



Soul Matters

Prepared for the Washington Ethical Society

September 2016

Promises



Exercises

Option A: Whose Am I?

Quaker teacher, Douglas Steer writes:

The ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitable leads to a deeper one: “Whose am I?” – because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

So, whose are you? To whom, in other words, have you made promises? This exercise invites you to consider this question by living with four different photographs this month. Here are your instructions:

1. Find and print out four pictures of four different people:
 - one of a person that represent your promises to those that have gone before you
 - one of a person that represents your promises to those who will come after you
 - one of a person that represents your promises to someone central to your life right now
 - one of yourself -- past or present -- that represents your promises to yourself
2. Put these four pictures in a place you will see every day this month. Perhaps tape them to your bathroom mirror or stick them in your wallet. Maybe frame them and place them on your desk or stick them with magnets on your fridge.
3. Make a conscious effort to reflect on them every day and do at least one thing to further or honor your promise to one of these people.
4. Bring your four pictures to your small group and share how living with them altered your days.

(Note: consider making this a group effort and do it as a couple or as a family.)

Option B: Return & Repair

UU minister Gretchen Haley writes:

What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other.

This exercises asks you to do the work of return and repair. Pick a relationship of heartbreak in your life. Maybe it involves a friend or family member, maybe even someone who is no longer living. Maybe a neighbor. Maybe even an institution, like your congregation or our government. Whoever or whichever it is, make time this month to return to that relationship and work on repair. Simply ask yourself “Where have I withdrawn, been betrayed or broken something myself?” Your heart will know the answer. Listen to what it says. Then open your heart one more time and lean into relationship once again, doing what you can to repair what you can.

Option C: Live in the Plural

UU minister and writer Victoria Safford writes:

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 [these questions], not once and for all, but again and again. ... The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

Full article here: <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>

What might it be like for you to live “in the plural”? For this exercise, get out a big sheet of paper and write “ME” in the middle of it. Then start adding the people, principles, values, and dreams you’re committed to. Draw lines of connection, creating a mind map of the network of promises you live in.

When you’re done, set it aside for a few days. Then come back to it and notice what stands out for you and, also, what is *missing* in your web. What relationships do you have in your life? How might you more intentionally live in the plural? Bring your mind map and your insights to your small group.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what covenant means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a part of a community of covenant means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?

1. What promises have you made to those who have gone before?
2. What promises have you made to those who will come after?
3. Have you kept your promises to yourself?
4. What is the most life-giving promise you've made?
5. Has society ever broken its promise to you? How have you responded when you've witnessed society breaking its promises to others?
6. Some of us preempt heartbreak by leaving relationships before others have a chance to break their promises and our hearts. What is keeping you from the risk and pain of relationship?
7. Ethical Culture rightly calls us to work on repairing relationship and sticking in there even when it is hard. But sometimes one's connection with and care of self require us to put up boundaries and know when to leave a relationship. Is it time for you to put your relationship with yourself first?
8. If you're a member of your congregation, what promise did you make when you joined? You probably had a sense of what you'd get, but were you clear about what you promised to give?
9. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources on Promises

This is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about the idea of promises or—using slightly different language—covenant.

Wise Words

To seek the truth in love means that even when we stumble, we continue to love. Even when we flail, we stay in relationship. To seek the truth in love means that we talk about the hard things rather than denying that things can be hard. This is a very difficult task. It is not something that I have found easy to do, but it is something that I continue to try to be brave enough to do.

~ **Rev. Anne Mason, Soul Matters Minister**

Out
of a great need
we are all holding hands
and climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
the terrain around here
is
far too
dangerous
for
that.

~ **Hafiz**

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change. It claims: *I will abide with you in this common endeavor; be present as best as I can in our becoming.*

~ **Lisa Ward** full text here: <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/covenant-invites-relationship>

The ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitable leads to a deeper one: “Whose am I?” – because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

~ **Douglas Steer, Quaker teacher**

We sometimes wrongly say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are [as Unitarian Universalists]. This is wrong. Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community. It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world.

~ **Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray**

We can join one another only by joining the unknown . . . [The 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.

~ **Wendell Berry**

Sometimes it's as simple as this: Our society tells us to ask “What do I want?” Our religion invites us to ask “Whose am I?” Two very different questions that lead to two very different lives. Which question will we invite to lead us? Every single sacred text says our choice is literally a matter of life and death.

~ **Rev. Scott Tayler**

A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is “no surprises.” A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. If either of us fails to honor this shared commitment, the other has permission to call the one who fell short back into covenant, to ask what is happening, to be demanding and supportive at the same time. In a covenantal relationship, there is an understanding that no one fulfills his

promises each and every time. Sometimes you make a doubtful promise, and then put your heart into it, and then fail, and then you and your covenantal partners pick yourselves up and ask, “how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?” In a covenantal relationship, the message you get from your partners when you fail is as just as much an affirmation of self-worth as if the promise had been fulfilled.

~ **Rev. Preston Moore**

Covenant

Let us covenant with one another
to keep faith with the source of life
knowing that we are not our own,
earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another
to keep faith with the community of resistance
never to forget that life can be saved
from that which threatens it
by even small bands of people
choosing to put into practice
an alternative way of life.

And, let us covenant with one another
to seek for an ever deeper awareness
of that which springs up inwardly in us.
Even when our hearts are broken
by our own failure
or the failure of others
cutting into our lives,
Even when we have done all we can
and life is still broken,
there is a Universal Love
that has never broken faith with us
and never will.

This is the ground of our hope,
and the reason we can be bold in seeking to
fulfill the promise.

~ **Rev. Rebecca Parker**

Videos & Podcasts

“The Mandate: A Call and Response from Black Lives Matter Atlanta”

A powerful two and a half minute video about how our societal covenant has been broken and how Black Lives Matter leaders are proclaiming a new mandate. The context of the video: “On July 13, 2016, members of Black Lives Matter Atlanta organized civil disobedience to amplify the call for long standing local demands in light of the police killings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Jerry Williams. Heavy police and state surveillance and presence attempted to halt

and block the organizers. These Black leaders would not falter.”

<https://vimeo.com/174684690>

“Heresy, Hubris and the Future of our Faith” by Rev. Sue Phillips

St. Lawrence District Assembly, April 2, 2016

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuufi5NMsVw)

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“Eleuthera, Pirates, and Covenant” podcast

Puritan Minister Rev. Cotton Mather loved confessing soon to be executed Pirates. But what happened when a young pirate by the name of William Fly defies Mather and the puritan establishment and does not rebuke his pirate ways? And what exactly is this pirates relationship with Unitarian Universalism? ... Dive in and explore the connection between Eleuthera, Pirates, and Covenant.

<http://www.pamphletpodcast.org/mathers-wrath/>

A three minute video about covenant by UU Youth and Young Adult Ministries

<https://vimeo.com/68767404>

“Breaking the Gender Covenant” by Joy Ladin, from On Being (podcast and transcript available)

“Did anyone ever teach you to be true to yourself?” a therapist once asked me. I had come to her in the midst of what I call my gender crisis — the physical, mental, and emotional breakdown I experienced after 40-plus years of living as the male I knew I wasn’t...”

<http://tinyurl.com/h2egz3d>

Articles

“Bound in Covenant”

A great starting place for this theme.

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>

“How Covenants Make Us” by David Brooks

“When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. When we are situated within something it is because we have made a covenant. A contract protects interests, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are part of one another. It involves a vow to serve the relationship that is sealed by love: Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people.”

<http://tinyurl.com/jhs3e2w>

Movies

God on Trial

Awaiting their inevitable deaths at one of the worst concentration camps, a group of Jews make a rabbinical court to decide whether God has gone against the Holy Covenant and if He is the one guilty for their suffering.

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1173494/?ref=kw_li_tt

Up

An animated movie about the quest to fulfill the dreams and promises of a lifetime.

<http://tinyurl.com/hqvnyzv>

Songs

“Nothing More” by Alternate Routes

“We are Love / We are One / We are how we treat each other when the day is done.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tXzIVjU1xs>

“Would You Harbor Me?” by Ysaye Barnwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp7JD5DP5FQ>

“Count on Me” by Bruno Mars

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvnaLuRm5p8>

Books

The Covenant with Black America - Ten Years Later by Tavis Smiley

In 2006, Tavis Smiley teamed up with other leaders in the Black community to create a national plan of action to address the ten most crucial issues facing African Americans. The Covenant with Black America, which became a #1 New York Times bestseller, ran the gamut

from health care to criminal justice, affordable housing to education, voting rights to racial divides. But a decade later, Black men still fall to police bullets and brutality, Black women still die from preventable diseases, Black children still struggle to get a high quality education, the digital divide and environmental inequality still persist, and American cities from Ferguson to Baltimore burn with frustration. ... So Smiley calls for a renewal of The Covenant, presenting in this new edition the original action plan—with a new foreword and conclusion—alongside fresh data ... to underscore missed opportunities and the work that remains to be done.

<http://tinyurl.com/zsa7fbq>

An interview with the author, Travis Smiley:

<http://tinyurl.com/h6dhern>

Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America by Eboo Patel

In Sacred Ground, author and renowned interfaith leader Eboo Patel says this prejudice is not just a problem for Muslims but a challenge to the very idea of America. Patel shows us that Americans from George Washington to Martin Luther King Jr. have been "interfaith leaders," illustrating how the forces of pluralism in America have time and again defeated the forces of prejudice. And now a new generation needs to rise up and confront the anti-Muslim prejudice of our era. To this end, Patel offers a primer in the art and science of interfaith work.

<http://www.uuabookstore.org/Sacred-Ground-P17840.aspx>

List of books for children and families about covenant and promises:

https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/20V4ZEESKJIHJ/ref=cm_sw_su_w

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