

Covenant Groups
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Opening Words – (#418, adapted from Israel Zangwill)

Come into the circle of love and justice. Come into the community of mercy, holiness and health. Come and you shall know peace and joy.

Readings

1. From "[Sitting in Circles](#)," an excerpt from [A Hidden Wholeness](#) by teacher, writer, activist, Parker Palmer:

The circles of trust...are a rare form of community--one that supports rather than supplants the individual quest for integrity--that is rooted in two basic beliefs. First, we all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher's voice...

Occasionally, I hear people say, "The world is such a confusing place that I can find clarity only by going within." Well I, for one, find it at least as confusing "in here" as it is "out there"--usually more so!--and I think most people do. If we get lost in New York City, we can buy a map, ask a local, or find a cabbie who knows the way. The only guidance we can get on the inner journey comes through relationships in which others help us discern our leadings.

But the kind of community I learned about...does not presume to do that discernment for us, as communities sometimes do: "You tell us your version of truth, and we will tell you whether you are right or wrong!" Instead, a circle of trust holds us in a space where we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people.

2. From "[Engagement Groups: Bringing Forth the Future from the Past](#)," by Thandeka:

Small Group Ministries engender pious feelings; they heal the human heart. This healing power is an act of right relationship. Our heart is healed through right relationship with others. Our heart was not broken alone. It cannot be healed alone. Salvation is not a solo act. To live in sacramental time means to live in right relationship with others and with the natural world. The redemptive power of our religious movement is the sacramental act of right relationship. This power is not a creedal belief but a way of life. We know it because we live it. We create redemptive power here and now in the world, among us, between us, through us. These feelings, when held by an organization structure that supports and encourages its congregants to care for each other, are the power that can recreate and revitalize our liberal religious movement anew.

Sermon

How often in your daily lives do you feel that what you say is being heard; that someone is truly *listening* to you. How often do you make the time—the space—to truly listen to others?

Now granted, for myself, I know that a lot of things that I say may not be worth anyone's commitment to deep listening. Though the human capacity for communication is mind-boggling, it is often put to use toward mundane tasks and shallow ends. It is rarely pointed toward increasing *understanding*, but rather

toward social niceties, the exchange of requests and replies, the transfer of information, persuasion, complaints, and manipulation. Because of the barrage of communication that surrounds us, and because it is apt to be intended toward one or more of these various uses, we have developed filters that serve to quickly identify and classify communications. In what I imagine to be an auditory version of speed reading, we listen for key words, assess the context of the communication, and decide on a response within a fairly short time.

Now listen, this is a useful skill. I don't mean to in any way denigrate any of these purposes of communication *necessarily*, nor the type of hearing that we've developed to receive it.

The mundane, however we may feel about it, must be addressed. Social niceties serve to increase social cohesion. (Remember, I come from the land of Minnesota Nice.) It is important that we make our needs and desires known; it is a great skill to learn how to persuade others to our point of view; complaints sometimes result in improvements, or at least serve to let off steam; the transfer of information is vital to almost every human activity; and manipulation, as much as we want to divorce ourselves from it, is probably as natural a human inclination as compassion. (Right, parents? How do we get these kids to do what we ask?? Right, kids? How do we get these parents to do what we want??)

There is nothing wrong with any of that...*necessarily*. Except that, in a consumer culture such as our own, we can sometimes receive even the most sincere of communications with suspicion. "What's *he* selling?" we say to ourselves as we hear the passion rise in a person's voice. "What does she want from me?" we ask as we hear someone voice their sorrow. "I don't know what to say," we think, as if our perfect words were what was called for. How often do you find yourself jumping from assessing the person to assuming the content of the communication to fashioning a response or worrying about not having a ready response...all while the other person is still talking, maybe still on their first sentence?

There is not *necessarily* a problem with our auditory filter—you can display your Evelyn Woodhead speed-hearing diploma proudly—except that we never seem to know when to turn *off* the filter. We've been *listening quickly* for so long, that we no longer know how to *listen deeply*. The filter does not work when we are coming together to communicate from our hearts; from our experiences; from our uniquely individual selves.

We will be inviting you to sign up for covenant groups this next month (October). In groups of approximately 6-8 people, we will be meeting in our groups twice a month, if possible, to speak and be heard, and to listen—truly listen—to one another.

Some of the details will be worked out in the individual groups, but the general format will be a welcome into your circle. This might be a lighting of the chalice, a brief time of silence and centering, a reading, or a ritual of your choice. Something that marks the beginning of a time set aside for the sharing of experience, emotion, and responses to a particular theme.

The themes may be a single word or phrase. Honor. Faith. Loss. Success. They will be open and expansive enough to invite you to reflect and respond from your own experience, with anything that this word evokes for you. The facilitator of the group will also have questions that relate to the theme if it feels a little too vague and you seek a little more specificity to inspire your response.

Participants will share within a predetermined time frame without interruption. When another person is speaking, your *only task* is to listen. When you are speaking, the other participants are hearing you.

The groups will close with some form of acknowledgment of the sharing, possibly a ritual closing, reading, or quiet, a thank you to participants, and details about the next meeting.

Simple, right?

One of the things that covenant groups will do is let us practice listening without the filter. Let us practice *deep* listening, as Parker Palmer might say. *Active* listening, as writer and activist, Frances Moore Lappe might say. And please...don't beat yourself up if you find the filter stubbornly refusing to budge. If you find that you've assumed that you know what someone is going to say and are already jumping ahead to what they will say next, or what they *should* say next...If you are already fashioning your wise response, or remembering your similar experience, or find that you have wandered completely outside the moment to concerns from other areas of your life...If you find yourself returning to the moment and not knowing where the heck you've been, only that you've missed what someone is saying...Don't beat yourself up; but don't interrupt, either. Don't *give up*. Just call yourself back to the moment and invite yourself once again into deeper, active listening and know that you will have more precious and rare opportunities to practice listening.

And besides listening—a supremely important skill that is sadly lacking in our world at large—besides listening, covenant groups will encourage you to speak. Now you might be thinking that most Unitarian Universalists don't seem to need any help in talking...we're doing just fine, thank you. But just as the culture encourages and inspires a particular type of filtered listening, we are also encouraged to develop a particular type of filtered speaking. We speak of *trivialities*; we voice our *opinions*; we *assess* and *assume*; we *analyze* and *intellectualize*; we *quote* and *quip* and *question*; but when do we just speak honestly, seeking neither approval nor agreement, but simply sharing from our experience?

There are places for all those other forms of speaking, but what about speaking from our hearts? We have ripped that from our daily lives and relegated it rather ashamedly to the antiseptic office of the therapist or the private meeting with the clergy or the last-ditch encounter with the counselor, but doesn't it belong in community? Shouldn't we find space for our reflective selves in our everyday life rather than waiting for crisis to reveal ourselves *to* ourselves? Don't we owe it to ourselves and to one another to create what Parker Palmer calls "circles of trust" that make space for our honest reflections, remembrances, the restoration of that which makes us who we are?

We quickly find that the practice of listening begins with listening to ourselves. We have neglected our inner voices, just as we have ignored the voices of one another. And I don't mean the inner voice that is constantly reminding you of your to-do list. I don't mean the inner voice that is full of criticism of your every move; that causes you to worry about what other people think; that carries the voices of society, or the church, or your neighbors, or peer pressure, or societal norms, or media messages...I mean the voice that lies beneath all the chatter of our daily lives. The voice that holds promise...and some fear. The inner voice that requires effort and patience and commitment to hear. The voice that Parker Palmer says can teach us if we are ready to learn.

I loved this passage from the reading:

Occasionally, I hear people say, "The world is such a confusing place that I can find clarity only by going within." Well I, for one, find it at least as confusing "in here" as it is "out there"--usually more so!-and I think most people do. If we get lost in New York City, we can buy a map, ask a local, or find a

cabbie who knows the way. The only guidance we can get on the inner journey comes through relationships in which others help us discern our leadings.

But the kind of community I learned about...does not presume to do that discernment for us, as communities sometimes do: "You tell us your version of truth, and we will tell you whether you are right or wrong!" Instead, a circle of trust holds us in a space where we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people.

Now let me be clear: covenant groups are not therapy. And while I hope that covenant groups will encourage personal discernment, I want to say--as Palmer said of the circles of trust--the community, the other participants in the covenant group, are not offering to do that discernment for you. If you're looking for advice, a covenant group is not the place. But seriously, how many of us are looking for advice? How many of us say to ourselves: "If only I could find a wise person in this congregation who could tell me what to do...Boy, that would be great!" Rather, what I hear from people is that they come here seeking *community*.

So covenant groups are not therapy.

Covenant groups are not discussion groups. It is neither analysis nor opinion that we are after, but a response from your own experience. We are asking participants to draw from a different source than one uses to debate or discuss issues, one that does not call for explanation or justification. And we also ask participants to engage a type of listening that is free from the anxiety of needing to respond.

Covenant groups are not affinity groups. There will be no "bicyclists' covenant group" or "anarchists' covenant group." Affinity groups are great, and I encourage you to start one as you are moved to do so, but I would ask that we don't confuse them with covenant groups. This allows a greater potential for people to come together in covenant groups without necessitating shared interest or orientation.

Covenant groups are not circle suppers; circle suppers are wonderfully informal and allow conversation to go where it will in strengthening our relationships with one another. Covenant groups are, once again, intentional in how they are structured and what we are asking you to share.

Covenant groups, to me, are a way to actualize the promise of our community. Our promise to honor and care for each other—made explicit in our covenant--is embodied in our commitment to speak honestly and to listen intentionally. It is what we practice.

And covenant groups allow us to practice. I have heard that listening—deep and active listening—is an art, and every art form that I know of requires practice. But here's the good news; unlike some other art forms, I believe that every single individual has the capability to excel at this art form. It takes work; it takes focus; it takes practice; but we are all capable. And listening to one another, and having the courage to speak openly to one another, and committing to providing the space in which trust grows between one another is an endeavor that can only deepen our covenant with one another and strengthen our mission in the world.

Sam Tanenhaus, writer and editor of The New York Times Book Review, [said this on Bill Moyers Journal](#) this last Friday:

The great political philosopher, Hannah Arendt once said, in one of her great essays on Socrates, whom she wrote about a lot -- that the sign of a true statesman, maybe particularly in a democracy, is the capacity to listen. And that doesn't simply mean to politely grow mute while your adversary talks. It means, in fact, to try to inhabit the thoughts and ideas of the other side.

[Frances Moore Lappe has placed active listening](#) as the first of ten “arts of democracy.”

There is little doubt that the practice of listening leads to understanding, and that understanding leads to stronger community, and that stronger community leads to the type of active involvement, negotiation, compromise, and coalitions that bring positive change.

There is a big picture...but I don't want us to rush too fast to the big picture and lose the focus on where we are beginning.

I'm sure that you are full of questions...I hope that you are. More details will be forthcoming at our introduction of and sign-up for Covenant Groups. Feel free to talk to me or Lorraine Groberg or the facilitator of your group as we go along. We welcome feedback; we encourage commitment; and we look forward to deepening our relationships with one another.

UU minister and writer, Thandeka writes of the healing power created in covenant groups as an act of right relationship.

Our heart is healed through right relationship with others...This power is not a creedal belief but a way of life. We know it because we live it. These feelings, when held by an organizational structure that supports and encourages its congregants to care for each other, are the power that can recreate and revitalize our liberal religious movement anew.

So may it be.

Closing Words (#694, Frederick E. Gillis)

May the Love which overcomes all differences, which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears, which reconciles all who are separated, be in us and among us now and always.