

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network, CGN January 2010

Unitarian Universalism - A Covenantal Faith Tradition of Liberation

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I need to talk about some givens I have, including the personal responsibility that goes along with belonging to our covenantal faith tradition. Unitarian Universalism is a unique religious movement. We are not really a true denomination with a priestly hierarchy and book of revelation that gives us a creed and dogma to adhere to. Because we are a free association of congregations we are used to the responsibility of being independent in basic congregational decisions such as whom we call to be our professional ministers. Out of this UU covenantal polity comes a UU culture of personal liberation to bring out our original goodness (not original sin.) The covenantal responsibility of what this culture of freedom gives each of us makes it necessary to apply reason and assess our experiences in order to grow into living one's religion, fully. Each is turning what we determine is the ideal into the real according to the gifts we each have to give for the common good.

We are a religion of ethical and caring relationship. This kind of relating allows for failure, forgiveness, reconciliation and the grace of empathy. The UU culture invites us to be as truly ourselves as we can be with one another. How do we make these UU covenantal relationships? The covenanting (a relationship of promises we make for our togetherness) inherent in the small group ministry is a ready-made way. As Rev. Suzanne Meyer puts it, "We are united not by our theological beliefs, but by the promises we make to each other. We are bound not by rules or bylaws or by transient political agendas, but by a commitment to right relationship." This gives an expectation that we develop the spiritual practices of giving confidentiality for a person's intimate sharings, of accepting each other as whole persons who change and grow, of sticking with commitments we make to one another, of being respectfully open to differences and open to one's own changing into being more mature and understanding than we are now. These covenantal habits of spiritual discipline are not a secular kind of contractual agreement. They are the present-day heritage of our faith tradition.

That's my quickie description for why I believe small group ministry is so important and natural for our UU movement. I bet you can look at your own experiences and add to my list of promises that are inherent in how we support one another's empowerment. Speaking of one's own experiences brings me to the spiritual realm of how our ministry's small groups give opportunity for finding awareness of what is ultimate for each of us. Our kind of covenantal right relating most easily comes from deep sharing of meanings in our lives. This facilitates one's expectation to grow and change for the better in living our religion. If we go to an authority, it's through the knowledge gained from our experiences and reality checks.

Why do I use the word "spiritual" for all this UU talk? "Ours is not the la-la land being blissed-out kind of spirituality" (as Rev. Marilyn Sewel puts it.) She goes on, "Our kind of being spiritual is being engaged and aware with the understanding that enters through the feeling self."

Regardless of the theology we each have, we all have two ultimate questions to answer if we are so motivated: 1. What meaning can my life have? and 2. Do I have faith in the sustainability of my having the inner strength to face life's problems? For me, knowing what my best talents and skills are for collaboration with others can give the answers to these questions. Also, knowing my best talents and skills for enhancing the common good can give opportunities for me to live in spiritual ways.

I expect every covenanting group session to be a spiritual experience for me. Here's what I find to be most important for these spiritual opportunities to occur in the covenanting process. What follows is inspired by the philosophy of Rev. Henry Nelson Wieman in Rev. Harold Rosen's book, *Religious Education and Our Ultimate Commitment*. In the group, we have religious conversations, not discussions about religion, in full bodily presence, giving great potential for creative transformation and the birth of new values. When we hear one another's words, we listen for the meanings more than the words. We ask questions for clarification. Wieman's Golden Rule

of Face-to-Face Interaction is "We ought to listen as we would be listened unto, and help others to listen as they would be listened unto." It's a co-creativity that comes out of each person's sensitivity and responsiveness. This quality of creative interaction between individuals brings about human growth from the accumulation of meanings, the enrichment of applying one's experiences, and the expansion of appreciative awareness. Wieman looks at this natural growth process as a wonderful mystery sustained by a creative power we can come to know and cooperate with. This knowledge and cooperation is the high calling for us facilitators, he believes. We are here to draw out a person's natural goodness and his/her value-quest. It's a self-discovery process for development of that person's ultimate values for living.

As the covenanters progress through creative interchange, central puzzlements/questions come out for people's reactions. We facilitators are constantly tuning-in to provide conditions of support and encouragement. An effective process to employ is called Socratic Questioning. This, often, takes the form of paraphrasing and making inquiries for clarification in order to lead a person to the next step in his/her thinking. Hopefully, the whole group engages in this respectful questioning. Through this facilitation of creative interchange, Wieman says, we "are addressing the highest calling of the human condition - to co-create, which means to help bring new values into the world." Wieman has a Three-Fold Procedure: "I will express my experience clearly, help you to express yours clearly, and then explore the interrelationships between our viewpoints."

Wieman's special kind of religious conversation that he calls "creative interchange" gives opportunities for liberating a person's inner wisdom. Wieman calls this process Four-fold Development:

1. Each gets from the other some value (meaning, perspective) which he or she never had before in just that form; [remove extra space here]
2. This new value is subconsciously integrated with the values already had by each individual;
3. This expands the range of values accessible to the valuing consciousness of each; and finally
4. This deepens and expands the community of values shared by the two or more participants.

In River Road's covenanting, we try to carry this unfolding process into meditation/silent reflection and addressing common threads found in our interchange. At the end is a feeling I have (and, I know, others have) of heartfelt acceptance, being immersed in loving kindness and giving the same love in return. The possibility is alive for each of us to reach a connection that has exercised "the human capacity for relationship that goes beyond the senses and that is experienced not as an act of will, but as a gift or as grace, framed by [the UU liberating] tradition and lived in creative action," as Rev. Judith Downing puts it. These sparks of co-creativity we have in our creative interchange is "when God happens" according to Wieman and I know this to be true for me (substituting the name of Goddess or Spirit of Life.)

Note: Bracketed words are mine. H. Pop Nov., 2008