

**Together in the Wilderness**  
**March 29, 2009**

During my ministerial internship at a Unitarian Universalist Church in northern California, one of my greatest achievements as a minister-to-be happened not in preaching an award winning sermon or leading a peace march, or anything grand like that, but in having a three-minute conversation. It was a Sunday morning, just after the service. Now, at that church, right outside the sanctuary, there's a long narrow hallway, where social hour takes place and where tables are put out every Sunday for various committees to set up their displays. That Sunday a woman I'll call Blanche had set up a display for the church book store. Next to her display, a man I'll call Roy had set up his display for the social action team. When the service was over, Blanche approached me, clearly irritated, and began to tell me how she had very carefully set up her display within her space, but that Roy had

encroached his social action display over onto her space and that she just didn't see how he could be so selfish, so uncaring, and so on and so forth. Here is where my moment of great accomplishment enters. When she paused long enough to hear how I might come to her defense and/or her rescue, I asked her, instead, "Have you talked to Roy about this?" Blanche, seeming to, well, blanch, stopped in her prosecutorial tracks, and responded, "No..." I then encouraged her to do so, and the conversation came to an end.

I share this story with you not to pat myself on the armored back for cleverly deflecting the controversy back to Blanche and Roy, thus avoiding conflict myself, but because that moment was a first for me in facing my own conflict with how to respond. It was, in fact in some ways a moment of grace. For, as many people do going into seminary, I had thought before entering seminary that my job as a minister

would be to serve not only as the pastor and the preacher, but as the great problem solver of *all* things churchy. Part of this assumption no doubt came from the alcoholic nature of my family background and the abundance of codependence that so readily comes with being part of an alcoholic family.

Perceiving that no one else seems capable of taking care of themselves or of the daily challenges of life, the codependent spouse or child takes on the role of the *one* capable person in the family, and so becomes weighed down by having to tend to constant repair of problems and so subsequently weighed down by a growing resentment toward others. My moment of suggesting to Blanche that she talk to Roy directly not only freed me from doing someone else's work (and of thus resenting them), it empowered her to be strong enough and vulnerable enough to speak and act for her own needs, to confront head on her own conflict.

Now, I don't know how Blanche actually approached Roy, if she did at all. On a range of passive to aggressive, she could have said anything from "You know, Roy, I don't really need all this silly space anyway; why don't you take it all?" to "Social action, schmocial action!! You are a poop head, Roy, and I want my space back!!" I'm hoping it was somewhere in between the two.

However that particular story played or is still playing out for Blanche and Roy, for me, it's remained a small but significant story to remember, and to use as a reminder of why church-wide covenants of right relations are good things to create and have in our congregations. In fact, in the year and a half or so that I've been here and worked with various committees and the Board, whenever I've mentioned my desire for us to create a church-wide covenant of right relations, that is the story that comes to my mind, and the first example I

give of what could be included in such a covenant is almost always, “I will speak directly and respectfully to those with whom I am in conflict.”

Other examples of what could be included in a church-wide covenant, as illustrated in Gil Rendle’s book, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*, include statements such as “We promise to listen with an open, nonjudgmental mind to the words and ideas of others....” and “We will talk about our own experience and understanding by using the word ‘I’ frequently. We will not talk about hearsay and rumor, and we will not use words such as ‘some people’ or ‘everyone.’”

Before going deeper into what could be *in* a covenant, though, just what *is* a covenant? What we recited together earlier, when we said, “mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge and community ever exceeding our practice, reverently we covenant together, beginning with ourselves as

we are, to share the strength of integrity and the heritage of the spirit in the unending quest for wisdom and love,” that is an example of a covenant. Another example is our seven religious principles. As you’ll see if you read the principles on any official document, they are introduced by the statement, “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote” the said seven principles.

Gil Rendle, whose book on covenants I’ve mentioned and whose story of the Sufi judge we heard earlier, explains just what a covenant is, and is not. “A behavioral covenant,” he says,

is a written document developed by leaders [in our case read *leaders* as the congregation], agreed to and owned by its creators, and practiced on a daily basis as a spiritual discipline. Practicing the discipline described by the behavioral covenant is an action of faith, since practicing such helpful and healthy behaviors is an

acting out of one's stated beliefs and values. It is far deeper and more significant than the manners of politeness. It speaks instead of *holy* manners—the manners of a faith community.

Rendle goes on to say:

...a covenant... is not a set of rules. Covenants refer to promises. The *theological* understanding of covenant refers to the promises made by God to humanity as found in scripture. While we currently live in a world of *rules* that are often found in legal or assumed contracts, the language of covenant speaks of *promises*. Promises [says Rendle] are vows made with the intention of keeping them. When a legal rule is broken, we seek compensation. We want a wrist to be slapped, a price to be paid. When a covenant is broken we seek understanding and recommitment. We want to know what went wrong. What are we having trouble with? How do we try again?

A covenant, in other words, is not punitive, but restorative.

When things go wrong, a covenant doesn't call us to shame or blame anyone, but to work together to mend any ties that may have been broken.

But speaking of broken ties or things going wrong, if you're wondering whether I'm calling us to have a church-wide covenant because I think something is going wrong right now, the answer is no. Troubled times, times of deep arguments about right and wrong within a congregation are in fact the worst times to create covenants. No, it is now, when we are growing and deepening our community, and beginning in earnest to search for a home of our own, it is now that we would be wise to create such a covenant, so that as we continue to grow and deepen and work and sweat and build, we will already have a covenant to go to should times indeed get challenging.

And I hope you will trust me when I say challenges will come. As I watch our numbers grow, I've been sharing with the Board, the Committee Council, and the Committee on Ministry some readings about the challenges of growing congregations. In her book, *Raising the Roof*, for instance, Alice Mann writes about family size, pastoral size, program size, and corporate size churches, and the growing pains that can come with the transition from one size to the other. We, by the way, are in the midst of transitioning from a pastoral size church—meaning 51 to 150 Sunday morning attendants of all ages—to a program size church—151 to 400 Sunday morning attendants of all ages.

What's the significance of that transition? Alice Mann writes, "in the move to program size, clergy must shift a good deal of their time and attention away from direct delivery of pastoral care, toward assembling and guiding [a] team of

program leaders.” She continues, “They must also find ways to offer spiritual enrichment to the *board*, whose job has become much more demanding.” So even if I *wanted* to fix Blanche’s display problem for her along with the problems of every other church member, in a program size church I wouldn’t have the *time* to do so.

But it’s not just the clergy who have to shift the way they do things. Mann lists several issues that *congregants* must address as a church grows. Those issues include: lack of clarity about whether we’re *called* to be a larger congregation than we’ve been; lack of physical space to welcome new members; lack of staffing; insufficient budget; and inadequate infrastructure. To keep the congregation healthy, the members of a growing congregation have to look intentionally at these issues and at what we will need to do to acquire and maintain a sufficient budget or a full staff or a properly functioning

infrastructure for a larger congregation. That means intentionally changing the way we do things at church, and change most often is not exactly comfortable.

In fact, change can be so uncomfortable for some that at times a congregation, or groups within a congregation will, even if only subconsciously, *resist*, even sabotage, further growth. Talk will arise of a new building being too expensive, or of that good feeling of knowing everyone seeming to disappear, or of the minister not being as available as she used to be. Rather than moving *through* the discomfort to new solutions, people will begin to essentially raise the drawbridge and retreat from growth.

In *our* journey forward, should such ambivalence about *our* growth arise, then so will conflict. That's not a bad thing. We face conflict all the time— where the greeters should stand, where I should stand at the end of the service, what table

cloths to use, whether or not to blow out the candle once the chalice is lit—and we work through it.

*How* we work through it is where we need to be especially mindful. Will we proceed as in the story of the Sufi judge, whose head seems to spin with questions of who's right as he listens to each person make his complaint, or will we create a means by which we can communicate not *about* one another but *to* and *with* one another in healthy, loving, respectful, and direct ways, thus focusing not so much on whether you're right or you're right or I'm right or you're right, but on how we can all be in right relationship with one another and ourselves.

Think about the Judy Chicago reading we heard Jan read earlier. It begins and has the refrain, "and then...." "And then all that has divided us will merge/ and then compassion will be wedded to power/ and then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind..." The reading continues on until

she concludes, “and then everywhere will be called Eden once again.”

I’m not sure if we Wildflowers, though our name might fit the setting, will ever reach Eden in our lifetimes. But I do know that our mission states that “we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice,” and that sounds like we want to at least head *toward* Eden, yes? Or whatever the Unitarian Universalist equivalent of Eden may be.... But the trick in figuring out how to do that goes back to how Judy Chicago’s reading *begins*: “And then...” And then? Doesn’t it sound like something should come before that? The statement is the second half, implicitly, of an “if this, then that” statement. We just don’t know what the *if this* part is. Maybe she said, beforehand, “we will strive to understand the other person’s point of view” *and then* “compassion will be wedded to

power.” Maybe she said, “We will practice forgiveness with ourselves and with each other,” *and then* “softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.” Maybe she said, “We will remember that what one person does affects others,” *and then* “everywhere will be called Eden again.” We don’t know.

But my bet is that what came before the promise of peace and renewal was the promise to *work on*, to *practice*, *how* to be in right relationship with one another. In other words, I bet there was some covenanting going on. Wouldn’t it be good if we got some church wide covenanting going on so that we could be focusing not only on having a collective *house* of our own, but a beloved and just *home*, within and out from which to live our mission of being deliberately inclusive and open-minded, of joyfully nurturing one another on our life long spiritual journeys, of committing, indeed, to transforming

ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice?

If you're hesitant to say, "Yes, this would be a good idea!" because you think it might mean more work for us to do, don't worry—yet. For the next five and a half months or so the Committee on Ministry and I will be educating ourselves, each other, and the congregation on how to proceed with creating such a covenant. Come September 12 or so, we'll be asking you all to come together once again, as we did *last* September to create the mission statement, in order to, together, create a church wide covenant of right relations.

You've got five and a half months to relax—and to reflect. Perhaps you might wish to reflect on how you wish to be in right relationship with each other. For in the next five and half months, you never know when someone's going to encroach upon your display, or your idea, or your plans, or your mood.

And when that happens, you never know what kind of answer you'll get from the minister or the president of the board or a committee chair, or a friend, or a spouse if you ask them to intervene where you have yet to step forward.

The prospect of confronting our own conflicts in an honest, respectful, and direct way may make each of us, you know, blanch a little bit. But, as the hymn says, "we believe in life and in the strength of love, and we have found a need to be together." So let us be together, in the wilderness of our shared journey and in our religious home, and together may we find "we have the right to grow, we have the gift to believe that peace within our living is an answer."

Amen.

Please rise in body or spirit and join in singing hymn  
#354, We Laugh, We Cry

