

**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
**“To Resolve Our Misunderstandings in a Spirit of Cooperation”**  
**Rev. Kathryn Ellis**  
**September 4, 2011**

(This sermon was the third in a series on the Restoration Covenant which can be found @ [http://www.uurestoration.us/documents/church\\_covenant.pdf](http://www.uurestoration.us/documents/church_covenant.pdf).)

I remind us again that covenants are sacred and serious promises. They are not meant to be easy to keep but reflect our best intentions and aspirations. They require us to be attentive, to recall our promises, to stay present when things are difficult. We are promising ourselves to stay faithful to our community, to restore our community when it needs restoration and to restore our souls together. We are making a serious commitment; membership at Restoration is a meaningful commitment.

UU minister Alice Blair Wesley frequently writes about the importance of covenant to Unitarian Universalist congregations. We are a covenanted community. We come together not around a creed but around our promises to each other. The Restoration Covenant comes directly from you, from your words, your wishes, aspirations and intentions. It comes out of your own experience.

Wesley wrote about the 1637 founding of the Dedham Massachusetts church which became a Unitarian Universalist congregation. *“Show me the patterns of your church organization and I’ll show you what the people of the church find most worthy.”*<sup>i</sup> Here are some key patterns that she found in the Dedham records that fit for us now:

1. The spirit of love is at the heart of the free church. They thought “the desire for a *‘further and nearer union and communion’ of love (was) the one good reason for*” becoming part of a congregation.<sup>ii</sup>
2. “Loyalty to the spirit of love . . . commits members . . . to *the best understanding of truth we can attain.*”<sup>iii</sup>
3. “*Reasoning together about what we love*”<sup>iv</sup> was essential for them.
4. To join the congregation was to make a promise. Like our covenant, it was simple promise but not an easy one. They covenanted to “*be in intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster.*”<sup>v</sup>

The covenant they made, the promises they made, were about how to live in community. They promised to do their best to live loving lives with integrity. Like this congregation, the Dedham folks “*understood the role of the church as filling the needs of both the members and the larger community.*”<sup>vi</sup>

This congregation has seen some difficult times in the past. Those of you who were here then have remained faithful to your religious community, sometimes without knowing quite why. You renewed your promises. To continue to keep them means to accept you, accept others and accept the community. As Jean Vanier says, "Stop wasting time running after the perfect community. Live your life fully in your community today."

Often this means giving up familiar habits for dealing with conflict, misunderstandings and differences. We will do better when we don't deny or avoid problems or conflicts, when we don't deal with conflict by secret complaints to a third person or group, and when we don't compare and compete with each other or with other congregations. There is no need for us to be perfect. We do need to be authentic, to be real. We do need to be able to keep our promises when things are difficult.

Obviously, that can be difficult and it hasn't always been easy for me. I did not learn about the importance of religious community as a child and I didn't learn about healthy conflict as a child. I was the oldest of six children with parents who in many ways were lost souls when I was a child. They were both bright, creative, passionate and alcoholic. They had vicious, loud fights.

I remember hearing my mother say the most hurtful things. I remember wishing on a star for wisdom; I wanted to understand people; and I wanted peace. Of course, I tried to be a peacemaker! My earliest learned conflict skill was avoidance. No, I take that back; my first skill was trying to take care of everything and make everyone happy! Then I tried conflict avoidance.

I have thought that things got worse at home when I went to college, maybe it was just coincidence, a matter of timing. At college, I began studying anthropology and psychology. I read a book about healthy fighting. I told my mother about healthy and fair fighting and she said she wasn't interested. She told me emphatically, "When I fight, I fight to win!" While I was writing this, I decided to check in with my sisters about their perceptions. Two of them wrote back with their stories and then I asked them if I could share their stories with you.

One wrote, "I remember that Mom didn't believe in compromise. As a married woman for almost 19 years now, I say 'WHAT?!?!?!' No, she thought that a compromise was a solution that made no one happy. But she was also a giver, sometimes a martyr. Certainly, she gave more than Dad did. So she often didn't get what she wanted. My reaction to the conflict, which I have never until this moment shared with a single soul, was that I wanted to pack up some pots and pans and blankets and whatever necessities, and take my siblings and run away and live in the woods - away from the conflict."

My sister's sharing reminded me that one of my favorite childhood books was *The Boxcar Children*. Do any of you remember that one? It was about several siblings who lived on their own and survived well in an abandoned railroad car in the woods. So a step beyond avoiding conflict is to run away from it.

The other sister wrote, "I can say that in the early years of my marriage, my conflict strategy was definitely to win each individual battle, which I was pretty good at since my husband is a big conflict avoider. I am guessing my behavior was a direct imitation of our mother's."

My mother was definitely not:

Assuming that others behave with good intentions;

Listening sincerely to each other's opinions, ideas, life experiences and concerns;

Working honestly through conflicts directly with those involved in a spirit of kindness and understanding;

Offering and accepting forgiveness;

Respecting differing voices and dealing considerately with dissent; or

Cooperating in a spirit of compromise and consensus.

She hadn't learned that winning really is working together, learning from our differences, our misunderstandings. Luckily my sisters and I were clear that her strategies were in fact not winning ones!

One wrote, "I feel that I had to learn constructive ways to deal with conflict as an adult. I certainly didn't see examples of it growing up. Eventually, I married a man who was so conflict-averse that he would just clam up and withdraw - not a good strategy for the long-term health of a marriage. I had to pull teeth to get him to TELL me what he was unhappy about. (Then, of course, I had to stand and listen to it!) I was ecstatic the day he came to me and complained about something about me for the first time. It was progress! And, to me, the ironic thing is that conflict can be a constructive thing - by identifying differences and communicating honestly and clearly about them, solutions that are better for everyone can be sought and found. In a workshop that I took years ago, I learned 'The truth works.' That applies to conflict, knowing that one has to try to be kind in the way one tells her truth."

The second sister said, "Somewhere along the way, though, I realized that winning the battle and building a healthy relationship weren't the same thing so gradually learned to shift to compromise and problem solving mode."

So my sisters and I learned and grew and changed, and so did our parents. This is not a story about blame. These things were long ago. My parents did the best that they could at the time, and they both learned and changed. It is really more a redemption story. My mother kept growing and before she died, I think she may have learned to deal with differences in healthier ways. Yesterday morning, I heard an old song by Annie Lennox and David Stewart on the radio and was reminded that she had this song on her telephone answering message for a while.

Sweet dreams are made of this  
Who am I to disagree?  
Travelled the world and the seven seas  
Everybody's looking for something.

Some of them want to use you  
Some of them want to get used by you  
Some of them want to abuse you  
Some of them want to be abused by you

Sweet dreams are made of this  
Who am I to disagree?  
Travelled the world and the seven seas  
Everybody's looking for something.

Hold your head up  
Keep your head up, movin on  
Hold your head up  
Movin on, keep your head up, movin on<sup>vii</sup>

I thought it was a pretty odd choice for a little old lady, but who am I to disagree!  
Actually, I was concerned about that second verse:

Some of them want to use you  
Some of them want to get used by you  
Some of them want to abuse you  
Some of them want to be abused by you

So, while I think my mother had learned better to accept difference, apparently she had not learned to assume that others behave with good intentions. I'm guessing that she hadn't yet really learned to accept and respect herself, and therefore couldn't really accept and respect others.

Spiritual teacher Sister Joan Chittester wrote, "Compassion for the other comes out of our ability to accept ourselves. Until we realize both our own weaknesses and our own privileges, we can never tolerate lack of status and depth of weakness in the other."

My story of learning about conflict is part of my own faith story, and it is part of my learning about the importance of religious community. I said that I did not grow up learning the importance and gifts of congregational life, but my husband did. When our daughter was young, we began looking for a spiritual home. My father had become Unitarian Universalist and I knew that Unitarian Universalism was where I fit. But there was no Unitarian Universalist congregation near where we lived. We found a small, unprogrammed Quaker meeting. For a number of years, we had a spiritual home. One day, a significant value conflict arose for me at the Friends' meeting. Overt and clear homophobia was forcefully expressed by many people in the congregation. They wanted to "hate the sin and love the sinner." They feared that the meeting might become a lesbian and gay congregation. I answered strongly that this was wrong, but my words seem to have no impact other than to shock people. I could not stay with the meeting and I felt disillusioned about spiritual community.

For some months, maybe about a year, I stayed home on Sunday mornings. During that year, a Unitarian Universalist congregation was forming in our town. Rick and I knew many of the people who were involved. Eventually, he said, "Let's go to the Unitarian Universalist worship service." And we did. I knew that my most important values were shared in the Unitarian Universalist community. I had learned that genuine community requires commitment and I resolved to stay, to work through conflicts and to grow with my Unitarian Universalist community.

Psychologist John Gottman researches marriages and treats couples. He helped me to articulate something that marriage had really already taught me that is also true in congregations. Some differences will never completely go away and that's okay. Those differences do not have to be fights if we just acknowledge that we are different.

Quaker writer, Parker Palmer, wrote about congregations:

I have argued that the church, picturing itself as a close and warm family, tends to suppress conflict, depriving its members of a vital lesson in public life. That same familial image undermines the public life in another way- by excluding the stranger from its midst. If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit, and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are aimed at making the stranger "one of us." The essence of hospitality -and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.

Conflict can be good. It is inevitable and it can lead to growth. There are five basic ways of responding to conflict.

1. Competition: I win. I get all of my needs met; you get none.
2. Accommodation: You win; you get everything.
3. Avoidance: Neither of us gets anything, changes anything, gives anything or learns anything.
4. Compromise: each of us gives a little and gets a little.
5. Collaboration: we redefine the problem to find a new creative solution that satisfies both our needs.

In order for collaboration to work well, you and I must agree that a problem exists and believe that a solution is both possible and desirable. We must not see each other as the enemy, but rather have the attitude, "We're all in this together." We need to be able to trust and respect ourselves and each other. Then, we can redefine the problem in terms of our needs and consider a broad range of possible solutions.

As you work to become more effective with conflict and to abide by our covenant, here are some skills to practice:

Let go of fear

Listen to your own heart's longing and share it out loud.

Listen to the other

Accept the stories that you hear. Never tell someone how they should or should not feel or that they are "too sensitive."

Recognize that creativity and growth come from healthy conflict.

There is no real growth or creativity without some conflict whether it is internal conflict, external conflict or both. Unitarian Universalist minister, the Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed, writes, "The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

May it be so! May you live in blessing.

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<sup>i</sup> Wesley, Alice Blair. *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures, The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and Promise of Our Covenant*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2002, p.36.

<sup>ii</sup> Wesley, p. 36.

<sup>iii</sup> Wesley, p. 37.

<sup>iv</sup> Wesley, p. 37.

<sup>v</sup> Wesley, p. 38.

<sup>vi</sup> Wesley, p. 21.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.metrolyrics.com/sweet-dreams-are-made-of-this-lyrics-annie-lennox.html>