

Covenant, Pluralism, Transformation: Unitarian Universalist Spiritual Disciplines

*With hope for a bright future
I come in trust.
With love in my heart for all of creation
I come in humility.
Seeking justice for all, marginalizing none
I come in open-mindedness.
With courage
I come willing to be transformed.
With great joy
I come to bind myself to you,
so that together we can do what I cannot
do alone.*

Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition. Revelation is not sealed. It is a path and a set of practices and disciplines that can lead us to a deeper understanding of who we are and how we want to be in the world. Transformation is the point. The work of transforming ourselves is ours to do. There is no one to do it for us. This transformation is available to all of us. Transformed people transform the world.

*The work of the church is not to build
the church, it is to change the world.*

—Natalie Briscoe

Covenant

Covenant must begin inside each of us individually. Covenant is a values-based vow we make to creation and ourselves. We hold ourselves accountable to these values. It is each person's work to amplify them in the world. They will be reflected in everything we do. When we fail to live up to our sacred promises as individuals, and we will, we call ourselves back to the values at the center of our promise.

Once Covenant lives inside of each of us in a community, we can make it live in the sacred space between us.

Once Covenant is alive between the people of a community, it binds them together. It is reflected in the heart and work of that community. These values are present in the mission and are what we collectively hold ourselves accountable to. Our work, programs, the way we treat staff and volunteers, and our presence in the larger community should all reflect these values. We ask ourselves, "Will this work we are considering reflect and/or amplify our values?" If the answer is "yes," it is our work.

A community Covenant is a vow from our hearts that we make together, grounded in shared values. We make it together. We keep it together. When we break it, our relationship is broken. We fix it together.

When broken (anyone can break Covenant), we look to ourselves first before we blame the behaviors of others. We call ourselves back into right relationship. We set kind and loving boundaries and rededicate ourselves to Covenant. The questions we need to ask ourselves are: *How have I been behaving? How have I kept Covenant? What role have I played in breaking it?* Then, having been honest with ourselves, sought counsel as needed, and been transparent with those to whom we are bound, we are ready to come back into Covenant with each other.

Pluralism

We must practice Covenant, hold it in our hearts, and struggle to live into our sacred promise. If we make Covenant holy between ourselves and others, hold ourselves accountable to the values at the center of Covenant, and try again when we fail because Covenant is a practice, then Pluralism comes naturally. In religious community, I bind myself to others who also wish to amplify and hold themselves accountable to agreed-upon shared values.

Pluralism is accepting, acknowledging, and learning from the truth of others.

There are many paths up the mountain. There are many ways to understand situations and to experience the world. There are all kinds of different struggles. All ways that lead to a good heart, that liberate, are good ways.

There is no fundamentalism in Unitarian Universalism. That is not to say that there aren't fundamentalists among us; any of us can be at a stage in our lives where we think and believe we have found the one and only truth. While this truth is real for the individual, it is not the discipline of Unitarian Universalism. The discipline acknowledges and holds sacred the fact that many things are true at the same time.

Transformation

Everything everywhere that ever was or ever will be is connected. We cannot change one thing without it changing everything and changing ourselves. All of creation is intertwined with, depends on, is affected by, and interacts with all the rest of creation.

This interconnectedness helps us understand that Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition. On this path, revelation is not sealed. Each of us defines our relationship with the divine and understands that every being is holy. Transformation is the point. Each of us has the potential to be transformed. Once transformed, we need to go beyond the comfort of the beloved community where we practice Covenant and Pluralism. Covenant and Pluralism support and empower us to be Transformed into all that we can be and call us out into the world to transform it into a just and loving place.

Transformation is the result of staying curious and humble, living into and practicing Covenant, accepting and being moved by the experiences of others. It is being open and willing to become and become and become yet again.

Unitarian Universalists are not born again, we are born again, and again, and again. There is always another adventure to have, more to learn, a deeper understanding to gain. Creation is not finished, and neither are we.

These concepts may not be difficult to understand. However, they are difficult to practice. Isn't it wonderful that we need not practice alone? Isn't it wonderful that we have each other?

CONNIE GOODBREAD is serving Unitarian Universalism as HOPE for Us Conflict Engagement Team Director. Connie studied Healthy Congregations development and conflict identification and transformation with Rev. Dr. Peter Steinke. She developed a conflict process called *Pathfinder* that was born out of that work. Connie served as Co-Lead of UUA Southern Region for three years. She has served in one capacity or another in every region of our Association. Prior to that she served two congregations as a credentialed religious educator.

KATHY MCGOWAN has been on the Congregational Life Staff for the Southern Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association since 2013. In that time her areas of focus have been in systems thinking, theology, conflict, intercultural sensitivity, and staff supervision.

For Further Reading

Love at the Center: Unitarian Universalist Theologies, edited by Sofía Betancourt (Skinner House Books, 2024).

Packs of this pamphlet are available at uua.org/bookstore.