

Belonging

Preached to the Unitarian Universalists of Fallston by Rev. Lyn Cox
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We have a lot to celebrate today. We celebrate the people who have committed to membership in the last year, and the joy of continuing membership for so many others. In planning today's service, I was reminded of one of the most important parts of new member education at a church where I served previously: the tour of the building and grounds.

The church I am thinking of was like this congregation in some ways. The members who re-established the congregation in its current location were, like the founders of the UU's of Fallston, concerned about issues such as civil rights and the wellbeing of children. They imagined a building that would be both remarkable in its visibility and flexible in its use, a meeting space for the larger community. I felt more and more connected to the history and life of the congregation every time I went on the tour with a group of prospective and new members.

The first stop on the tour was in the garden. In 1960, when they broke ground on their new spiritual home, members had planted a Cedar of Lebanon in the garden. The tree was meant to mark the entrance to a sacred place. In my mind, I can still hear the voices of the volunteers who cared for the flowers and trees in the garden. Their love for the physical environment of the church grew out of an understanding that they belonged, in body, to the incarnate congregation. By sharing the history of the community and affection for their spiritual home, the volunteers invited new members to become part of that body.

The next stop on the tour was the sanctuary. The main hall was a poly-sided room with a domed roof. Hexagons were a continuing motif in the architecture and decorations. This is the point in the tour when the guide would explain the congregation's logo, which featured a hexagon. When they established their current home, the members wanted to highlight shapes found in nature. The meaning of the architecture and the logo said something about the identity of the members: to belong to this congregation is to cast your lot with the forces that sustain life.

Later in the tour, we examined the walls of the religious education wing. We learned that, during the construction phase, members helped with the placement of custom decorations in the poured concrete walls. This is a congregation where big things can be accomplished when everybody pitches in. Brushing our hands across the walls, we could touch the concrete fingerprints of members from a generation ago. We understood in that moment that membership is a covenant, a set of promises that people make to each other for the sake of generations past, present, and future.

I have been on the tour here at the UU's of Fallston once, and I'm sure I will discover more each time I walk the grounds. There are three things about membership that I learned in the past, and I think they all apply here. Touching soil in the garden or warm hands in greeting, we find that membership means being part of a body. Challenging ourselves to incorporate new insights, we find that membership means a transformation of identity. As we connect with past generations and meet the representatives of generations to come, we find that membership means entering into a

covenant. Membership is a body. Membership is an identity. Membership is a covenant.

Membership is a Body

Before I knew anything else about congregational membership as a child, I knew that membership meant being part of a body. For many of us, the first letter to the Corinthians was our introduction to the meaning of membership. I have my disagreements with the writers of the Christian scriptures, but I still find useful perspectives there regarding community organizing. Here's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit ...

The author continues.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?

The section concludes, "there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

The author is saying that membership means we each channel our individual talents with the understanding of being part of a whole. There is a need and a space for every member. Every person has gifts to offer. What affects one affects us all, so we care for the system of which we are a part. From this perspective, I think the author has a good point.

The difference, I think, between what I'm hearing from 1 Corinthians and what I'm hearing from Unitarian Universalism is that we don't see each person's role as fixed. People learn new skills and bring them to the congregation. We take turns being the heart or the hands or the ears of the congregation. Just as in ancient Corinth, members gather to be part of something larger. We gather today with the awareness that our membership body is living and changing. Each person is a vital part of the whole, and each person's role is subject to change. An atom or a molecule might be a better metaphor than a human body, because each part moves in harmony with the whole. Embodiment is a dance.

I may have mentioned before that I used to perform with an English Country Dance troupe. English Country is a form of patterned social dance, first documented in the late 17th century. If you have seen a movie like *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*, you

have seen English Country Dancing. Somewhat like square dancing, people circle around each other, interact with more than one other dancer in their group, and follow agreed-upon steps. Partners take hands and release hands as they go about the pattern.

Much like in congregational life, what one person does affects everyone else. We weren't perfect dancers. We adjusted for each other. We forgave the occasional step on the toe. We laughed a lot. Knowing that each one of us belonged to the whole made me feel proud when we completed a dance together. I liked being part of something in which my participation mattered, but I didn't have to stress about making the whole system work. No single person carried all of the responsibility for our success.

On one memorable occasion, we were dancing at the Renaissance Festival for a small crowd of visitors early in the day. Our performance space was in the open, so patrons could come and go freely. I could see the performance as it unfolded from my spot among the musicians. As my friend Susan circled around the person next to her and got ready to take hands with her partner, a girl, about ten years old, slipped in and took Susan's place and seamlessly entered the dance. All of us, including Susan, thought this was hilarious. None of us knew the young dancer. She had learned the steps somewhere else.

This experience reminds me of church membership. When we're new to a congregation, the procedures and the rituals may seem complicated. With preparation, we can learn to slip into the dance, to relieve someone else who may be ready to try a different step. People who transfer from other congregations already have some of that preparation. We never know what talents and knowledge someone brings until we are in motion. Most of all, I learned that membership remains true wherever we are in the world. The young dancer was an English Country Dancer during her visit with us just as surely as she was at home. So it is here. As Unitarian Universalists, we belong to the body of this faith, wherever our journeys may lead.

Membership is Identity

This leads to my second point, which is that membership means a transformation of identity. Certainly, there are practical changes that come with membership, such as voting. Membership is also an opportunity for a spiritual shift in how we understand ourselves. For UU's, the ongoing search for truth and meaning spurs the growth and change of our identities over time.

James Luther Adams, who was a prominent Unitarian Universalist theologian of the twentieth century, wrote about transformation in liberal religion. By "liberal," he meant a theology of freedom, not a political perspective. He wrote:

Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that "revelation" is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself, as an actuality, is patient of this limitation. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents and do not capsule reality. Events of word, deed, and nature are not sealed. They point always beyond themselves. (James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, p. 12)

Ideally, transformation happens because we have gotten ready for it. We have the capacity to be rigorous and intentional about preparing ourselves for revelation. Membership means re-orienting a religious identity around the disciplines of search, challenging ourselves, and supporting each other. Identifying as a member does not depend on things that are settled, such as your religious upbringing or the flags of your heritage. Identifying as a member is a declaration that we are open to change. Belonging is an invitation to change and to be changed by the gathered community.

One of our UU ancestors demonstrated the transforming power of gathering when she organized educational seminars for women. Margaret Fuller's "Conversations" attracted prominent citizens and social reformers for spellbinding discussions of philosophy. Fuller wrote to a friend that women "wish for some such means of stimulus and cheer, and . . . for a place where they could state their doubts and difficulties with hope of gaining aid from the experience or aspirations of others." In 1839, there were very few such opportunities where women's ideas could be taken seriously.

Topics included classical mythology, education, ethics, the fine arts, and "woman." Each session focused on one philosophical question. Fuller would facilitate a discussion among the women before sharing her own views.

Margaret Fuller's "Conversations" transformed the participants by affirming their intellect and their relationships. The women who participated took their sharpened skills in rhetoric and their stronger alliances with them as they worked on voting rights, abolishing slavery, and advocating for women's education. Elizabeth Cady Stanton said that Margaret Fuller's conversations were a landmark in "the vindication of woman's right to think."

For Fuller, being a professional conversation convener for five years gave her the income, the time, and the inspiration she needed to follow her calling as a writer. Her 1845 book "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" is a gift of the "Conversations" period in Fuller's life.

For more information on Margaret Fuller, check the following websites:

<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/margaretfuller.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/poet/fuller.html>

<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/fuller/conversations-mf.html>

Membership is a transformation of identity. Membership changes who we are. How we change is, in part, up to us. Those who have been members for awhile, take some time to think about that. How has membership changed your life? How can identifying with the congregation help you to grow into the person you want to become? Don't answer yet. I think we're going to try to have a class about that next year. James Luther Adams said that revelation is continuous. My point is that membership is a gateway to continuous revelation if we take the opportunity to reflect.

There are a lot of stories about Adams, passed down through generations from his students to their students. I'll share one about congregational membership and transforming identity. This one comes through George Kimmich Beach, who retold it during a lecture in 1999 called "The Parables of James Luther Adams."

In the First Unitarian Church of Chicago we started a program some of us called "aggressive love" to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral. We had two members of the Board objecting. Unitarianism has no creed, they

said, and we were making desegregation a creed. It was a gentle but firm disagreement and a couple of us kept pressing. “Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church?” we asked, and we kept it up until about 1:30 in the morning. We were all worn out, when finally this man made one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion. “OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . . well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them!”
[George Kimmich Beach, “The Parables of James Luther Adams,” in *The Minns Lectures, 1999* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999), 63. Quoted in Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, p. 12]

I am confident that there are members of this congregation whose lives have been transformed by taking on the identity of membership. May it be so for all of us, including for the new members who we celebrate today.

Membership as Covenant

One of the ways membership transforms people is through covenant: mutual promises, freely pledged, mindful of generations past, present, and future. Covenants are sometimes misunderstood as words or documents, but the essence of a covenant is the relationship itself. Marriage is a covenant that many people are familiar with: a relationship in which people voluntarily make promises to one another. Wedding vows are the description of the covenant, but the actual covenant is in the relationship itself. I almost hesitate to use that example, because I don’t want anyone to think that joining a congregation means marrying 42 other people. I’m trying to get across the essential elements of a covenant: promises that people have the freedom to make, a relationship that is mutually sustaining, understood in the context of a past and a future.

The promises that people make to one another in a covenantal relationship may be explicit or implicit. Some congregations work through a long-term study and discussion process to arrive at an explicit covenant of right relationships. I can make some guesses about the implicit promises that people make to one another here as part of membership. You can tell me if my guesses sound about right.

One of the most consistent rituals in this congregation is the welcome. No matter how you arrived, no matter your age or your gender or your background, you are welcome here. Every week, a Board member assures us that we are welcome here. It seems to me that becoming a member means becoming one of the people doing the welcoming. Being a member who welcomes others would entail kindness, prioritizing the comfort of the visitor, and non-defensive listening. Does that sound accurate so far?

I’ll take it a step further: if we are intent on welcoming everyone, with all of the different stories and backgrounds and questions with which people arrive, it seems to me that part of practicing welcome is working to understand why differences divide us in the world outside this congregation so that we can be sure not to let division happen here. The more we understand each other’s unique identities, including the challenges and blessings those identities carry in the world, the more authentically we can welcome each

other. To me, a covenant of welcome implies a call to learn about diversity. I am curious about whether this follows for you as it seems to in my mind.

Moving on past welcoming, the implicit covenant of this congregation probably has something to do with putting energy into the congregation's common goals. For instance, this congregation has goals related to making a positive impact in the local community through programs such as the Sharing Table.

When it comes to learning about diversity and relieving suffering in the community, James Luther Adams is right there with you. He wrote:

A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members; it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or a party. (James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, p. 15)

[I was reminded during the post-sermon discussion in worship that a commitment to consensus process is another promise that members of the UU's of Fallston make to each other. Members may disagree, but they stay at the table until they find plans and solutions that everyone can support.]

None of these promises would be possible without one more promise in the covenant of membership: forgiveness. We are real people with bodies and feelings that can get hurt. We are going to fall short sometimes. Adams wrote, "The community of justice and love is not an ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world." The covenant of membership includes the possibility of reconciliation in response to everyday mistakes and misunderstandings.

I experienced this myself as a member of the first UU congregation I joined. I had decided to go to seminary, but I didn't have any experience leading worship. The minister offered me an opportunity to preach on Thanksgiving weekend, which was typically a lay-led Sunday in our Fellowship. I wanted to preach about truth-telling in families when we gather for holidays. As an aside in the sermon, I referred to the history of Thanksgiving, saying that I thought a more complex story of the holiday should be part of our truth-telling.

Speaking of truth-telling, I have to tell you that the sermon wasn't very good. One might have complained of too many movie references, not enough spiritual content, or an aimless structure. The thing that upset one of the other members, though, was my reference to history, with which she disagreed both in fact and in principle. She spoke to me after the service, and she followed up with a long letter. I don't think I can remember her letter well enough to do justice to the points she made, but suffice it to say that we had to reconcile after our misunderstanding.

I was in my mid-twenties and I had never been in a church disagreement before. I didn't know what to do! I was afraid that I had messed up forever, and that I would have to leave the Fellowship for stirring up trouble. The minister encouraged me to speak directly to the other person. We came to an understanding about some things, and agreed

to disagree about others. When I graduated from seminary, this person was one of those who went out of her way to congratulate me.

The covenant of membership involves an expectation that we will not give up on each other easily. This is part of acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. Reconciling after a misunderstanding is one avenue to spiritual growth.

The Commission On Appraisal is a group of Unitarian Universalist leaders from all over the country whose volunteer calling is to study issues that are significant to our faith movement. Their report, “Belonging: The Meaning of Membership,” was helpful as I prepared today’s sermon. The writers of the report affirmed the value of disappointment in strengthening our covenants. They said:

The church is a human institution and it can become all-too-human. When such difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it. They are not better or worse than the others, just different. Out of their disillusionment grows a loyalty less to the institution and more to the values and ideals that the institution seeks to serve and embody. It recognizes that institutional as well as personal failure is virtually inevitable. This is loyalty of a high order. It requires extraordinary patience, tolerance, and the capacity to forgive. These are spiritual gifts, learned in real community.

Those who have gained these capacities, these gifts, are in the deepest sense members: people who are committed for the long haul, those who have a loyalty not just to what the church is but what it could be, what it can become through their persistence and with their assistance. They are committed in other words, not so much to the institution as to the values and ideals it exists to promote and uphold—even in its periods of failure to do so. They are patient with brash young ministers and tolerant of plodding older ones. They are cheerleaders in the good times and steady supporters through the bad. They keep perspective, they take a longer view. (Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, p. 11-12)

So ends the reading. May we grow in our capacity to covenant, to forgive, and to commit to our shared dreams for the congregation.

Conclusion

As we get to know each other better, I look forward to touring the building and the grounds over and over, seeing this spiritual home anew through each set of eyes. Every person here has something to teach about the embodiment of membership, the meaning of a membership identity, and the promises that members make in covenant with one another. Let us learn and grow together.