

Connection in a Creedless Faith

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In 1640's our ancestors the Puritans in New England were getting a lot of heat from the Presbyterians. The English Presbyterians, who were gaining power because of the English civil war going on. That's a long story. The funny thing is, the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists (a name that some puritans took on) had nearly identical beliefs but one significant difference. And it won't surprise you hear that it came down to power and control. Shocking, I know. The Presbyterians wanted the authority to run the churches to be owned by a group of elders who were outside of the individual churches. The congregationalist wanted each church to run its own business but also to be in relationship with each other.

Now just to be clear, the Congregationalists weren't anarchists bucking the local system to do their own thing. At the time, Congregationalism was the established religion. That meant that the churches were supported by taxes collected by the local government, and at least in Massachusetts, only men who belonged to the congregational church were allowed to vote in elections.

But the pressure they were receiving from the Presbyterians made them realize that they needed to get together a standard set of practices. And that's what they did in 1648. They created a covenant that became known as the Cambridge Platform. The Platform covered a lot of ground. It said that church government and civil government should be separate but support each other. It said that Civil authorities can't force people to be members of churches or to take communion.

The platform laid out all the different roles within the churches. Positions like Elders, pastors, teachers, and deacons. Deacons would oversee the financial affairs of the church. It's funny because there's a lot of language in the platform saying that deacons should not be drunks. For example at one point it says the deacons should not be "Double tongued, or given to too much wine, or given to filthy lucre". The drinking comes up other places too which makes me wonder just what was going on back in those days.

Individual churches would govern themselves. They would choose their own leaders and have the authority to ordain ministers. That's still the case today.

And it talks about relationship with other churches. A church should provide financial support for poor churches, it should look out for the welfare of other churches, it should consult with other churches on difficult topics. It also says that churches should admonish other churches when they get off track. So I have a homework assignment for you this week. When you come back next Sunday, I want everyone to have a list of three UU churches that we should admonish. Got it? We're gonna do some admonishing.

But you see that this covenant found a balance between being able to run their own affairs, but also having a mandate to support the larger community of churches. And that's the balance that our covenants still aspire to maintain today. This church, First U, supports the UUA financially and morally. This church sends delegates to our general assembly which is coming up in June, and those delegates, along with delegates from all our sibling churches, make big decisions using the democratic process. This year the delegates will decide if we should move from our 7 or 8 principles to statement of shared values.

This kind of covenant is connected in a straight line back to the Cambridge Platform. Of the 65 congregations that voted to ratify the platform in 1648, 21 of those churches are members of the UUA today.

And I'd be remiss if I didn't share that you can go to the facebook page of Liz James, and see her give a sermon on the platform that is delivered in rap form. Yes, she raps it, and it's awesome. Check out Liz James!

I think fundamentally, this covenant, and all our covenants that followed, attempt to find the balance between the individual and the group, and the group as a single church and the group as an association of churches. It's a struggle that continues to today and it might be more challenging now than it has ever been. And the struggle revolves around Individualism. Individualism threatens UU churches everywhere and it's something that we at this church will have to take a hard look at when we create our new covenant this year.

Individualism is the ideology that emphasizes the intrinsic worth of the individual. So far, so good, right? We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. But taken to its extreme, individualism can mean that the interests of a single person should take preference over larger social groups and institutions. Individualism makes the individual the primary focus. And taken too far, taken out of balance, it's a problem.

I read this amazing talk that was given at the general assembly in 1998 by an Episcopalian minister named Robert Bellah. Although he's an Episcopalian, he's worked with a lot of UUs and given a lot of thought to how we function as a faith tradition. In fact, he was a student of James Luther Adams, who is an important theologian in our tradition.

In the paper he salutes our UU tradition of dissent, of calling out things that we think are not right. But what happens to a group when dissent becomes a habit of mind? What happens if we are always focused on the things we disagree with? Bellah points out that our first principle is about the sacredness of the individual and our principles go on to say that we have the right of conscience and a free search for truth and meaning. And he thinks that our affirmations of community and interdependence that also appear in our principles are not enough to offset this spirit of individualism. His point is that emphasizing difference and respect for difference leaves

us UUs adrift when it comes to what possibly could hold us together. If the shared value that connects us is individualism, then what is the group, the whole about?

Here's where his paper gets really interesting. He cites a thinker named Mark Lilla who says that in the last fifty years, there were two revolutions. The first was the revolution of the sixties. And that revolution was about the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. The civil rights movement, the new feminism, gay rights, all about personal expression and individual freedom.

The second revolution was in the 80's under Ronald Reagan. It was about the dominance of the free market, the commodification of everything including law, medicine, and education, and dismantling parts of the social safety net.

Here's where it gets weird: Mark Lilla says that there weren't two revolutions, there was only one. Both were embraced by the majority of Americans. And both were about individualism. The 80's revolution, which I'd argue continues to today, was about the individual right to pursue one's personal financial interests, and the larger good be damned. I got mine, to hell with everyone else. The cultural individualism of the 60's opened the door to the economic individualism of the 80's. And what was going on in the UUA in the mid-80's, when Reaganism was in full swing? The UUA was revising the 7 principles.

Bellah argues that this individualism that permeates everything is at odds with the reality that we humans, actually, this whole planet, only survives and thrives through interdependence. Our true nature as humans is social. We exist together. No person is an island. And that is at odds with a core belief of ours as UUs.

How does this individualism show up in our communities? I asked some of my colleagues for examples of toxic individualism in UU churches and here's some of what they shared:

- People who complain about the use of the word God in worship because it bugs them even though it comforts others.
- Similarly, the belief that nobody needs God and anyone who does is not a fully capable individual.
- One colleague said: The tyranny of the decorating committee! I'm sure there's a good story behind that.
- People who have individual theologies that can't hold up within community or spaces of accountability.
- The person who won't accept that an initiative is going forward when they weren't consulted and then try to do their own version.
- People who want everyone to vote on what style bathroom door, flat panel or six panel. Everyone to vote on a bathroom door.
- Conversely, people with institutional power who make unilateral decisions on big issues.
- Finally, a colleague shared: At an annual meeting when people get obsessed with Robert rules of order and don't actually listen to each other.

Just to make this clear, that list is from colleagues serving at other congregations. This is not a statement on First Unitarian.

At the end of his paper, Bellah doesn't tell us what to do next. He doesn't know and he's too humble a person to dare do so. But he says this: "the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves." This is a conundrum that all of society faces right now, but today, right here, I'd like us to think about what it means for First Unitarian.

OK, I just got very nerdy and intellectual there and although I do love to geek out I know folks have limited patience for that. So let's talk about how a new covenant at First Unitarian might balance this tension between the individual and the larger good, right here in this congregation.

In the poem we heard, *Mending Wall*, we hear the poet teasing his neighbor about why they should bother with a wall anyway: He says his apple trees will never cross the property boundary and eat the cones under his pine trees. He makes a good point though, before creating a wall, we should be clear about why we're doing that. It's the same for a covenant. If everything is going great, we wouldn't need a covenant. It's the times when things get foggy, when misunderstandings brew, and roles seem to get blurred. Those are the times when covenant is fundamental. How are we to be together? And how will that togetherness ensure safety and kindness and consolation? We know that we want a more just and caring world. But how are we to be together?

So as we move into this process of creating a new covenant, what are we working with in terms of our existing covenant? Well, right now we have a mission covenant, which is an interesting hybrid of a mission statement and a covenant. I understand it was created some 30 years ago and its existence was the result of some kind of compromise that is lost to the mists of time, unless someone who was there would like to bring me up to date, which I would love. Anyway, this is how it reads:

We the members of first Unitarian, agree to:

- promote the spiritual intellectual and personal growth of each member
- Minister to each other in an atmosphere of welcome acceptance and caring
- Be a positive force for social environmental and economic action
- Promote the wider understanding of our purposes and principles in the larger community
- Provide a dynamic religious education program for all ages
- To the to these ends we declare our commitment to the health and vitality of this liberal religious community.

It's not bad, right? But I do think that in light of our new understandings, our fresh challenges, the contemporary needs of this congregation, it's worth trying to create something new.

I'd like to tell you about our planned process for creating a new covenant. We'll kick it off on this coming Saturday, June 1 with a gathering in the Social Hall. This is going to be from 10 am to 1 pm and everyone is invited. The more voices that are in the mix, the more perspectives there will be, and that is a good thing! While we're together on Saturday, we'll use creative exercises to explore what it feels like to be in a healthy community. We'll talk about what a covenant is and isn't and we'll look at other church's covenants. We'll learn about the concept or pre-emptive radical inclusion. Then we'll divide up in teams and start to develop some concrete ideas. At the end we'll have the elements of a covenant.

And I'll tell you what we won't be doing: We won't be wordsmithing! We're not going to try to write a covenant by committee! There will be no arguments about whether to use the Oxford comma or if that sentence has a dangling participle. To be honest, I don't actually know what a dangling participle is, but I do know that we won't be talking about it.

Child care will be provided, so bring your kiddos if you want. We'll have coffee and pastries, and everyone is very welcome to bring whatever snacks they think they might need, since we won't be stopping for lunch. And you can still register on Realm!

That's the first step.

After we finish on Saturday, we'll have a bunch of ideas about what should be in our new covenant. And that's when the wordsmithing will begin. Rev. Angela and I will take all these good ideas and boil them down into a first draft.

Over the next couple of months we'll share this draft with the board and with the congregation and we'll be very happy to get feedback. We'll post a copy of the draft as a google document that will allow people to offer comments on it. We'll also have a couple facilitated conversations to hear people's reactions. So there will be a lot of opportunities to give input.

All of this feedback will help us sharpen and focus the covenant. We're hoping to have a final draft to vote on as a congregation at our annual meeting next January.

I also want to mention that we are splitting out the covenant and our mission statement. Our excellent board of directors has taken on the process of developing a new mission statement and they are actively recruiting members for a mission statement task force. You can find more information about that in this week's broadsheet.

So far in 2024 we've spoken a lot about covenant and covenant-related things. In February I gave a sermon titled Love, not Legalism, about being a covenantal faith. That same month, Angela preached on the UUA common read On Repentance and Repair, and then she and I taught a class on the book. In March Angela preached on the Article II movement to change our principles to shared values, another form of covenant. And now the conversation opens up to all of us here at First U.

As the kids say, don't sleep on this conversation. We need to hear from everyone. We need a covenant that guides and inspires us. You've probably heard me say this quote from former UUA president Rev. Susan Frederick Grey: This is no time to go it alone, and this is no time for a casual faith. A vibrant covenant will bind us more closely, and deepen our connection to this faith. May it be so.