

Showing Up: Intention, Action, and Connection

January 9, 2022

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Come Sing a Song with Me; We Would Be One; Come Though Fount of Every Blessing.

Chalice Lighting (Peter S. Raible, based on the Book of Deuteronomy)

We drink from wells we did not dig. We warm ourselves by fires we did not light. We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant. We build on foundations we did not lay. We profit from persons we did not know. We are ever bound in community. May it always be so.

Reading “From iChurch to Beloved Community” by Frederic J. Muir (printed at end)

Personal Reflection “Showing Up” by Celia Buckley (printed at end)

Sermon

Our Soul Matters theme in this month of January is Living with Intention. The topic naturally brings to mind thoughts about the intentions that an individual person sets for the day, for a new year, or for the rest of one’s life. But intentions also belong to communities. This morning I want to reflect on the intentions which guide us as a liberal religious congregation.

As you heard, we have a monthly orientation session for newcomers today after the service. And in two weeks, we have a class called Exploring UUism, before church. In the past 22 months of disruption, isolation and stress, many individuals and families have begun participating in UUSS. Some have joined officially, and others are asking about membership. We offer these informational programs because we want to be sure people know what it is they are getting themselves into.

A person usually signs up as a member of UUSS in the presence of one of the ministers, but we are not the congregation. Of course, we fill this pulpit on Sundays, and we edit the Weekly Message, so you may have gotten to know the ministers first. **But when you become a part of the congregation, you are making a commitment to a whole group.** You are joining in covenant with a whole community of people, some of whom you may not ever meet, unless you are *very* outgoing.

In any relationship, a covenant involves the goals or expectations of the relationship; it has to do with the purpose of being together. Whether it is an implicit one or explicitly written down, a covenant includes the promises we make about how we will support one another and make decisions together. In a national culture which encourages everyone to be *me*-oriented, a covenant is *we*-oriented.

In this country, to live by a sense of covenant is counter-cultural. Right now in the United States of America, we experience increasing division and hostility. We experience resurgent attitudes of repudiation of one another and isolation from one another. As the dangers of the Corona virus pandemic persist, the need for us all to wear face masks in public and get fully vaccinated becomes ever more urgent. Yet we hear assertions that it’s about freedom.

“Let me make my own choices about my own health.” In this assertion, there is a denial of that *my* exercise of *my* freedoms has an ethical connection to *your* health. It’s a denial of my role in the safety of my community. The culture of individualism goes back a long way in this country.

Since our liberal religious movement grew up in this country and along with this country, it shouldn’t be surprising that Unitarians have struggled with individualism right alongside the larger American culture. In today’s reading, we heard the esteemed minister Fred Muir describe the presence of individualism as a UU ideology and as our historical way of operating our congregations. As a college student, Fred was drawn toward Ralph Waldo Emerson’s rejection of conformity and affirmation of the individual. In the early and mid-1800s, the religious climate of Emerson’s home of Massachusetts was conventional and stifling. For some, this culture was comfortable because it upheld their privilege; for others it was cold and suffocating. Yet Emerson’s answer was not to work for change from within the community, but to withdraw from it. He served as a Unitarian minister for only three years before he left the ministry. As a philosopher and writer and teacher, he was a great American original. But he was not a great church leader. For too many of us and for too long, Emerson’s message was assumed to be: My preferences take precedence. What matters is *what I think, what I believe, what I want*. Fred Muir says that we became the i-Church.

Think about it: For more than a century, many of our churches tried to operate on the ideology that everybody can do their own thing. We catered to individual demands instead of deciding together how we would serve the common good. Coming together... but not *really* coming together! It was more than a paradox; it was a recipe for pain.

The Rev. Cheryl M. Walker is a UU minister in coastal North Carolina and a former president of our ministerial association. She writes:

Individualism is so attractive in the beginning. For many people who felt the heavy yoke of being in communities of faith where they could not fully be who they were, individualism tastes like the food they have been hungering for. But it is good only when we are starving. When we have had our fill, we look for food to sustain us for the long journey of life. That life-sustaining food can be found only in true communities of shared purpose and values, where the individual is affirmed but is not worshipped.

Fortunately, in the past few decades many of the congregations in our movement have generated energy and vitality by coming together with a sense of common purpose. Here at USS we have embodied these inspiring trends in our UU movement. We have gained a greater sense of abundance and generosity, inside and beyond our walls. Many of our congregations are engaged in a journey toward racial justice and equity in our denomination and our communities. We have come to understand our ministry to children, youth, and families as expressions of our calling to care for all souls and build a loving community across the generations. In the past two years of pandemic disruptions, the steadfast support and the practice of mutual care by the vast majority of members and friends has been a vivid example of abiding loyalty and love. **That is what covenant means: loyalty and love.**

When I think of moving from an i-Church culture to a culture of shared commitment, I think about the first congregation I served as a new minister. It was a UU Fellowship which had been around for 35 years but never had a full-time settled minister. After a couple of years of discernment, they had concluded that if they were going to grow in vitality, strength, and relevance, they needed full-time ministry. Yet they knew this would involve change and

adjustment. Things would be different. For some it would be unpleasant. And so, they got me. After I arrived there, a devoted lay leader in the church told me that coming to the decision had involved many conversations, focus groups and meetings. It had not been easy. He told me that one longtime congregant had said: “I don’t want this congregation to change until after I’m dead.”

Of course, it is understandable to seek to hold on to what is familiar. Avoiding discomfort and avoiding a sense of loss is a powerful impulse. This is why having a commitment to something larger than our own preferences is crucial for a community to remain vital and thriving.

Another i-Church moment I remember from those early days: On Sunday mornings, an older member made a fresh flower arrangement for the table up in front by the flaming chalice. Sadie. Sadie was cute and friendly, her bouquets were artistic, and she was highly praised for her lovely gifts. She brought fresh flowers twice a month, coming before the service and taking the bouquet home after it ended. Sadie was a lifelong Unitarian, having grown up in another UU church. She passed away a decade ago. Before my arrival, the congregation had been discussing whether to have two Sunday services instead of one. Attendance was growing, and the space was crowded. They had made a commitment to growth. By the end of my first year, these discussions led to a decision to try two services. So, we did. Starting in September we had an early service, then coffee hour, and a second service. Sadie brought her floral arrangement before the early service, stayed for the service, and then took the flowers home. Second service, no flowers! When she was asked to consider leaving the flowers so people at the second service could enjoy them, she said no. It would inconvenience her to come back for them or to stay for the second service before taking them. As a new minister, I didn’t think of how to negotiate a solution with her, and nobody else did either. I wonder if her generous gift of the flowers was more about her contribution to the community as a whole—or more about being celebrated for her talents by the community.

Fred Muir notes that many of us are moved to “articulate and live our UU Principles,” including our first principle, affirming the dignity and inherent worth of every person. Yet he notes the UU Principles are not individual statements of belief – they are promises we make to one another. He says they represent “a commitment to create and sustain a community, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.” This is the intention of covenant.

The life of this congregation, here in Sacramento, includes many kinds of covenant—some of them are implied, and others are written down explicitly. For example, when volunteers are elected to lay leadership, they are joining in an implied covenant to show up and support their team—the board, program council, and so on. Their team shares the purpose of working for the mission of the congregation and its overall welfare. An example of a covenant which is written down was created last fall by the Junior High Youth Group. They discussed it, agreed on its contents, word-smithed it, wrote it on newsprint, and posted it on an easel. Then they signed it. One line from it says: Take space and make space. (This means to participate in discussions but leave space for others.) Another line says: Please let the adult leaders know if you can’t show up on a Sunday. The group reviews it frequently; when new youth attend, the leaders invite them to comment on it, and then to add their names. When I helped out last Sunday as a co-leader of the youth group, I added my signature to it. Another explicit covenant here at UUSS is part of our program of Soul Matters Small Groups. Every session of a group invites personal reflection and sharing our thoughts and our own stories. The groups began in October and will conclude in

May; some groups meet in person, others on Zoom. When a person signs up for a group, this implies a commitment to the other people in the group. But what this means also is that if you join it, the group is making a commitment to you as well.

I bet that most people think about coming to church as a matter of our own preferences and needs—our own choice. Of course, I saw it like that myself, long before I was a minister. I was probably thinking things like: *It's so good to get a friendly greeting and hear my name spoken. I need to sing some hymns; I need to hear the music. I am longing to sit quietly, along with others. I choose to come so that I can be reminded that my values can matter in this world. I don't want to be alone.* Have you ever felt this way when planning to show up for a service, whether in person or online? I have heard that many of you do. I am so grateful that many of us can meet some of our needs for inspiration and connection even when participating online. It's amazing!

Yet the paradox is that when we show up for something that *we* need, our participation helps others to have an experience that *they* need. Whether we are here online or in person, the desire for an experience which draws each of us here as a *me* becomes a *we* experience. Without realizing it, we show up for one another. This is a gift that you are giving. You are giving it now. Today you are invited to recognize this gift. Why not claim it as your intention? We all seek human contact; we all need reassurance. And by showing up for it, we provide it for others.

This congregation is a voluntary organization. Nobody attends, joins, or participates in UUSS because you have to. You have made a choice. In Latin, the root word for volunteer and voluntary means “will,” as in “free will.”

There is not one single way that we embody and live out our commitments to a congregation, just as there is no single way that families embody their love and loyalty. But without a sense of love and loyalty, our life together is much more difficult and a lot less fun.

A community of covenant makes things possible which we could not achieve on our own as individuals. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for your intentions of love and loyalty. When I think about what it means that hundreds of people come together to make a congregation thrive, I find it to be a miracle. It is a miracle of trust in one another and faith in the reliability of community. It is a sign of hope that our shared values can make a difference-- to one another and in the larger community. It is miracle of love and loyalty. Thank you for this intention, this gift, this miracle we call community. So may it be. Amen.

Reading: “From iChurch to Beloved Community” by Rev. Dr. Frederic J. Muir

This reading comes from a lecture given by the Reverend Dr. Frederic J. Muir to a conference of UU ministers in June of 2012. Fred Muir is the minister emeritus of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, Maryland, where he served for 34 years.

Near the end of my junior year in college, on the afternoon of the first Earth Day, [in 1970], I was in a class on American Transcendentalism. We sat in the grass and listened as the teacher read aloud Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Divinity School Address.” It was as though he was channeling the Sage of Concord, who was speaking to me.

After class, I asked what religion Emerson was. “Unitarian,” he said. I asked if it still existed. “Exist?” he replied. “Yes it exists! There’s a congregation on the west side. Do you want to go Sunday?” And that was that!

Prior to my Earth Day epiphany, I was religious—I had felt the pull toward ministry as a boy in my liberal Protestant church—but did not think of myself as “spiritual” because I never had the words to put to the spirituality I had known since childhood.

“No law can be sacred to me but that of *my* nature,” Emerson proclaimed. “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Emersonian individualism has become part of the American story, of course.

Think of the “i” that’s placed in front of the names of Apple products. Some say the “i” means “Internet.” Others explain that the “i” stands for “individual”: This is your personal piece of technology, to be used for whatever purpose you want. Fifteen years ago, Apple appealingly exploited the theme of individualism in a commercial that sounds like Emerson channeled through Jack Kerouac: “Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. They push the human race forward.”

Many of us were drawn to Unitarian Universalism because it seemed to be the church of Emersonian individualism. We [have been] the iChurch.

My thirty-seven years in the UU ministry have convinced me that [Unitarian historian] Conrad Wright is correct [in his critique. For people like Emerson, he writes], “a true community is not constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together, but is made up of atomic and unrelated individuals.”

For all its appeal and its influence in American culture, individualism is not sustaining: **Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we Unitarian Universalists have also committed ourselves.** There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.

The inherent worth and dignity of the individual is not just our First Principle as UUs: often it is our defining principle. But we frequently overlook another strand of our tradition in our Association’s Principles and Purposes, another story about ourselves that can deepen and grow our future. It is not the language of individualism, not of the iChurch, but of **covenant**: “As free congregations we promise to one another our mutual trust and support.”

We cannot do both covenant and individualism, individuality, yes, but not individualism. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant—creating and sustaining a community by “promising to one another our mutual trust and support”—this takes extra effort.

Personal Reflection "Showing Up" by UUSS Member Celia Buckley January 9, 2022

About 4 years ago I joined a weight loss program called Food Addicts in Recovery, or FA for short. FA is a program modeled after the original Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step program that originated in the 1930s.

Common to virtually all 12 Step programs, a member chooses another member to be their "sponsor" to help them work the 12 Steps to achieve sobriety or abstinence from their addiction. Sponsors are simply other members who have used the 12 Step program to achieve recovery from similar addictions or behaviors. Sponsors become a source of emotional support as they offer guidance to working the steps with their sponsee. Sponsoring not only benefits the sponsee, but it is a crucial element to help the sponsor maintain their recovery.

My personal experience with FA was mixed as I found their interpretation of the sponsor-sponsee relationship a bit unconventional from other 12 step programs. Among other things, this program gave the "sponsor" total control over their "sponsees" food: when to eat, what to eat, where to eat, & how to eat. Members were not encouraged to find their own path.

I had met enough of the requirements to take on a "sponsee" who I became quite fond of. I'll call my sponsee Julie.

My many decades in Alcoholics Anonymous supported how I sponsored Julie and encouraged her autonomy in finding a food program that worked for her. As time passed, it became clear to both of us that I no longer met the FA program requirements or qualification to be a sponsor. Continuing to sponsor Julie when wasn't active in the program felt dishonest but Julie wanted me to continue to sponsor her.

But then, the unthinkable happened. They found Julie's 18 year old son's car on a bridge with a suicide note, but he wasn't found. Julie turned to me for emotional support.

My decades of providing grief support to parents of children who died from their heart defects was a grief work foundation, but I was unprepared for the waves of shock and grief that a mother experiences when a teenager chooses suicide. That loss was unique. Her grief and anger and bewilderment roused my very being. My soul reverberated with her rawness. It was gut wrenching to take those daily calls as the months passed. Sometimes I didn't want to answer. It was like putting my hand into fire. But I took her call night or day and we talked and wept and even sang.

Eventually they found his body after the winter rains decreased the river flow allowing a search & recovery effort. The spark of hope that he might yet be alive was quenched, but replaced with the ache of a final goodbye.

It has been a powerful chapter in my life and my own spiritual growth. My Unitarian Universalist faith of our principles and purposes supported me as I sought words to comfort an atheist woman who yearned to find closure and peace. I felt buoyed by knowing other UUs in this congregation and in the world who are engaged in often painful justice work. Being a UU gave me strength to show up for Julie.

As a long time sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous I needed to show up for her. As a caring friend, I needed to show up for her. Taking that daily call as she navigated her nightmare of existence. Being there for someone else. Witnessing. Keeping faith. Showing up. All forms of prayer.