

MINDING THE GAP: THE VALUE OF COVENANT
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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

~ Elizabeth M. Strong

Today we celebrate a dream awakening.
Today we worship with renewed hope in our hearts.
Today we act on an audacity of hopes and dreams for the future.
Today we begin the hard work for justice, equity and compassion in all human relations,
For today is a day like no other and it is ours to shape with vision and action.
Let us worship together and celebrate a dream awakening.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Wonder Box

We looked at friendship bracelets, and how each colour in the bracelet could symbolize a promise we make with one another.

READING

from *"Tiggers Don't Climb Trees"* ~ A.A. Milne

In "The House at Pooh Corner", a story is told about Tigger and Roo climbing a tree and then realizing they don't know how to get down. Pooh and Piglet happen by, and in true Pooh fashion, Pooh decides to eat a sandwich and think.

Whether he would have thought of anything before he had finished the last sandwich, I don't know, but he had just got to the last one when there was a crackling in the bracken, and Christopher Robin and Eeyore came strolling along together.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it hailed a good deal to-morrow," Eeyore was saying.

"Blizzards and what-not. Being fine to-day doesn't Mean Anything. It has no sig -what's that word? Well, it has none of that. It's just a small piece of weather."

"There's Pooh!" said Christopher Robin, who didn't much mind what it did tomorrow, as long as he was out in it. "Hallo, Pooh!"

"It's Christopher Robin!" said Piglet. "He'll know what to do."

They hurried up to him.

"Oh, Christopher Robin," began Pooh.

"And Eeyore," said Eeyore.

"Tigger and Roo are right up the Six Pine Trees, and they can't get down, and -"

"And I was just saying," put in Piglet, "that if only Christopher Robin -"

"And Eeyore -"

"If only you were here, then we could think of something to do."

Christopher Robin looked up at Tigger and Roo, and tried to think of something.

"I thought," said Piglet earnestly, "that if Eeyore stood at the bottom of the tree, and if Pooh stood on Eeyore's back, and if I stood on Pooh's shoulders -"

"And if Eeyore's back snapped suddenly, then we could all laugh. Ha ha! Amusing in a quiet way," said Eeyore, "but not really helpful."

"Well," said Piglet meekly, "I thought -"

"Would it break your back, Eeyore?" asked Pooh, very much surprised.

"That's what would be so interesting, Pooh. Not being quite sure till afterwards."

Pooh said "Oh!" and they all began to think again.

"I've got an idea!" cried Christopher Robin suddenly.

"Listen to this, Piglet," said Eeyore, "and then you'll know what we're trying to do."

"I'll take off my tunic and we'll each hold a corner, and then Roo and Tigger can jump into it, and it will be all soft and bouncy for them, and they won't hurt themselves."

"Getting Tigger down," said Eeyore, "and Not hurting anybody. Keep those two ideas in your head, Piglet, and you'll be alright."

MESSAGE

Minding the Gap

I wish I could show you the picture from *The World of Pooh* that illustrates the story Jovanna just read. The perspective is from way above Tigger and Roo...you see them sitting on a high branch, with Roo's little arms waving in excitement...and Pooh and Piglet way, way far below, looking up with a kind of puzzlement. There is a huge distance from the limb to the ground, a dangerous gap, and at the moment, all seem to be quite stumped about what to do about it. How'd they get up there? And how will they get down?

Our relationships can be that way. Somehow we manage to move far, far from one another, and the distance becomes too great, or the danger of hurt too imminent, to do anything but stay the distance. And yet, we long to connect, we long to be in relationship, but it's difficult to know how to do it without somebody getting hurt.

I've titled today's message, *Minding the Gap*. This phrase originated in England, to remind people that there is a space between the subway car and the platform, in order to reduce incidents of objects and feet getting stuck in that open space. Mind the gap. Step carefully.

I love how the Brits talk, don't you? So genteel. No warning bells or alarms. No hint of 'Hey, watch out stupid,' let alone any exclamation points. Simply, mind the gap. Stay calm and step across. Pay attention.

But I'm not talking today about some crevice or hole into which we might fall, but rather about another kind of gap, a space we're already in, and which we exist in every day. Educator Parker Palmer suggests that as human beings we live in a constant gap¹...the gap between what is and what could be. Palmer suggests that living at either extreme is dangerous....either "corrosive cynicism" if we think change is impossible or unnecessary, or "irrelevant idealism" if we live so much in the dream of what could be that we are not present to what is. Parker focuses on the presence of that gap in socio-cultural terms...for example, in social justice work.

Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly*, which I preached about a few weeks ago, also speaks of a gap...the space between where we're actually standing and where we want to be,² and her work is more focused how that gap exists in individual relationships. She suggests that standing in that gap, and facing the distance between who we are and who we want to be, takes courage...because in order to align our behaviours and responses with our values, we need to be able to be vulnerable (which means showing up in uncomfortable ways) and also shame-resilient (being able to face ourselves honestly and with compassion.)

¹ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/blog/103-parker-entries/639-parkerpalmer-tragic-gap>

² Brown, p.172

That gap is a fertile place, because if we can be truly open-minded and curious, there's great potential for growth. But this is tricky stuff. On the one hand we need to affirm loud and clear that we are beings of inherent worth, and that who we are, right now, is enough. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that there is always room for growth, always potential to move closer to our vision of who we want to be, always the possibility for improvement. It's almost paradoxical...like we have to value ourselves enough to believe in our potential to change...to live fully into who we already are. This is true for individuals, for communities, for cities, for nations, for the world.

Today we're talking about community...this community. I want to explore what it would take for us to be courageous enough to stand in the gap between who we are and who we want to be.

For about four years I've been suggesting that this congregation would be well-served by a Covenant of Right Relations. The idea of covenant is central to our faith; we are a covenanted people, bound by our promises to one another, in the simplest terms, to walk together in the spirit of love. We speak a unison covenant together on Sundays, as we did this morning...which expresses our intention to welcome all who enter in friendship, to create a culture of peace and freedom, to work together to care for the earth, to serve the family of humanity, and to cherish each other as friends.

Our Board of Directors has a covenant that expresses how they will do their work together, and our Lay Chaplaincy Committee has recently created a covenant to guide their conversations and relationships. And, of course, our covenant groups have covenants, which I trust they read each time they meet.

A covenant, and specifically a Covenant of Right Relations, has two key elements.³ First, it is something that is 'agreed to', and second, it concerns a 'course of action', that is, how we will behave and interact with each other...how we will treat one another. What kind of agreements? Well, one man shares the story of the first experience he had of creating covenant; he was working with youth who were going on a wilderness trip where they would camp by a stream. He asked the youth what kind of agreements they ought to have in order to guide their living together that weekend. The first kid to raise his hand said, "No peeing in the stream."⁴

Words to live by. So, the goal of a covenant is to form group norms that help all of us get along, or in other words, to state intentionally who we aspire to be and what our expectations are of one another.

The 'forming of group norms' is a powerful concept. Brené Brown defines culture as "the way we do things around here." And that 'way we do things around here' is what becomes expected and normative within our culture. But does our lived reality meet our intentions?

Here are some questions that Brown suggests might give us a hint as to how our practices line up with our values. I'm going to ask them one at a time, slowly, and give you a chance to think for a moment. In thinking about life here at UFP...

³ <http://www.floridadistrict.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Authentic-Dialogue-on-Way-to-Right-Relations.pdf>

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What rules or expectations are ignored?

Do people feel safe and supported when expressing how they feel or asking for what they need?

Do people feel that the contributions they make are valuable and appreciated?

What happens when someone makes a mistake?

Is the ministry here... the work of the congregation...truly shared?

What happens at UFP when someone is disappointed or angry?

Do we place a premium on comfort?

What came to mind for you? Do you have a sense that we live pretty well-aligned with our values, or did some of the questions leave you feeling a bit disappointed about how we are as a community? I believe I can say with certainty that we are a community that desires to be led by our values...but as we know so well, what we do doesn't always true up with who we say we are.

Some might ask why we need a Covenant of Right Relations when we have both a covenant that we speak on Sundays and when we have the seven principles to guide us.

While both of those things are extremely important in establishing our values, and are therefore foundational to who we are, they are not specific enough to really guide our interactions. For example, how do you apply the principles when someone volunteers to do something important and then fails to follow through? How can you 'cherish each other as friends' when someone is pursuing their personal agenda in a way that you think is harmful to the congregation? When someone says something hurtful and you feel the urge to retaliate, what guidance do you find in our principle, "justice, equity, and compassion" in human relationships? A Covenant of Right Relations would better offer us support to live into who we want to be together.

For example, a while ago, when talking to one of you about the potential for a Covenant of Right Relations, I got a response steeped in what Palmer calls 'corrosive cynicism.' "Good luck with that" was the response. "You'll never get agreement on something like that here." I admit the comment slowed me down. In thinking more about it, I realize that this type of response is part of our culture...not only the cynicism, but the 'giving up' in the face of any criticism or lack of support. It happens regularly...when there is any voice of dissent, often an idea is dropped, or a decision is avoided, or at the very least, the conversation halts.

What if, in the first instance, I could have said, "you know, our covenant calls us to be supportive of one another, and to support the work of the congregation. Can you support me in this?" Or, in the case of disagreements, to say, "Our covenant calls us to honour our diversity. Tell me more, because I want to understand what you have to say, and I hope when it's my turn to talk, you'll listen to me as well." Can you imagine us doing this? I hope you can see how a Covenant might be a very useful guide in our relationships with one another.

But, remember, there are two key elements about a Covenant...the guidelines themselves and the part about it being agreed to. If a Covenant is going to work here, I'm going to need a little help with that second part. How shall we do this? You've all already established a particular relationship and agreement with the congregation, however unspoken, so this is a bit like going back and re-writing our terms of engagement. How do we do this and get a general sense of buy-in?

I'm well aware not there are few, if any, among you who like the idea of more congregational meetings and gatherings, or more commitments in your lives. This is part of our current culture too. Church, congregational life, does not occupy a place of prominence on the list of life-priorities, at least for most people. We also, as a congregation, are working to keep a healthy balance between projects we take on and our human resources, so that you are able to participate in things joyfully, rather than begrudgingly. We want everyone to be able to engage and serve with grace and joy.

So, assuming that a Covenant of Right Relations would be of great benefit to us, and wonderful tool in challenging us all to more closely align our behaviour with our aspirations, and that we're unlikely to find a lot of time to spend on it, how are we going to come to some mutual participation in, and agreement on, a Covenant of Right Relations? I've been turning this over and upside down, looking at it from many different angles, trying to figure out how best to approach this, and now finally, facing the deadline of preaching about it today, here's what I propose.

I propose that acceptance of a draft Covenant be on the agenda at our Annual Meeting on May 25....adopted in draft form only. Then, if adopted, over the next year, we can experiment with use of the draft Covenant, and also make suggestions for changes to be made, with the hope of a more final Covenant coming to our Annual Meeting in 2015. Of course, any Covenant is always a living document, and should be revised and adapted as is necessary, but this would be a start. What do you think about that?

I'll be putting a copy of this, or something very much like this, in the May newsletter:

Covenant of Right Relations - The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough

It is our desire to create and sustain relationships within our congregation that are respectful, affirming, compassionate, and generative. We make this covenant with one another to express how we, at our best, want to be with one another, as we strive to work together to grow as individuals and to build a vital, resilient spiritual community.

To this end, we aspire:

- To serve and support the congregation with commitment and compassion
- To remember that we are part of something larger than ourselves
- To speak only for ourselves...authentically, honestly, openly...building the courage to make our values and ideas heard
- To listen to others, with respect and without judgment, with the intent to understand
- To honour diversity as a source of communal strength
- To take responsibility for our own words and actions
- To seek and to offer forgiveness, understanding that we are all fallible
- To speak directly with one another...when there is disagreement, misunderstanding, or hurt...and to share feelings and differences respectfully
- To stay engaged, even when it's tough
- To express gratitude
- And, to be open to having others call us back be to 'being in covenant' when we fail to live up to these aspirations, encouraging each other to begin again, in love.

I'm sure this isn't exactly right. I'm sure it's missing some key things. I'm sure it could be better. But it's a start.

As I said a few weeks ago, I believe we CAN be a community where vulnerability and authenticity is not only accepted but encouraged. A Covenant of Right Relations, a pledge to one another, is a way to grow in our sense of worthiness and our trust, allowing us to broaden and deepen the connections we make here. A Covenant of Right Relations calls us to pay attention to where and how we step, to Mind the Gap, that we may live in greater peace and understanding.

So be it.

READING

Credo

~ Robert Fulghum

Robert Fulghum, in his famous little book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, begins with his 'credo', or at least the one for that year, since he says he re-writes it every spring. In this version, he realized that he already knew most of what's necessary to live a meaningful life - and that it isn't all that complicated. Living it - well that's another matter.

And isn't that how it is with us...we know how we want to live, but living it isn't always that easy. Here, in part, is what Fulghum concluded:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody....

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

CLOSING WORDS

Dear ones, our friends at Pooh Corner tell us that we'll be alright as long as we try not to hurt each other and help one another when we're stuck. As Fulghum reminds us, everything we need to know we already know...we just need to do it. No matter how old we are - when we go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.