

Sunday, Sept. 10, 2017
Ingathering Sunday - UU Fellowship Kamloops
“Promises, Promises” – The Rev. Helen McFadyen

(sing) Come, Come, Whoever You Are...

*Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair,
come yet again come... **Though you’ve broken your vows 1,000 times...***

We sometimes omit that part of Rumi’s poem found in the familiar UU hymn, despite that it is the key to our whole philosophy of covenant.

No matter how many times we fall out of covenant with our religious community, we can come back to the circle, seek forgiveness, try again.

Rev. Anne Mason writes: “To seek the truth in love means that even when we stumble, we continue to love. Even when we flail, we stay in relationship. To seek the truth in love means that we talk about the hard things rather than denying that things can be hard.”

This is a very difficult task. It is not something I find easy to do, but it is something that I continue to try to be brave enough to do.

I would like to share a story...something that happened just a few days ago.

It was the big opening welcome back to school bash for TRU students, faculty and staff. I was there too...as one of the Multifaith chaplains.

We represent many different churches and faith traditions...various Christian denominations, and recently, a Buddhist and Unitarian Universalist. There’s been an effort in recent years to bring the chaplains into a common understanding and frame of conduct and responsibility for how they provide spiritual care. My peers are mostly lovely and well-meaning volunteers, some clergy, others not. They have had little professional training, except in my case...my professional background is in clinical pastoral education and spiritual health provision in hospitals.

But there’s one individual in particular...a small, wiry character who has had pretty much free reign to prosthelytize at TRU.

That day, our multifaith table was supposed to be solely for general information about the overall supports we provide to students, staff, faculty. No promoting of any individual program offered by a representative of a particular church or religious group

At one point, I suddenly became aware that my table buddy had placed up a display sign with “bible study -sign up here” ...completely disregarding the directives of our committee and the guidelines of the university.

This breach of boundaries was relatively harmless, though I think a case could be made for unethical behaviour and even passive spiritual abuse by virtue of one's misuse of power and influence as a religious leader or representative.

My response was visceral. I felt nauseous and disgusted. I sometimes have this inexplicable hard-wired response to pushy, aggressive, zealous religious recruiters...I see it as a form of ecclesiastical assault. This pathetic little man, who has been going around TRU for 20 years, herding kids to his bible study group, hopeful they will convert them to his brand of Christianity, is hardly a white supremacist or neo-Nazi hate-monger or moral majority figure...but that's pretty much how I perceived him in this instance.

I left after my shift at the event...thinking, I should have torn up his sign, because he'll only put it back up again....though, I did have the forethought to take a picture of it with my phone...and later sent it to the student services office and the chair of multifaith chaplains with a request they bring order and accountability to the multifaith chaplains group.

Little shwarmy chaplain buddy knew what the guidelines were, but chose to ignore them. He broke covenant with the university and my trust as one of the multifaith chaplains.

But it's his problem, right?

I want to take the higher road...to be a model of love and forgiveness and acceptance. However, it is so difficult when one's anger and sense of betrayal clouds thinking and heart. It's painful to be on the disappointing end of a broken promise!

Forgiveness when promises, vows, and covenants are broken is forever...though this does not mean we ignore the errors and failings that have created so much pain. We must call people back to covenant again and again.

What was the last promise you made to your spouse, or child, or friend, or sibling? Think you'll keep it? What are the barriers that impede you from fulfilling your promises?

How about promises to yourself? What have you promised to do or change in your life? And what behaviours or patterns do you default to that might sabotage your efforts?

Why do we need promises anyway? Why can't people simply do and be what they are meant to be rather than talking about our intentions all the time?

Are we so afraid of being tricked, taken advantage of, or having our expectations shattered that we need to frame every relational experience in terms of making or eliciting promises? Especially when the price of failing at promise is often crushing disappointment, disillusionment, and loss of trust?

I wonder if the act of promising is a way to intentionally express our expectations...."if you do this I will do that and we'll be ok"? Is it that we need accountability? Or want witness to our efforts to being our higher, better selves?

What of the covenants we enter as religious community?

Rev. Thom Belote, minister at Shawnee Mission UU Congregation outside of Kansas City tells the story of being at a protest rally after the Governor of Missouri signed legislation that called for abstinence-only sex education in all Missouri schools.

So, Thom was there at the protest, sign in hand, advocating for an approach to health education that says “information and education, rather than ignorance, is good health policy.” Now, at the rally were two young reporters for a religious magazine, who, when they heard a minister was at the protest, went right to him for an interview.

Here’s how he describes the conversation:

“I introduced myself as a Unitarian Universalist minister. They asked me how to spell that, and then they asked me to explain what UU’s believe. I explained that we are a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not a creed of what we all must believe together.”

Then the questions really began: “Well, does your church believe in the Bible?” they asked.

Thom’s response: “That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal congregation. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.”

“Does your church believe in God?” they asked. “That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.”

This went on and on but eventually they reports got what he was saying.

Then Thom writes, “I think that sometimes we stress the fact that we are not a creedal faith a lot more than we stress that we are a covenantal faith.

We emphasize the creeds we are not asked to recite more than the covenants we are asked to share. We over-emphasize the fact that we are not necessarily required to believe in God or believe a certain doctrine about the Bible or the afterlife. And we under-emphasize the covenantal dimensions of our shared faith, preferring not to articulate the covenants of behavior we do share.”

(Source: “Covenant – Not Creedal” by Thom Belote, 2009)

Newly elected president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the first woman in history to hold that office, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray writes about covenant:

“Covenant is an ancient word. One of the oldest religious references is from the Hebrew Bible and the covenant that YHWH makes with Abraham and Moses. In our religious tradition, covenant is primary.

Our forbearers, having been on the wrong side of the creedal tests too often, long ago gave up creed in favor of the right of conscience, the freedom to trust the truth, the doubt, the questions and the convictions of one's heart and mind.

However, we sometimes wrongly say that this right of conscience or freedom of belief is what is most important. We sometimes wrongly say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are. This is wrong. Any one of us could practice religious freedom sitting at home in front of the TV, or while sipping a latte at Starbucks. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community.

But, it is covenant that brings us out of isolation, out of selfish concerns, out of individualism to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world. This, even without creed, even without shared beliefs, is sacred, religious work."

As we begin this new church season, the work I want to lift up with you, my congregation this year...is deeply personal. The lyrics of David Miles' song, When It Comes My Turn* captures my sentiments well:

*I'm getting old but I'm not old yet
I'm already worried that I might forget
How to laugh, how to love
How to live, how to learn
I want to die with a smile when it comes my turn*

*(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o2J9dOwHc8>)

When I worked as the Director of Spiritual Care at an Assisted Living residence in Edmonton, I witnessed the experiences of 150 elderly and physically vulnerable residents. Many of them were preoccupied with reconciling themes of loss -- loss of independence, autonomy, privacy, dignity, physical and mental ability, and even loss of joy, meaning and purpose.

Many struggled with boredom, loneliness, frustration, depression, grief, anger, fear, worry, and regret.

We smile when we feel contented, satisfied, safe, and pleased...not when we are afraid, depressed, in pain, or lacking for life's necessities...in other words, to die with a smile is to sustain quality of life as long as possible.

I want to die with a smile when it comes my turn. What about you?

We are ALL getting older... many of us in this Fellowship find ourselves in, what Jane Fonda calls, the "Third act" of our lives....and most younger members here have aging parents in their 3rd Act.

Many of us look to religion to answer some of the deepest questions of our lives and deepest yearnings of our spirits. Now, we, the collective ministry of the UU Fellowship of Kamloops stand poised to break open these questions with the larger Kamloops community.

I am excited and optimistic about the energy I feel around me from the Re-visioning people who are helping discern pathways for this Fellowship to reach out beyond these walls...(introduce the team).

We believe that given this fellowship's small numbers and limited resources we must choose a focused approach, one that inspires, calls us, sustains us, needs us. We want to model a ministry of presence within and without this fellowship, with people who are concerned about issues of aging.

Next Friday night there will be a potluck and social right here starting at 5 pm. Come on down...let's have fun time, sharing time, quality time with one another. I also want you to hear all about the opportunities the Revision team and our shared ministry is developing over at Kamloops Seniors village for example with a community partner program I'll be offering twice a month, and a Unitarian Universalist service offered by our amazing, Heather Allen.

This is a timely and relevant approach to ministry and outreach in the community. Whether directly affecting individuals in their 3rd Act, or the adult children of seniors who are coping with the processes of transition and finding appropriate housing and care for their parents, I believe with my heart and soul that this opens a pathway to recovery and growth for this Fellowship...but only if everyone makes way for the living.

There are a thousand ways to be part of a shared vision...even for those people who are tired, skeptical, or worried. Those of us with hope and optimism will model hope and optimism for those who lack it. We will honour together the history, accomplishments and brighter days of a younger congregation....but we must not allow romantic notions of how things "used to be" impede the change and direction in shared ministry we need... so, make way for the living, my friends.

This direction is not merely about attending to our own aging selves...or community "do-gooding"-- Ageism is a justice issue, and one of health ethics and social responsibility. With Canadians now living many more years on average than ever, we must recognize and respond to the fact that our society is failing miserably to meet the health and residential needs of seniors which sustains quality of life. Let's face it, we are talking about a whole aging generation that is systematically being disenfranchised, disrespected, and disempowered by a culture which disproportionately values youth, ability, and speedy productivity over wisdom, experience, and what I call, achingly beautiful and sacred vulnerability.

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, "Who am I?" inevitably leads to a deeper one, "Whose am I?" -- because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask, "Whose am I?" is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder:

Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

Exploring these questions circles us round to covenant, for it brings us into an understanding of the ways in which we are not alone. Our lives are inextricably bound up with the lives of others, even if we choose not to see those threads. Being a part of a covenantal faith acknowledges those threads and then asks the question: "Given that we are connected, given that we are brothers and sisters, given that we share a future, a planet, a world -- how then, shall we live?"

May it be so, and Amen.