

Preparation for Commitment (Theme for March)

Philosopher Martin Buber calls man the “promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-restoring animal.” Why are commitments important, and why can they be difficult? Commitments – to relationships, family, careers, art, knowledge, social causes – are important for meaning and connection in our lives. They embody our values and our identities. But they can be problematic, too.

Taking on commitments is traditionally part of growing up, and sometimes we are pressured into decisions like marriage or career. For commitments to be meaningful, however, they must be voluntary. As we move through life, we “re-evaluate” our commitments by testing them against our developing values and identities. Identities that are meaningful become part of “who we are” as partner or parent or teacher or artist or free spirit (a commitment to freedom) or activist. These chosen identities and the values associated with them sustain our commitments and help us grow.

Commitments can be difficult because they often require a balance between competing values and different aspects of identity. In a loving relationship, for example, there is a balance between commitment to the other and to personal autonomy and growth or even safety. If that balance changes, the relationship may end. Sometimes we join a group or a cause or a project and then find that others in the group don’t share our values or our level of commitment. Or we can end commitments when our interests change. And because we live in a world of change, sometimes we suffer broken commitments because of altered circumstances or because our loved ones have themselves changed.

Our investments of value and identity make it hard to let go when commitments end. Whether we choose to “let go,” or whether another person breaks a commitment, or whether circumstances cause a loss, a broken commitment can be very painful. Years afterward, the loss can still haunt us.

How do we reconcile our commitments to the future with the reality of change? Some commitments have a time-limited result – we commit to a project or to a political candidate. The Celtic tradition of trial marriage promises “a year and a day,” and then a reconsideration. Our most meaningful commitments, however, are often marked by looking to the future without requiring outcomes. We are connected to families and friends, but we can’t control their actions. If we have children, we can’t guarantee how they will grow up. If we work for a cause like social justice or the environment, we may not see a clear result in our lifetime.

The Buddhist idea of loving without “attachment” offers a way to think of commitment without results. Attachment is often described as “clinging,” but can also be seen as attempting to control experience and outcomes. Loving without attachment nourishes the other’s well-being, even with change. Change is also a part of the UU practice of covenants. As UU Rev. Lisa Ward says, “A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change.” Change can bring growth and new beginnings, even within an existing commitment.

We develop our identities and our values through our commitments. When we nourish the growth of others, we nourish ourselves. And as commitments are paths to love and growth, they can be paths of joy and meaning. They can be our view to the future, a way that our values and something of ourselves can live on as we build projects and connections and communities for the next generations.

Some quotes to consider as you reflect on commitment ...

Freedom is not the absence of commitments, but the ability to choose – and commit myself to – what is best for me. *Paulo Coelho, The Zahir*

Love is when I am concerned with your relationship with your own life, rather than with your relationship to mine ... Most people who say they have a commitment don't; they have an attachment. Commitment means, "I am going to stick with you and support your experience of well-being." Attachment means, "I am stuck without you." *Stewart Emery*

I know it is a bad thing to break a promise, but I think now that it is a worse thing to let a promise break you. *Jennifer Donnelly, from A Northern Light*

The Peacemaker taught us about the Seven Generations. He said, when you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation. He said, make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming. *Oren Lyons (Seneca)*

It takes a deep commitment to change and an even deeper commitment to grow. *Ralph Ellison*

The relationship between commitment and doubt is by no means an antagonistic one. Commitment is healthiest when it is not without doubt, but in spite of doubt. *Rollo May*

Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow. *Helen Keller*

When a covenant is broken, when conflict occurs, the relationship is not nulled. Rather, the invitation is to return to the table in the hope for seeking understanding, healing, and reconciliation. Covenant asks us to commit to pursuing right relationship, to prioritize the interest of the whole above our own self-interests. *Beth Chronister*

Never doubt that a small group of committed, thoughtful people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. *Margaret Mead*

Questions to Ponder

1. What was your family's view of commitment? How do you view commitments now?
2. What commitments have you made that you see as representing your deepest values or as having become a part of your identity – "who you are"?
3. Have you ever committed to something because of pressure from others or cultural pressure? How did you handle any tensions this might have created?
4. People who are committed to a belief or a cause can find themselves in conflict with people who have opposing views. What are your experiences in such situations?
5. Sometimes people commit to relationships or groups but then learn that others have different values or goals or levels of commitment. If you have experienced this, how did you deal with it?
6. What commitments have brought you the most joy?
7. What commitments have you made that you see as leading toward the future?

Words of the Day

Before the Gathering, reflect on your commitments. You might want to strengthen one, or lessen it, or change it. The Words of the Day sentence is "*A commitment I would like to change is ...*"