

## **BOUND IN COVENANT: UU WORLD magazine**

By Victoria Safford

*Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law; this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another. James Vila Blake, 1894*

In the first weeks of my first ministry in an old New England congregation, a woman came to see me. Nearly 90 years old, she was a lifelong member of that church; her parents had joined in the late nineteenth century. She didn't like change, she said. She wasn't sure that she liked me, or what she called my "point of view."

"Just remember," she said. "I have outlived all of your predecessors, and I will probably outlive you."

This woman was a dedicated political conservative in what had become a progressive community; she was a liberal Christian in a congregation that had known gracious eras of theological diversity and also some fits of intolerance; she'd worked for the U.S. State Department through three wars and for the American Unitarian Association through the merger with the Universalist Church of America. In this church of her childhood, which she'd never left, most votes at most annual meetings had not gone her way for the past forty years. She was no stranger to discord.

In the end she did outlive me there: she died shortly after I accepted a new call in another state, and I was saddened by the news.

Over ten years we cultivated a fierce, respectful love for one another, and what I loved in her most was her commitment to that church, no matter what; her fidelity to it; the ferocity with which she paid her pledge each year, no matter how wayward the budget or insufferable (in her humble opinion) the sermons. She kept her covenant with that people, with their proud history and the bright promise of their future, and with the free faith tradition they embodied. I was a young minister then, and her way of being in relation, her integrity, taught me more about Unitarian Universalism than anything I'd learned in seminary.

I think of her often on Sundays, when we welcome our people each week, saying, "This is a congregation bound not by creed, but by covenant." We are bound by covenant, each to each and each to all, by what theologian Rebecca Parker calls "freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence." The central question for us is not, "What do we believe?" but more, "What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we accountable?" In a tradition so deeply steeped in

individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask, not once and for all, but again and again, even over ninety years of life: How do I decide which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold (in the words of one congregation's bond of union) my "name, hand, and heart"? The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

Seeing ourselves as bound in covenant is an old practice among us. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the *Arabella* toward a new life in New England:

Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other's burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their "superfluities," for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of foundering, literally, on New England's rocky shore, but of failing in their errand to establish this commonwealth, their "city on a hill." The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to "keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace"—to make and keep a sacred covenant together.

The organizing statements of the early Universalist and Unitarian congregations in New England echoed this Puritan ideal. The theology changed—Unitarian beliefs about the nature of God, Universalist beliefs about the nature of human beings—but the essential premises of covenanted community, the foundation of their polity, did not. What the Lord required, and what the people needed from each other, was willingness to meet their struggles in the plural voice. The church of which my 90-year-old friend was a member broke from the town's Congregational church in 1825, and its founding statement carries a trace of its Puritan ancestry: "We covenant to walk together in the faith and order of the gospel. . ."—even if that "gospel" was in fact a most radical reinterpretation of Jesus' most radical message; even if by "order" they meant the relative chaos of religious pluralism. The covenant remains, in that

particular church and deep in Unitarian Universalist tradition, to walk together across disagreements, dissent, and difficult discernments, cherishing the way we walk as dearly as any outcome. This is no easy aspiration.

Ethicist and theologian Margaret Farley makes this observation in *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*:

Civilization's history tends to be written in terms of human discoveries and inventions, wars, artistic creations, laws, forms of government, customs, the cultivation of the land. . . . At the heart of this history, however, lies a sometimes hidden narrative of promises, pledges, oaths, compacts, committed beliefs, and projected visions. At the heart of any individual's story, too, lies the tale of her or his commitments.

What covenants order our personal lives? Farley wonders about our daily human-scale commitments, about what our promises imply:

What did Sheila do when she married Joshua? What will actually happen in the moment when Karen vows to live a celibate and simple life within a community dedicated to God? What does Ruth effect when she signs a business contract? What takes place when Dan speaks the Hippocratic Oath as he begins his career as a doctor? What happens when heads of state sign an international agreement regarding the law of the seas? What happens when Jill and Sharon pledge their love and friendship for their whole lives long?

To act in these ways is to give our word. We send it out and it carries our integrity, our fidelity, our faithfulness, our truth. Our word is still ours, but it calls back to us from the heart of another person, or a circle of people, within which it now dwells. Such a commitment does not predict the future or set it in stone. It makes a certain kind of future possible.

Not long ago, I sat with a woman just a week before her wedding. "I can't speak those words," she said, referring to the well-worn text she and her partner had chosen months before: "Love is patient, love is kind, . . . love is never irritable, . . . love endures all things." "I'm none of that," she said, "and everybody knows it. I'm impatient, crabby, selfish. I didn't 'endure' my first marriage; who will believe me now? I don't want to stand up there and be a liar."

Underneath her nervous jitters she had uncovered a serious, essential tension: Would her vow be intended and heard as a statement of fact, mapping the future in one incontrovertible way, or as an honest, open aspiration? In the end she and her partner added a second reading, from Wendell Berry's book *Standing by Words*: "We can join one another only by joining the unknown . . . [Your union] is going where the two of you—and marriage, time, life, history, and the world—will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way." In making their promise, making their vow, giving their word, entering this holy covenant, they

described not what they expected or needed to happen, but how they intended to walk hand in hand, the way they intended to go, and to be.

A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping or guarded under glass in a museum. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas. . . . Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up.

Every Sunday in my congregation we repeat in unison the affirmation the Unitarian minister James Vila Blake (1842–1925) wrote for the church he served in Evanston, Illinois, in 1894, "Love is the spirit of this church . . ." Each week, quietly, aloud, I promise that I will "dwell in peace," and then I don't live peacefully at all: by Monday afternoon or Tuesday at the latest, I'm living fearfully again, or acting meanly or self-servingly. I say that I will "seek the truth in love," and then proceed to act quite otherwise, closing my ears and shutting down my open mind and heart, seeking instead the validation of my own narrow, safe opinion. I say, "Our great covenant is to help one another," and then I forget to do it.

I love singing the round in our hymnal based on Rumi's invitation, "Come, come, whoever you are." Whenever I sing it, I think of one line that doesn't appear in *Singing the Living Tradition*, however: "Though I've broken my vows a thousand times." Yet, because I am held in and hold to a covenant—with the people in my church and with others whom I love, with convictions I cherish and principles I mean to practice—I turn to a different page in the same hymnal. I sing the line, "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love," and I remember: a covenant is an aspiration to go deeper in relation to ourselves, to our best intention, to our God, and to each other.

Someone said to me not long ago, "Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things." When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant, from *covenir*, to travel together. We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice.