

Living a Life of Commitment

Small Groups: September 2014

The Unexpected Path of Commitment

What does commitment mean to you? What are the commitments you have in your life? Is it possible that commitment is becoming a path less traveled these days?

When I was first considering marriage – and feeling a little, well I'll just say it – scared of making the commitment, a pastoral counselor told me that commitment is a journey. She said it is a journey that goes from choosing to commit, to doubting and uncertainty, to choosing again to commit. I was glad to get this perspective early. It reminds us that commitment isn't a onetime thing, and that anything that requires commitment, whether it be to a relationship, to parenting, to a cause, to a value, to a community, isn't easy and there will be times when we will honestly struggle and even question our commitments. To know that this is natural, somehow makes it easier when you experience it.

We live in a time when ideas of duty and obligation are secondary to choice. This is not a bad thing. It provides opportunity for freedom and equality that is invaluable. It is choice that makes something a commitment and not an obligation, but the work of commitment is choosing it again and again, despite times of doubt or even disillusionment.

Choice is a gift. Something we choose has a value deeper than something we are told we must do, told we must believe. But choice is also more complicated. Ideas of choice, rather than obligation, make it possible for us to live without deep commitments. In this age of choice, there is much more emphasis on immediate gratification, personal preference and less demand or interest in the hard work and sacrifices that commitment requires. If we don't have to stay when something gets difficult, why stay?

Yes, certainly there are times where we have to make an ending, when we have to let go of a commitment we have made, for our own health and well-being, or because we truly are being called in a new way. Discerning if we are in a place of uncertainty that will lead back to a renewed commitment or to different road entirely is the most difficult personal work one can do and it is accompanied by real grief. And yet, this should not keep us from the risk nor the investment. For it is through commitment that our lives are deepened and woven with meaning.

We experience meaning through the people and the values that matter to us, when we dedicate some portion of ourselves to something beyond our individual life. And the doorway to experiencing the fullness of life and a deep knowing for who we are comes when we challenge ourselves, when our strength is tested, when we risk and face uncertainty because of something we love dearly. May our exploration this month of the theme of Commitment invite us to reflect on where we have invested ourselves, and on whether and how it reflects who we hope to be.

Yours in love,
Rev. Susan



Living the Theme: Commitment

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience commitment. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience commitment and what you learned from the practice.

1. Rekindle Your Commitment to Small Things

Mother Teresa writes, “Do not think that love, in order to be genuine, has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.”

Indeed, it is all too easy to lose sight of the small things that make a big difference. For instance, you might be devoted to dinners with your kids and having everyone say grace (e.g.. something that we are thankful for from that day), but when things get busy, your commitment to this practice easily falls to the wayside. A friend used to be committed to calling at least one long-distance friend each month, but somehow this past year, it’s not happened at all. Other friends describe themselves as devoted hikers, artists, runners, or choir members. They say these things re-energize them and connect them to something larger than themselves. However, in the same breath, they say they haven’t “gotten around to doing it in months.” Reading a book to your children before they go to bed; volunteering monthly to help with a cause you care deeply; bringing out the fine china and treating yourself to beauty; writing a love letter to your spouse; checking in on a homebound neighbor; writing to your congressperson, these are all “small, ordinary things” that contain great power. But we get tired, so they disappear from the world.

This month, take some time to remind yourself of “a small love with great strength” and then do at least one thing to reaffirm your commitment to it.

OR (see next page)



2. Do Your Values Really Have Your Commitment?

Last month, as we explored Seeking in depth, a critique was raised of Unitarian Universalists that some consider UUs to be at best “dabblers” and at worst, that we don’t believe in anything because we have no clear or singular path to follow to deeper, richer insights and commitment. However, at its best, our tradition guides us in articulating and living our deepest values. We know in our hearts the values to which we are most devoted, but sometimes our lives don’t reflect that devotion as much as we’d wish.

This exercise offers us a chance to step back and see how well we’re doing:

Step One: Fill in the Blanks:

"The two values I am most devoted to are _____ and _____."

Step Two: Fill in the Blanks:

"You can see my devotion to these values by looking at these parts of my life:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

(As you fill in these blanks think about how you interact with your family or friends, what you've chosen to do as your employment, how you spend your free time, how you handle conflict, how you use your money, where you volunteer, what you do for fun and/or self-care, etc)

Step Three: Fill in the Blanks:

"Three ways I'd like my life to more deeply reflect my devotion to these two values are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



Some Questions to Live With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. **How has commitment played a role in your life? Has it been central or peripheral? What difference or outcomes have your commitments made in your life? Are your commitments a source of greater meaning or purpose in your life? What about happiness or satisfaction?**
2. What have been your experiences of obligation versus commitment? **Where do you currently feel obligated? Where do you feel committed?** Are there commitments you have that currently feel like obligations, or obligations which feel like deep commitments?
3. **What do you do when two commitments you have compete for your time or attention?** For example your son's recital at the same time as an important meeting for work? Your commitment to your own self-care and the needs of a person or group you are committed to? **How do you balance or prioritize competing commitments? What have you learned about trying to find a good balance?**
4. Any commitment comes with trade-offs. To commit to one thing may mean you have less time or are unable to commit to something else. So, it could be that there are benefits and drawbacks to commitment. **Do you have personal examples of commitments you've made that illustrate benefits or drawbacks?**
5. **Where in your life do you avoid commitment?** Why do you think you avoid it?
6. **Do you have feelings of regret associated with commitment?** We can't all do everything, how do you deal with regret for the "road not taken?" And committing to something is a risk, which if it doesn't work out might be accompanied by regret.
7. With the seemingly endless number of choices/opportunities for making a commitment of time, talent, energy, and other resources, **how do you decide when to make a commitment?** Do you know yourself well enough to know when to say "yes" and when to say "no"? Do you sometimes "bite off more than you can chew"? Do you shy away from any commitment, overwhelmed by the choices?
8. **How do you make decisions around commitment?** (see [The Paradox of Choice](#) by Barry Schwartz) When making a decision to commit to someone or something, is your goal to research thoroughly and strive for the very best (maximizer) or are you willing to explore a few options and make a decision based upon what seems good enough, what matches most of your criteria (satisficer)? Has this served you well? Can you be a maximizer for some types of decisions and commitments and a satisficer for others?
9. **How do we teach our children to make choices and commitments?**
10. **How do you decide whether or when to end a commitment?** Does your answer make a difference if the commitment is to a friend, a partner, a family member, or to a job, a hobby, or volunteer effort?
11. E. B. White writes, "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy; if the world were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I wake up each morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it very hard to plan the day." **How is E.B.'s struggle impacting your efforts to plan your day? How are you doing at balancing your yearnings to save and savor the world?**



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

“Commitment”

- A pledge or promise, an act of engaging oneself.
 - The state of being obligated or emotionally impelled.
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*No matter how weary we get, no one of us is
without embers to kindle a light.
Each of us can be bringers of light,
And together we can make a radiance.*

Rev. Mark Belletini, UU

*We each have talents
We each have strengths and weaknesses
We each have gifts
Some people have the gift of compassion
or perseverance or discernment or action.
Each person has a gift to use for the good of
all-
Each of us has a gift to bring to our living,
and the Family of the earth deserves to
receive it.*

Jean Varnier

*He meant what he said,
And he said what he meant-
An elephant's faithful one hundred percent.*

Dr. Seuss

*Commitment unlocks the doors of
imagination, allows vision, and give us the
right stuff to turn our dreams into reality.*

James Womack

Commitment is an act, not a word.

Jean-Paul Sartre

*Be doers of the word, and not merely hear-
ers.*

James 1:22

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot, with those who,
age after age, perversely, with no extraordi-
nary power, reconstitute the world.*

Adrienne Rich

*Never doubt that a small group of thought-
ful, committed citizens can change the
world, indeed it's the only thing that ever
has.*

Margaret Mead

*The prayer of our souls is a petition
for persistence; not for the one good deed,
or single thought, but deed on deed, and
thought on thought, until day calling unto
day shall make a life worth living.*

W. E .B. Du Bois

*I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I
can do.*

Rev. Edward Everett Hale, UU

*At the moment of commitment, the entire
universe conspires to assist you.*

Goethe

*When you learn something from people or a
culture, you accept it as a gift; it is your
lifelong commitment to preserve and build
on it.*

Yo-Yo Ma



Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. The person who truly loves does so because of a decision to love. This person has made a commitment to be loving whether or not the loving feeling is present. ...Conversely, it is not only possible but necessary for a loving person to avoid acting on feelings of love.

M. Scott Peck
The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth

Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth... Love is as love does. Love is an act of will -- namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.

M. Scott Peck

Infinitely more important than sharing one's material wealth is sharing the wealth of ourselves – our time and energy, our passion and commitment, and above all, our love.

William E. Simon

Commitment means staying loyal to what you said you were going to do long after the mood you said it in has left you.

Unknown

The irony of commitment is that it's deeply liberating—in work, in play, in love. The act frees you from the tyranny of your internal critic, from the fear that likes to dress itself up and parade around as rational hesitation. To commit is to remove your heart as the barrier to life.

Anne Morriss

Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes . . . but no plans.

Peter Drucker

We, the people, recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights; that our destinies are bound together; that a freedom which only asks what is in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity or duty or patriotism, is unworthy of our founding ideals, and those who died in their defense.

Barack Obama

You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.

C.S. Lewis

In life, many thoughts are born in the course of a moment, an hour, a day. Some are dreams, some visions. Often, we are unable to distinguish between them. To some, they are the same; however, not all dreams are visions. Much energy is lost in fanciful dreams that never bear fruit. But visions are messages from the Great Spirit, each for a different purpose in life. Consequently, one person's vision may not be that of another. To have a vision, one must be prepared to receive it, and when it comes, one must be prepared to accept it. Thus when these inner urges become reality, only then can visions be fulfilled. The spiritual side of life knows everyone's heart and who to trust. How could vision ever be given to someone to harbor if that person could not be trusted to carry it out. The message is simple: commitment precedes vision.

High Eagle

On a personal note, the most sacred commitment I've made is to live a life of sobriety. Without this commitment, no other commitments would be possible.

Worship Associate

We have committed the Golden Rule to memory; let us now commit it to life.

Edwin Markham



Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.

Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sets of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no one could have dreamed would have come his or her way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.

Goethe

The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready he is to claim all excellence for his nation, his religion, his race, or his holy cause. A man is likely to mind his own business when it is worth minding. When it is not, he takes his mind off his own meaningless affairs by minding other people's business.

Eric Hoffer

"Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening"

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

But I have promises to keep,

and miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

- Robert Frost

To me, the "lovely, dark, deep woods" represents all the temptations to procrastinate or find something else to do that can arise when there's a promise to be kept that may be uncomfortable or inconvenient.

Worship Associate

People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.

Dorothy Day

"4 Steps to Control the Chaos"

paraphrased from Jennifer Louden

1. Set fact-based, measurable goals.
2. Define incremental progress.
3. Plan realistically, not ideally.
4. Celebrate what you did, not what you wish you'd done.

There is an old joke that shows the difference between commitment and involvement; it goes something like this:

"Consider breakfast: The chicken is involved. The pig? Committed."

Unknown

Additional Resources

Renata Salecl

http://www.ted.com/talks/renata_salecl_our_unhealthy_obsession_with_choice

Malcolm Gladwell

http://www.ted.com/talks/malcolm_gladwell_on_spaghetti_sauce

Barry Schwartz

http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice

Ruth Chang

http://www.ted.com/talks/ruth_chang_how_to_make_hard_choices