

**Covenant: What Binds Us**  
UU Community Church of Santa Monica  
Heart to Heart Circles  
May 2016

## **Welcome and Explanations**

### **Chalice Lighting**

[They] drew a circle that shut me out —  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took [them] in.  
- Edwin Markam

### **Sharing Silence** 3 minutes

You may wish to bring your attention to your breath, or move a bit until you have found a comfortable seat. If silence is not a familiar experience to you, three minutes may seem long. If you are accustomed to silence, it may seem short.

### **On Our Hearts** 15 minutes

This is a time to share wonderful news or a heavy heart - the major highs and lows of your life you'd like everyone to keep in their hearts or in their prayers for you.

## **Covenant and Ground Rules**

Our covenant includes a description of how we want to be with each other, ground rules for our time together, and our expectations for members of the group. This covenant is adapted from *Heart to Heart: Fourteen Gatherings for Reflection and Sharing* by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins.

I commit myself:

- to give attendance at meetings a real priority knowing that my presence is important to the group;
- to let the leader know if I will be absent or need to quit;
- to participate with my group in two service projects, one for our church community, and one for the wider community;
- to share with the leader the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others;
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and tell only my own story to others;
- to honor the safety of the group by listening to what others share with an open heart;
- to refrain from cross-talk, judging, problem solving, or giving advice;
- and to share as deeply as I can when it is my turn.

## Housekeeping

### Readings

There are names for what binds us:  
strong forces, weak forces.  
Look around, you can see them:  
the skin that forms in a half-empty cup,  
nails rusting into the places they join,  
joints dovetailed on their own weight.  
The way things stay so solidly  
wherever they've been set down—  
and gravity, scientists say, is weak.

And see how the flesh grows back  
across a wound, with a great vehemence,  
more strong  
than the simple, untested surface before.  
There's a name for it on horses,  
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh,  
is proud of its wounds, wears them  
as honors given out after battle,  
small triumphs pinned to the chest—

And when two people have loved each other  
see how it is like a  
scar between their bodies,  
stronger, darker, and proud;  
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric  
that nothing can tear or mend.  
- Jane Hirshfield, "For What Binds Us"

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest of truth is its sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve humankind in fellowship,  
Thus do we covenant with each other.  
- Arranged by L. Griswold Williams (c. 1933) (adapted by UU Santa Monica)

In the first weeks of my first ministry in an old New England congregation, a woman came to see me. Nearly 90 years old, she was a lifelong member of that church; her parents had joined in the late nineteenth century. She didn't like change, she said. She wasn't sure that she liked me, or what she called my "point of view."

“Just remember,” she said. “I have outlived all of your predecessors, and I will probably outlive you.”

This woman was a dedicated political conservative in what had become a progressive community; she was a liberal Christian in a congregation that had known gracious eras of theological diversity and also some fits of intolerance; she’d worked for the U.S. State Department through three wars and for the American Unitarian Association through the merger with the Universalist Church of America. In this church of her childhood, which she’d never left, most votes at most annual meetings had not gone her way for the past forty years. She was no stranger to discord.

In the end she did outlive me there: she died shortly after I accepted a new call in another state, and I was saddened by the news.

Over ten years we cultivated a fierce, respectful love for one another, and what I loved in her most was her commitment to that church, no matter what; her fidelity to it; the ferocity with which she paid her pledge each year, no matter how wayward the budget or insufferable (in her humble opinion) the sermons. She kept her covenant with that people, with their proud history and the bright promise of their future, and with the free faith tradition they embodied. I was a young minister then, and her way of being in relation, her integrity, taught me more about Unitarian Universalism than anything I’d learned in seminary.

I think of her often on Sundays, when we welcome our people each week, saying, “This is a congregation bound not by creed, but by covenant.” We are bound by covenant, each to each and each to all, by what theologian Rebecca Parker calls “freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence.” The central question for us is not, “What do we believe?” but more, “What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we accountable?” In a tradition so deeply steeped in individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask, not once and for all, but again and again, even over ninety years of life: How do I decide which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold (in the words of one congregation’s bond of union) my “name, hand, and heart”? The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

- Victoria Safford, “Bound in Covenant,” UU World Summer 2013

**Questions for consideration:**

1. Do you think of yourself as inside or outside the circle of communities that are important to you – family, church, work? What stories do you have of being inside or outside from when you were growing up?
2. UU ministers Jackie Clement and Alison Cornish define “covenant” in UU congregations as *a way of articulating shared values that speak about what the congregation values most highly, define the promises they make together, and define how members will act with one another.* How does our church covenant fit this description? How about our Heart to Heart Covenant and Ground Rules?
3. What does covenant mean to you, as a UU? How has your understanding or experience of covenant in Unitarian Universalism changed over time?

4. What binds you and keeps you connected to the people, institutions, or communities that are important in your life? If there been a time in your life when you needed to “unbind” yourself, what was that like?

**Sharing** 60 minutes

### **Reflecting on Our Time Together**

Please share anything that would otherwise be unsaid as you leave our time together. Do you wish you had shared something more, less, different? How are you feeling as you leave? Feeling words are ok, such as sad, mad, glad, peaceful, powerful, joyful.

### **Closing Words**

Covenant begins in longing. There, where the heart calls up our origins and oldest memories of oneness and belonging, we find a taproot that grows into covenant if given the right conditions, including our own willingness to acknowledge and oblige it. When we feel that tug beckoning us from our individual isolation into relationship with others, there is the germ of covenant already taken root.

- Karen Hering