

# Can We Really Agree to Disagree – Covenant Respect

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,  
*after a much warmer week,*  
to celebrate our unique lives together,  
*to be accountable, both to our ideals*  
and to each other, in peace and kindness;  
*to live our lives deliberately,*  
with self-awareness, self-questioning, and love.

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

#1010 Oh We Give Thanks

*Ingathering A GREAT Story by Amy Rosenthal*

Hey, look! A duck!  
**That's not a duck. That's a rabbit!**  
Are you kidding me? It's totally a duck.  
**It's for sure a rabbit.**  
See, there's his bill.  
**What are you talking about?**  
**Those are ears, silly.**  
It's a duck. And he's about  
to eat a piece of bread.  
**It's a rabbit. And he's about to eat a carrot.**  
Wait. Listen. Did you hear that?  
I heard duck sounds.  
**That's funny. I distinctly heard rabbit sounds.**  
Now the duck is wading through the swamp.  
**No, the rabbit is hiding in the grass.**  
There, see? It's flying.  
**Flying? It's hopping!**  
No, the rabbit is so hot,  
he's cooling off his ears.  
**Look, the duck is so hot, he's getting a drink.**  
Here, look at the duck through  
my binoculars.

**Sorry, still a rabbit.**

Here, ducky ducky!

**Here, you cute little rabbit!**

Oh great, you scared him away.

**I didn't scare him away. *You* scared him away.**

You know, maybe you were right.

Maybe it *was* a rabbit.

**Thing is, now I'm actually thinking it was a duck.**

Well, anyway...now what do you want to do?

**I don't know. What do *you* want to do?**

Hey, look! An anteater!

**That's no anteater. That's a brachiosaurus!**

### **Affirming:**

#### **Our Covenant of Respectful Relations**

We build our church community on a foundation of love with the goal of promoting justice and peace. Toward this end, I covenant to do the following:

Accept responsibility for my own actions.

Be receptive to connecting with others by listening with care and compassion.

Speak my truth honestly and directly with care and compassion.

Honor the confidentiality and private disclosures of others.

Welcome new members and guests within this religious community.

Embrace our diversity as a source of communal strength, and accept and care for others despite our differences.

Cherish the well-being of the congregation above my personal preferences.

Remain engaged in the process with compassion and respect when conflict occurs, knowing that truth and sound decisions emerge from an open exchange of ideas.

Use the Conflict Resolution Policy when I believe the Covenant has been broken.

### **Communing**

*(in honor of Tony McDonald's choir piece setting the words of our Mission Statement to music ...an unpacking of some of the words.)*

#### **Mission Statement of First UU:**

**We are here**

**to learn to practice true hospitality**

**to revere the reasoning mind**

**and the generous heart**

**to claim our diversity as the source of our strength and to relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice.**

To learn, not with the head alone, but with the heart. With the body.

To practice, not just by repeating as often as possible, but by going deeper each time.

True. Not just the opposite of false, but true in the building sense...*to bring into alignment* with principle.

Hospitality. Not just an open door, but a table with bread and flowers.  
To revere...to see something not with the eyes, but with the heart, and with loyalty.  
To reason...not to stop at the surface, but to go deeper and to pay attention to the context.  
Mind....not just our own individual minds, but the conversation of minds.  
Generous...not charity from our abundance, but the kind of giving which empowers both self and others.  
Diversity...the reality of all that is.  
Strength...the ability to do work for self and others with power, without shame.  
Relinquish...to let go, to release, to set free, to undo.  
Safety...to know for sure, without doubt or question.  
Unexamined....deliberately hidden, as in covering one's eyes and thinking oneself invisible.  
Privilege...the arbitrary assignment of power to some and theft of that very same power from others.  
Transforming...growing deeper, self and others intertwined for good.  
Silence...the reality that holds all beginnings and endings and middles in its embrace....

### *silence*

Love...the ability to admit that we are not alone.  
Grief...the ability to admit that we hurt.  
In the midst of the silence which embraces us all, may we call to mind and heart those whom we love, those who love us, those whom we miss, those for whom we mourn. For our mission calls us to a generous heart, and a generous heart is one that embraces it all...

### *naming*

Mission...the focus of our spiritual life...who we are and what we do, instead of what we believe or do not believe. Let our mission now be made clear and empowering by the singing of it...

**The First Reading** is from the book *Patience with God*, by Frank Schaeffer, the grown up son of one of the most influential conservative evangelicals of the twentieth century, Francis Schaeffer, whose books plowed the ground for the religious right in the USA. Frank Schaeffer, however, the son, has rejected his parents' religious beliefs and practices, walking a colorful road between fundamentalism on one side, and Richard Dawkins' rhetoric on the other. He is a very strong but intriguing writer.

The idea that faith consists of signing onto a series of statements, such as "I believe that Christ died for my sins" or "I believe that selfish genes rule!" and that somehow, by saying these things, I get "saved" or "enlightened" (the secular version of redemption), is crazy. Saying words is not the same as understanding what they mean, let alone living by them.

Because we can never be sure what our motivation for anything is, we don't ever know whether we're sincere enough. Am I saved enough? Am I atheist enough? I may say I believe this or that, but do I believe enough? So belief is not the point. Who is sincere enough? And who has a good enough memory?

This is why Pascal's wager, wherein one bets in favor of God, rather than risking damnation, is one of the stupidest ideas ever articulated. If there is a God, God would know you are just splitting the odds---insincere, but scared.

The point *isn't* belief, but who we are, how we learn to treat the bullies we run across in our lives. There are extremists in all camps...religious and secular...who have the anger, or worse yet, the blind certainty of their correctness. According to a parable of Jesus, those most convinced they are saved are the most lost. But the rest of us have the numbers. The future belongs to the peacemakers.

**The Second Reading** *is a poem called Boxes from the great United States poet Nikki Giovanni from her book Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day (1978)*

i am in a box  
on a tight string  
subject to pop  
without notice

everybody says how strong  
i am

only black women  
and white men  
are truly free  
they say

it's not difficult to see  
how stupid they are

i would not reject  
my strength  
though its source  
is not choice  
but responsibility

i would not reject my light  
though my wrinkles are also illuminated

something within demands  
action  
or words  
if action is not possible

i am tired  
of being boxed

muhammad ali must surely be pleased  
that leon spinks relieved him

most of the time  
i can't breathe  
i smoke too much  
to cover my fears  
sometimes I pick  
my nose to avoid  
the breath I need

i do also do the same  
injustice to my poems

i write because  
i have to

### **Sermon**

I first started attending the Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington Michigan in 1972. I was 22- years-old. Back in those days, the word "young adult" was not used, so I was just another person who attended the service on Sunday. I never discussed my sexuality in those days, so I don't know how they would have responded to that, but I was surprised at how many people commented that my last name "really had a lot of vowels in it," and was hard to pronounce, which mystified me. Still, we rarely used last names, so that wasn't much of an issue either. I learned that the simple white meeting house dated back to before the Civil War, and had served as a station in the Underground Railroad, and that there were members of the church whose families had been part of the church for six generations. There was no kindling of a chalice at the beginning of the service...that custom had not yet been claimed, at least in Michigan. The minister at the time, Rick Neff, was also the music director...he was a terrific musician and composer as well as a preacher.

One Sunday, just before he left to take up another congregation, he offered a choral piece he had composed as a parting gift to the congregation. A small but talented ad-hoc choir performed it during a special afternoon service.

Just after the first movement of the piece, a long time member of the congregation showed up drunk. I don't mean that he had alcohol on his breath, I mean he was blotto: loud and staggering. It was not, sad to say, the first time he showed up at church this way. Usually, as is often true with alcoholics, people made excuses for him..."Oh, that's just Al. Yeah, he drinks too much. Pay no attention to him." Yet I don't know how it's possible to "not pay attention" to someone quite that loud, and with a truly uncanny ability to find you and corner you every single time during the social hour... just when you feel most vulnerable.

This time, Al was even worse than usual. He cried out loudly during a quieter movement,

**"Don't you tell me to settle down, brother. I can do whatever I want."** He moaned and wailed that he didn't think the minister was a very good composer...just as the soprano finished a particularly lovely aria. At that moment, the whole congregation turned, many of them angrily shushing him, but to no avail of course....he *was* drunk. Finally, two rather sturdy men got up, went back to him, and carted him outside, setting him out on the porch as he protested loudly, vowing to stay with him until he came down from his staggering high.

Of course, the choral piece had already been polluted by his obnoxious behavior. And during the coffee hour, there was no talk of the music, (which *I* certainly thought was beautiful in text and tune both), but only talk of the drunk's truly awful behavior.

The most senior member of the congregation, an elegant woman of 93 years, with her silver hair swept up fashionably, a woman who had grown up in that church and known two thirds of its history personally, posted a large sign in the social hall the next Sunday. It read "Our friends the Quakers can, as they put it 'write someone out of the Meeting.' When are we going to wise up and do the same?" She signed it, and dated it the Sunday before, so no one had any real doubt that she was referring to Al and his consistently disruptive behavior. Her poster generated a huge discussion among the members.

A few people spoke up immediately: "But we have always been a *Universalist* church, and we have to welcome everyone as a true mark of our heritage." But others said, just as passionately, "I'm a Universalist too, as was my mother before me, and my grandmother, but I am telling you right now, people can wear out their welcome...even in a church like ours."

The congregation had no process in place to deal with such disruptive behavior. No one knew what to do but to talk about it endlessly, clarifying and re-clarifying their position. Sort of like the two people debating whether what they saw was a rabbit or a duck in the story this morning. Some may have started to change their minds about things from all these conversations...but unfortunately, I don't know what they eventually chose to do, since I moved to California to go to seminary just a week after that poster went up.

Since those days, the practices of every UU congregation I know of has changed. We begin worship with a kindled chalice in most places. We offer AA groups for those who are struggling with addiction issues....we have one that meets here on Monday's at 4, for example. And most of our congregations have crafted a Covenant of Respectful Relations, like the one we read earlier.

We do not do this just because we recognize that there will be many different kinds of belief and unbelief and religious practices among us and could be worried about that. No. We recognize we will simply have to agree to disagree about great theological issues like God or life after death. (Agree to disagree. Old phrase. Comes from the Methodist divine John Wesley who used it first in 1770 to express his differences with the very emotional preacher, George Whitfield. Wesley was more liturgical and liberal in his style of worship, Whitfield more dramatically evangelical in preaching and doctrine. Wesley used the phrase to express why they could still both be authentic Christians.) We also recognize, like John Wesley did, that we will express our emotions differently, and that some will be more direct than others, some shy, some more easily wounded, some with thicker skins.

So we crafted a covenant...that is, a freely entered agreement...where we simply state that we know that this is so, and that we will do our best to make sure the differences between us are protected by our mutual commitment to create the safest space we can. It's about safety, not belief or emotional style. After all, "The point isn't belief," writes Frank Schaeffer in the first reading, "but who we are." He adds another phrase, of course...he adds "and how we treat the bullies who come across our lives."

Bullies. Anyone who disrupts the peace of the meeting, like that man in my first church. People who make physical threats, verbally. Or even pull stunts like I mentioned in a sermon almost 15 years ago...a man our San Francisco church who came into the Christmas Eve candlelight service with a can of gasoline and a bullwhip. Boy, did he ever wear out *his* welcome! Another man in that church, who was eccentric in every way due to the sad practice of frequent lobotomies in the mental health field of that era, was welcomed into the congregation despite his very many rather demanding behaviors. But people went out of their way to be there for him because of his undeniably special needs. But one Sunday when he verbally, publicly and loudly attacked a married heterosexual couple of differing ethnicities and colors because he personally didn't approve of such marriages, we confronted him, and he made it clear that he would always have that reaction. So we, the leaders of the church, both ordained and lay, asked him to leave the church. We valued safety for all people who enter the building, and his action, his behavior, devalued both that safety and those people. We had no covenant of respectful relations written down back then...we, the leadership in the church, simply took up the tough responsibility to protect the vulnerable from someone who, sadly, was vulnerable in a different way.

Now of course, these hyper-dramatic events are rare. Very rare in this or in any of our congregations. But the covenant of respectful relations does recognize that sometimes conflicts reach that level, and there needs to be something in place to help the community to deal with it not reactively, but with principle and fairness.

But mostly, the covenant asks us to take responsibility for how we respond to each other in ordinary, not urgent, circumstances. It encourages us listen to each other carefully, and to speak as clearly and directly as we can. It urges us toward an attitude of mutual respect...and to always speak to each other *within* the context of differences and diversities. Remember, we claim as much in our mission statement which makes clear that differences of opinion, belief, doubt, culture and understanding form *the great strength* of our community. Such differences are not a nuisance, but rather, foundational.

The covenant is not a set of commandments, but a reminder to do as we do best. It acknowledges we are not always at our best, but suggests we can almost always return to right relationship.

It also asks us to welcome new members and guests within our religious community. Sounds a bit superfluous at first. We *have* greeters every Sunday, don't we? Good ones too! We begin every service with a welcome from the Board, right?

But I am thinking about an event from a congregation where I served a fill-in ministry while the regular minister was on sabbatical. A woman came to see me that Sunday afternoon after the

service. I was just about to leave my borrowed office, when she knocked timidly at my door. "Pastor, can I speak with you for a few moments?" (I knew she was a visitor already, since we do not use the word "pastor" ordinarily.) I asked her to come in and sit down, and she told me her name first, and then her story.

She told me that it was her first time to visit the congregation that very morning. She told me she had heard about Unitarian Universalism in a religious studies course she was taking at a local university, and that she had nearly leapt out of her skin with joy when she heard about our principles, our practices and our purposes. She had even heard of some of our more famous members, like Ralph Waldo Emerson. "I read his Self-Reliance in high school," she beamed. "It changed my life." Then she got serious. She told me she had indeed been welcomed by many people. With warm smiles. And great sincerity. But each of them said to her some form of the following sentence after their warm welcome. "Oh, I wish more people like you would come to our congregation." "Oh," I said. "I'm so sorry." "Don't get me wrong, Pastor," she said. "I understand that they were all thinking that what they said was kind. They all seemed to imagine that one day this congregation would look like a multi-cultural paradise. That's fine. But I am not here to help create a multi-cultural paradise. I am here to come to a church which lifts up the spiritual values that changed my life in high school. I am a person, not a category. I am not here to fulfill someone else's dream, but to work on my own dreams. Look," she said, "I know you can't do anything about this now, but I really thought you should hear my experience."

Now, I am not going to tell you her ethnicity, or what color her skin was. No, I just want to lift up that sometimes welcoming takes more than a handshake. It takes focusing on the person, not the category. Or the box, to use Nikki Giovanni's word. *"i am tired of being boxed,"* she confesses.

*"everybody says how strong i am," she complains.  
"only black women and white men are truly free  
they say...it's not difficult to see...how stupid they are..."*

The word stupid is a harsh word, but I understand why she used it in her poem. I understand her anger. Categories...*black women and white men are the only ones who are strong?* She blows up those categories with her harsh words and understandable impatience. Giovanni's poem made me remember the day when someone at my first church made a comment about how many vowels I had in my last name. Hardly as serious as the categorization...the boxes...the poet has known, but still...

The woman who came into my office to tell me her story? Never saw her again. I told her story to the regular minister who came back just a week later, but her name never appeared on the guest list again. And I'm sad to have to admit that I can think of at least one reason why that might have been.

This is why I say that taking our covenant of respectful relations seriously means more than being warm. It means questioning even the most well-meaning ways we speak to each other, to members and guests, all of whom, I dare say, are persons, and *never*, representative categories.



Frank Schaeffer uses the harsh word Nikki Giovanni used too: "stupid." He uses it to describe his reaction to Pascal's Wager, the idea that it's better to bet on God and possibly win, than to give up on God and certainly lose. And although I completely agree with his analysis of Pascal's wager, I am not sure that Pascal...or anyone sharing his theology...would then simply respond by quietly dropping such theology in total defeat, just because of Schaeffer's certain judgment reflected in the word "stupid."

This is why I think the practices invited by our Covenant of Respectful Relations actually also serve as a spiritual practice that informs life *beyond this community* as well. Because, although I am comfortable in this community religiously, despite wide diversity in religious expression, some of which I do not share...I also live in the wider world where I am not as comfortable. In the sacred privacy of my mind, I sometimes certainly do judge certain ideas...both religious and political...that I find in that world, as stupid, or foolish. I certainly have all sorts of negative emotional responses to religious claims that strike me as downright cruel, even after I have tried hard indeed to understand them in a more generous way. I am not sure it's possible, or even enviable, to pretend that I will be free of those feelings someday.

But I am never in favor of traducing the safety of ANY gathered community...not just this one...by trotting out such verbal parries as if it was my right or even my duty to do so.

To summarize: our Covenant of Respectful Relations, along with its conflict resolution component, is important to our community...and to the wider world...because ultimately it's not lists of beliefs or disbeliefs that are important (as Schaeffer himself says so elegantly), but *who we are*. As persons, not categories. As a community of diverse individuals, not as a closed club of "like minded" people. As a church of people who are growing deeper, more understanding every single day.

I've come a long way from my first days as a newly minted Unitarian Universalist, with a lot of vowels in his name, back in Farmington MI. But because I have been challenged so much, and learned so much, and grown so much in my understanding of the importance of persons in all their diversity, the journey has been a blessing all the way.

### Offering

There are many ways that we contribute to our congregation. We thank all those who showed up yesterday to work on cleanup day, for example, to weed and tend our many gardens. Our monetary contributions are also vital. Many of us contribute on a monthly, rather than a weekly, basis, however, so it may seem **awkward** for us to just pass the baskets. Instead, I invite you to receive and pass the basket while **contemplating all the good work** that comes from our shared contributions of time and treasure.

### A Litany: Muchos Somos

We who can imagine a just world, who are unashamed to dream of a good life for all...  
***muchos somos***

We who are part of one earth, sharing its single history east and west, north and south, all intertwined, all blended, interdependent

***muchos somos***

We who are all different from each other, yet united in our evolutionary past, our mortality, our astonishment that we exist at all...

***muchos somos***

We who gather to celebrate, to take our lives seriously, who wave the banners of both our joys and brokenness in great assemblies, so that we remember that we are not alone....

***muchos somos***