

Reflections On Covenant

*By Jim McCrae, Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, NC
Given during Sunday Worship Service, March 20, 2016*

As a human living in the web of life on planet earth, I am never alone. I am always in relationship with others. I define myself and the world around me through my relationships. The discernment and clarification of the nature of my relationships with others takes up a significant share of my thought time. As I become aware of the relationships around me, I learn how to be in the world. I need to know the boundaries and the strength of those relationships. This is not a one-time exercise that results in me knowing who I am, but an ongoing process of observing and refining.

Like Escher gazing at his image in a crystal ball, the image gracing the order of service two Sundays ago, my perception of the world is distorted by the physical and mental circumstances constituting my own private lens. What I take to be the real world is a very narrow slice of that world limited to what my senses can capture and filtered through my personal story and experiences. The more I can leverage the experience of others the more refined my world view becomes.

One way to integrate the experience of others into my world view is through reading books by authors I trust. Consider the first time you read "Romeo and Juliet" or one of its many retellings. Shakespeare's depiction of a thicket of relationships and their tragic outcome holds up a cautionary mirror of the world we know. We cannot help but feel that the players could have behaved another way toward one another; that another outcome was possible if only those characters could agree to be in relationship in a more understanding and compassionate way.

The most important way I discern and clarify my own relationships is through the sharing of personal experience within the circle of my close relationships. When I listen to a friend's personal story or hear how that friend felt about some experience we had in common, I have the opportunity to add to or adjust the impact of my own perceptions on my understanding of the world.

A covenant is an explicit promise to a circle of friends or a larger community that we will behave toward one another in certain ways. Together we promise that our relationships with each other will be bounded and defined by certain rules of conduct. An important element of this promise is that we will share our experiences as honestly and as clearly as possible. When I enter into such a covenant, I am more ready to accept the stories and experiences of others in the community. I have the opportunity to see the world not just through my own narrow field of perception but through the experiences of others that I trust.

Through this practice of dialogue in covenantal relationship, I have the opportunity to correct for some of the distortion inherent in my own private lens. I emerge better prepared to help the larger community understand that other outcomes are possible if only we can agree to be in relationship in a more understanding and compassionate way.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2016