

Seven Principles around the Welcome Table

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Rev. Paul Beckel

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Gathering Songs

All Creatures of the Earth & Sky #203
The Principles Song

Welcome

Let's begin today with a story from my colleague Rev Erika Hewitt, who writes:

All material from other sources today have been adapted or shortened. The originals can be found at <https://www.uua.org/worship/words>.

Ding-dong. When my friend Beth answered her door one day, she found a pair of earnest Mormon missionaries.

Being Beth, she invited them in, listened to what they had to say, and in response shared her “good news” — her beliefs about justice and inclusion; of being responsible for the most vulnerable among us; of countering oppression with love. The point wasn't to change their minds, and the missionaries must have realized that they weren't going to change hers. Beth's intention was to create a moment of connection beyond—or in spite of—opposing beliefs.

At the end of their visit, one of the Mormons asked, “Shall we pray together before we leave?”

“Yes,” said Beth, “I'll go first.” And so she said a prayer, and then the missionaries said a prayer, and they parted ways.

Days went by; the weather grew oppressively hot. Again one afternoon, Beth heard her doorbell. On her doorstep were the same missionaries, wilting in the harsh sun.

“Can we have some water?” one of them asked.

Beth remembered the words of Jesus: ‘I was thirsty and you gave me drink!’ “Of course,” she said, “come in.”

The young men drank their water, thanked her, and left. She never saw them again — but those missionaries have never left *my* mind, because their story forces me to examine my own heart and the way its doors sometimes stay stubbornly closed.

Of all the doors they'd knocked on, in all the neighborhoods in Beth's town, a pair of devoted Mormons sought help from Beth not just because she had embodied the religion of kindness, but also because she risked opening her door to them the first time they visited.

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And so: welcome to BUF. All who come in the spirit of goodwill are welcome here. If you affirm and promote the same principles that this congregation shares with Unitarian Universalists around the world, and even if you don't.

Let's open the doors of our hearts today not only to newcomers, tho -- but to those we've known for a long time whose understandings of the principles have evolved over the years. We come today, and we will probably leave, not agreeing on the nature of the divine, or on the correct response to every ethical dilemma. And yet we come together in covenant, and we invite, or re-invite, all who voluntarily share this aspiration.

Rev. Lisa Ward puts it this way:

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming. This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.

A creed creates a static truth, something that does not incorporate new insights and realities. A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives.

A creed seeks uniformity and a unison voice.

A covenant seeks harmony and a shared voice. Sometimes we may arrive at a unison, but it is not required.

A creed gives authority to the statement.

A covenant gives authority to shared intention.

A creed creates an "us" and "them."

A covenant invites relationship.

The courage within this covenant is in the acceptance and celebration of life, with all of its challenges, pain, ironies and joys.

Our task in covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripples of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

Let's share, then, our covenant:

Lighting the Chalice

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

Children's Focus*The Mitten*

Jan Brett

Summary: A child loses his snow-white mitten in the snow, but a long series of animals find it and snuggle inside — from mole ... to bear.

Eracism

on Sojourner Truth

Heidi Ohana

Where God Is

Kenny Wiley

The first time my heart felt broken, I went to church. When my mom died, I went to church. When I failed a class, I went to church. *When I failed a friend*, I went to church. When I felt like I'd failed at life, I went to church.

I didn't go asking for forgiveness. I didn't go asking for salvation.

I went to church to be reminded, through hugs from friends, awkward interactions with strangers, and inspired messages from leaders, that no matter how down I feel, I still matter. I still have worth.

My God says, "Whoever you are, you are enough. Whomever you love, you are enough. Whatever your race or ethnicity, you are enough. Whatever your abilities, you are enough. Whatever your economic class, you are enough. Whatever your gender identity, you are enough. Whatever you do for a living, you are enough. If you don't have a job right now, you are enough. You are a human being, and so you are enough!"

My God says this when we come together, worship together, listen deeply to one another, and love one another. This is the God of my Unitarian Universalist faith.

My minister in college started the prayer with the same words every Sunday. I don't remember most of it; I do recall that he used the phrase, "*alone together*." We experience life through our own lenses, yet we don't have to go it alone.

I know too well that grieving the loss of a parent is a long, exhausting road. I also know that walking alongside a mourning friend can also feel taxing. Being there for others can be hard. It can be tough to work up the courage to talk with a newcomer. Yet I believe that it is in those public spaces that God or the Spirit of Life truly resides.

In the days after my mom's death, I felt like hiding. Doing so would have been perfectly okay. I decided, though, to go to church. My friends went with me, and the community held me up, as well as my family. Being in community *was harder than being alone—yet it was what I needed*. I needed to sit in that sanctuary with my friends. I needed to sing those hymns and hear the voices of others.

I believe that living out our faith requires interaction beyond our own selves. I believe that's where God is. Through covenant with others,

we reach God,
we know we are enough,
and we are made better.

We strengthen our souls and increase our capacity for love and understanding.

Meditation / Silence (5:00)

Becoming a “Real” American

Yuri Yamamoto

When I took the “Intercultural Development Assessment” my trainer told me that I had some issues with my own cultural values and practices. I responded, “Why do you think I came to this country? I hated it there!”

I was very unhappy in Japan. When I graduated from college as the only female majoring in animal science, no professional job for women was available. All the professors were male. One older woman researcher with a doctoral degree *was paying the university* so she could continue her research.

When I came to this country, I explained, I felt liberated from suffocating Japanese cultural norms. I didn't go back home for twenty years.

The trainer listened to me patiently and said that perhaps this assessment might not work well for immigrants. “At any rate,” she continued, I should find ways to accept my own culture. This recommendation confused me: I knew exactly how I should *behave in Japan* — but there was no way I would accept it.

For many years after coming to the United States, I didn't fully understand the cultural cues around me. Initially, this gave me a false sense of liberation. I often interpreted uncomfortable situations to be my fault, as an ignorant immigrant. Trying hard to assimilate, I unconsciously suppressed what came naturally to me. Because I wanted to believe that emigrating to the United States was the right decision, everything about my new country had to be better.

Today I am much more critical toward the norms of white middle class America. Friends who are not part of the dominant culture have given me perspective. I travel back home more often. I used to consider Japanese bows humiliating, but now I can see in them the respect and appreciation for others. *Both cultures* have things to teach me.

Fear Can't Last

Rev Robin Tanner

This is an in-the-middle story, so it's best if you do not expect a resolution. There are so many resolved stories where the crisis passes and the triumph is clear.

Sometimes we need a tale shouted from the whale-belly of worry.

When the letter arrived we were informed that our two-week old infant was tested for 57

different medical conditions while he was in the hospital. And then came the line: “The test needs to be repeated.”

It was followed by all manner of assurances that nothing was necessarily wrong—but we should contact the hospital or our pediatrician immediately. I began catastrophizing. I even searched the internet for a list of the fifty-seven conditions. I did everything *except* call the pediatrician.

And here we breathe anxiously two weeks later. So, this is a story of in-the-middle sent out to all those in-the-middlers. It’s for those at the edge with a cheering crowd shouting, “It will be fine!” *It’s for those in the belly of the whale, feeling daylight coming in through the blowhole, trying to wind up the courage to burst toward daylight.* It’s for those holding a phone, staring at the keypad, trying to promise, “I will...tomorrow.” And for those wondering how their story ends.

This is a prayer for all of us: Beloved, companions in whale-bellies of fear and terror, let us gift one another with the grace of solidarity in these days, and the courage to push together until day breaks. Amen.

Musical Meditation

The Kindness of Others

Rayla Mattson

My youngest child, who is autistic, has taught me so much — and yet there are times, like our morning bus routine, when her autism causes me anxiety. We have to wait for her bus for up to twenty minutes on a small strip of grass on a busy road, and I have to be very creative to keep her entertained – and out of the street. (I wonder how many people we entertain each morning.)

One day last month, a white woman pulled over and ran over to us with a shopping bag. She said she sees us every morning and is so moved by my obvious love and adoration for my daughter that she felt compelled to do something kind for us. She noticed that I never have on a coat and I often stand in the rain. She didn’t know if the things would fit, she said, but the receipt was in the bag. She smiled and drove away.

As I looked down at the bag, I had very mixed emotions. I have a winter coat, but my worn-out sweatshirt is usually more comfortable. I stand in the rain *because umbrellas cause anxiety* for my little one. Did she do this because I’m black? Why did she feel I needed these items?

I put my daughter on the bus, went inside, and found a note in the bag. She was a single mom who had struggled for years to raise her boys. She didn’t know if I needed anything, but was drawn to me and my daughter. The note said to return the items and get what I wanted if I didn’t want what was in the bag.

My eyes filled with tears. Amid these racially tense times and political unrest and horrible acts of violence we see almost daily, she just needed to do something nice for someone. Seeing my daughter and me every day reminded her of the good this world has. I think she needed that connection.

Although I have what I need for the winter, I'm still a struggling single mother of three. I took the items to the store and exchanged them for items I'd been wanting. I sent out a blessing for her to the universe and held on to the notion that there are those of us who want to reach out to others; who believe that there's goodness in the world, and want to find it. And I am grateful.

The Miraculous Pitcher

Barbara Rohde

One of my favorite childhood stories was "The Miraculous Pitcher." An elderly, poor, generous-hearted couple invite two gods, disguised as beggars, to come into their cottage to rest and eat. The gods keep asking that their bowls be replenished, and the old couple become sad and embarrassed because they know the pitcher is empty. But the gods show them otherwise. No matter how often they pour from the pitcher, it is always full.

I suppose that as a child, what I liked was the thought of possessing such a pitcher. Much later I realized that, in some sense, I did. The story of the miraculous pitcher seems to be telling us that *in the realm of the spirit there is no such thing as a non-renewable resource.*

Somehow we've gotten it backward: For centuries we have believed that material resources are infinite. But the *resources of the spirit need to be hoarded* with care. We act as if the supply of oil can go on forever. But there are limits to the amount of love we can give away.

We are beginning to realize that this planet is our only home; we can no longer make a mess of the place and then move on. But are we any more aware of the truth in the story of the miraculous pitcher—or the loaves and the fishes? Do we find it hard to believe that we could find the spiritual nourishment to meet the needs of this chaotic age?

The wisdom of the centuries can give us hope. If we do not let our fears have dominion, we may discover that in the midst of pain we find inner strength, in the midst of bewilderment we find inner clarity.

In the midst of nourishing another, we may find ourselves nourished.

Social and Environmental Justice Collection

for the *Restorative Community Coalition*

There Is More Love Somewhere

Glen Thomas Rideout

Last summer at General Assembly, a woman walked up to me after a worship service that I had been leading.

"Doctor Rideout!" she said. She held my hands as if we had known each other for the longest time. She looked into eyes and she said, "You know what? *I* always sing that song: *There is more love right here....* There is more love *right here....* I'm gonna keep on 'cause I found it.... I don't understand why we don't sing that here at GA. We've already found a community of love."

And because she had enough compassion and grace to call me Dr. Rideout, she had given me

enough time and opportunity to summon up a bit of stillness from the weary remnants of my churchman's posture.

She looked into my eyes and spoke and sang to me with her own truth. She asked with genuine curiosity why it is that *we don't all sing* the words *that she* had come to know.

I was compelled to respond to this person I had just met, "Thank you for trusting me with that question." And then I explained to her why I thought it was necessary — particularly with the music of people of color — that we enter and examine these songs with more curiosity than colonization.

I thanked her, and I explained that for those of us who live with the privilege of knowing love, it can be difficult to understand the perspective of one who lives without such a privilege.

I explained that it can be difficult to understand the lived experience of those who have trouble finding the evidence of love in their immediate vicinity; in their church; in their neighborhood; in their city; in their nation; even in their planet.

I offered that if we, as a spiritual community of Unitarian Universalists, populated by well-meaning people, are to mean anything to the lives and the deaths of people of color, we must begin by learning — not squelching — the forms of expression that arise from these living perspectives.

And she said, "Thank you. I've never heard it expressed that way. I've never understood it that way. And I will never sing it that same way again."

When we inhabit the music -- the forms of expression of people who lived their lives along the margins of notice -- we must notice that we have entered holy ground, a sacred space of learning; a sacred space of relationship.

Sending Song

Hush

#1040

Benediction

"Share the good news at all times. If necessary, use words."

—St. Francis of Assisi

Circle 'Round