



Ploughshare

Seven or Eight Pieces of Mike's Mind...

by Rev. Mike Morran

Statements are in the air. Organizations, companies, denominations, unions, and more are putting out statements about where they stand on matters of racial justice, Black Lives Matter, police brutality, and civil protest. It's good to see.

Perhaps the core statement of our faith tradition is our covenant, known as the (seven) Principles and Purposes of Unitarian Universalism:

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A Love Letter to All the Books I Have Not Yet Read

by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

Warmest salutations, you lofty tomes held in high regard!

I have been meaning to visit you, to spend some quality time with your thoughts and perhaps marry them to my own. I do love to read, and have, ever since my grandmother taught me the sounds of letters that make the words, which make the sentences, which make the paragraphs, which make the stories that comprise our collective human experience.

I want you to know that I value your presence in the world, even though we have not met beyond a surface introduction. I know your name, and perhaps even the name of the person who created you. You patiently lounge on the shelves of my home, a reminder that you are

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- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

There is a movement afoot to add an eighth principle to this list:

- Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

You can learn more about this at www.8thprincipleuu.org

First Unitarian Denver is also considering a statement. You are aware that we initiated a process to articulate a new Congregational Covenant this year. After a thorough process of gathering and compiling feedback, our Covenant Task force has proposed:

I will listen to you. I will make space for you. I will include you.

Together we will be a community of love, respect, and justice.

Together we will learn about white supremacy culture to create an equitable congregation.

Together we will protect the vulnerable.

When we fall out of covenant, we will call each other back in.

Please read through the recommendation letter, elsewhere in this issue of the Ploughshare. I will be speaking about this in the Sunday morning worship service on July 12th.

Hope to see you there!

Mike

Love Letter from page 1

always there when I need you. I admit that some of you have not aged well. I adore the journeys that you have provided to the beloved folks around me, the learning that you have facilitated, and the ability to share you as a resource even if I don't know you that well. I plan to settle down and get to know you one day. You are, as they say, "on my list."

I owe you an apology. I have subtly claimed to know you during conversations with others. It's not a pronouncement, but more of a head nod as though I understand your perspective from what I read on your dust jacket. In so many of your cases, nuggets of your wisdom, discovered from your depths by another reader who has taken the time to acquaint themselves with your whole being, have been shared out of context and are easy to pass along without committing time to personally discovering you for myself. I am guilty of dropping your name to gain favor, while holding shame that I've not yet made time for the relationship we both deserve.

My intentions are honorable. In you, there are worlds of truth and challenges that will exercise and expand my own view of myself in this world. Here, I admit that I've allowed my fear of change, of conflict, of shaking my own world view to be a barrier in opening up. You are a time commitment, in a phase of my life where time disappears like water through my grasping fingers. My distractions are many, and spending time with you feels like a luxury that I can rarely afford.

Let's understand one another. No significant learning comes without significant relationship. Though I might snatch up pieces of you from other sources in an effort to know you, we both know that's a game that leads to misunderstanding. To be in right-relationship, I will need to acknowledge that I don't know you as well as I had hoped when you joined my shelf. I'll need to be aware of my love of the opportunity to know you as secondary to the love that will manifest when we both open ourselves to each other.

You, at times, can also be an easy distraction from the harder work to which you call your readers to take on. Personal growth, systemic change, acknowledgement of failures and rebuilding of nations is often inspired by what is read, but the work does not conclude on the completion of your last page. To be consumed in reading, at some point, becomes an obstacle to living your inspiration into existence. I wonder what you will require of me.

We do not know each other, yet, but we will. Yet is a powerful word, full of possibility and promise, of success and failure, in the same moment. So close, yet so far from fruition. But I wonder what we might do together after the reading is done. I anticipate, with love and fear both the changes you may create in me, and how I and others might misuse your messages to reach toward our own selfish ends

Please see *Love Letter* on the next page

Love Letter from previous page

And so, dearest books I have not yet read, may we endeavor to understand one another by assuming best intent, and honestly owning our impact. I intend to read you and you intend to challenge me to grow. Your unread status may be perceived as a lack of interest on my part, and a source of internal guilt and failure for now. May we be ready to meet when the opportunity arises, and may others do the same, with the knowledge that your reading is not an ending, but just another beginning on the path toward becoming who we are meant to be, that the real, messy, uncomfortable work of integrating our knowledge with our actions must start when the reading is over.

With love and admiration,
Erin

It's Not Really "Good-Bye" *by Karen Derrick-Davis*

Dear Community,

As you have most probably heard by now, I am leaving my position as Stewardship Coordinator of First Unitarian. That, however, does not mean I am leaving the church community! I have been a member of First Unitarian for nearly 12 years and plan to be around a lot longer. 😊

In my work with First Unitarian, I have had the honor of coordinating the Capital Campaign and then transitioning to the coordination and oversight of all congregational giving. I have learned so much from so many people, but I want to especially thank Sharon Pressly-Fiero, Nancy Crow, and Mike Cranmer for their support and volunteer leadership.

I have SO enjoyed developing deeper relationships with so many people in the church. We have come very far as a church community with regards to our fundraising and congregational giving. Our work over these four years has been driven by a donor-centric view – valuing transparency and simplicity. Internally, we have made significant steps in this direction and I hope you have felt the difference – as a donor.

We have an incredible church community that is willing to push into uncomfortable spaces, which makes us special and important – and makes me incredibly proud to be a member. I look forward to continuing the struggle with you as a fellow congregant.

The Board Beat

by Joe Verrengia, Vice-President, First Unitarian Board of Trustees

This is Mary's space. But as we enter a new congregational year, she has invited others to occasionally write in her place to raise a variety of voices. As the new face on the Board of Trustees, I was volunteered to go first.

It's not the first time at First Unitarian I have found myself caught in the moment.

My wife Hilarie and I joined FUSD five years ago. Like most people, we came inside to hear Mike's sermon. And we stayed.

I was that guy sitting in the back, on the aisle, and to the far-right side of the nave.

I didn't take my coat off. When Hilarie asked me if was cold, I said "No, but if I hear too much religion, I'm so outta here."

Rev. Mike describes Unitarian Universalism as a transformative faith for troubled times. As our times became increasingly more troubled, I found myself getting more comfortable in church. I was grateful to be surrounded by people considering the same big questions of society and spirituality and doing it so openly.

In year two, I started singing along. (More importantly, I mouthed the words when I couldn't hit the notes. You're welcome.)

In the third year, I took my coat off.

In year four, Hilarie and I joined the committee writing our new covenant. I was collaborating with people I didn't know on a common promise of values and conduct that will knit our congregation for the next decade.

Talk about being caught in a moment!

We took the questions of covenant to every corner of our church, week after week and by every means available. We were determined to learn from everyone, whether they showed up on Sundays or not.

And the message we received – most clearly from the POC Caucus, but also from hundreds of others – was the new covenant must address oppression, and explicitly white supremacy culture.

This jolted me. I assumed that because I had joined FUSD my commitment was self-evident. As the committee sat at our dining table (this was pre-pandemic) laboring over each word, we kept it civil but often challenged each other with fixed gazes.

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During these debates - and when I wasn't on the hot seat - my mind flooded with uncomfortable memories.

- In my all-white town near Boston, a dozen New York City teens known as ABC Kids were transplanted to our high school. We remain connected today. While generally successful, the "privilege" of receiving the same diploma didn't always level their playing field.
- In college as a student journalist, I attended a large Klan rally outside...wait for it...Hartford, CT. It was the first time anyone casually played with a gun while talking to me.
- In the 80s as a journalist, I covered Florida's prisons including the largest Death Row outside of the Soviet Union. The inmate population was overwhelmingly urban Black, isolated in rural prisons on mandatory sentences and guarded by white overseers. It was my first encounter with mass incarceration.
- Then there were all the times I have been pulled aside by airport security (while my colleagues were waved on) because I look vaguely Arabic or Hispanic.
- Or, that time in a Rocks Springs, WY cafe when I waited 20 minutes for a menu while two servers leaned against the counter and just watched me.
- And more recently when I took the car keys from a Black member of my work team. He was the technical project lead, as well an amateur competitive driver. But we were in a Corvette with out-of-state plates in an unfamiliar city. We both knew what could happen.

Today it's my Year Five.

Our new covenant seems tragically clairvoyant after the recent police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain, the BLM protests and how COVID-19 disproportionately harms minority communities.

Talk about being caught in a moment.

We are approaching our church's 150th anniversary. FUSD is an important force for justice and compassion in Denver and the West.

These are the troubled times that require transformation. Our transformation.

I took my coat off.

Now let's roll up our sleeves.

A Tip from Stewardship

by Nancy Crow, Chair, Stewardship Council

A prescription for combating COVID-19 anxiety is to practice gratitude. As our new church year begins in this age of uncertainty, my heart is full of gratitude for you, our amazing, loving, compassionate and giving congregation, and our extraordinary, dedicated staff.

We exceeded our pledge goal for the 2019-2020 year and initiated a robust campaign for 2020-2021 before it was curtailed as we stayed home and learned about virtual church services and coffee hour. In the face of an unsettled financial future, 198 of our 291 individual or family unit pledging members and friends have committed \$535,568 toward the church budget for this brave new year. Thank you to all for keeping our covenant alive.

Proposed Congregational Covenant

TO: First Unitarian Society of Denver Board of Directors

FROM: Nellie Stagg and Hilarie Verrengia, FUSD Covenant Committee Co-Chairs

DATE: April 27, 2020

RE: Proposed Covenant

On behalf of the First Unitarian Covenant Project Committee, we submit to you our final proposed covenant:

I will listen to you. I will make space for you. I will include you.

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Together we will learn about white supremacy culture to create an equitable congregation.

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Process

Tasked with updating FUSD's covenant for the next ten years, the Covenant Committee created an inclusive, accessible process to collect input from as many of our members and guests as possible. We wanted it to be easy for people to participate in the manner that worked best for them. We posed several questions to invite comments on not just how we should act together, but how it felt to be included in a group, what words and actions made everyone belong. Comments could be shared on sticky notes in the community room, a voicemail line, an online survey, via committee and group discussions and through written comments and conversation during a February sermon devoted to the notion of covenant.

Please see *Covenant* on the next page

Covenant from previous pageFeedback

Comments came in--from our youth, young adults, long-time members, newcomers, people of color, LGBTQ members, musicians, people with disabilities those in sanctuary with us and others. It was moving and gratifying that so many people would share their thoughts on such a personal topic.

There were many sentiments about being included, acknowledged, safe. About making space. A specific request was made by our People of Color caucus, through thoughtful and honest dialogue, to include language around oppression and specifically white supremacy culture in the covenant.

The Covenant Committee members read all of these hundreds of data points and identified the most commonly used words, phrases and themes.

Writing & Revision

Rather than drafting an “executive summary” of comments, we chose to write a short, personal and memorable covenant. We want it to be words to say and live by, not a document filed somewhere rarely seen.

The first draft of the covenant was shared back with the congregation through the Ploughshare, on social media, and through outreach to our congregational committees/groups.

We received approximately a dozen emails with feedback. Some liked it as is, some suggested tweaks to language. Several responses questioned if “white supremacy culture” were the right words or if the covenant was the right place to speak to it. Emails from FUSD’s Racial Justice Project gave strong support for the language.

Our committee discussed this feedback in depth. To learn more about white supremacy culture, its characteristics, and how it appears in interpersonal relationships and organizations, we reached out to the co-chairs of the FUSD Racial Justice Project and reviewed the Allies for Racial Equity website (a resource for UU congregations). We learned that “white supremacy culture” does not refer to radical groups but to a culture that is dominated by whites and works to keep whites in power. It is not an “issue” out there to fight, but the culture we all exist in. And, in fact, it may be the root cause of things we advocate for, from racial justice to hunger to housing.

We also discussed where this language belonged- in the covenant or the congregation’s mission and vision statements? The latter present intentions to grow an inclusive community, realize justice and celebrate diversity. How are we to do these things without understanding how culture affects the ways we interact with each other? The norms, values, beliefs and power dynamics that inform our interactions and decisions?

And we acknowledged how the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare our city’s deep inequities, caused by decisions by people in systems and institutions over who gets access to what--whether it’s healthcare, jobs or safe places to live. People in our congregation who are being disproportionately harmed have asked us to call it what it is and what they know to be true.

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Our committee respectfully came to the consensus that it was important to include this language in our covenant. We realize that it is not gentle language--but our culture is not gentle to many of us. We agree to learn, and consider how our own words and actions can make our communities--including FUSD--more equitable.

Next Steps

Our congregation has been on a path for several years now learning about racism and white privilege. It is time to explore how our culture embodies these, and how we can all work to remedy it in our relationships, our congregation and our communities. Today's pandemic has prompted many to ask, "How do we want our community to be after this?" We have an opportunity now to keep learning, gain skills, and become the diverse and inclusive congregation our mission and vision call for. We therefore recommend that the board consider supporting the congregation with educational training, such as the Beloved Conversations program.

We appreciate everyone who contributed to this project, and the trust you placed in us to see this project through.

Experience Sunday Service Online Without a Computer

People can attend our Sunday service virtually even without a computer. From a telephone dial 312-626-6799, 646-558-8656, or 301-715-8592. When prompted enter the meeting ID 466 677 668 and the password 454623.

Whole Souul Living

“The Sources” is our Whole Souul Living Theme for the month of July.

Below is a paraphrased summary of the spiritual sources of Unitarian Universalism:

- Direct experience of life and the divine
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men
- Wisdom from the world's religions
- Jewish and Christian teachings
- The guidance of reason and science.
- Earth-centered traditions and the rhythms of nature.

The fact that we have a list like this defines us as pluralists, and it is wonderfully indicative that these sources look both backward and forward, both inward and outward, befitting a people who seek wholeness.

In this month when our Whole Souul Living Theme is The Sources of Unitarian Universalism, the following questions are provided for our individual and communal reflection:

1. What sources do you look to, depend on, or turn to, for strength/courage/peace?
2. Which of the sources above has the greatest capacity for holding a community together?
3. Which are the most challenging to you personally?
4. Which do you want to learn more about?
5. And, which ones should be held up more often, or more powerfully, in our common worship experience on Sunday mornings? Why?

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