

LIVING IN THE AGE OF INCIVILITY
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
February 3, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

The Persian poet Hafez writes:

I have come into this world to experience this:
people so true to love
that they would rather die before speaking
an unkind
word,
people so true their lives are a covenant -
the promise of
hope.

I sure wish Hafez had been with me at Logan airport earlier this week.

It is Wednesday morning. 10:30 AM. I'm at terminal E, about to board a Southwest Airlines flight to Chicago. The back up at security isn't too bad. I take my three plastic grey bins, strip off my down parka, empty my pockets, take the plastic bag filled with liquids and gels out of my knapsack, remove my mac-book air laptop and put it in its own plastic bin, and begin to unlace my winter boots. All this takes time, and the same can be said for the businessman who is in front of me. It takes a bit of patience for all involved.

But the guy behind me doesn't have any patience. "Will you move it?" this young businessman blurts out. "Moving as fast as we can, dude. Chill, ok" the man in front of me says in a friendly tone. "Screw you both," says Mr. Speedy. He grabs two plastic bins and walks in front of us, plops the bins on the conveyer belt, in front of us, and proceeds to fill them with his stuff.

I'm taken aback. And I feel a hot anger boil up in me. I'm a pretty patient guy, but I have little tolerance for rudeness. I am rising for a fight. I wanted to blast the guy, to say to him "What right do you have jump the line? Why are you more important than any of us?" Then I remember: I am preaching on Sunday about living in a world of incivility. This guy is certainly uncivil, but did I want to become uncivil in return? Or was this a moment when I could practice what I was going to preach, when I could apply what my Unitarian Universalist faith says about acting differently from the world around us?

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Last Sunday afternoon, 14 newcomers to the church gathered for our Unitarian Universalist Basics Class, learning about the history and beliefs of Unitarian Universalism. At one point, I asked the group: “What is it about this religion that speaks to you, that resonates the most for you?” One wonderful young woman in the group replied: “This faith challenges me. It challenges me to think beyond myself. I have to expand to take into consideration other people, and how what I do might impact them. When someone cuts me off when I am trying to get onto Route 95, this faith says I have to be kind. This faith demands that I become a better person. This Unitarian Universalist faith is *hard work*.”

At the core of our Unitarian Universalism is what we call the Seven Principles and Purposes. They are printed on the back of your order of service, and found in the hymnal (you might want to turn to those right now). These Seven Principles and Purposes are power words, power promises that we make to each other and to the world. And they provide a guide for living in a world of incivility.

They begin with us saying: “We [the member congregations of the UUA] covenant to affirm and promote.” Let’s stop there a moment. “*We covenant*.” What does that mean? “Covenant” is just a fancy word that means promise, a kind of sacred, heart-centered, mind-engaging promise. The idea of covenant originates in the Jewish religion, in the old stories told about God and the ancient peoples promising how they will be in relationship with each other. Our Unitarian Universalist faith originates within this Jewish tradition of covenant, but it upends that tradition and puts a post-modern twist on it. We Unitarian Universalists aren’t making a covenant with the Divine, with God. We are rooting our covenant in humanism, in the human realm and the human world. Unitarian Universalism begins with a covenant, a promise of how we will act toward *each other and the world*. Many other faith traditions begin with a CREED, a set of beliefs that you have to subscribe to, but Unitarian Universalists begin with a COVENANT, a set of promises about how we will be together, how we will be together in the world. Thus, we say we are a *covenantal religion*. Covenant is at our core, without covenant, we wouldn’t be a religion, without covenant we wouldn’t be a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Our Seven Principles and Purposes define this clearly. We, as Unitarian Universalists, as members of Unitarian Universalist congregations, covenant (make a sacred, human promise) to affirm (to say “yes!”) and promote (to advance and disseminate) these seven religious values:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our

- congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

So what does this covenant really ask of us? It asks many things, but I want to focus on what it says about living in an age of incivility.

With these words, we are promising to treat each person in the world with worth and dignity, and to uphold, among other things, compassion in our human relations. We are saying “yes!” to treating *each person* (even the ones we disagree with or dislike) with worth and dignity. We are saying “yes!” to *upholding compassion* in how we relate with one another. I can’t chew out the jerk who cuts the line at Logan airport, we can’t talk trash in the parking lot after service about someone with whom we are in disagreement. Our faith calls us to a higher standard.

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As I said in a sermon last year, this Unitarian Universalist practice of covenant, of being responsible for what we *say* to or about others is counter-cultural. This Unitarian Universalist practice of covenant, of being responsible for what we *do* to others is counter-cultural.

Our current society has a problem. Incivility is on the rise. Unskillful thinking, speaking, and actions are commonplace. Look at our media, and the deeply divided partisan nature of news broadcasts. Look at what passes for entertainment on so many of these so-called reality shows—they glorify nastiness and backstabbing, celebrating self-centered individual outbursts rather than cooperation toward the greater needs of the group. Listen to the tone in our politics, the deepening divisiveness and destructive derision in the Senate chamber, the House of Representatives, and the campaign trail. Look at the corporate greed that crumbled Wall Street. Listen to how we talk about each other in the locker room, in the classroom or while waiting in line at Starbucks. There is a savagery in our society. (Quoted from Rev. Tim Kutzmark’s sermon entitled “We Can Be Kind” preached September 25, 2011)

I believe the reason we come to church is we want an alternative to society’s uncivil norms. I believe the reason we come to church is because we want to be part of a community of kindness. I believe the reason we come to church, the reason we yearn to become part of a religious community, the reason we bring our kids here, the reason we stay here is that we want to be recalled to our best selves again. We *want* to remember to

treat each person with worth and dignity, to uphold compassion in all our human relations. We come because we want to be who we are meant to be. We come because we realize that we can't do it alone.

Our Third Principle champions “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” This part of our covenant says that we will welcome and accept each other as we are...but that we also realize that the purpose of this church community is not to *keep* us as we are. The purpose is to change us through spiritual growth. We are promising each other that we will encourage each other to become different people than who we were when we first walked through the door. And our Fourth Principle illuminates one way that spiritual growth will come. It says it will come through a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Notice I didn't say *free search*. I said *free and responsible*. A free search for truth and meaning means there will be differences between us. We will have a diversity of beliefs, opinions, and perspectives. That diversity can be as large as having a deep belief in God while the person sitting next to you in the pew finds meaning in scientific algorithms. But that diversity can also manifest itself in the mundane: in a disagreement over the number of hymns that should be sung in a service, different feelings about how long the actual length of the service should be, different opinions about where our tight budget dollars should be spent, different ideas about the form of programming we offer our youth, or various assessments about the strengths and weaknesses of the minister or staff members. In this church community there will be a diversity of opinions about any number of things. This isn't a bad thing. As we said in our reading this morning: “Diversity is a part of the natural order of things . . . diversity brings new solutions to an ever-changing environment . . . sameness is not only uninteresting but limiting. To deny diversity is to deny life.”

That diversity, those differences, those conflicts of need and perspective offer a true opportunity for spiritual growth for us as individuals and as a community. That's where the second part of that “free and *responsible*” search comes into play. Our Unitarian Universalist faith demands that we are responsible to something beyond our own insight, our own opinions, our own wants and needs. Spiritual growth comes when we widen our perspectives and become accountable to something larger: accountable to the values and actions promised in our Principles and Purposes, accountable to the entirety that is our church community (rather than to the individual that is you, or you, or you, or me).

This is a true story from a different congregation. There was a wonderful volunteer who had started the church's electronic newsletter and email service. But this individual became incensed when the church Governing Board authorized the creation of a task force to evaluate whether the congregation consider selling the church building and moving to a new location on the other side of town. This individual started sending email messages to the entire congregation viciously lambasting board members by name. This person spoke hurtful accusations about lay leaders who were trying to do what they thought was best for the church. This person's actions were certainly free, but I would suggest they were far from responsible, and they certainly were uncivil.

Diversity and disagreement can be mismanaged. Well-meaning people can run amuck. The incivility of the greater culture outside the church can permeate the behaviors within the church. When that happens, the moment presents itself: a moment for compassion, spiritual growth, and responsibility regained.

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It isn't that we won't have disagreement here at church. It is how we have those disagreements that matter. How do we preserve the authentic diversity in the church while also preserving it as a sanctuary for our souls, a place that forever recalls us to our best selves again, a place that rises above the norm of society's incivility?

Some Unitarian Universalist churches are answering these questions through the creation of congregational covenants. We have our larger Unitarian Universalist covenant, our Principles and Purposes, but many churches—especially ones that are growing and changing, or have a history of people acting unskillful in times of conflict—find it useful to talk about how they can maintain the spirit of love, compassion, and spiritual growth that is so central to our faith. These simple congregational covenants are nothing more than taking the core covenant that already exists among us in our Principles and Purposes and making it a bit more specific to our individual congregation and day-to-day personal interactions and experiences. These covenants ask: “How should we be in relationship?” “How do we be compassionate in our interactions?” “How can we remind each other, when necessary, to be kind?” “How do we, in times of conflict, be respectful?”

We are human, and that means we all will make unskillful choices. How can we help each other to be recalled to our best selves again? How can we help each other to be responsible to something greater than our own opinion, ideas, impulses, or perspectives? How do we promise to be together as Unitarian Universalists?

Over the next nine months, our Governing Board will engage us in a series of conversations about diversity and difference, kindness and compassion, and our promise to encourage each other to spiritual growth. We'll talk about the balance between free and responsible. We'll discuss if and how we could offer each other a congregational covenant. Who knows what we'll decide? I hope we'll all be open to discovering together the answers to all these questions.

Just a footnote before we end. We began at Logan airport, so let's end there. After I'd gone through security and got all packed up, I noticed that Mr. Speedy who jumped the line was being detained by TSA staff. It seems he had several things in his carry-on bag

that couldn't be brought on board. He was standing there trying to figure out how to deal with his dilemma, even as they called his flight. I thought of making a snarky comment, but instead I offered him a silent blessing as I walked past him to the gate. Sometimes the universe finds ways to help recall us to our best selves again. May we be open to those moments.

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