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 Arlington Street Church  
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## Covenant

In the spring of 1630,<sup>1</sup> before the crossing of a band of Puritans from Southampton, England to Salem, Massachusetts,<sup>2</sup> Governor John Winthrop gave his now-famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” calling for a covenant based on a social ideal in which the wealthy were to show charity and avoid exploiting their neighbors and the poor were to work diligently. Based on the parable of salt and light from Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, John Winthrop told his people that, if they sought to live by this covenant, the new community they would establish would be “as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people ... upon us.”

Being Puritans, much of the sermon was given to the wrath of G\*d in the event that they fell short of this covenant: “The Lord will surely break out in wrath against us and be revenged on such a perjured people, and He will make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.”

I’ve told you before that a colleague from another denomination once said to me, his eyes wide with amazement, “How do you get them to church if you can’t scare them with an angry god and a fiery hell?”

My answer was actually based on John Winthrop’s call to covenant: We gather here, not out of fear, but out of love. Here are his words; I’ll trust you to translate:

“Now the only way to avoid ... shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity,” he said, “is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our G\*d. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one. ... We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves for our superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience,

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<sup>1</sup> April 8 - June 12, 1630

<sup>2</sup> preached on March 21, 1630 at Holyrood Church in Southampton, England

and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' condition our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace...."

I don't know if the word "delight" shows up again in Puritan literature, but here it is, in the founding directive. We will only avoid shipwreck — literally and spiritually — if, delighting in each other, we make and keep this sacred covenant.

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith instead of a creedal faith. What does that mean? If you're part of a creedal faith, you recite a creed, such as these opening words of *The Apostle's Creed* — "I believe in G\*d, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth" — which I know many of you, in your childhood, recited by heart. In a creedal faith, you're bound to others by your shared beliefs. "Creeds are about beliefs.

"[But] covenants are about relationships," says Rev. Mark Harris. Instead of the bonds of shared beliefs, we share the bonds of covenant. Rev. Alice Blair Wesley adds, as Unitarian Universalists, "It matters what we believe, but it matters most what we love." We say, "We need not think alike to love alike."

In this beloved community, we covenant to gather in love and service for justice and peace.

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There is a creation myth that the earth was once a perfect, blue-green sphere, made of glass. The gods became enchanted with it and began to play, tossing it among themselves, high into the air. Inevitably, the globe shattered, and the fragments of the earth were scattered to the far ends of the universe.

In the sixteenth century, a Jewish mystic named Isaac Luria revived this myth, and called all of humanity to what he named *tikkun ho'alam* — the repair of the world. Our work, he said, and the work of each succeeding generation, is to make the earth whole again — not as it was, but in a new way.

We cannot do this work alone. We cannot do this work without great love, hard work, laughter and tears and covenant.

In the children's book which tells the story of *tikkun ho'alam*, author Marc Bellman writes, [G\*d said to the people,] "If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

The [people] asked, "What's a partner?"

And G\*d answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you [partner with others], it means that you can never give up, because your partners are depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough, and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days, we are still partners, and we must not stop trying to finish the world..."

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Ethicist and theologian Margaret Farley, author of *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*, writes, "... The history of the human race, as well as the story of any one life, might be told in terms of commitments. The history of civilization tends to be written in terms of human discoveries and inventions, wars, artistic creations, laws, forms of government, customs....<sup>3</sup> At the heart of this history, however, lies a sometimes hidden narrative of promises, pledges, oaths, compacts, committed beliefs, and projected visions. At the heart of any individual's story, too, lies the tale of [their] commitments: wise or foolish, sustained or broken, fragmented or integrated into one whole."<sup>4</sup>

Alex Sheen's father taught him to keep his promises; it was, Alex says, his defining character trait; his "inner compass." In 2012, to honor his father's memory, Alex had blank cards made up that say, at the bottom, "because I said I would." Since then, he has sent over 11.3 million Promise Cards to more than 150 countries. People fill them out and post them to declare their intentions and commitments, to remind them and to invite others to honor them. Some of my favorites are, "I will play with the kids at recess no one's playing with ... because I said I would"<sup>5</sup> and "This mom is going to college to make a difference for my son and [me] ... because I said I would."<sup>6</sup>

You know how, when you learn something new, or something's on your mind, suddenly, you keep seeing it or hearing about it everywhere? This week, out of the blue, a friend told me about two cousins from Oklahoma who are writing a book together. They were talking about the need to keep a promise they'd made to their publisher, and one said, "It's the ice wagon all over again!" (*Stay with me here!*)

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<sup>3</sup> the ellipsis represents "the cultivation of the land, and the conquering of seas."

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Farley, Chapter 2, "The Meaning of Commitment" in *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*

<sup>5</sup> paraphrased; the card wasn't entirely legible, but this is the idea!

<sup>6</sup> Please see [becauseisaidiwould.com](http://becauseisaidiwould.com)

In a time before refrigeration; food was kept cold by real blocks of ice, sold by a man delivering it from a horse-drawn wagon. The cousins' dads were brothers in a family of five boys who thought it was great fun to chase after the wagon, jump into the open bed, and chip off some ice for themselves. The ice man would chide them and shoo them away, but every time he made his rounds, they were back. So the ice man went to the boys' father.

He called his sons to him, and they figured they were in for a punishment. But he had something else in mind. He distributed a piece of paper and a pen to each boy and said, "Write this down:

*I will not jump on the ice wagon ever again.*

Then sign your name to it."

They did it, and waited. One of the boys asked what they should do with their papers. "I don't need them," their father said. "In our family, a person is as good as his word. I know if you sign your name, you'll keep your promise."

The boys folded up their papers and stuck them in their pockets. The ice man's troubles were over.

Years later, after each of their fathers had died, both cousins found their ice wagon notes tucked in among their treasures — a timeless lesson on personal integrity and living in covenant."<sup>7</sup>

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Every Sunday morning, we bear witness to the joys and sorrows of this beloved community of memory and hope, and we covenant to live together peacefully; to speak truthfully, with love; and to give service. There's a good chance we fall short of those aspirations, sometimes before we even leave church. But the next Sunday morning, we do it again, and begin again, in love.

I'm thinking today about the power of covenant, and the ways it sustains us. I'm thinking of the ways we give ourselves to love, to prophetic hospitality, to the work of healing the world. I'm thinking of the ways we renew our covenant with gifts of love, service, and sustaining financial gifts. I'm thinking of the 10,000 kindnesses I witness between and among you — welcoming the stranger and making them friend, laughing together and crying together, uplifting and upholding one another through devastation and celebration.

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<sup>7</sup> I looked it up; you can find this story at [oklahoman.com/article/2652910/teach-children-value-of-keeping-promises](http://oklahoman.com/article/2652910/teach-children-value-of-keeping-promises)

I'm thinking that to covenant is a choice;  
to love is a choice.  
I choose you.

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I've told you the story of a Provincetown landscape painter named Hayes. On this Day of the Dead, I'm remembering a covenant that we — all of us — carry forward.

Hayes wasn't unfriendly, though I don't believe he had a friend in the world, except bad friends who had turned on him: alcohol and cigarettes. He was a wildly gifted artist, though, and somehow painted through it all.

One afternoon, he set up just inside our fence. Emerging on his canvass was the lawn, the side garden, and the church, with the great door open.

Skipping "hello," he said, "I thought I might come around on Sunday morning." I didn't let on my astonishment that worship was even on his radar. "The service is at 11:00," I told him. "You're always welcome."

It never occurred to me that he would actually come, but there he was, in a clean shirt, with his dark hair combed off his thin, ruddy face. He listened to my sermon attentively. Afterward, during the sharing of joys and concerns, he stood. "This week, I found out I have AIDS," he said. "It's made me think about my life, and how I want to change." He paused, then continued, "I'm coming to church now, and I'm going to quit drinking." That was all; he sat down, and everyone clapped for him.

After the service, I spotted him in coffee hour. My A.A. posse was talking with him, though no one doubted that it would be a miracle if Hayes could — or would — get sober.

The next Sunday, he was in church again. Again, he stood. "I'm sober one week," he said, and sat down. Again, everyone clapped.

And so it went, with Hayes reporting his sobriety to the congregation: "I have 21 days.... I have 42 days...." He set his sights on attending 90 A.A. meetings in 90 days.

At 56 days, Hayes could no longer stand for the sharing of joys and concerns, but he raised his hand and spoke from his seat. Two weeks later, he lay

on a pallet in front of the pulpit, but he was exultant as we celebrated 70 sober days with him.

By the next week, he lay bedridden at home, but we all kept the calendar for him. He was wasting now – AIDS was ravaging his body. Still, he was eloquent about his spiritual awakening, and A.A. long timers and newcomers alike sat by his bedside, lovingly attending this dying, luminous man.

On the ninetieth day, an A.A. meeting was gathered at Hayes' apartment. People sat on his bed, on the radiator and window sills, and spilled out into the hall. The topic of the meeting was "The Promises" of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Hayes had memorized for this very special occasion. Slowly but surely, to the expectant crowd, he recited, "If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are halfway through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity, and we will know peace."

He finished strong, asking, "Are these extravagant promises?"<sup>8</sup> The crowd responded, "We think not."

It was the final meeting for which Hayes was conscious. A week later, people crowded into the sanctuary for his memorial service.

And Hayes had left me something: the painting of the Meeting House ... with the great door open.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we delight in each other,  
Keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,  
and so avoid shipwreck.

It matters what we believe, but it matters most what we love.

May we keep the great doors open, welcome the stranger,  
and keep our sacred covenant of love, service, justice, and peace.

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<sup>8</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* [*The Big Book*], pp. 82-83

To love is a choice.  
I choose you.  
*I love you.*