

A Covenant of Reciprocity

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

April 7, 2024

Rev. Craig M. Nowak

Ask just about any Unitarian Universalist to describe this faith tradition and inevitably you will hear it described as a non-creedal faith in which we nonetheless affirm the worth and dignity of every person, respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, and encourage a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

These attributes, and this language in particular, are part of what we presently call our principles which point to values, rather than specific beliefs, broadly held in common by Unitarian Universalists.

What is often missing, in my experience listening to UU's describe their faith is any reference to the sources or inspirations of our tradition. And yet each of the principles we name, and the values to which they point, are rooted in sources, multiple fonts of inspiration, wisdom discerned and shared throughout the ages through the world's great religious, spiritual, and philosophical, traditions, as well as the arts and sciences.

I've been thinking quite a lot about our UU principles, values, and sources as we get ready to launch our annual canvass or stewardship campaign...that ritual we both must and want to engage in year after year to keep SUUS and Unitarian Universalism alive and well in the world.

In short, this is the time of year we ask members and friends to commit to making a financial pledge to the church for the next church year. The money raised is the primary source of our annual revenue without which this place, your spiritual home, and our Unitarian Universalist values would cease to exist in this little corner of the world.

This fact underscores the truth of our seventh principle which points to the shared value of interdependence by acknowledging the interconnected nature of existence. And yet, a common source to which people often appeal or claim inspiration to think and talk about stewardship is some version of the outdated- and some argue incorrect- orthodox Judeo-Christian reading of Genesis in which human beings are made stewards or caretakers, and given special dominion over and use of whatever it is that is in our care.

Meanwhile, our readings this morning invite inspiration from another perspective and understanding of stewardship. One that, “Celebrates the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” Indeed, the contrast between the traditional Judeo-Christian view of stewardship drawn from Genesis and the earth centered view expressed by Robin Wall Kimmerer got me to thinking about transactional versus reciprocal relationships.

Several years ago a person living in a lovely home way down the street from me died. The house was inherited by their three children who were all young adults, none of whom grew up in the house. Rather than sell the house, however, the three of them decided to move in and live there. Within a year, the once lovely, meticulously cared for house had become an eyesore. Cars, motorcycles, and even a lawnmower were routinely left out in the driveway, suggesting the garage was either full or the door had ceased to function. The grass was left to grow wild and high, making the front yard appear more an abandoned field than suburban lawn. Within a year or two the roof looked as if it might just fall in one day.

The decline of the house’s appearance seemed all the more dramatic to me as I don’t often venture down that end of the street past the house unless I want to go to a certain orchard or get my Christmas tree from a nearby farm. And even then, there are other routes I can take. About a year and a half ago, I drove past the house following an intense wind storm. A tree in the front yard had fallen, just missing the house, its top branches extending partly across the driveway. And there it stayed until one day a large dumpster appeared in the driveway. Gradually the house seemed to emerge from the ashes of deterioration, the lawn was cut, the fallen tree removed, and the dumpster filled. The roof was replaced and soon the driveway was clear of all vehicles and unused lawn equipment. By Christmas, the house appeared neat and tidy, at least from the outside, but empty. Signs of life at the house began to appear again after the new year and I learned from a neighbor that the three who had inherited the house had moved out and sold it.

Now, I don’t know the reasons the three who inherited the house didn’t keep it up, but one possibility is that they had a transactional relationship with the house they had inherited. It was given to them and so long as it continued to serve their needs they continued to occupy it, that is, to maintain a certain relationship with it. Perhaps like the merchant, from our story for all ages, they believed the house didn’t need them. That they could just take what they needed from it and it would just continue. But that belief depleted the house and it was no longer able to serve their needs and the relationship ended.

Transactional relationships are the way of the world and that's not necessarily always a bad thing. Nonetheless the church exists, in part, as an alternative. A model to counter the dominant ways of the world, particularly those that have become so commonplace as to be considered "natural" rather than a choice we make to resist or deny what the rest of nature, of which we are but one part, knows is actually true.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "We are all bound by a covenant of reciprocity. Plant breath for animal breath, winter and summer, predator and prey, grass and fire, night and day, living and dying. Our elders say that ceremony is the way we can remember to remember. In the dance of the giveaway, remember that the earth is a gift we must pass on just as it came to us. When we forget, the dances we'll need will be for mourning, for the passing of polar bears, the silence of cranes, for the death of rivers, and the memory of snow."

Her words suggest that transactional relationships are a kind of forgetting. A quicker means to an end, perhaps, especially in the hyper-busyness of a modern, multi-tasking world and the seemingly endless pressure to keep up, not miss out, and get things done. The kind of existence that all but guarantees forgetting the gifts of the earth, community, and life itself which we receive and are called to pass on.

Again, I don't know for sure why the three who inherited house down the street didn't maintain it, but if it's deterioration was due to a transactional relationship, I wonder what it might have looked like had the three who inherited it remembered the covenant of reciprocity which binds each to all. I imagine it would have come to be cherished as a home rather than mere roof or shelter. That it would have been as well cared for as it cared for the occupants. Certainly it would have been appreciated as a gift, like the wild strawberries Robin Wall Kimmerer's father loved, and thus might have been understood as an opportunity and obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate rather than simply a resource to use.

The improvements made since I first spotted the dumpster in the driveway suggest that the house may now once again enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the new people who have moved in.

But now I want to shift our attention again to this house, that is, this spiritual home we call Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society and your relationship with it.

As I see it this church is like the pecan groves of which Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote, that, "give, and give again."

This “communal generosity” as she calls it, “might be incompatible with the process of evolution, which invokes the imperative of individual survival.” But, she warns, “we make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole.” “The gift of abundance from pecans”, she observes, “is also a gift to themselves. By satiating squirrels and people...that is, by providing more than enough... the trees are ensuring their own survival.”

In noting this, she points to the potential for people and communities to remember and adopt cultural practices that ensure survival. And among these practices are generosity and abundance. These are the practices that feed and sustain reciprocal relationships. And this is, at its core, what our annual canvass is all about.

People have ensured this community’s survival for over half a century. People who understood their relationship to it as one of reciprocity, a mutual practice of generosity and abundance. Yet, as a minister I have met people from time to time over the years who show up at a church only when they need something for themselves from the church.

Usually they’re looking for a pretty space for a wedding or someone to lend an air of solemnity to a funeral. Sometimes they show up when something bad has happened and the best selling self-help books aren’t helping anymore.

Some have left whatever religious tradition they were raised in, while others have never attended any church at all. More often than not, I encourage them to attend a service or two to get a sense of what this faith is about and to get to know something of the community they are asking to serve their needs.

In response, most look down or away as if they believe not looking at me will make me disappear. Many make excuses of one kind or another and it is clear they have forgotten the covenant of reciprocity that governs life. The only relationship they’re interested in or perhaps even know how to engage in is a transactional one.

But a true, life affirming, life giving, and loving community like SUUS will not and cannot survive on transactional relationships. The gifts received from and as part of this community ought to be met and reciprocated with a joyful and generous heart. And for over 60 years they have been. For that we owe our sincerest gratitude to those past and present whose abundance and generosity has ensured not only their own well-being but that of this spiritual community.

As we begin our annual canvas I invite you to reflect on the gifts this community, the people seated around you here today, as well as those you hold in your memories of this place, have given you and how you're life and sense of well-being is made better, richer, and more joyful for being in relationship with this place and its people. And then consider your commitment...the gifts you bring and might offer still as an expression of love, abundance, and gratitude but also as an acknowledgement...an acknowledgement of your remembering of the covenant of reciprocity by which we all live and depend. Thank you.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be