

Farewell
Sunday, July 28, 2024
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Section 2 of the bylaws of our Unitarian Universalist Association now begins, “As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our Association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

“Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.”

A foundation of love, a discipline of love. This is not some airy idea of love, some cartoon hearts in the eyes love. This is a solid base for our beliefs, our ethics, our actions. This is something that requires practice, love as a spiritual discipline. As I leave you this is what I wish for you, a foundation of love, a spiritual discipline of love.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, you have a heritage of freedom, reason, hope and courage that has been built on a foundation of love. This is your heritage, and you are this time’s builders whose role it is to build upon and pass on that heritage.

Nineteenth century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing said it like this,

“I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness: Which passes life not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness. I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith: Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven. I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances and is not the creature of accidental impulse: Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement. I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion: Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world. I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues: But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions. I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God’s children and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind. I call that mind free which has cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril can enthrall: Which is calm the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost.”

“I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering.” This is a foundation of love, a spiritual discipline of love.

“Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

“Inseparable from one another, these shared values are: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity and equity.”

Interdependence. “We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.” This is the new phrasing of what was our seventh principle. “We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Our new values and covenant statement puts into words what covenant to affirm and promote may look like. “We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.”

Pluralism. “We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.” This is the new wording for what were our first, third and fourth principles. “We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our new values and covenant statement uses some of those words in the covenant statement connected with this value, pluralism. “We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.” As Channing put it in the nineteenth century, “I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God’s children and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.”

Justice. “We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.” This is the new wording of what was our fifth principle, “We covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,” and, it also encompasses the eighth principle, which was not adopted by the whole UUA, but was adopted by many of our congregations, “We covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” The covenant statement connected with this value, justice, includes some of the previous language, “We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.”

“Transformation. “We adapt to the changing world.” This value does not directly relate back to one of our previous principles from the 1980s, but its tenet is basic to who we are. To go back Channing’s words,” I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith... I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues: But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.” The covenant statement that goes with this value says, “We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.” An early twentieth century Universalist minister, when asked where Universalists stood, answered by saying that we did not stand we marched. That is perhaps a bit too military an image for me, but I like the point we are not content to stand still and never question. We are ready and willing to move if convinced of new truths.

Generosity. “We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.” This value does not relate directly back to one of our 1980s principles, but it goes back further than that. It reflects some of the wording of our Transcendentalist forebears on self-culture. In a sermon from 2005 Jane E. Rosencrans said, “Self-culture, then, referred to the cultivation of the soul in individuals. In his address on self-culture, William Ellery Channing defined it by writing, ‘To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make it grow. Growth, expansion is the end. (The one), therefore, who does what (one) can to unfold all (one’s) powers of capacities, especially (one’s) nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned, vigorous, excellent, happy being, practices self-culture.”

The Transcendentalists believed in a process of lifelong spiritual growth. In her Memoirs, Margaret Fuller acknowledged this process when she wrote, ‘Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow. I was often false to this knowledge, in idolatries of particular objects, or impatient longings for happiness, but I have never lost sight of it, have always been controlled by it, and this first gift of love has never been superceded by a later love,’” [Transcendentalism for the New Age \(vcu.edu\)](#). In his essay, “The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism,” Dr. Barry Andrews writes, “The experiments at Walden Pond, Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and even Emerson’s dinner table, where the servants were invited to eat with their employers, were attempts at reforming individuals in their personal and domestic lives. Typically, the Transcendentalists began with the self in their reform efforts, believing that it is through the agency of individual(s)... that political change and social transformation are brought about. They aimed at setting an example of principled behavior whenever crucial moral issues, like slavery, were involved. There must be ‘some absolute goodness somewhere,’ Thoreau declared in his essay on Civil Disobedience; ‘for that will leaven the whole lump.’ Furthermore, action from principle was ‘essentially revolutionary’ and would have profound effects on the attitudes and behavior of the majority.... The ethical consequences of their Transcendentalist ideals impelled them into a wide variety of causes and reforms: the educational reforms of Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; the Christian socialism of William Henry Channing; Margaret Fuller’s feminism and involvement in the Roman Revolution of 1848; Thoreau’s civil disobedience; George Ripley’s Brook Farm; abolitionism and women’s rights. These were not accidents or deviations, but logical consequences of the Transcendentalist social ethic. They were the

inevitable outcome of a belief in a common human nature and the desire to integrate spiritual aspirations and moral behavior. Transcendentalism, for all its emphasis on spirituality, led its adherents into the world more often than away from it,” [The Roots Of UU Spirituality In New England Transcendentalism — Transcendentalist Spirituality](#)

Our new covenant statement connected to this value, generosity, states, “We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.” It is this generosity that grows love. Let each other into your lives, your hopes, your dreams. Be generous in what you share of yourselves. That sharing is necessary to the creation of Beloved Community.

Equity. “We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.” You might say that our current values statements on generosity and on equity flesh out what was our sixth principle, “We covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” The covenant statement connected to the value of equity states, “We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.” It obviously also relates back to that eighth principle, “We covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” As eighteenth-century Universalist George de Benneville put it, “The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship...”

The words of our values and covenant statements may be new to us, but the ideas contained there have been growing from our beginnings.

Unitarian Universalist minister Carl Seaburg said of a prior Universalist, “[What Clarence Russell Skinner] was doing for his time — and challenging us to do for our time — is to continually reshape the (congregations) that we inherit — whether as ministers or as laypeople — so that they can face up to the new challenges and opportunities of the days that lie ahead . . . We must continue the kind of work that Skinner made central to his life’s ministry — always building a new kind of (congregation) [— a]lways reaching out for a vision of the (congregation) that lies just beyond our grasp but with hard, dedicated work can be conjured into being.”

This is my wish for you as I tell you to fare well as I leave you. Stand firm on a foundation of love, cultivate your souls with a spiritual discipline of love, honor your heritage of freedom, reason, hope, and courage as you live out your values centered in love.

I end with words from American feminist theologian and Episcopal priest, Carter Heyward. She writes, “We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called “love.” Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member

of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.” And, I say, as I leave you, when faced with a choice, choose love.

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen.

Michael Jordan

Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing always find a song. Plato