

**“Covenant as Spiritual Practice”<sup>©</sup>**  
**Mattatuck UU Society**  
**Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister**  
**October 26, 2008**

**SOUNDING OF BELL**

**CALL TO GATHER**

Come, Come Whoever Your Are, #188

**Service Leader: Spoken Words**

Come, come, whoever you are;  
Man, woman, parent, child  
Whatever your religious journey,  
Whatever your skin color,  
Whatever your ability,  
Whomever you love-  
You are welcome here this morning.  
You are welcome at our table.  
You are welcome in this religious home.

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Good Morning! Welcome to the Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society. I am The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, and it is my great pleasure and privilege to serve this congregation. We welcome all of you.

If you are a newcomer, and haven't signed our guest book in the entryway, please do so before you leave so that we may send you a newsletter listing our activities. If you have questions about Unitarian Universalism or are thinking about joining this congregation, we invite you to join us for coffee/tea after our service today and to speak with me or a member of the Membership Committee. You can recognize them during coffee hour, because they wear gold nametags. (Ask if there is anyone wearing a gold nametag today to stand.)

Later in the worship service newcomers will have an opportunity to introduce themselves, and we hope that you will do so, so that we can give you a proper welcome. To parents, children are always welcome to stay in the service, or join the other children in our religious education classes.

**Announcements:**

Important parts of our community life are the invitations we give to one another for activities beyond our morning's service. Please note the announcements in your order of service.

Here ends this morning's announcements.

**\* CHALICE READING #435 (*antiphonal reading*)**

**\* HYMN 129 "*Let Love Continue Long*"**

**COVENANT** (in unison)

*Love is the spirit of this society.  
Dwelling together in peace,  
Seeking truth,  
Helping one another,  
Serving human needs,  
Honoring the Earth and all that is,  
This is our covenant.*

**OFFERTORY #674**

As we take our collection, we invite first time visitors to let the plate/basket pass them by, you are our guests today.

Let us now take an offering to sustain and strengthen this place,  
which is sacred to so many of us; a community of memory and of hope, for we are now  
the keepers of the dream. (Braddock Lovely)

**SHARING JOYS AND CONCERNS\*\***

One of our joys is welcoming people for the first time. If you are visiting, or have come back after a long time, or if you are still getting to know us, we would love it if you would introduce yourself to us. It is purely optional, but we'd like to give you a proper welcome. Please raise your hand so we can bring you a mic.

Let the congregation say, "Welcome!"

**And, now for our Joys and Concerns:**

If you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak. May all that is shared at this time be seen as holy.

**Ring bowl.**

Many joys and sorrows live in the heart, and we recognize their presence, even when they are offered in silence. May we find solace and gratitude in each other's caring. Amen.

**Ring bowl.**

**SINGING THE CHILDREN ON THEIR WAY**

*As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace;  
know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.*

**PRAYER AND MEDITATION**

In Words #501

These words from Frederick Gillis:

Spirit of Community, in which we share and find strength and common purpose, we turn our minds and hearts toward one another seeking to bring into our circle of concern all who need our love and support: those who are ill, those who are in pain, either in body or in spirit, those who are lonely, those who have been wronged.

**JOYS & SORROWS**

#634 "Let us hold these joys and sorrows, named and unnamed, in the embrace of this community, knowing that it is who we are together, in good times and in bad, that sustains our spirits, individually and collectively."

And, now for a moment of silence . . .

In Song—Spirit of Life, #123

**SERMON      “Covenant as Spiritual Practice”      Rev. Jeanne Lloyd**

**RING BELL**

This tale comes from the Rev. Cathleen Cox Burneo.<sup>1</sup> It goes something like this:  
There is a Buddhist Zen story that goes something like this:  
The student said to the Master Roshi, “You confuse me all the time.  
Sometimes you tell me to go this way and sometimes you seem to be telling me to do  
just the opposite . . .  
I don’t understand.”

And the Master said, “All I can tell you is, I stand behind you  
as I see you walk the path.  
It is a narrow path.

Sometimes you’re falling off on one way, and I say,  
‘Go left, go left’. And sometimes the other way, and I say,  
‘Go right, go right.’ But it is always about the path.”

Covenant is always about returning to the path.

**RING BELL**  
**PAUSE**

Covenant as Spiritual Practice. Mighty big words. Lets start at the end of the phrase.  
Practice. To practice, meaning that we have to try over and over again, to get it right.  
Meaning we don’t know how to do it now, and that we have to practice to learn it.  
Meaning we will probably make mistakes. Meaning we will wince when we do make  
mistakes, because none of us like to make mistakes. Meaning that we don’t like to  
make mistakes because someone once yelled or blamed us for something we did wrong,  
and because of that too easily we feel shame.

Practice. In this day and age where every thing may seem “instant”; where life is  
seemingly controlled by the push of mere buttons; where we can play guitar hero  
without really playing guitar; and drive virtual cars and shoot virtual guns  
without really driving or shooting either; where we can live vicariously through TV  
shows and movies of other people imitating our lives; practice seems like a lot of  
unnecessary hard work. And, one may well ask – why bother?

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<sup>1</sup> As told in the “How to Build a Covenant of Right Relations Workshop”, The Rev. Cathleen Cox-Burneo,  
GA 2007: Portland, OR

And, my simple answer would be, because we are called to do things that don't come easy. Why must we do things that don't come easy? Because, without hard work, we are never transformed. We never move from here to there. We never change from the person we are today to the person we could be tomorrow. More importantly, if we don't learn how to practice, we don't learn how to try. To try means to “make effort.” The very essence of our capacity to thrive and survive the challenges of our times, requires that above all else, my friends, we make effort. It requires that . . . we try.

And, by trying our spirits are transformed.

Next word:

Spiritual, acting as an adjective describing the word practice. Spiritual Practice. My, my, my - - - Spirit, all by itself is such a big word and so often misunderstood. I ask of you to think of the person you are. Undoubtedly there are different selves that you present to strangers, to acquaintances, to friends, family, and finally to an intimate loved one. Circles and spirals of yourself that get closer and closer to the authentic core of your being.

But, wait, I said finally – to an intimate loved one. Is there a self separate of the one you share in intimacy? My guess is that there is. That self through which you personally experience life. The conscious self that can name what you did yesterday, and need to do tomorrow. The self that gives voice to who you think you are. What you are unhappy about. What you are joyful about. And, so there it is, that core self.

Ah, but wait, I think we can go one step further, peeling back the many layers of your selves, and finally naming the true core self. The self that is the essence of your spirit, residing inside of you, but - - - too often, unknown. That Spirit is covered with so many layers of selves you claim and present to others, that most often in the busyness and distractedness of this culture, we altogether lose touch with our spirit within. It plays hide and seek with us, occasionally knocking on the inside walls of our hearts, seeking expression, and yet, we in our busyness often ignore it and when we do, we do so at our own peril.

Our spirit, whether we acknowledge it or not, is constantly seeking relief from the soul starving nature of our busyness. My friend, Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown, reminds us that, “Spirit is the Latin word which finds its roots in the Hebrew word *Ruah*, meaning breath, air, wind. Breath though invisible is animate, alive, lively, steady, wet, blustery, gusting, awesome . . .”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown, “Spirituality Is” March 2, 2008,  
<http://www.firstchurchleominsteruu.org/Sermons/3-2-08.pdf>, October 26, 2008

If you acknowledge that there is within you a Spirit, the breath of life that is more than the sum of the atoms and chemicals that make up your body, then you are ready to move on to the word, “spiritual”. The word spiritual describes those things that pertain to or consist of the spirit. If you believe you have a spirit, then those experiences that describe and give voice to the spirit - - are spiritual. Thus we have spiritual songs, books on spirituality, spiritual meditation, prayers of the spirit, all things that describe the imperceptible nature of the spirit.

Personally, I like this simple definition of spirituality from Rev. Suchocki Brown: “Spirituality is the practice of living in harmony with oneself, others, and the larger world.”<sup>3</sup>

Living in harmony, living in balance is not just one state of being, it is a harmonic state of attitudes and approaches to life that push and pull differently at different points in life. It is not a static, never-changing state of heaven or nirvana, spirituality is a way of being that is in harmony, responsive to ourselves and others.

Rev. Suchocki Brown says, “Can spirituality [this way of being] be out of reach? Yes! Can it be other worldly? Yes! Can it be transitory and slippery? Yes! But it is attainable and useable and accessible quite simply because it is part of us – a part of us which like our intellect, our emotions, our talents, our character, is something that can be harnessed, and developed.”<sup>4</sup>

A spiritual practice then is the trial and error work of discovering the elusive spirit that resides within you. Spirit is the essence of who you are that cannot be measured out in beakers and test tubes. It is that essence that causes you to sing and dance, laugh and love; it drives you to behave in ways you cannot explain, and plays hide and seek when you try to find it.

It takes practice to find it, practice to be with it, and much much practice to come to the point that you can begin to touch it. It is by this spiritual practice that the opportunity comes for spiritual formation. Through spiritual practice, we have the opportunity to not only get to know the spirit that resides inside of us, and very often controls our conscious actions, we have the opportunity to form it into a spirit that is resilient in the face of tragedy, loving in the face of hate, and grounded in the face of oppression.

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<sup>3</sup>Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown, “Spirituality Is” March 2, 2008, <http://www.firstchurchleominsteruu.org/Sermons/3-2-08.pdf>, October 26, 2008

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And, this, my friends, is in large part, what Unitarian Universalism is really about. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I cannot dictate to you a creed that will tell you what to believe in and how to behave. That is not what we are about. Unitarian Universalism is about movement. It is about moving from who we are today to who we hope to be tomorrow. It is about both getting to know the intimate details of our spirit while also growing it into one that can sustain us during troubled times.

And, here is where we get to covenant. Sometimes people think that a covenant is simply a contract. It is not. A contract focuses on what you will do for me, and vice versa. If you do A, I will do B. When someone doesn't fulfill the contract, the emphasis is on restitution or retribution. Although it may affect relationships, it has little to do with relationships. I do not have to like you, in order to paint your house or fix your car. It may help, but it is not required.

A favorite quote of mine is: “It is difficult to love people who hurt and disappoint us, yet there are no other kinds of people.”<sup>5</sup>

Covenant is a spiritual practice. It is deeply relational at every level of practice. At the personal level, the interpersonal level, and the worldly level. At an intimately personal level, our spirit cannot grow, when ignored by our conscious mind. Spirit needs a conscious self that cares for the spirit well, tending it as you would care for the seedling just breaking through the soil's crust. But, more, it grows when drawn forth by others. Like when the sun calls forth the seedling to put out leaves of growth. It is by our relationships that we grow. By our conversations, our singing together, our gentle disagreements, our exploring of tender subjects we are afraid to discuss.

By these efforts, this trying, this spiritual practice that may not come easily, our spirits grow. That said, the spirit can be like a small child. It will not come out and play, if it senses that it is not safe to do so. It will not take risks, unless it is certain it will not be yelled at. It will not trust others, unless others demonstrate they are trustworthy.

A congregation should be an ideal place to discover one's spirit. To practice spiritual formation one needs others who create a safe place to grow. A safe place to learn and demonstrate trust. A safe place to make mistakes.

The only way to create a safe place for people to test their wings and practice spiritual formation is through covenant that is formed by the congregation to hold in harmonic balance (or right relationship) the individual needs of its members and the congregation

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<sup>5</sup> Author unknown. Told in the “How to Build a Covenant of Right Relations Workshop”, The Rev. Cathleen Cox-Burneo, GA 2007: Portland, OR

as a whole. We are the keepers of the sanctuary of trust that we build here. We are the ones who, by our way of being with one another, create the safe place for spiritual formation. It is not this building’s walls, as strong as they may be. It is not this pulpit. It is not the history of this congregation that makes it a safe place. It is how we are with one another that creates sanctuary for spiritual growth. It is who we are with one another that calls forth the best in the other. And, when, in our trying, one person makes mistakes they regret, and the other person is disappointed or hurt, it is what you do that determines whether this sacred space remains safe enough for the spirit to grow.

Where else, in this world, do such opportunities exist for spiritual formation in relationship with others? What other places have this primary purpose? Few others, that I know of.

My colleague, The Rev. Cathleen Cox Burneo says, "Ultimately we keep our covenantal agreements not because of how we are accountable to others, but how we are accountable to the highest and best in ourselves and the transcendent powers of being. We return to who it is we want to be as human beings, because we have committed from that place. The call back to covenant is always a call back to a spiritual practice of becoming and returning to the best we can be. As a spiritual practice, there is a reason we call it practice, because you have to [practice]. That means, you have to be doing something actively, engaged in reflecting on whether you are doing what you said you wanted to do, to be who you say you want to be. [And, because we want to live our ideals, and because it is human to fall short of our ideals we will miss the mark from time to time, not once, but again and again. . . . such is the essence of practicing at coming closer and closer to our ideals. Covenant is different from a contract because it recognizes our human frailty, and it does not beat people up, when they have fallen short of their ideal.]”

It simply says, “let us return again.” “Now, I will return again.” . . . It is always about the path, returning to the path . . . Covenant calls us to come from the depths of our sacred being, with full awareness of the sacred being or beings who are in front of us, and to do our best to discern and to meet as many [of our mutual] needs as possible. It is astonishing when we come from this perspective, how many needs can be met. So many more than we think, than when we are attached to our [wants and desires] only.”<sup>6</sup>

This is what a mutually crafted covenant that is unique to this congregation and its people, does for its people and the world. You can form similar covenants in your family and/or with friends. Sometimes you can form covenants or codes of practice in a

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<sup>6</sup> How to Build a Covenant of Right Relations, The Rev. Cathleen Cox-Burneo, GA 2007: Portland, OR

secular organization. Wherever formed, the covenant says, “Come, Come, Whoever you are. Ours is no caravan of despair. Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, though you have broken your vow a thousand times, Come yet again come.”<sup>7</sup>

Through our covenant with one another, we practice spiritual formation. We keep trying; we keep reaching out; we stay in relationship, even when angry and confused. We come, yet again, committed to our highest ideals, to try to listen to the other, learn from the other, and create sacred space for mistakes to be made, lessons to be learned, and spirits to laugh and sing, love and play, and find their fullest expression.

Living in covenant with one another is our uniquely Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice.

May it be so.

#### **REFLECTION AND RESPONSE** (congregation)

**\* HYMN #188 “Come, Come Whoever You Are”**

#### **CLOSING WORDS**

These words from Rev. Walter Royal Jones, Jr.: “Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge and community ever exceeding our practice, reverently we covenant together, beginning with ourselves as we are, to share the strength of integrity and the heritage of the spirit in the unending quest for wisdom and love.”<sup>8</sup>

May it be so.

#### **CHORAL BENEDICTION**

#### **EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE**

Please join hands for the extinguishing of the chalice.

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again. Let the congregation say: AMEN!

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<sup>7</sup> Singing the Living Tradition, 188.

<sup>8</sup> UUA Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition.