

We Would Be One
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
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Some twenty-five years ago, I walked through the doors of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte, North Carolina with an urgent need for community and a chip on my shoulder big enough to use for furniture. I had left the Roman Catholicism of my childhood behind fifteen years before, a casualty of a too-short reading list that left me with the mistaken idea that I knew everything worth knowing about religion, and all of it was bad. I wore my atheism proudly and sometimes loudly, and I was sure you could make a good life without religion of any kind. And yet. . . we found ourselves in a situation we knew we could not handle alone. My wife Jessie and our three-year-old daughter Garner had just moved to a city where we knew no one, and Jessie had been diagnosed with an illness that is always eventually fatal. We needed people. And both of us had grown up in churches where supportive, caring communities could be found.

So we talked with a lot of people, and someone suggested this religion we'd never really heard of, and in we came. I had a list of things people might say that would make me walk out—too much god-talk, anything about mysteries and miracles, sin, Christ on the cross saving the world, on and on. And top of the list was anything about anybody claiming the authority to ever be able to speak for me about anything.

Nobody said any of those things. Here was a whole idea of what religion could be that I had never imagined: about how you live every day; about celebrating the everyday miracle of this life in this world; about becoming an active partner in moving the moral universe toward justice and compassion. I even took a class called “Building your own theology.” This was religion? The sheer freedom of it, the liberation from what I had experienced as a tyrannical approach to faith, was amazing. I was hooked.

Cheryl Walker, minister of our Wilmington, NC congregation and the incoming president of the UU Minister's Association, had a similar experience in her first visits to the Community Church of New York City, one of several UU congregations there. Growing up in a Nation of Islam family, she had left as an adult because she felt pressured not to be her whole self, and to follow rules she didn't believe in. Here's how she describes her “new UU” feeling:

“I fell in love with being an *individual* in a religious community,” she says. “. . . I was like a kid in a candy store. Me, me, me. My faith, my journey, my religion. It's all about me. This religion was created with me in mind, just waiting for the day that I would show up and make it complete. Thank you very much, all you people who came before me, whoever you were, for making a religion just for me.”

Does this sound familiar at all? Now, I know everybody who finds our faith doesn't have this kind of experience, and of course some of us grow up UU, but I've heard something pretty similar from a lot of people, and they weren't all folks who wound up becoming ministers, so it's not just church-geeks this happens to.

For many of us, if not most of us, one central feature that sets our faith community apart is the respect we give to freedom and self-determination. We celebrate the unique individuality of every precious person as a gift. We acknowledge no higher authority in spiritual understanding than the conscience of the sincere, responsible seeker. We find free thought more trustworthy than any settled dogma. We see no sanctuary more sacred than the unforced mind.

Seen from this angle, the history of our faith is a centuries-long story of individual free-thinking heroes one after another proposing new religious ideas, often at great risk to themselves. Then in the 19th century, an ordained Unitarian minister named Ralph Waldo Emerson put the finishing touch on the story by declaring that individual freedom of conscience and suspicion of authority are the foundations of any faith adequate to the needs of a free society in the modern, scientific age. Celebrating individuality, freedom of thought, and self-reliance is a precious part of our religious heritage—and our present. We're a heretic's faith, if you take that word "heretic" back to its root, which simply means "to choose."

But a funny thing happened on the way to today. Our love of individualism has developed a shadow.

Fred Muir, who leads our Annapolis, Maryland congregation, says we have taken our commitment to individual autonomy so far that we are at risk of becoming the iChurch, a name he takes from the enigmatic lowercase "i" Apple uses to identify its products. The "i" might mean "internet," but more likely it stands for, well, "I." As in Individual; as in a piece of technology that is mine alone, and will set me free from conformity and ugly design features.

In the iChurch, the individual is the center of the Universe. Any single person can block the community's processes and reset the community's agenda, because the community doesn't want to compromise the sacred freedom of the individual. The iChurch deeply mistrusts authority and power, because structured authority limits individual freedom. It's the Emersonian ideal curdled into dogma.

The challenge of a faith built entirely around individualism is that it can't give what most of us come to any religion for in the first place. What brought me to the UU Church of Charlotte, what brought Cheryl Walker to the Community Church of New York, what brings so many people through our doors every year is a hunger for *community*.

You can't build true community in a faith that worships individual autonomy. Cheryl Walker puts it this way: "True community doesn't happen unless everyone is willing to give up some of their identity as an individual to take on the identity of the group. If this doesn't happen, then we are merely a group of individuals sharing common space but not becoming a community."

Or as one of my mentors in ministry, Gordon McKeeman, used to say: "We need to decide if we are a *congregation*, or just an *aggregation*."

We each come to a moment of decision in our own way. For Cheryl Walker it was realizing that there was a power for social justice and resistance to oppression in the unity of her Nation of Islam childhood that she was missing in her new religious home. For me it was realizing that my

trust in community had become so strong, so sacred that most of my anti-authoritarianism and resistance to traditional religious language had dissolved. For some it's realizing that some hurt or brokenness in the world or in their own life is too great to be held and healed by a group of nice people who get together for interesting conversations. However it comes to us, we arrive at the realization that we *need* true community.

The good news is that right alongside the saga of religious freedom and individualism, another story has been unfolding. For as long as we have seen ourselves as religious communities, Unitarians and Universalists—and the Puritans and Congregationalists who were their ancestors—have been asking: How do you create a religious community that protects individual freedom of conscience, a true community that protects the democratic distribution of authority and power?

You can find our solution on the same page in your hymnal as the Principles, way down at the bottom. It's a simple sentence: "As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

Covenant is a heritage which has been with us as long as the heritage of individualism, though we haven't always valued it as highly. Covenant is a commitment to intentionally set boundaries on our autonomy, in order to create community together.

Our opening hymn today, "We Would Be One," was created in 1953 by Samuel Wright, a minister who served as an adult leader for national youth groups. He combined the familiar tune "Finlandia" with new words for a very special occasion. At a joint meeting in 1954, the national youth groups of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America voted to merge to create a new community called Liberal Religious Youth. They beat their adult religious associations to Consolidation by 7 years.

Wright's hymn names the kind of community the young people hoped to create together, and it is only partly about the personal spiritual quest, the search for "greater understanding of who we are, and what in us is true." The new community they sought was also dedicated to building a better world for tomorrow; it sought to find the deep common identity that binds us all together and guides us through life. It is pledged to greater service, to love and justice.

In musical form, the hymn expresses a covenant.

The reading we shared in response to the Offering today is another covenant, created by James Vila Blake and adopted by the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Evanston, Indiana in 1894.

We have our own covenant, which you'll find on the back of your Order of Service. These are the commitments we've made to each other as we joined this congregation, and they are the foundation for our community life.

The community's covenant is the place where *I* gives way to *we*, where I cede some measure of my autonomy to the process, the authority, and the needs of the community. It names the higher

purpose that brings us together; it is the common value to which each of us agrees to make ourselves accountable.

In recent years, Unitarian Universalists have begun to use the phrase “Beloved Community” to express our vision of a world of justice, equity, and compassion, where each precious individual is connected to all in an interdependent web of relationship. Dr. King brought this phrase of the philosopher Josiah Royce into the Civil Rights movement as a way of envisioning the Kingdom of God which we are called to create on this earth. One writer describes Beloved Community as “an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places, and things.”

In the isolating, dehumanizing culture of consumption—call it the iWorld—that surrounds us, and inflicts such devastation on our environment and on the lives of oppressed people, the vision of Beloved Community has the power to transform and heal the human family and the world. It has the power to bring comfort, healing, commitment, and joy into the lives of people who have walked too long in the iWorld alone. This is what most spiritual seekers come to religious communities looking for today. It is what most of us need. Will we create it together?

The covenant we share, and the Principles and Sources that make up the Covenant connecting us to the other congregations of our faith, are a path toward creating Beloved Community here among us, so that we can learn how to live into its power ourselves, and how to offer it to a world which needs it so much. Living in covenant does not diminish our individuality, it enriches and enlarges it.

May we work together in love and in celebration of life, promising to one another our mutual trust and support, to build Beloved Community—around us and among us.