

Renewing Our Vows
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Perhaps I have weddings on my mind after the summer season, typically a season for weddings, and having recently celebrated my own wedding anniversary. Or perhaps it is the energy and excitement of getting together today with friends and family. But regardless of the source, I was moved to talk today about *Renewing Our Vows*.

Some couples renew their wedding vows periodically. It's not that their vows have lapsed, but they decide that it would be helpful to remember why they got married in the first place. They choose to renew that feeling of excited commitment that they experienced when they first made those vows, in the light of what their relationship has taught them over the intervening years. For me, In-gathering Sunday and the water communion is rather like the renewal of vows.

When I contemplate vows, I realize that we make vows, or commitments, on many levels. I thought of six, but there may well be more that we can think of.

1. An obvious set of vows is the one made between a couple, straight or gay, who decide to commit themselves to each other for a lifetime. While some people say that marriage should be defined as between one man and one woman, and that gay marriages somehow threaten the sanctity of marriage, I don't understand that. It seems to me that the sanctity of marriage is more threatened by those who make a commitment to it without realizing what they are doing. If they bail out when the relationship struggles, as most relationships do at times, rather than digging deep and finding the resources to help the relationship work, that marriage is threatened. Or, if one partner fails to treat the other partner with love and respect, and instead becomes abusive in some way, then that marriage is threatened. There are so many factors involved in keeping marriage vows, that it seems to me to be simplistic to blame something outside the

marriage for its failure. Loving, respectful relationships between any people can be a great blessing, and need to be supported.

2. The members of this congregation are connected by a *covenant*, a sacred agreement, or a vow. We agree to walk together in this sometimes difficult journey of discovery, which has more questions than answers. We agree to encourage each other to seek knowledge responsibly. We agree to treat each other with love and respect, even when we don't agree with each other's ideas or styles. We agree to learn from each other, and to give each other loving feedback which will contribute to this ongoing learning. Some people come for fellowship, and some stay away when their feelings have been hurt too severely or too many times.

Some Unitarian Universalist congregations have a *covenant of right relations* among their Board members, or among the members of their congregation at large. The *covenant of right relations* specifies how they will treat each other in a variety of circumstances. It is in keeping with the first principle of Unitarian Universalism, that *we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*. Other congregations, like this one, don't have a specific *covenant of right relations*, but assume that their members will treat each other well, according to their commitment to the Principles. If they don't treat each other well, then a *covenant of right relations* can be drafted and instituted. But it might be difficult to draft such a document in the heat of disagreements or unkind behavior. It's kind of like doing personnel evaluations; it's more helpful to do them regularly, in the context of regular dialogue, so that there aren't any surprises in the formal evaluations. Such ongoing dialogue and honest loving feedback requires courage, but relationships do require courage. It is usually better to keep our communication with each other clear, current, and respectful.

3. Upon joining this church as a member or an active friend, we agree to be awake to the needs of this church community, and of each other. We agree to contribute what we can as we see the need, in terms of our time and energy, our talent, and our treasure. Sometimes people think that there is a church, separate from them, but we are the church. We have a democratic process in which we elect an Executive Board at a

congregational meeting the first Sunday in June each year. The Board members all serve as volunteers. The Board provides leadership on the many concerns involved in operating the church. Board meetings are open, except for rare Executive Sessions which deal with personnel matters, which are confidential. If anyone would like to attend a monthly meeting of the Board, or has an agenda item which they would like the Board to address, they just need to let the President, Janie Garlow, know in advance.

In addition to the Board, there are many committees which again are operated by volunteers within the church and which attend to such matters as worship, buildings and grounds, ministerial advisory, nominations, church organization, and so on. Being a small church, some people are on more than one committee, and some committees need new energy (like publicity, membership, and finance). If you are not on a committee, or have a particular interest or talent which could benefit the church please let Janie or another Board member know. Remember, *we* are the church, and it takes the talents and energy from each of us to help it thrive.

4. We are a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and as such are part of a larger Unitarian Universalist movement. We covenant to affirm and promote the Principles which are outlined in the front of our gray hymnals, *Singing the Living Tradition*. While this is a creedless church, and the *Principles* do not constitute a creed to which we all swear allegiance, the *Principles* are something we take seriously. We may not be able to live up to them every day, but the *Principles* can provide guidance for us in our daily decisions and actions. So, not only do we covenant with our local church, but we also covenant with the larger Unitarian Universalist movement. Just as we, as individuals, make annual pledges of financial support to our local church, as a congregation we make an annual pledge of support to the Saint Lawrence District and to the national Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations (UUA). The UUA, is an *association* of congregations, rather than a separate entity. They also have an Executive Board to conduct much of the business. There is also a General Assembly (GA) each June at which delegates of the various congregations vote on important issues, along with electing the President of the UUA. While our local church has not sent delegates to GA for

several years, the UUA is designed to be a representative democracy. The Saint Lawrence District of the UUA is also a representative democracy. There is a District Annual Assembly, to which we have sent delegates regularly. We also participate in the New York State Convention of Universalists (NYSCU) and vote in their annual meetings. As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we agree to uphold the Principles and to extend their teachings into our wider world.

Speaking of the wider world, I see that as the fifth and sixth levels in which we have a covenant . . . to embody the *Principles* in such a way that we have a positive and profound effect upon our country and our world. I am thinking here of the sixth principle of Unitarian Universalism, *We covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.* In the water communion, we bring samples of water from many different sources. Each of our contributions to the common vessel of our community is unique in all the world. I remember one year a family contributed green water from their trip to Ireland, and the whole collection of gathered waters turned green. As we come together to build a *Beloved Community*, each of us will make a unique contribution which will help to color our country and our world. As citizens of the United States and of the world, we can take our covenants seriously and become informed and involved.

There is no need to let others hijack the system for their own purposes, and then sit back and complain about it. We need to speak out and work for the changes which will honor a commitment to our principles, to each other, to our church, to the Unitarian Universalist movement, to our nation, to our world, and to future generations. As Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see." May it be so.