

***Love is the Spirit of this Fellowship:
What does this Mean to You?***

February 26, 2017
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
Rev. Paul Beckel

WELCOME

In today's service we'll be encountering the ideals and the stories of many members of our beloved community with whom I've spoken this week: what BUF has meant to them, and what we have meant to one another.

Today we light the chalice with thoughts of **Bob Keller**, who is in hospice house and nearly at the end of his life. Bob has not only an extraordinary intellect but also a great sense of humor. So he might say, now, why are you lighting the chalice, I'm not dead yet! Bob was also, by the way, a tremendous model of how to die. Not that we ordinarily have much control over these things, but Bob faced death with great calm and realism. He had taught a college class in death and dying long before this was something that was socially acceptable to address. He was curious; he wanted to know about life, and death, from every angle, biologically, culturally, historically, emotionally. He did his research so he would *always* know what he was talking about...and dealing with.

Bob has been a part of this congregation for 49 years. He's seen us through a lot of ups and downs – divisions over Viet Nam, many ministers coming and going, budgets and fundraising and memorial

services for so many of his friends. I'm saying this now because Bob represented, very well, the spirit of this fellowship. Let's say it together:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship
and service gives it life.
Celebrating our diversity,
and joined by a quest for truth,
we work for peace, and honor all creation.
This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG

Gather the Spirit #347

RE MINUTE / CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Magic Penny, by Malvina Reynolds

COMMISSIONING of CANVASSERS

I invite the canvassers to stand as I read their names [**about 40 names**]

Congregation: We call on you today, to call on us...to be with us for a moment to hear of our aspirations for BUF, to hear of our concerns and our vision.

Canvassers: We will call on you and we will listen...we will not ask you for money, but we will ask you to share a bit about your passions and how this liberal religious community might comfort you in times of distress, and challenge you as well.

Congregation: When you contact us we will respond. When you offer a pledge card we will receive it as an opportunity.

Canvassers: We thank you for receiving us. We come to you as ambassadors for our beloved community.

Congregation: Thank you for your commitment to the well-being of BUF. As members and friends and well-wishers today, we pledge to work in partnership.

SINGING TOGETHER

Wake Now My Senses #298

READING

"Night Airs" **Rick Hermann**

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship: What does that mean to you? This prayer, pledge, affirmation, whatever you want to call it, originated with the Rev James Vila Blake in Evanston, Illinois in 1894.

I have preached at the Evanston Unitarian Church, where they call this their “Historic and Living Covenant,” and still say it every week. That original version goes like this:

Love is the spirit of this church, 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.

In my previous, historically Universalist, congregation in Wisconsin, a pretty conservative place founded 24 years before Blake, only one word has been changed: There they say: Love is the spirit of this church and service is its “gift” rather than law.

In the grey hymnal you can find both Blake’s version and still another one assembled for a Universalist hymnal in the 1930s. The Unitarians and the Universalists were separate denominations back then. They had each emerged in the 1700s out of the spirit of dissent, and pluralism, and religious freedom of the American colonies. But the Unitarians were the urban elite in government and commerce...sober intellectuals who looked at the bible with the tools of historical and literary criticism, and found it essential to peel away the accretions of theological gobbledygook and focus instead upon the practical ethics taught by Jesus.

The Universalists meanwhile were enthusiastic country evangelicals eager to spread the good news of universal salvation. To them it was nonsense to imagine a god *of infinite love* damning any of his beloved children into eternal misery. It took a couple of centuries for the Unitarians and Universalists to fully merge, which we did in 1961. But over time they grew to recognize their essential similarities while also finding that their differences could complement one another very well.

The Universalist version of 1933 reads:

Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve human need, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine—thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

So we see aspects of these distinct traditions within their evolving statements of aspiration. And we can watch the continuing evolution to what we are today, and might become tomorrow, and in the generations to come.

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What is common to both traditions, and essential to Unitarian Universalism today is the emphasis upon covenant. For as we have expanded our vision of inclusivity century after century, we have found it increasingly difficult, unnecessary and counterproductive to define ourselves according to common beliefs. And so covenant, rather than creed, has become the central principle of how we relate to one another.

And yet, this isn’t new, it began with a group of our ancestors who rejected the hierarchies of the battling European churches. That is, much deeper than their theological quibbles, the Puritans’ most radical departure from their authoritarian past was based in a new view of how we must be *governed*. That is, not by someone else, somewhere else. We must be self-governed. Each

congregation must gather and govern itself as an association based in love, and grounded in freedom.

Rod Haynes pointed out to me the words of John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, who said in 1630:

We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work; our community as members of the same body.

Rod then continued: “Winthrop's reference to ‘the body’ was undoubtedly Christ. But I think his words are more broadly applicable to a community of people, a church at large, who do not necessarily all share a singular faith or belief or dogma. Our shared unity is love, and freedom of spirit, and celebration of divergent points of view.”

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So how did “we” the body of people who have made up and do make up the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, how did we choose the covenant that we say together today?

Frank and Liz Morrow became members of BUF in 1966. Frank told me that they came to Bellingham from All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis, where they routinely said the 1894 version. And without pause Frank then rattled off that original that he said he'd learned in the 1950s. When I asked Frank about the trajectory of the covenant here, he told me that in the 1970s there was no minister at BUF, so he coordinated a lot of the services himself. He thinks somewhere along the way he introduced the Indianapolis/Evanston version and he thinks that about 10 years later that BUF made some changes and after some discussion, voted it in at a congregational meeting, as is the prerogative of a self-governing congregation.

Bob Davis remembers a similar dynamic in the late 1990s. **Dorothy Davis** says ‘we older members are used to having it tweaked, if it happened again it wouldn't be a big deal.’ (I'll say more about this later.) And what does it mean to you, I asked. Dorothy says: It's so hard to remember to love when I'm trying to keep my equanimity in these disturbing times. Which, by the way all of a sudden have reminded me how much I love my country.

Several people spoke about the value of being reminded week after week about the values they want their lives to reflect.

For instance **Bonnie Kelly** says it reminds her of the sense of personal connection that she felt on first walking in here...which she did not because she was looking for community, but because she had heard about Tim DeChristopher, the climate activist who subverted the auction of oil and gas leases on 22,000 acres of public land. When Bonnie learned that Unitarian Universalism had played a part in shaping DeChristopher's conscience, she wanted to know more. Since then she's found that same consciousness to be an important part in shaping our collective love.

Kaitlin Davis said: I imagine people here with lifelong trajectories of service ... grappling with different circumstances ... inspired by their ideals and contributing in so many different ways, with so many different skills, with a mindset that we want to make things a little better. She sees this every Sunday even in subtle way, Kaitlin says, like when we join hands for Circle ‘Round...and

there's always a missing link, until someone assertively takes that loose hand to make sure everyone is included.

Anastacia Lundholm says: I feel it most palpably singing out the children, I bet the first fifty times we did that I choked up. Also seeing the coming of age kids with their clear eyes now going off into the world, and each year being amazed like where did these kids come from oh they were here all along, and I'm excited for them and I also regret that I didn't get to know them sooner.

She added: After my sister died I didn't even want to go out of the house, but I finally went to Fred Meyer and ran into Kara Black in the garden center and she hugged me and I cried. And I felt it would be safe to come back out into the world. Then a few minutes later I ran into another guy who looked familiar and I said don't you go to BUF, he said yes and I cried just a little bit and said you have no idea how much it means to me right now to run into you. I'm sure he didn't know what to think but I meant it.

Kara Black works Sunday mornings but she sometimes gets here in time to go down to coffee hour (and this is her experience too at community night dinner when she goes down into the social hall) she says that she feels so embraced and embracing. Coming down the steps and seeing one person after another that she knows, and then lots of people she doesn't know, and in all of this she says she feels, I quote: "a wash of love."

Ann Stevenson says she found this phrase to be meaningful when she learned that the immigrant farmworkers feel safe to come here. Then she acknowledged, I don't know if that's true anymore with the changing circumstances in our country, but I want it to be true. (And by the way, for Ann this is not just some weak sentiment; she puts in her time with immigration activism and real face to face hand to hand spatula to spatula relationship-building with the farmworkers of our partner organization, Community to Community. She knows that justice is what love looks like in public.

Rachel Smith Manrique points to BUF's Humanitas program as a manifestation of our covenant. Something significant about Rachel's point, I think, is that Humanitas is directed outwardly beyond these walls, and yet it reflects and is empowered generosity from within.

Rachel also points to some very practical matters: like the elevator, which was a large financial investment in inclusivity. And even such day to day matters as BUF-news email, and basic administrative work that helps people to stay connected even if they have limited mobility.

Shirley Dunwoody writes: I am still overwhelmed by the love and support members of BUF have been giving to me since (my husband) Bill's passing. There have been calls, e-mails, cards, lunches, hugs ... some from people I'm just beginning to know and some from people whom I recognize, but don't know. It is comforting and is making a difference in my life.

Shirley adds: As you know, I sing in the Women's Ensemble. In one particular song, our soloist was having difficulty with the rhythm until her fellow soprano put her arm around her and tapped out the rhythm on her back, enabling her to bring the melody to life. I have sung with many groups in my lifetime, but I have never seen that manifestation of love.

Let's be honest though. When I asked people this question I was perhaps unconsciously steering people toward positive experiences. But we are not always at our best. **Bonnie Phinney** points out

that we *can* show that Love is the Spirit of the fellowship through our interpersonal relations at the church...and she's experienced that significantly at the women's retreat. She also notes, tho, that as a relatively new member she's troubled that people she's just beginning to know disappear, apparently upset with BUF but not saying why. She's had enough experience with other UU congregations to know that discord happens, but she can't just shrug this off. She says we need a process for improving the way we relate to one another when we disagree. She says: If Love is, in fact, the Spirit of this Fellowship, then how can we do otherwise?

Can we persist when love is hard? **Jim Reimer** reminded me of the exchange between Tevya and Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof*: *He asks, do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him...If that's not love, what is?*

Cat McIntyre says: I love the cats that I live with: I pet them and talk to them and feed them and clean up after them. That's a big part of love. But I'm an introvert, and I know that I need people to practice on too, and I have to go outside of my comfort zone. Cat says: BUF is my biggest investment, where I push myself to make sure to keep open the channels of love—by using them. I look for opportunities to love people who are difficult, people who are not easy for me to love, people with rough edges, knowing that I have my own edges. Because having challenging relationships cause me to re-examine my values, helps me to understand and expand my limited vision, motivates me to try again. She says that engaging with people who have experienced loss in their lives deeper or in different ways than she's experienced loss gives her an understanding of why people are so motivated for one particular cause or another. She says: I can love their passion without having to mirror it.”

Ursula Zvilna was on pastoral care team where she found experiences of giving love to be extremely satisfying. She says: when I've had a deeper conversation with someone, then later even if I just see them for a few minutes or in passing then that quick encounter benefits from the depth of connection we made earlier. She added: you support what you love.

Linda Fels spoke of the year we lost 3 active women to cancer: **Ruth Ashworth, Katie Walker, and Leslie Veatch**. She said: It meant so much to me how the congregation came together for mutual support in our grief. We knew Ruth was sick, and even Katie, tho she was only about 40...but with Leslie the diagnosis came and she died so fast. It was a really hard year. And it was really beautiful how we responded.

Rick Hermann says that Love is an ephemeral process, not a state of being, it's like trying to write a poem that is true.

But truth?

Lea Seaman says: When I first came to BUF I saw the words in the covenant about a quest for truth and I thought c'mon, isn't the truth rather obvious, and the means of determining truth straightforward and widely accepted? But today I find that how we arrive at truth is a relevant question. I say this in part because of so much deliberate obfuscation of the truth, and in part because this has probably become inevitable with today's technology and the freedom and irresponsibility that can come with everyone having their own private media channel. So appreciation of and skills for critical thinking and the *free and responsible search for truth*, as we

put it more explicitly in the UUA statement of principles—a free and responsible search for truth and meaning—that’s something I can no longer take for granted.

It may seem like we’re verging off from the path of Love into conflict and politics and the difficulties of celebrating our diversity. But love is all of these things. Love is a warm feeling, it is hard work, and it also making choices. “We must give ourselves in love but we must not give ourselves away.” So even though I’m always encouraging your generosity, I want to acknowledge how easy it is to become overextended. This can happen in any aspect of our lives. It can happen to us collectively with our ambitious programs and our congregational budget. In our time, our energy, our finances, even in our empathy we have limits and too often we discover them when, with the best of intentions, we run out. That’s why we need all of us, because none of us can run in high gear, in every dimension of our lives, without rest. So I’m going to continue to invite you to generosity, and I’m going to continue to urge you to love yourself, which can include stretching and risking and trying something new...and it can include stopping to breathe, saying no, and retreating from time to time.

It’s a dilemma. I know that committed members sometime avoid coming here on a Sunday morning because they need a retreat from busywork of BUF. We need to be sensitive to that and make sure that volunteering does not become just another job. We need to do this for ourselves and do this for each other. Because just *being here* for each other is a form of love. Showing up. I’m not going to say that it’s good for you to be here, you’d probably find it condescending. But I will say that it’s good for BUF for you to be here. BUF the beloved community that thrives when we connect, when we listen, when we find a way to overcome all those times we’ve stepped on each other’s’ toes.

But maybe you’re new here. Maybe you haven’t stepped on anyone’s toes yet. Or you’ve been neglected. Maybe you think all this gushy lovey stuff is a lot of hoey. What you may not know yet if you’re newish is that there are rewards and satisfactions that come with sticking it out. Loving relationships involve disillusion, mistakes, misunderstanding, and bad choices. Covenant means we promise to start again, and again. It’s not the same as a contract in which violation of term x leads to consequence y. That sounds way too much like the worst stereotypes of dogmatism that none of us want to recreate here.

And there’s another thing you might not know if you’re newish. You might not know if we know who you are. You might not even be sure if you’re going to be canvassed. So I’m inviting you now to connect. I am confident that you will find your generosity to be empowering to BUF and to you. And if you’ll visit with a canvasser (one who will not ask for money) I am confident that that this will lead to other acquaintances, some of which may change your life. To initiate that connection after the service today talk to the tall bald guy in back. If there are too many tall bald guys, go for the one with a green cape. **[Rick Steele]**

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Crystal Neva says that in 2003, Rev Nan Geer, from the Blaine Free Church—Unitarian Universalist, led an all-church visioning extravaganza for BUF. A high percentage of our congregation participated. One of the exercises was to rewrite the covenant. Crystal took notes while people offered up phrases and key words like joy and humor and compassion. She remembers these words vividly, and **Todd Jones** independently confirmed these details and the result, which was that when it was all tallied up, not one person had mentioned love. Still, Crystal and **Debra**

Young were charged with weaving together a new version to present for vote at the next congregational meeting. They came up with two new versions which were decisively voted down.

Todd Jones, who remembers saying one version or another throughout his 35 years at BUF, says without acrimony, that he's experienced a fair amount of wrangling in the congregation, especially in the early days with Christian bashing and disputes between the theists and the humanists ... and that we had needed a lot of love to temper all of this. Todd seems unflappable to me. Warm and kind but not sentimental. He says we could replace the word "love" with "respect," and it would mean the same thing.

Barbara Gilday smiled and said, "God is love...and the combined love of all of us is God."

Lee Willis offered: you're safe here; we look out for each other. Then she frowned, stopped to think, and perhaps disagreeing with the whole premise of the question, Lee said: It doesn't need any interpretation.

She's right. Finding the right words isn't the point. A covenant is simply as strong as the community that brings it to life.

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE

Lean on Me

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Blue Boat Home #1064

BENEDICTION

I want to thank all of those who generously shared their thoughts and stories with me to contribute to this service ... and acknowledge that I may have messed up in my paraphrasing of their words. There were many more whose ideas I could not fit in—maybe someone sitting next to you. Be sure to thank them as you go down to coffee hour. And then chat about what the covenant means to you.

And as we go let us thank the ineffable spirit of love and generosity which unites us in beloved community.

Proposed Revision of BUF Covenant—2003
Created by Crystal Neva and Debra Young
In response to all church visioning event with Rev. Nan Geer

Version 1

We gather to celebrate the search for personal meaning
In the spirit of compassion
We embrace human diversity and respect our unity with nature.
We commit to actions that promote justice, dignity and freedom of expression
Together we embody the depth of human experience
And in caring for each other
Create joy, humor, and love
This is our covenant

Version 2

We gather to celebrate the search for personal meaning
And commit to actions that promote justice and freedom of expression.
In the spirit of compassion
We embrace human diversity and respect our unity with nature.
Together we embody the depth of human experience
And in caring for each other create joy, humor, and love
This is our covenant

Version 3

The covenant that we say now was offered in the Congregational Meeting as an optional vote and won by a large margin

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Alternative Covenant—this one was just for fun...!

We are a group of fun loving folk who enjoy music and all sordid expressions of discourse.

Together we are inclusive of all life forms and worship the gravity and “o-natural” of big mama “E”

In a spirit of guilty fellowship we trash the dignity of the radical right and piously preserve Our truth, Our dignity, Our freedom of expression, and Our humility.

In unison, we rejoice in our emotional instability and in caring for each other create mischief, ridicule, and giggling.