



EXPLORATION

Covenant & Promise

Readings



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Communities of Memory and Promise

by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons

Our communities of memory and promise are founded upon covenants because we all need a defense against the impulse of immediate feelings that challenge our best intentions. It is necessary to be reminded from time to time of what you said you were going to do, and what you really want, over and above the lure of momentary comfort.

"Covenant" is our word for the solemn promises that counteract the randomness of a future in which anything and everything is possible, by committing us in advance to certain relationships and values. We do [this] because what we build with intention, and even with difficulty, is more satisfying in the long run than the pleasures that we happen to encounter. We do it in time-consuming rituals, invoking powers that we scarcely know how to name, because we are seeking some way to give our lives the density, and dignity, and depth that we suspect, with longing, might yet be possible.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/communities-memory-and-promise>

Bound in Covenant

by Rev. Victoria Safford

A covenant is not a contract.... 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.

...I love singing the round in our hymnal based on Rumi's invitation, *Come, come, whoever you are*. Whenever I sing it, I think of one line that doesn't appear in Singing the Living Tradition, however: *Though I've broken my vows*

a thousand times. Yet, because I am held in and hold to a covenant—with the people in my church and with others whom I love, with convictions I cherish and principles I mean to practice—I turn to a different page in the same hymnal. I sing the line, *We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love*, and I remember: a covenant is an aspiration to go deeper in relation to ourselves, to our best intention, to our God, and to each other.

Someone said to me not long ago, "Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things." ...We speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant, from *covenir*, to travel together. We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice.

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/285904.shtml>

Covenant: A Matter of Love

by Rev. Preston Moore

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.

Source: <https://www.uuberks.org/sermon/our-great-covenant>

The Failure of Rugged Individualism

by M. Scott Peck

The problem—indeed the total failure—of the "ethic" of rugged individualism is that it runs with only one side of the paradox, incorporates only one half of our humanity. It recognizes that we are called to individuation, power, and wholeness. But it denies entirely the other part of the human story: that we can never fully get there and that we are, of necessity in our uniqueness, weak and imperfect creatures who need each other.

...In our culture of rugged individualism—in which we generally feel that we dare not be honest about ourselves, even with the person in the pew next to us—we bandy around the word "community." We apply it to almost any collection of individuals—a town, a church, a synagogue, a fraternal organization, an apartment complex, a professional association—regardless of how poorly those individuals communicate with each other. It is a false use of the word.

If we are going to use the word meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some serious commitment....

Source: *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* by M. Scott Peck

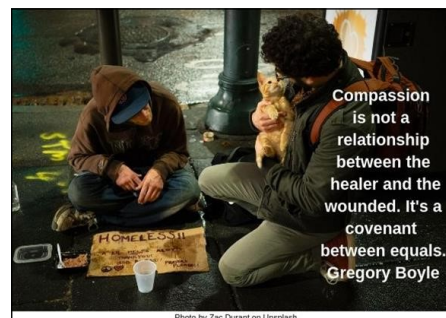


Photo by Zac Durant on Unsplash



Reflections on a Peach Seed Monkey

by Sam Keen

Once upon a time when there were still Indians, Gypsies, bears, and bad men in the woods of Tennessee where I played and, more important still, there was no death, a promise was made to me. One endless summer afternoon my father sat in the eternal shade of a peach tree, carving on a seed he had picked up. With increasing excitement and covetousness I watched while, using a skill common to all omnipotent creators, he fashioned a small monkey out of the seed.

All of my vagrant wishes and desires disciplined themselves and came to focus on that peach-seed monkey. If only I could have it, I would possess a treasure which could not be matched in the whole cosmopolitan town of Maryville! What status, what identity, I would achieve by owning such a curio!

Finally I marshaled my nerve and asked if I might have the monkey when it was finished (on the sixth day of creation). My father replied, "This one is for your mother, but I will carve you one someday."

Days passed, and then weeks, and finally, years, and the someday on which I was to receive the monkey did not arrive.

In truth, I forgot all about the peach-seed monkey. Life in the ambience of my father was exciting, secure, and colorful. He did all of those things for his children a father can do, not the least of which was merely delighting in their existence. One of the lasting tokens I retained of the measure of his dignity and courage was the manner in which, with emphysema sapping his energy and eroding his future, he continued to wonder, to struggle, and to grow.

In the pure air and dry heat of an Arizona afternoon on the summer before the death of God, my father and I sat under a

juniper tree. I listened as he wrestled with the task of taking the measure of his success and failure in life. There came a moment of silence that cried out for testimony. Suddenly I remembered the peach-seed monkey, and I heard the right words coming from myself to fill the silence:

"In all that is important you have never failed me. With one exception, you kept the promises you made to me—you never carved me that peach-seed monkey."

Not long after this conversation I received a small package in the mail. In it was a peach-seed monkey and a note which said: "Here is the monkey I promised you. You will notice that I broke one leg and had to repair it with glue. I am sorry I didn't have time to carve a perfect one."

Two weeks later my father died. He died only at the end of his life.

For me, a peach-seed monkey has become a symbol of all the promises which were made to me and the energy and care which nourished and created me as a human being. And even more fundamentally, it is a symbol of that which is the foundation of all human personality and dignity....

(The) civility which separates (us) from the lower animals depends upon the making and keeping of promises, covenants, vows and contracts. As Nietzsche so aptly put the matter, "man is that animal who makes promises."

Source: <https://uuwestport.org/sermons/rev-frank-hall-minister-emeritus/frank-hall/reflections-on-a-peach-seed-monkey-may-3-2009/>

The Broken Covenant

by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

What shall we promise one another? The history of covenant can help us answer this question.

Covenant, most simply, means "to come together".... Covenant, more specifically, means "to come together by making a

promise"....

As Unitarian Universalists, we most often speak of covenant as a verbal statement of promise among individuals who exercise their power to choose, and thus bring community into being...: individual first, then community.

...The theological history of covenant has another side, and can be a resource to help us see another way. ...The limits of a merely individualistic understanding of human existence are pressing upon us. Our attachment to an economic system that maximizes self-interest has broken our covenant with the earth and with our neighbor. In our religious movement we are grappling with what this means, including taking a hard look at the complicity of our religious tradition of this broken covenant. It is important that we do this. Multiple oppressions that our hearts cry out against—racism, sexism, the neglect of children, and the abuse of the environment—intersect in an economic system whose bottom line is the maximization of self-interest for individuals.

...All of us as human beings have experienced promise not kept. We know the impasse and the anguish that comes to human life when commitments are broken.

...The path to deeper spirituality begins in the experience of promises failed, covenant broken, hope suppressed. It begins with disillusionment, impasse, and grief. And it passes through the fire to a new revelation. This is the path we need to follow to find a new heart ...[and] a new covenant....

Source: *What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do* by Rebecca Parker in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* edited by Walter Herz

We Inherit Covenant Before We Create It

by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

My life was given to me. I did not make myself. And this is how it is.

We receive who we are before we choose who we will become.

As human beings our lives begin and never leave the soil of this earth that shapes us through blood, kinship, genes, culture, associations, social systems, networks of relationships, and extended communities. Even when we do not directly know the





people whose lives are linked with ours, our lives unfold in relationship to theirs.

And this is how it is with covenant, as well.

We are born into relationship before we shape relationships by our conscious intention.

We inherit covenant before we create covenant.

We do not make ourselves. We are given the gift of life, the gift of the earth that sustains life, and the gift of one another—here, now—and in all the generations leading up to now.

...Covenant making must begin with the question, “What have we been given? What is the covenant we are already in?”

...Explicit covenant making is a human response to a gift from a source larger than ourselves.

...There is room to imagine this source larger than ourselves in multiple ways: Earth itself, ... Spirit of Life, God, ...Buddha nature, the communion of all souls, universal love.

... We make this response, most fundamentally, not by what we say, but by what we do—by coming together in peace, committing ourselves to be co-workers with the source of life.

Covenant is, first-most, not a verbal agreement, but a practice.

Source: *What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do* by Rebecca Parker in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* edited by Walter Herz

Wisdom Story

The Ice Wagon by Jim Priest

The way folks kept their food cold was in an ice box—chilled by real blocks of ice!

The blocks were ...delivered by the ice man driving a horse-drawn wagon. The ice wagon was a welcome sight on a hot day....

The five boys in the family thought it was great fun to chase after the wagon, jump on the open bed, chip off some ice

and cool their parched throats. The wagon man would ...shoo them but the next time he made the rounds they were back....

Finally, the ice man complained to the boys’ father. Something had to be done....

[The father] called the boys around the kitchen table [and] explained [that] ...the ice man had complained. Their conduct had to stop. His voice was stern and steady. They thought they were in for a whipping, but dad had something else in mind.

“I want you to take out a sheet of paper and write this down: ‘I will not jump on the ice wagon ever again.’ Then I want you to sign your name to it. I know if you sign your name, you’ll keep your promise because in our family a person is as good as his word.”

One of the boys asked, “Daddy, what should we do with the paper when we’re finished?”

“Do what you want with it,” said the wise father. “I know if you’ve signed your name to it, you’ll keep your word. I don’t need the papers. You can keep them.”

[And they did for the rest of their lives.]

Source: <https://oklahoman.com/article/2652910/teach-children-value-of-keeping-promises>

Snippets

Covenant

“The defining commitment that members of a religious community make to each other arises from their calling—their covenantal duty—to bear witness to each other’s lives: the lives they now lead and the lives they hope to lead in the future, and the world they now occupy and the world they hope to occupy in the future.” *Galen Guengerich*

“...I made a covenant with myself: I will accept. Whatever will be, will be. I have a life to lead. I recalled words a friend had told me, the philosophy of her faith. “Life is a journey and a struggle,” she had said. “We cannot control it, but we can make the best

of any situation.” I was indeed in quite a situation. It was up to me to make the best of it.” *Wangari Maathai*

“We’ve been given the covenant community because we need each other, and together we’ll be more mature, experience more life, and know more joy than we ever would apart from one another.” *Matt Chandler*

“The only unforgivable crime is to cut short the experiment of one’s own life before its natural end. ...Anything less than a fight for endurance is cowardly. Anything less than a fight for endurance is a refusal of the great covenant of life.”

Elizabeth Gilbert

“Political campaigns offer Americans an opportunity to adjust direction, reaffirm values, and recommit to the covenant that binds them together.” *Stanley A. McChrystal*

Promise

“These 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.”

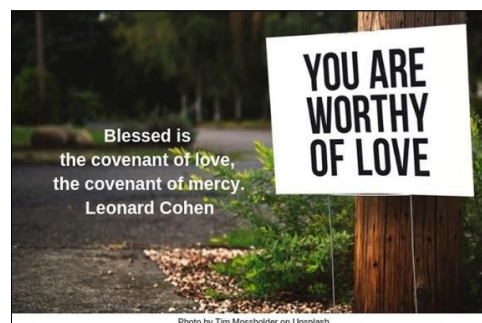
Robert Frost

“What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again.” *Suzanne Collins*

“Some people don’t understand the promises they’re making when they make them,” I said. “Right, of course. But you keep the promise anyway. That’s what love is. Love is keeping the promise anyway.” *John Green*

“When did the future switch from being a promise to being a threat?” *Chuck Palahniuk*

“Hope. It’s like a drop of honey, a field of tulips blooming in the springtime. It’s a fresh rain, a whispered promise, a cloudless sky, the perfect punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. And it’s the only thing in the world keeping me afloat.” *Tabereh Majfi*



Questions

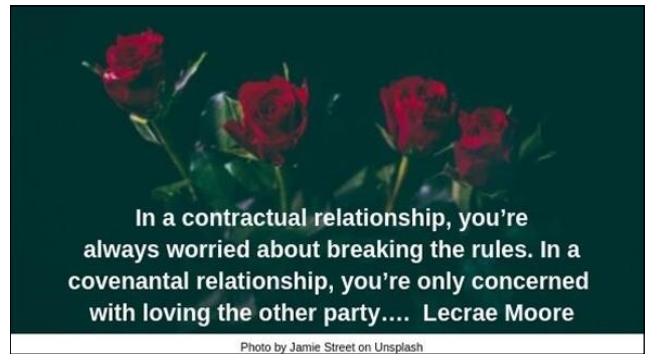
1. Rev. Kendyl Gibbons suggests that a covenant claims our attention and intention in ways that commit us to honoring relationships and living out certain values? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Rev. Victoria Safford quotes someone who said, "Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things." Why is this important? Do you have a covenant with yourself? If yes, how does it inform your actions? If no, could such a covenant bring clarity to who you are and what you do? How?
3. Rev. Preston Moore writes, "A contract is a matter of law. A covenant is a mat-



- ter of love. How is this true? Why does it matter?
4. Moore observes that when we fail to keep our covenant, as we do from time to time, we ask, "how shall we recover from this failure? How shall we keep going?" How does a covenant become stronger by overcoming failure?
 5. M. Scott Peck raised concerns about rugged individualism and the way it undermines community. How can com-

mitment to covenant mitigate the negative aspects of rugged individualism and strengthen community?

6. Sam Keen's story about a peach-seed monkey and his father is about more than his father and a promise. As Keen writes, "a peach-seed monkey has become a symbol of all the promises which were made to me and the energy and care which nourished and created me as a human being." What important promises were made to you and kept that nourished and created you as a human being?
7. The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker also raises the challenge that individualism can pose to community, especially when self-interest breaks our covenant with the earth and with our neighbor. She notes, however, deeper spirituality emerges "in the experience of promises failed, covenant broken, and hope suppressed." Have you experienced broken promises that were devastating? How did it/they impact you? What about the implicit or explicit promises of government and society. What promises have been broken and what has been the result? How do we, in these circumstances, find a new heart with which to love and a new covenant to inform our actions?
8. As a child, did you have an "ice wagon" incident when you did not behave as expected? What do you regret? What did you learn?
9. Rebecca Parker writes, "We receive who we are before we choose who we will become." The truth is that we are born into the middle of a story. In the same way, she writes, "We inherit cove-



nant before we create covenant." What story were you born into? How did it influence you? What covenants have you inherited? What covenants have you created?

10. Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) was a renowned Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (2004). Through her *Green Belt Movement*, Kenyans planted tens of millions of trees throughout Kenya. She wrote, "I made a covenant with myself" in an effort to make the best of a very difficult situation. Have you made covenants with yourself? When? Why? Was there a benefit?
11. Stanley McChrystal speaks of the covenant that binds Americans together. From your perspective, what is that covenant? How can it be strengthened?
12. John Green writes, "Love is keeping the promise...." Do you agree? Why?
13. Chuck Palahniuk writes, "When did the future switch from being a promise to being a threat?" Do you feel that way? What can be done to reclaim the promise?
14. Tahereh Mafi writes that hope is a whispered promise and "the only thing in the world keeping me afloat." What promise does hope offer to you?

