Thus Do We Covenant…

BY **MEGAN LLOYD JOINER**, MINISTER, UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF NEW HAVEN, HAMDEN, CONNECTICUT

A number of years ago, I was the guest preacher at one of our small congregations in northern New England. It was a bitterly cold Sunday in February, and the congregation at the first of two morning services was sparse—so sparse it was almost awkward. So there we were, the ten of us, including my husband Anthony and myself. And as I delivered my sermon, I noticed a middle-aged woman sitting in the very last row, with a boy about age ten next to her.

After the service, as I made my way out of the sanctuary, the woman from the back of the room caught up to me. "Reverend!" she called out. I wasn't a reverend yet, so the title was still novel and made me a little nervous.

"Reverend," she called again. "Can I speak with you a moment?" We found a quiet corner and she said, "I need to ask you a question. Today is our first time here, me and my son." She took a deep breath and her voice shook. "I haven't been in a church for a long time." She paused. I waited.

She continued: "I need to ask if it's okay that I'm here."

"Of course," I said. We are glad you are here. I'm not the minister here, but I'm sure someone would be happy to show you around…" I launched into my welcome pitch, not listening well enough.

"No," she said, slowly. "You see, I'm gay. And I haven't been in a church in a long time." Her eyes filled with tears. And I understood the seriousness of what she was asking. "I need to know that it's okay that I'm here."

"Yes," I said, answering as I had before, but this time my eyes filled with tears, too. "We are glad that you are here."

She nodded. And smiled. "I just wasn't sure. Thank you."

I touched her arm. "You are welcome," I said.

I think of the trust that stranger placed in me on that February morning. Of the courage it took to call out. But I just happened to be the person in the pulpit. She was, in fact, placing her trust in the congregation, in Unitarian Universalism, in the people of that place, and, by extension, in all of us.

What courage it took for her to bring her son to church that February day, to open her heart again, to seek relationship, to offer her full self. I would hazard a guess that each of us has a similar story. A time when we began again. When we put our faith in someone even though doing so was terrifying, and we didn't know how it would turn out.

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker is the former president of our Unitarian Universalist seminary Starr King School for the Ministry and author of *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now.* She writes, "All human beings have experienced the impasse and anguish of violated trust. We all know the pain…of hurts that feel personal, of betrayal, of being told that we are not welcome. It is part of the human experience, and it happens to all of us at one point or another."

This is, in part, why what we do is so radical. UU historian Alice Blair Wesley reminds us that being part of a community like this, a freely-gathered, covenantal congregation, is a choice that involves not signing on to a list of beliefs, but rather a promise. In a speech for the 2000 Minns Lecture series, Wesley says: "Entrance

Quest

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Blessed is the covenant of love, the covenant of mercy… deathless song in the house of night.

—Leonard Cohen

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT COVENANT

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into the covenantal community summons a lifelong, forbearing engagement of heart, mind and body."

Choosing to enter into covenant with other people in a congregation, to make such a promise, begins with choosing to walk through the doors of a faith community again for the first time in a long time. It continues when we choose to try again after betrayal, when we choose to trust each other, though each of us knows the anguish of broken trust, when we choose to love each other instead of fear each other.

Being in covenant with one another means that we promise that we will engage our hearts and minds and bodies on this adventure of the spirit that we are taking together. It means that we promise to do our best to do what love asks of us, and to live together "with the integrity of faithful love."

As Unitarian Universalists, we trace our roots back to congregations that peppered New England in the mid-17th century. Having fled the domination of bishops in the Church of England, our spiritual ancestors arrived here ready to embark on a new congregational experiment in which people attended by choice rather than decree, where freedom of thought and belief were paramount, where the way people treated each other became more important than whether or not they all believed the exact same things.

Alice Blair Wesley explored documents that chronicle the beginning of one of our oldest congregations—the church in Dedham, MA, gathered in 1638. She discovered that as the founding members of that congregation asserted their freedom from the Church of England, they sought to define what exactly a "free church" would look like. They declared (and recorded for posterity): "A free church is a group of people who want the spirit of love to reign in their lives."

As Unitarian Universalists, we have inherited this definition. At our core, are we not a group of people who want the spirit of love to reign in our lives? We gather together bound not by creed, but by covenant; guided not by fear, but by love; informed not by suspicion and mistrust, but by promises we make to each other. Our ancestors in Dedham believed that the best way of being in relationship was to be in what they called "continuous consultation." Doesn't that just sound Unitarian Universalist?

We gather together bound not by creed, but by covenant; guided not by fear, but by love….

Continuous consultation. Members of these early congregations also called it "walking together." So committed were they to walking together in love, in continuous consultation, that when there was a conflict or a disagreement, they outlined detailed guidelines for the conversations to be conducted.

Members of the congregation committed to listen deeply to each other's truths, to work with conflict, to walk with each other in respect and love. Today we promise each other many of the same things that our ancestors did. And many of us believe that this relationship, this way of walking together, is the most important part of our faith.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, of the UU Congregation of Phoenix, Arizona, writes:

> *We sometimes wrongly say it is the absence of creed that is most important to who we are [as Unitarian Universalists]. This is wrong. Any one of us could practice religious freedom at home on Sunday mornings. We could practice religious freedom all day long, every day, and never come into community.*

Frederick-Gray continues:

> *It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, out of selfish concerns, out of individualism, to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world. This…is sacred, religious work.*

It is.

Like all people, all congregations know the anguish of broken trust. All congregations have had their share of conflict and broken promises. Walking in love, in peace, in continuous consultation, takes courage. It takes the courage to begin again, the courage to trust in others and to allow ourselves to be trusted.

In the congregation that I serve, we have created a covenant that guides our walk together as we seek to be our best selves, within and beyond our walls, as we join in what Pope Francis named as the heart of all religious traditions: "the proclamation of the truth and dignity of the human person and human rights."

We come together to celebrate the blessing of true community: the freedom to trust each other with our vulnerabilities and our truths, to treat each other with dignity and respect, to engage with forbearance, to keep our promises, and to do what love asks of us.

Never forget that what we do is important. Not because we can believe what we want or say what we want, but because of the trust we place in one another and the trust others place in us. What we do is important because of the stranger who has yet to find us, who will one day come to us with the memory of trust betrayed and say, "Is it okay that I am here?"And we will say, "Yes, we are glad you are here. You are welcome." ■

The Covenants We Keep

BY **MARK STRINGER**, MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DES MOINES, IOWA

My seminary classmate was 30 years older than me. I sat in his small apartment, hoping for the kind of wisdom and guidance I had already come to know he might provide. At the time, I was only a few months into theological school and just over a year into my marriage.

The world in which I moved was heavy with transition and new ways of being. I was feeling the burden of all this change, and so was my marriage. The details of the challenges my spouse and I were facing don't matter now. I suspect most married couples have endured similar pressures, especially during the early years of their covenant with one another to remain together "for better, for worse."

I told my friend what I knew, laying before him the mystery of what was happening and the weight of it all. He listened patiently. When I was done sharing, a few tears were rolling down my cheeks. Silence hung in the room.

And then he spoke with the voice of a grandfather, which he was. He spoke with the perspective of a man who had lived through his own broken marriage, his own disappointments, his own reflections on what life had brought through circumstances he had chosen and those he had not. He spoke with well-earned confidence that he had something to say that I needed to hear.

"Mark," he said. "You have to be strong." More silence.

And that was basically it.

I know we chatted some more that night, but neither of us really needed to say much more. I had put my burdens before him and he had reminded me not only that I *could* carry them, but that I *should*. Or at least, that the covenant I had made with my spouse required that I try.

He didn't say, "Mark, you have to be rigid." He didn't say you have to be angry. Or you have to be happy. Or you have to be vengeful, or oblivious, or passive aggressive, or forlorn, or committed to pretending that all is well even when it is not.

"Mark, he said, "You have to be strong." Still, to this day, his words are the best marriage advice I have ever received.

Several years later, I was preparing to officiate a wedding for a couple not affiliated with our church. They asked me to preach a homily as part of the ceremony. This was a surprising request, considering that I didn't know them all that well, and given that most couples I marry just want the ceremony and nothing but the ceremony. Nevertheless, I agreed. And I knew the homily I had to preach.

Theirs was an extravagant wedding. Held outside in downtown Des Moines, it involved dancers and antique automobiles and stringed instruments. When the time came for my homily, I closed the book from which I had been reading the words of the ceremony and spoke from the heart. I told the story of the early days of my own marriage, and how my wise friend had offered me guidance that had served me well ever since, guidance that I thought worth sharing with them.

"When things get tough," I told the couple, "as they most certainly will, you have to be strong. That is the covenant you are making today…to be strong together."

I sensed by the look in the bride's face as I spoke that maybe I had not offered the homily for which she had hoped. In fact, I thought she looked a little angry standing there in her beautiful dress. I couldn't blame her. Why would I, the hired help, distract from the fairy tale with the truth? I felt bad for raining a bit on this lovely parade, at least until after the service.

As I walked away from the revelry, the parents of both the bride and groom went out of their way to pull me aside and offer their gratitude for the words I had spoken. The dads offered me firm handshakes, the moms big hugs. They knew I had told the truth. And they knew that the truth matters. Having kept *their* covenants for many years, through what I have to imagine had been their own challenging times, they knew the rewards of being strong. They knew that being strong is what keeping a covenant is all about.

As parents wanting the best for their children, they wouldn't want to inflict a narrow understanding of "being strong" on this couple, and neither would I. We wouldn't want *any* married couple to commit to undying confidence in their covenant despite all evidence to the contrary. I wouldn't want them to think being strong means uncritically accepting abuse or tolerating bad behavior without naming it and calling each other back to the covenant.

"Being strong" does not mean resignation to being trapped in an unhealthy or unsafe situation. The "being strong" I describe includes a willingness to honestly assess how the covenant is being lived and whether room exists for the health and growth of those bound in it. The "being strong" I suggest is the very means to the freedom we all deserve, a freedom that comes when we hold ourselves accountable with others to be the kind of people we want to be and to live the kind of lives we yearn to live.

When we are in covenant, being strong requires that *together* we hold the responsibility to remember, to celebrate, and even—when necessary—to mourn. Being strong means being willing to return, in our memory and in the moment, to the covenant we have made, to the shared vow to travel together to the very best of our ability, through all of the ambiguities, disappointments, and yes, the mistakes, of our lives together.

Being strong in covenant is not being certain of the destination toward which we are traveling or even the path that will take us there. Being strong in covenant is choosing to travel together despite all the uncertainties and maybe even because of them, unsure of where we are headed but knowing how much it matters that we are willing to move in directions we might not yet understand or predict.

We who have made a home in Unitarian Universalism understand covenant, too, for ours is a covenantal faith, a religion not bound in creed. We are not bound by shared understandings of the holy or of our final destination. We are united in our covenant to travel together, to hold ourselves and each other accountable to preserving the precious freedom for each of us to discern the ultimate as our hearts and minds allow.

We are bound in a covenant to the journey of unending revelation and discovery that unfolds when we open ourselves to the possibilities of creative interchange in community. We are bound in covenant to the journey itself, to a way of being.

When people ask me what the point of our religion is if we don't all believe in God, I explain that we do not share a creed, but we do share a covenant, and that covenant to travel together through our differences is where our religion finds its meaning and its power. We don't always do it well, but the promise we keep with one another asks that we try.

"We…covenant to affirm and promote" the principles of our Unitarian Universalist Association, "promising to one another our mutual care and support." Many UU congregations recite covenants as a part of their services. The members of my internship congregation, the Unitarian Church of Evanston, Illinois, still say together as part of their weekly worship a covenant their minister (James Villa Blake) crafted in 1894:

Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

In my congregation's weekly services, we share covenantal statements as well. We have a chalice lighting reading in which we call upon our "reason and our passion" to "lead us to be true to ourselves, true to each other and true to what we can together become." We don't name that truth, but we express our intention to pursue it, for the good and growth of all.

When we extinguish the chalice we say that we will "go from this place open to life, expecting to love, and prepared to serve." We do not list specific promises of what our life, love and service will entail, knowing that they will mean different things to each person. And yet, I believe, these words are a covenantal statement, because when we say them and we strive to live them, we are agreeing that there is a larger purpose to our time together and that we are each responsible to carry that purpose forward.

When we welcome new members we affirm together the importance of this "workshop of common endeavor—a place of comfort and challenge," promising to combine our "strength and talents" to "better shape the meaning of our lives" than we could alone.

When we dedicate children we promise to offer these young people our "caring, wisdom and trust," and our dedication to "building a world worthy" of their "gifts of life and hope."

Through these shared covenants we invite each other to be strong, to see that our unmet expectations and disappointments are less important than the promises we keep and renew with each other to help build and sustain the community we yearn to inhabit. We practice leaving space for the individuality of our companions even as we hold ourselves and each other accountable to the larger goals of our union—a nurturing of the compassion, humility and intimate justice so desperately needed in our world today.

In this faith, just as in marriage, we know that we may be disappointed. We know that things will not always go as we expect. We know that we have the right (and sometimes the responsibility) to leave. But my hope is that through our commitment to be strong in the face of adversity, through our discipline of being disappointed and staying anyway, through our practice of pursuing right relationship with our companions, we will do our part to nurture the peace, freedom and justice befitting the kind of people we most want to be and the kind of world we most yearn to see.

It is a world where more of us can more often be "true to ourselves, true to each other and true to what we can together become." ■

Our liberal religious covenant is to trust one another enough to seek help when we're down and to offer assistance when we're able.
–Tom Owen-Towle (Unitarian Universalist, minister, author)

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Bound in Covenant (Excerpt)

BY **VICTORIA SAFFORD**, LEAD MINISTER, WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA

A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping or guarded under glass in a museum. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: *Whereas, whereas, whereas. . . . Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God.*

A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up.

Every Sunday in my congregation we repeat in unison the affirmation that Unitarian minister James Vila Blake wrote in 1894 for the church he served in Evanston, Illinois: "Love is the spirit of this church…" Each week, quietly, aloud, I promise that I will "dwell in peace"—and then I don't live peacefully at all. By Monday afternoon or Tuesday at the latest, I'm living fearfully again, or acting meanly or self-servingly.

I say that I will "seek the truth in love," and then proceed to act quite otherwise, closing my ears and shutting down my open mind and heart, seeking instead the validation of my own narrow, safe opinion. I say, "Our great covenant is to help one another," and then I forget to do it.

Someone said to me not long ago, "Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have together with other people, and with all other living things." When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant (from *covenir*, to travel together).

We will go together with you, child; we will go together with you, friend; we will journey together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice.

Excerpted from "Bound in Covenant" which appeared in the summer 2013 issue of the UU World. ■

In the Presence of God and One Another (Excerpt)

BY **REV. JAMES ISHMAEL FORD**, LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

We are being invited into a place where we move from an idea to an experience. The practice of covenant is paying attention—to ourselves, to each other and to the world. In our willingness to just be present, things happen. Our hearts can be touched in ways we can't even anticipate. And the wonder is, it comes to us however we name or do not name that mysterious unity. It comes because we are willing to be present to what is.

This encounter may happen in a worship service. It might come to us when we're teaching a class in religious education. It might come to us when we're working at the food pantry or taking a sandwich down to someone who is hungry. It might come to us as we're walking along the beach on an autumn day with a friend. It might come to us as we look at a freshly fallen leaf on the ground.

Pure presence. Just this. Just this.

However it happens, we find in that moment that the boundaries between our individual lives and the life of the world begin to dissolve. Small insight. Great one. We have many experiences over many years—smaller and larger insights, all coalescing over time into wisdom. What we discover is some great dynamic, like electricity leaping between us-as-individuals and us-as-part-of-something-larger. Not an idea—an experience, a body knowing, something that grows deeper over the years.

And, I suggest, finding this insight is worth a great deal. It brings a certain peace, knowing that even as we are a part, we are also the whole.

This knowing can inform how we encounter each other and the world. It is the source of our ethics, our intuition that we need to work for each other and for this planet.

It's that important. So, rather than just knowing that life teaches us and then waiting for that teaching to come, some of us take the bull by the horns and adopt a deliberate discipline of connection. We take on the disciplines of spirituality found in our way of covenant, in our covenant of presence, to push the river just a little.

Actually, some of us wade in the shallows, some of us swim out, and some of us throw ourselves into the depths. Each moment a practice of presence.

Whether and how you take this on as your practice—wading, swimming, or diving—is your choice. We have no compulsion on our way. Although, I need to point out, the clock ticks. And this work is the great work of being human. ■

From Your Guest Minister

BY **VICTORIA WEINSTEIN**, MINISTER OF THE UU CHURCH OF GREATER LYNN IN SWAMPSCOTT, MASSACHUSETTS

While Rev. Meg Riley is on sabbatical her column is being written by invited guests.

I often wonder if there is much more going on with free will than meets the eye, especially when it comes to finding and joining a spiritual community. We do some research, analyze the doctrines and beliefs of the group to find points of rejection or agreement, and check out the other people involved to see if they seem worth joining up with. We are looking for a gathering of "like-minded people." We are looking for a progressive Sunday school program for our kids. We are looking for a place that stands against hatred and bigotry and that will welcome a family that looks like ours. We are looking for a good music program or a group of people we can pray with in a way that doesn't require us to utter words we don't truly believe. It's all about us and our minds and our reason, right?

I don't know. Is that all there is? I don't think so. I happen to believe that we find community out of a much deeper instinct than an internal check-list we're looking to fulfill. I call that instinct a calling; a prompting of the soul. When we venture out of the confines of individual concern and into the demands of community, something deep is at work, and I believe that something has a holy origin.

In our congregations we use the word *covenant* for the spiritual contract that binds us to one another in love, mutual aid, spiritual and ethical growth and reverence. The covenant concept originates in a moment recorded thousands of years ago when God pulls aside a guy named Moses (as God had already pulled aside a couple named Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob, and Noah) and said, "Let me make you an offer you can't refuse: you are going to be my people and I am going to be your God."

The original story of God's courtship of humans was not a subtle negotiation. What are you going to do, ignore a burning bush that is on fire but not being consumed? Moses objected that he wasn't a good choice to be the matchmaker between God and "His" people, but God insisted. Moses subsequently did a lot of schlepping around with enormous stone tablets that contained the contract between the holy and the human. We know them as the Ten Commandments but the agreement was far more complex and detailed than that one list of conditions.

> A covenant is only as strong as the community that adopts it.

Serious relations are never easy, and neither was—or is—the relationship God's people had with the divine or with each other. Some things never change. The original community that received this invitation to covenanted relationship refused plenty at first, misbehaving and rebelling and infuriating this commanding reality, but God did not forsake them. In a detail that always makes me laugh, the people managed to violate their covenant with God while Moses was still up retrieving the tablets that had the ordinances inscribed on them. That's talent.

We are no less talented today at destruction, defilement, alienation and covenant-breaking, and are therefore no less in need of being made "a people," again and again and again by the commanding reality that we recognize in our communion with each other and with creation. It is one thing to learn to try to see the divine spark in every person. It is another level of commitment entirely to be in covenanted community with them. The word covenant can be used to describe many contracts and agreements, but covenants made in the congregational context always refer, implicitly or explicitly, to what Rev. Barbara Pescan called the "magnificent, unnamable intensity" that I believe is the source of our instinct to come together in community. It is in our wiring, or perhaps the soul.

What does this continuing, deep, sacred beckoning to be in relationship with the holy (which you may interpret as our values or principles) and with one another require of us right now? Is the covenant concept just an arcane curiosity from an ancient tribal people with rich imaginations that got picked up as an organizing principle for congregational polity, or is it a powerful through-line that binds us to one another, our history and our deepest communal calling?

I think that a covenant is only as strong as the community that adopts it. It can be a museum piece gathering dust in a congregational record or tucked away, inconsequential, on the last page of the weekly bulletin. It can be a formality that no one knows or cares about, or it can be a defining statement that is given life by frequent repetition, interpretation, and review. It can sit around looking fancy but doing nothing, or it can become inscribed on the people's hearts to whom it belongs. A covenant should be revised with each new generation, however the community defines generation. When it no longer speaks and resonates for the people whom it is intended to bind together in common purpose and promise, it should be aired out and edited.

Ultimately, our covenants should speak both to us and for us, proclaiming not necessarily our reality as a community—for we are often a mess, depending on the hour or the season—but rather our aspirations. A contract implies a job that will be accomplished within a set time and under specific circumstances. Covenantal promises are based not on certainties and specificities but on faithfulness to the love that calls each one of us out of our separateness to become a people.■

REsources for Living

BY **LYNN UNGAR**, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I've been going lately to choir rehearsals in a classroom at a school for the arts, so I've had a chance to read the posters on the front wall. One poster talks about what the *students* will do: be respectful of each other, be open to trying new things, do their best, and so on. Another talks about what the *teacher* will do: be respectful of the students and not yell at the class or humiliate any student.

In short, what they have on the front wall of their classroom is a covenant—a set of promises that people make to each other about how they will be together.

When you're thinking about covenant, it's important to remember that a covenant is an agreement, not just a hope. When you have a classroom covenant or a covenant of marriage or a covenant of how members of a church will be together, it isn't just an aspiration, a statement of how you would like things to be on the best days. It's a commitment—or it isn't a covenant.

But then, what happens when a covenant gets broken? What happens if the teacher loses it on a really frustrating day and does yell at the kids? What happens when a student says something mean to another student? What happens when a person who has promised to support and encourage their spouse through all the changes of their lives comes up against a change that they really just can't stand? What happens when church members get caught up in gossip and start assuming bad things about one another without talking things through directly?

What do you do when a covenant gets broken?

Well, you might want to step back and think about whether the covenant was realistic to start with. Maybe it's possible for someone you love to change in ways that you really just can't support. Then you have to go back and rethink the covenant and either change your agreement or decide that you simply can't be in covenanted relationship at all. That can happen with friends and even church memberships. If someone wants to be a member of a community but can't—or won't—behave in the ways that the community has agreed to behave, then the best solution can be to ask them to leave. It's never easy, but it can be the right thing to do.

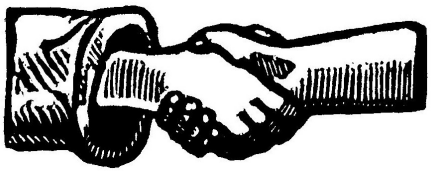
> Maybe what we need from our covenants is not just a statement of how we agree to be together, but also a statement of how we will come back into covenant when we mess up.

But much more often, people just mess up. They had every intention of living up to their part of an agreement, but something falls apart. I know as a mom that there have been more times than I care to count when my plans for speaking calmly and kindly to my daughter have gone to pieces in the face of frustration. I didn't decide that it's fine for parents to yell at their kids; I just yelled. Given that all of us human beings are less than perfect, maybe what we need from our covenants is not just a statement of how we agree to be together, but also a statement of how we will come back into covenant when we mess up.

I am imagining a third poster on that classroom wall—or in my kitchen or in a church social hall. It might say:

If I feel you have broken our covenant I will talk with you directly. I will name your behavior and how I feel about it, but not assume that a single action defines who you are as a person. I will be clear with you about what I would like you to do differently, and what, if anything, I need from you in order to make our relationship whole again. If I realize that I have broken our covenant I will go to you directly to apologize. I will name what I did wrong and what I intend to do in the future. I will ask you if there is anything you need from me to make our relationship whole. If you come to me to tell me I have broken our covenant I will listen harder to what you have to say than to my own defensiveness and embarrassment. I will be more invested in making our relationship whole than in being "right."

The idea of a covenant is a very old one. In the Hebrew Scriptures God makes a covenant with Noah, promising not only Noah, but also all the creatures of the earth that the world will never be completely flooded again. Which is great, but you have to think that the promise never to completely flood the earth has got to be easier to keep than a promise to never yell. Especially if you're perfect to begin with.



For the rest of us mortals, keeping covenants is not just a matter of making a commitment to how we will be together. It's also about making a commitment to coming back into right relationship after we mess up, turning over and over again back toward love and truth and compassion, back toward our core commitments of who we are and how we want to be in relationship with one another. ■

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Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke, and to provide for our posterity, is to followe the counsell of Micah, to doe justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together, in this worke, as one man. Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affection. Wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities. Wee must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekeness, gentlenes, patience and liberality. Wee must delight in eache other; make other's conditions our oune; rejoice together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes haueving before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace.■

From John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill," 1630.