite understanding. Our covenants are freely entered, by people of relatively equal standing.

And therefore, covenantal relationships are the perfect vehicle for a free church or a free, democratic society. They still have that vertical component, of shared higher values, and they are \*chosen,\* *freely*.

In our second reading, Alice Blair Wesley wrote, “The freely entered and profoundly meaningful covenant is the root idea of the free church and ultimately of the free society. Unless it starts to mean much more to enter the covenant of our local churches and our Association, liberally religious churches ...will ... soon die off.” She is dismayed by congregations who take membership too lightly, who neither understand nor communicate the compelling force of our covenant. Alice fears that congregations which do not stress the verticality of their covenant, who do not stress the “cross my heart—I really mean it” aspect of the promises we make to each other, will begin to shrink, and fail, and disappear.

Fortunately, we are not in danger of that happening here. The generosity of this congregation is astounding. Not just with money, but with time and effort and compassion, our fellow members live up to our covenant.

And that covenant has benefits on \*both\* sides of the triangle. By living up to our covenant, our highest ideals, we may be changed and deepened in ways that we cannot predict.

I know one member, who volunteered to deliver food to someone ill at home, who was so struck by the experience that he is eager for more such opportunities, and is planning how he might restructure his summer, so he can fit in more of that pastoral care work.

And a couple other members, who agreed, perhaps with some reservations, to “do their duty” and visit people as part of the stewardship campaign...Afterward, they confessed they had been sort-of dreading it, when it turned out to be a really wonderful time—they can hardly wait to do it again, next year. Their conversations with other members, the sharing of stories and values, left them feeling deeply grateful for the church and their fellow members.

Sometimes, we support each other because that is what we value, it is part of our covenant together. Sometimes, others support us. And sometimes—often, even—it turns out to be a win-win, as our covenantal relationship, our freely-entered bonds of affection, benefit and deepen us all.

So may we be.

NEW MEMBER RITUAL And therefore we are pleased to be able to welcome others into our life-sustaining, covenantal community...

Current members read: “We, the current members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse welcome you into our circle of love and commitment. May you find comfort here, for life often carries with it pain, and may you find joy in the shared gifts of life and love; May you be challenged here, for questioning is a source of love and learning; May you add your voice to ours finding harmony in the diversity we affirm; May you build on your faith here, a faith that sustains you during life's transitions; May you find your spiritual home here, creating with us a community which welcomes all; Above all, may you help us to create a better world, cultivating human wholeness and authentic interdependence.”

All read: “We, the established and recently joined members of our Unitarian Universalist congregation do covenant together: Finding healing and joy for ourselves, we shall seek to give support to others; Being challenged, we shall grow within ourselves and as a community; Sharing our spiritual journeys, may our lives serve as beacons, proclaiming justice and joy to all beings, embodying the hope that goodness, beauty, and truth will prevail.”

So may we be

Please be seated.

REFLECTION Being desirous, of promoting practical goodness, we are a congregation, creating a better world. Not as agreeing in opinion or belief, not as having attained universal truth or perfection in character, but as builders, providers, workers, and seekers after truth and goodness, we have associated ourselves together.

Now strengthened by our newer members, let us go forth and live out our shared values and covenant. So may we be.