



# *Soul Matters*

**September 2020**

(originally from 2016)

## *What Does It Mean To Be A Community of Covenant?*

A covenant is a  
living, breathing  
aspiration, made new  
every day.

REV. VICTORIA SAFFORD



# *What Does It Mean To Be A Community of Covenant?*

Covenant is one of those words that can initially sound kind of stuffy, academic and out-of-date. But when you unpack its meaning and its practices, covenant holds a whole vision for how to live in this complicated, beautiful and broken world. It is a vision that says we are most human when we bind ourselves in relationship. But not just any relationship – relationships of trust, mutual accountability and continual return.

This is not what our culture teaches us. Our culture teaches us that what it means to be human is to be an individual – self-defined, self-determined, separate even. But our UU covenantal theology affirms that being human comes down to the commitments we make to and with each other – the relationships we keep. We become human through our promises to and with each other.

And even more than that: covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other, even when we think the other isn't doing enough, even when the other is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done – even then. When we realize right then, that we are still connected, and we can't give up – and so we return, and begin again. This beginning again, says our faith, is when the holy and the human meet.

Let me tell you right now, sometime in the next year, maybe in the next few minutes, the people you most believe in and care about are going to disappoint you. Your church is going to disappoint you. This world is surely going to disappoint you. Like, all the time. We all are walking wounded and weary from the way this world can – and does – break our hearts.

And what our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other, keep on opening our hearts with greater love. And, right then, our covenantal faith says – we will feel not only most human, but also most whole and most at home.

**Rev. Gretchen Haley**

*Senior minister of our Soul Matters partner congregation, Foothills Unitarian, Fort Collins, Colorado*

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## Option A: Whose Am I?

Quaker teacher, Douglas Steer writes:

The ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitable leads to a deeper one: “Whose am I?” – because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

So, whose are you? This exercise invites you to honor this core covenantal question by living with four different photographs this month. Here are your instructions:

1. Find and print out four pictures of four different people:
  - one of a person that represent your promises to those that have gone before you
  - one of a person that represents your promises to those who will come after you
  - one of a person that represents your promises to someone central to your life right now
  - one of yourself -- past or present -- that represents your promises to yourself
2. Put these four pictures in a place you will see every day this month. Perhaps tape them to your bathroom mirror or stick them in your wallet. Maybe frame them and place them on your desk or stick them with magnets on your fridge.
3. Make a conscious effort to reflect on them every day and do at least one thing to further or honor your promise to one of these people.
4. Bring your four pictures to your small group and share how living with them altered your days.

(Note: consider making this a group effort and do it as a couple or as a family.)

## Option B: Return & Repair

In this month’s introduction, Rev. Haley writes:

What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other.

This exercises asks you to do the work of return and repair. Pick a relationship of heartbreak in your life. Maybe it involves a friend or family member, maybe even someone who is no longer living. Maybe a neighbor. Maybe even an institution, like your church or our government. Whoever or whichever it is, make time this month to return to that relationship and work on repair. Simply ask yourself “Where have I withdrawn, been betrayed or broken something myself?” Your heart will know the answer. Listen to what it says. Then open your heart one more time and lean into relationship once again, doing what you can to repair what you can.

## Option C: Live in the Plural

UU minister and writer Victoria Safford writes:

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 [these questions], not once and for all, but again and again. ... The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

*Full article here: <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>*

What might it be like for you to live “in the plural”? For this exercise, get out a big sheet of paper and write “ME” in the middle of it. Then start adding the people, principles, values, and dreams you’re committed to. Draw lines of connection, creating a mind map of the network of covenant you live in.

When you’re done, set it aside for a few days. Then come back to it and notice what stands out for you and, also, what is *missing* in your web. What covenantal relationships do you have in your life? How might you more intentionally live in the plural? Bring your mind map and your insights to your small group.

# Your Question

*Don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what covenant means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a part of a community of covenant means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?*

1. What promises have you made to those who have gone before?
2. What promises have you made to those who will come after?
3. Have you kept your promises to yourself?
4. Have you made a covenant with the holy? What promises have you made to Life itself? To God? To your inner voice?
5. What is the most life-giving promise you've made?
6. Many congregations recite these lines for their chalice lighting: *This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.* How might you adapt this to your own relationship with yourself or with the universe? Perhaps you might finish this sentence: "This is my great covenant: ..."
7. Has society ever broken its promise to you? How have you responded when you've witnessed society breaking its promises to others?
8. Some of us preempt heartbreak by leaving relationships before others have a chance to break their promises and our hearts. What is keeping you from the risk and pain of covenant?
9. Covenant rightly calls us to work on repairing relationship and sticking in there even when it is hard. But sometimes one's covenant with self requires us to put up boundaries and know when to leave a relationship. Is it time for you to put your covenant with yourself first?
10. If you're a member of your congregation, what promise did you make when you joined? You probably had a sense of what you'd get, but were you clear about what you promised to give?
11. Theologian James Luther Adams names the foundational covenantal nature of the universe as "the love that will not let us go." How do you experience this love? Has it kept its promise to you? How? Have you kept your promises to it?
12. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

# Recommended Resources on Covenant

This is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a community of covenant*.

**Definition:** a formal and serious agreement or promise. In Jewish and Christian theology, an agreement between God and God's people; in Unitarian Universalism, an agreement about how we will strive to be in relationship with one another.

**Synonyms:** commitment; trust; bond; pact; pledge; agreement; understanding

## Wise Words

To seek the truth in love means that even when we stumble, we continue to love. Even when we flail, we stay in relationship. To seek the truth in love means that we talk about the hard things rather than denying that things can be hard. This is a very difficult task. It is not something that I have found easy to do, but it is something that I continue to try to be brave enough to do.

~ **Rev. Anne Mason, Soul Matters Minister**

Out  
of a great need  
we are all holding hands  
and climbing.  
Not loving is a letting go.  
Listen,  
the terrain around here  
is  
far too  
dangerous  
for  
that.

~ **Hafiz**

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change. It claims: *I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming.*

~ **Lisa Ward** *full text here:*

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/covenant-invites-relationship>

The ancient question, "Who am I?" inevitable leads to a deeper one: "Whose am I?" – because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask "Whose am I?" is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

~ **Douglas Steer, Quaker teacher**

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.

~ **Rev. Victoria Safford** *full text here:*

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>

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. It is covenant that brings us out of isolation, covenant that brings us 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.

~ **Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray**

We can join one another only by joining the unknown . . . [The union] is going where the two of you—and marriage, time, life, history, and the world—will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way.

~ **Wendell Berry**

Sometimes it's as simple as this: Our society tells us to ask "What do I want?" Our religion invites us to ask "Whose am I?" Two very different questions that lead to two very different lives. Which question will we invite to lead us? Every single sacred text says our choice is literally a matter of life and death.

~ **Rev. Scott Tayler**

Hope is key to every covenant. As I have told my congregation, which takes pride in a heritage of being non-creedal, our forbearers were wise in putting aside creedal questions – "What do we all believe in common? What ancient formulae of faith are we willing to confess together?" in favor of the more covenantal questions: "What spiritual hopes do we share? What shall we promise to one another and to God as we try to live together toward our hopes? How shall we then try to treat one another?" But sometimes I worry that in taking pride in their non-creedal freedom they can easily forget the deep responsibility that their freedom – if it is truly covenantal freedom – necessarily entails.

~ **Rev. John Buehrens, *A House for Hope***

A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a matter of love. A contract speaks this way: if you do this, and only if you do this, then I will do that. It is hedged, cautious, risk-averse. Its most basic principle is "no surprises." A covenant speaks this way: you and I will do whatever is needed to achieve our shared purpose. We will remember that our covenantal relationship is more important than any particular action we take or fail to take to serve its purpose. If either of us fails to honor this shared commitment, the other has permission to call the one who fell short back into covenant, to

ask what is happening, to be demanding and supportive at the same time. In a covenantal relationship, there is an understanding that no one fulfills his promises each and every time. Sometimes you make a doubtful promise, and then put your heart into it, and then fail, and then you and your covenantal partners pick yourselves up and ask, "how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?" In a covenantal relationship, the message you get from your partners when you fail is as just as much an affirmation of self-worth as if the promise had been fulfilled.

~ **Rev. Preston Moore**

### **Covenant**

Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the source of life knowing that we are not our own, earth made us.

Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the community of resistance never to forget that life can be saved from that which threatens it by even small bands of people choosing to put into practice an alternative way of life.

And, let us covenant with one another to seek for an ever deeper awareness of that which springs up inwardly in us.

Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives, Even when we have done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will.

This is the ground of our hope, and the reason we can be bold in seeking to fulfill the promise.

~ **Rev. Rebecca Parker**

One of the most important lessons I learned in seminary, I learned from a three year old boy. . . . My wife Sandy and I were visiting with Jeffrey and his parents for dinner one evening. As we sat down at the table, Jeffrey looked around at us expectantly. . . . Now, I expected that they would say some form of grace, but I was surprised.

Jeffrey was our leader. He had all of us hold hands while his father lit the chalice at the center of the table. Jeffrey then had us recite their family covenant... *Love is the doctrine of this family, 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.* Covenant as a personal spiritual practice... taught to me by a three year old Unitarian Universalist.

Amazing.

~ **Rev. David Pyle**, "Covenant as Spiritual Practice" *full sermon here*:

<http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=900>

## Videos & Podcasts

### **"The Mandate: A Call and Response from Black Lives Matter Atlanta"**

A powerful two and a half minute video about how our societal covenant has been broken and how Black Lives Matter leaders are proclaiming a new mandate. The context of the video: "On July 13, 2016, members of Black Lives Matter Atlanta organized civil disobedience to amplify the call for long standing local demands in light of the police killings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Jerry Williams. Heavy police and state surveillance and presence attempted to halt and block the organizers. These Black leaders would not falter."

<https://vimeo.com/174684690>

### **"Heresy, Hubris and the Future of our Faith" by Rev. Sue Phillips**

St. Lawrence District Assembly, April 2, 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuufi5NM5Vw>

### **"Eleuthera, Pirates, and Covenant" podcast**

Puritan Minister Rev. Cotton Mather loved confessing soon to be executed Pirates. But what happened when a young pirate by the name of William Fly defies Mather and the puritan establishment and does not rebuke his pirate ways? And what exactly is this pirates relationship with Unitarian Universalism? ... Dive in and explore the connection between Eleuthera, Pirates, and Covenant.

<http://www.pamphletpodcast.org/mathers-wrath/>

### **A three minute video about covenant by UU Youth and Young Adult Ministries**

<https://vimeo.com/68767404>

### **"Breaking the Gender Covenant" by Joy Ladin, from On Being (podcast and transcript available)**

"Did anyone ever teach you to be true to yourself?" a therapist once asked me. I had come to her in the midst of what I call my gender crisis — the physical, mental, and emotional breakdown I experienced after 40-plus years of living as the male I knew I wasn't..."

<http://tinyurl.com/h2egz3d>

## Articles

### **"Bound in Covenant"**

A great starting place for this theme.

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>

### **"The Five Major Ingredients of Covenant" by James Luther Adams, UU Theologian and Social Ethicist (1901-1994)**

"Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promise. The human being as such ... is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature."

<http://tinyurl.com/jzdx9db>

### **"How Covenants Make Us" by David Brooks**

"When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. When we are situated within something it is because we have made a covenant. A contract protects interests, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are part of one another. It involves a vow to serve the relationship that is sealed by love: Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people."

<http://tinyurl.com/jhs3e2w>

### **"On Covenant", a position paper by the Rev. Sue Phillips**

"As [Unitarian Universalist] congregations we 'covenant to affirm and promote' the Principles. Affirming and promoting shared values is



important, but it puts tepid commitment at our collective center, asks virtually nothing of us, and offers virtually nothing. This is not covenanting. It is parallel play.”

<http://tinyurl.com/zpwrtpn>

## Movies

### *God on Trial*

Awaiting their inevitable deaths at one of the worst concentration camps, a group of Jews make a rabbinical court to decide whether God has gone against the Holy Covenant and if He is the one guilty for their suffering.

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1173494/?ref\\_=kw\\_li\\_tt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1173494/?ref_=kw_li_tt)

### *Up*

An animated movie about the quest to fulfill the dreams and promises of a lifetime.

<http://tinyurl.com/hqvnyzv>

## Songs

### “Nothing More” by Alternate Routes

“We are Love / We are One / We are how we treat each other when the day is done.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tXzIVjU1xs>

### “Would You Harbor Me?” by Ysaye

Barnwell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp7JD5DP5FQ>

### “Count on Me” by Bruno Mars

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvnalurM5p8>

## Books

### *The Covenant with Black America - Ten Years Later* by Tavis Smiley

In 2006, Tavis Smiley teamed up with other leaders in the Black community to create a national plan of action to address the ten most crucial issues facing African Americans. The Covenant with Black America, which became a #1 New York Times bestseller, ran the gamut from health care to criminal justice, affordable housing to education, voting rights to racial divides. But a decade later, Black men still fall to police bullets and brutality, Black women still

die from preventable diseases, Black children still struggle to get a high quality education, the digital divide and environmental inequality still persist, and American cities from Ferguson to Baltimore burn with frustration. ... So Smiley calls for a renewal of The Covenant, presenting in this new edition the original action plan—with a new foreword and conclusion—alongside fresh data ... to underscore missed opportunities and the work that remains to be done.

<http://tinyurl.com/zsa7fbq>

An interview with the author, Travis Smiley:

<http://tinyurl.com/h6dhcrn>

### *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationship*, edited by Laurel Hallman and Burton D. Carley

These twelve essays from Unitarian Universalist leaders emerge as part of a movement in the faith from focusing on individual identity to relational connectedness. Through personal stories and thoughtful reflections, the contributors describe how we might grow our souls through our connections with one another and with the Holy.

<http://www.uuabookstore.org/Not-for-Ourselves-Alone-P17454.aspx>

### *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* by Eboo Patel

In Sacred Ground, author and renowned interfaith leader Eboo Patel says this prejudice is not just a problem for Muslims but a challenge to the very idea of America. Patel shows us that Americans from George Washington to Martin Luther King Jr. have been "interfaith leaders," illustrating how the forces of pluralism in America have time and again defeated the forces of prejudice. And now a new generation needs to rise up and confront the anti-Muslim prejudice of our era. To this end, Patel offers a primer in the art and science of interfaith work.

<http://www.uuabookstore.org/Sacred-Ground-P17840.aspx>

### List of books for children and families about covenant:

[https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/20V4ZESSKJIHJ/ref=cm\\_sw\\_su\\_w](https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/20V4ZESSKJIHJ/ref=cm_sw_su_w)

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