

Claiming and Being Claimed

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All Souls, New London CT

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Reading: *The Way it is*, by William Stafford

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Sermon

As a little girl I ran away from home at least twice every summer, hurling myself out of the house with outrage at childhood oppressions like being left out by my brother and his friends. I'd hastily make a bologna and cheese sandwich, slather it with Miracle Whip, pack a napkin – a napkin! – along with a baseball and whatever book I was reading and charge out of the house, full of nine-year-old indignation. My little sister Julie panicked and cried by the front door. I was Never Going Back. Ever.

The problem is I never knew where to go. My little world extended only a few blocks in any direction. Narnia's secret wardrobe was hidden a world away. A warm hearth waited for me in that little house on the prairie, but I had no horses to take me there. Those places weren't fiction to me. I could have told you all about the path Bilbo had taken from the Shire to Rivendell, but going out my own front door in those steamy Midwestern summers I didn't know where to go, much less how to get there.

All I could think to do was run away. When I was a girl, leaving was journey enough to ease my anger and disappointment, and my longing.

Twenty-five years later when I first walked in to a Unitarian Universalist church, I was propelled like so many others – maybe just like you – by longing for a richer, more meaningful life. I had heard that within UUism I might chart my own spiritual course and find my own way. This promise of freedom totally appealed to my spiritual pride and isolated independence. I had no way of knowing then what I do now, that the most profound gift of faith has been *not* having to chart my own course. This faith has given me – us – a path laid down by others.

It's bold enough, isn't it, to come for the first time to a strange place like this, an old car dealership for heaven's sakes, to wander in that front door not knowing a Soul, and finding a seat in the back of the hall in those first brave days. Remember that? It may have taken you weeks and months to learn the names for things here. That the greeting is called "passing the peace", and that the candles are "candles of peace." (There's a lot of peace here at All Souls.) It probably took you a while to learn that this thing up here is called a chalice, and that you all are Souls with a capital "S".

It took time for you to learn the names for things. And as you did, morning by morning and day by day, perhaps you began to feel belonging. Perhaps you began to lift your face from the hymnal and sing a little louder as the words became familiar, to sit a little closer to other people. One day, maybe even without you noticing, the children here became your children. And the elders your elders, and everyone in between became your people. And that is when you stepped into your place in the tapestry here, recognizing the threads for what they are – woven by the ancestors, and yours to weave in this time.

The poet William Stafford writes,
There's a thread that you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.

Our faith – the faith that is lived here, now, at All Souls – is the thread that you follow. And when you follow that thread, when you hold on as if your life depended on it – you begin to care for your elders' grandparents, and your children's children. That care turns into a deep sense of responsibility, which becomes moral imperative, which in turn creates a life of love rich with meaning.

Church gives us children, and ancestors. This (this!), my dear siblings in faith, is *everything*.

Let us use this morning to remember. Let's spend our time together reanimating our connection to the stream of history lived by the people who created this path and by the souls not yet born who will in their own time walk this way. To help us remember, we must name and honor what it is that is happening here. We must tell this story so that others can step into it.

How do we name the thread that you – that we – are following here?

First we have to discover that there's a thread at all. Learning all the names for things – all the hymns and the children's names and the elders' – living in to all these connections, this alone could be a solid life's work! But as people of faith we are called to name that which connects us. What do we call the desire to hold on, the promise to hold on, the commitment to becoming a thread in the tapestry of other people's belonging?

Our ancestors had a name for this path and these promises. They called it Covenant.

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We have to explain about the thread that we are weaving here, for it is hard for others to see! Covenant gives us a way to explain about the thread. It is the path we walk as Unitarian Universalists, and how we walk it.

Covenant is the tapestry of sacred promises we make to ourselves, to the Holy, and to each other on the journey of a faithful life. It's the impulse to walk out of our homes and arrive here, it's the call to sing the songs and learn the names, to grab hold of that thread and to explain it. Our ancestors knew that covenant is more than a thing, more than a noun. They knew that covenant is also a verb – the process of making, practicing, failing at, and re-making those promises. Together.

It's easy to abstractify an idea like covenant into some vague religious ideal. But the desire and commitment to be and stay connected to other people is not vague – our well-being depends on it. And it's not an ideal, for it lives here, in this place, now. You are connected to each other. The collective you and the individual yous, all mashed up together, practicing being the best people you can be and learning to carry the love you create here into the wider world.

Religious life thrives at the intersection of self, community, and Spirit. The beauty and fullness of faithful lives emerge everywhere these dimensions meet and merge. Covenant is the threaded path along which meaning is discovered, and practiced, and shared. The rich landscape of covenant helps us understand how to discover, how to practice, and how to share.

If we each walk alone, charting our own course every which way, it is not possible to be religious people. We may be able to practice spirituality by ourselves, but it is by walking with others that personal spirituality transmutes into religious community. Religion – *our* religion – *requires* that we walk with others.

And we, in turn, make way for others as if *their* life depends on it.

On the treeless granite ledges of New Hampshire's White Mountains, faithful trail keepers have built stone cairns every ten feet on trails crossing the stark landscape so that hikers can crawl to safety during the area's notoriously dangerous winter weather. Wayside crosses mark pilgrim paths in Spain, and painted white triangles guide hikers across the long Appalachian Trail. In the dense forests of Eastern Europe, colored stripes on trees signal direction and terrain. In every time and culture, using the tools and materials of the day, trailblazers have marked paths through the wilderness, leaving behind "blazes" to signal the way for those who follow.

In Unitarian Universalism, covenant is the path and the blazes. Covenant is the call to lay down piles of stone and mark the way for others to follow. For as soon as we belong we are called to create belonging for others, and to live in peace as we do.

Live in peace. Easy, right? Sometimes. Not always. When I think of everything you Souls have been through together – buying this place, launching your ministry to homeless neighbors, giving up the old chapel up the hill – my spiritual socks get knocked right off. But even your amazing story is just the barest glimpse of the wonder our people have wrought.

Together, Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists have worked theological miracles. We have allowed our beliefs to change over the long years according to conscience and science and revelation. We have managed to stay together even as the core Christian story receded as one among many wisdom stories. Our people have integrated the rationalism of science, the intuition of transcendentalism, and the ethics of humanism. We have managed to stay connected as communities of faith through radical changes to our collective beliefs. It's amazing, isn't it?

And yet, as a religious movement we are a people of competing commitments. The freedom of belief which has helped us remain flexible in light of new revelation and experience has also weakened our binding ties. We value interconnection but are cautious about asking much of each other. As individuals and groups we want to belong but are reluctant to be claimed. This vivid tension between freedom and connection is also a part of our story.

Our faith's collective anxiety about this tension and the resulting deification of individual conscience have sometimes squashed the rich dimensionality of covenant until it has become synonymous with a vague sense of commitment to a vague set of principles. We have flattened covenant into spiritual cohabitation, a big tent under which we eat at separate tables. Covenant lives on as a vestigial metaphor for interconnection in our movement, but it is a bird grounded with a broken wing.

The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our collective past. We sense that interconnection, we preach it, and we rely on it. But covenant is more than impulse and echo. It must be activated intentionally for the full power of liberal religion – and a liberal religious life – to be revealed.

I believe – I genuinely believe – that you all here in New London have something to teach the rest of us about the power that is revealed when covenant lives at the center of shared community life. You choose to walk together not because you are commanded but because you are called, called to walk a certain path that runs through a former car dealership, and because you answer that call. Your covenant here at All Souls is both the call and your answer.

Somehow you have learned to claim and be claimed by each other and by all that is holy. You thrive here in Soulful balance between freedom and connection. That, too, is a kind of miracle.

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things that change. But it doesn't change...
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The forces of dissolution and disconnection are so strong. Our people come to Unitarian Universalism just as you came here to help navigate and withstand all that alienates us from meaning and connection. My friends, this is holy work, the work of a spiritual lifetime.

Sometimes we are the trailblazers breaking new ground for people to follow. Sometimes we are the child hurling herself out of the house, propelled by indignation. Sometimes we are the desperate, lost hiker crawling on hands and knees to the next cairn. May we also be the faithful people who don't ever let go of the threads of connection. May we call each other back when we do. May we speak the names of our ancestors, and remember our children's children. And may we ever and continuously open ourselves up to claiming and being claimed by each other, by all that is holy, by covenant.