

*Deepening the Commitment*  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix  
Sunday, March 31, 2019  
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

We are called by the rich, deep beat of the drums into commitment – into living, into engaging and deepening our lives in this covenantal community. As Unitarian Universalists, we seek to live a life of commitment, a life firmly grounded in our values, fully engaged in relationship, working always for the wellbeing of this complex planet and all the beings it supports.

Last week, once again, we read together this congregation’s covenant of commitment, affirming the role that UUCP plays in our spiritual and religious life; affirming that we choose to grow in love as we work through disagreement and conflict; affirming our active support for this flourishing religious community. Those covenantal words are printed once again this week in your order of service. Your covenant provides a powerful statement and guide for life together in vibrant community in a dynamic world.

I invited you last week to affirm your own commitment and how you live into the covenant, asking you to write that affirmation on an index card which we collected at the end of the service. I then spent time with those cards, reading and reflecting on them, and I found my heart filled with the affirmations of commitment you wrote. There were so many deeply felt messages, affirming commitment, value and our identity as Unitarian Universalists in the world. I will share some of them now, as we ground our spirits in your words, and in the love that flourishes in this community.

Many of the commitments you wrote of on the cards were personal, sweet and deep:

- *Commitment to covenant is a challenge to myself to explore and discover my true self,*
- *to challenging myself to be more than I feel I am;*
- *A practice of patience, humility, service, spiritual growth, community.*
- *I will honor my truth, my heart, and spirit. And I will love myself ...*
- *This community is my family. I choose this. And so I choose to support UUCP financially, sing in the choir, grow spiritually, and write postcards to speak out for justice issues.*

Some of your messages went to the heart of the most challenging and aspirational aspects of living in this community and in the world:

- *I am committed to brave witness;*
- *to encourage respect and understanding for those with whom we disagree;*
- *to help create an inclusive environment, one that is welcoming towards those with differing views and beliefs;*
- *to show up and care, not just pretend to care. Listen deeply to issues that resonate with members. Work to change the underlying issues;*
- *to listen with my whole being;*
- *to treat all others with compassion and empathy;*
- *to have courageous conversations;*
- *to create community, to bring our voice to others, to remain calm in the midst of turmoil.*
- *We cannot sweep conflict under the rug and pretend it doesn’t exist, because it just comes back again and again in our system. I look forward to seeing folks embrace conflict as an opportunity for learning and healing.*

And there were some that spoke deeply to the present moment in the life of this congregation:

- *I covenant to always strive to move forward in a positive direction with the congregation*
- *To stay the course: coming back to self, and from a place of center, offering the best of myself to others and my community. Forgiveness and willingness to begin again, with no regrets.*

Always in covenantal community, we begin again, we move forward in love. We begin again, going ever deeper into living the mission and covenant of this amazing congregation. Especially now, with a new settled minister on the horizon, we bring with us all the powerful learnings of this time of transition, as we deepen our commitment in hope and love. To deepen is to move down and in, approaching the heart of the matter, the center of the self, the glow in that burning coal at the heart of the congregation, the power of mission, the full meaning of commitment. A powerful energy rises in deepening.

When I was learning to ride horses many years ago, I learned that the key to riding well and securely when the going gets rough is to sit deeper in the saddle, and I call on that image in these times, when the ride of life becomes bumpy and turbulent. To deepen is sometimes the opposite of what our instincts call us to do. Even as our first reaction may be to stiffen up, tighten our grip, to brace and resist, we find our real power when we release the tension, soften down and in. Sitting deeper in the saddle, you find your true center and sink into it, deepening your connection with the horse, with yourself, with the dynamics of the ride. That is how I think about deepening into the tumult and turbulence of life, deepening in connection with those we love, deepening into our highest values, deepening in commitment.

Author Madeleine L'Engle has named deepening as a shift from the pleasure-seeking dance of youth into a deeper rhythm, bringing ourselves into a place of stillness, embracing our spiritual maturity and allowing our roots to grow. When we deepen, we learn a new song, we find new strength as we join with others to create the rhythm and music that generates life. That is the paradox of deepening – deepening happens only when a person finds the courage to slow the dance and relax into what is most real. When we grow our roots, we enter a deeper dance of spiritual maturity. We shift the dance into something new; we transform in shape and movement, beyond the superficial dance into a new ground of what is most real, what has the most power for our lives.

This congregation in the past two years has shared an amazing journey of transition, from Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray's election to the UUA presidency, through a time of acknowledging the strengths that have brought you to this place and time; a journey of exploring new possibilities, and preparing to move into the future.

You are now entering the final phase of that journey, and about a month from now you will be voting on the call of your next settled minister to serve this strong and resilient faith community. This has been at times a turbulent ride, one that has invited us all to soften deeper in the saddle, to deepen our commitment, to learn new ways of being together as a congregation, as staff, as minister. And as I have heard people say, again and again in recent weeks, this congregation has come through turbulent times before, and always you emerge stronger, more committed, more resourceful and capable of living into the vision of beloved community than ever. As we began a conversation about stewardship last fall, your stewardship team felt called into what we began to call deep stewardship, a process that is not focused on money, but on creating the real connections of caring for each other in this congregation, deepening engagement and commitment as you prepare for new beginnings with a new ministry here.

It is human to yearn for deep connections, connections that touch the depth of our real lives. Making deep connections can be challenging in our busy lives, and we know when people first come to explore this congregation they often cite a desire for connection as one of the things they hope to find here.

So from the early stewardship conversations grew the Neighborhood Connections initiative, a process to open the possibility for all sorts of gatherings and activities for the people who live near each other, rather than having everything happen here on the UUCP campus in Paradise Valley. The team marked out geographic areas across this Valley, created lists of UUCP members within those areas, invited some people in each area to serve as Connectors, taught the Connectors how to use our database to contact people and gave them the joyful assignment of creating opportunities for deeper connections all over the place. Those gatherings are starting to happen now, we hope this will be an ongoing process that grows over time, and the excitement is building.

Another opportunity for deep connection is the creation of new teams and opportunities to be involved in the life of the congregation. UUCP belongs to you, the members and friends who are the congregation. Last week I was hanging out in the office, as I love to do, and there were five people there working on various tasks – working on the computer, stringing Ethernet cable, sorting through files, chatting and sharing laughter and life, as they carried out the work of the congregation. My heart was simply filled with the joy of being part of that. If you have not yet found a way to offer your time and talent, please talk to us, because it takes some time to get everyone sorted out, and we are still discovering all the loving processes that generate power and joy here.

This UU Congregation of Phoenix has the deep gift of a connected covenant, a powerful mission and an inspiring vision. That is why in this time of organizing and mobilizing for the future we have focused on the mission, and on the covenant of commitment to this congregation. It is a gift to have covenant that clearly states your values for how you live and work and grow together, learning from difference and conflict, learning to go deeper into your faith commitments, realizing your mission.

Mission by its very nature defines your deepest purpose, your core, your “thing that continually renews your spirit ... the indomitable force that moves you to action when nothing else can, [that grounds] you with a single whisper in your quietest moment; ... the bedrock of your soul and ... the wind beneath your wings.” That is a deep call.

As our current UUA president has famously said, this is no time for a casual faith. This is a time to deepen into our commitments, to find new ways to live into covenant and mission. Now is the time in the history of this world to deepen, to reach down into our roots, to ground ourselves in the core of our identity, to open ourselves to emerging possibility, and to make real those commitments in our living, in our hopes, our dreams, our priorities, our investments.

As you entered today, you received a packet with this year’s beautiful brochure that so well captures the spirit of this vital community – and you will find there as well a letter, and a commitment form inviting you to act on your commitment to the connections, the community, the covenant and the mission of this congregation.

This is a time of new possibilities, a time to invest your love and your resources, the shared resources that fuel the fire of this place, that make possible so much of what we do together. As you have heard, in addition to seeking a moderate financial increase to sustain the congregation,

another and vitally important goal for this year is to have every member and friend make a commitment of financial resources to the future of the congregation. Your investment counts, whether what you can afford is \$5 a month, or \$50, \$500 or \$5,000 a month – it is not the amount that is important, but the spirit of love and commitment, the depth of caring and reach of vision, that makes this congregation a powerful force in the world.

It is my privilege and honor to serve you as your minister in this transitional time, and I contribute financially to UUCP because I believe in the promise and possibility of this congregation. I believe in you, your power and resilience as you come through times of challenge, as you deepen into your mission and commitment, and as you learn ever more powerful ways to live into the world. I hope you are as inspired as I am by rich promise this congregation brings to the world, and that you will continue to do what you can to assure that your next ministry here begins with strength, abundance and confidence.

We deepen, and from those depths we rise. We come from the fire, the water, the mountain, and to those elements we return, creating connection, knowing who we are, finding our power – and in deepening into commitment, into spirit, we have what we need to transform the world, truly to turn the world around. I invite you now to rise in body or spirit and join in singing #1074 Turn the World Around.

Sources:

Madeleine L'Engle (1973) A Wind In The Door

Loehr, Jim (2007-09-18). The Power of Story (p. 42- 44). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition