Behaving, Believing, Belonging

Introduction

We are a religious community, a community of faith that is bound together by covenant rather than creed, by the promises we make to each other that reflect how we will live together in community and carry out our work in the world. They reflect our most sacred values. Being covenantal is our self-descriptor; there our other non-creedal communities – the Quakers being one – but we are singular in our commitment to covenant over dogmas of belief as our unifying feature. I would add that it is also our greatest and most sacred challenge. The Rev. Lisa Ward says that “A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: "I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming." This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.” http://www.uufhc.net/s021117.html

As our board leadership has committed to reviewing and renewing our congregational covenant this year, we will have the worship theme of covenant and belonging woven intermittently throughout the coming months, like a golden thread through a tapestry, hopefully adding both beauty and depth to our understanding of who we are together as people of faith and vision.

Stefan Jonasson, Director of Large Congregation Services for the UUA, wrote the words I’m about to share with you in 2012 for the Church of the Larger Fellowship’s Quest publication – it is titled “Behaving, Believing, Belonging” http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/behaving-believing-belonging – his message seemed to me a most fitting entry point for our covenantal journey together. In the spirit of this pulpit of many voices, hear now his words…

It is astonishing how certain human bonds are able to transcend time and place. Early one year, my brother Chuck made contact—on the Internet, no less—with a long lost relative in Iceland. As genealogists reckon relationships, Kiddi is our second cousin once removed; in the simpler reckoning of the American South, he might be called a “kissing cousin.” What matters, of course, is that however it is measured, we are kin! We belong to something that crosses generations. We belong to one another.

You may be familiar with the old saw that you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your relatives. When one is dealing with distant relations, this observation doesn’t really matter much—unless they come to visit. Well, Kiddi did come to visit that summer, accompanied by his wife, Bára, and their youngest daughter, Gunna. They stayed with my brother and his family. Now, I admit that I found myself a little anxious about the prospect of distant (read: virtually unknown) relations coming to town.

What if we had nothing in common? What if we couldn’t easily communicate with one another? What if our expectations of behavior were incompatible? What if differing beliefs proved to be barriers? What if… what if… what if…!

There was no need for anxiety. Almost immediately, we connected through the swift, sure bonds of kinship. In the days and weeks that followed, our affection grew—at the dinner table, around the campfire, along the beach. I shall not soon forget this glorious time. We were blessed by their visit. And we were moved to tears when it came time for them to return home.
What is it about kinship that transcends the normal boundaries of human relationships? How is it that, as distantly related as we are, somehow we felt an almost instant bonding with one another—a connection, a sense of belonging to one another and, more importantly, belonging to something that transcends time and place?

Sometimes families cannot bridge even the smallest distances of time and geography. But it has been my experience that, more often than not, families do rise above their differences and, despite their imperfections, we can rely on them as on few other human institutions. Even after a distance of many generations, we can embrace those we call kin, often sharing a remarkably common set of beliefs and behaviors, feeling clearly that we belong to one another.

This can happen for more than just families. It happens, too, in the political realm and in social matters. **Ideally, it happens in religious circles.** In his book Sacred Fragments, Rabbi Neil Gillman notes how the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan, taught that:

There are three possible ways of identifying with a religious community: by behaving, by believing, or by belonging. Kaplan himself insisted that the primary form of Jewish identification is belonging—that intuitive sense of kinship that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in the contemporary world. Whatever Jews believe, and however they behave as Jews, serves to shape and concretize that underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny.

In many ways, Unitarian Universalism is akin to this, though with a difference. If we accept Mordecai Kaplan’s analysis that people in religious communities tend to identify with those communities by behaving, believing or belonging, we will find ample evidence to support this view. There are the believing religions, such as puritan traditions, from which we are religiously descended, and pietists of all religious communities, who tend to place tremendous emphasis on the way we behave. Of course, the easy route to excommunication in pietistic and puritan groups involves inappropriate behavior.

But a behavioral emphasis is not all negative. In the late nineteenth century, our own “Issue in the West” presented two competing claims for the basis of membership in Unitarian churches. On the one hand were those who affirmed that membership demanded a common devotion to the Christian faith, as interpreted by Unitarians, of course. They felt that Unitarians needed to believe in and worship God as their object of devotion and acknowledge Jesus as their spiritual leader.

On the other side of the issue were those who argued for what was called the “Ethical basis.” For these Unitarians, what really mattered in religion was how we treated one another, how we cared for our neighbors—how we behaved towards one another. In time, those who advocated the Ethical basis came to advance an even more broadly-based interpretation of their position. But, at first, they argued that behavior was the primary characteristic that bound people together in religious community. It mattered less to them what people believed than how they acted.

There are also the believing religions. Creedal Christianity comes immediately to mind. The defining characteristic of such religions, which are the most numerous, involves assent to a particular creed or statement of faith. If the classical philosophers had been given to creeds, they might have said, “I believe, therefore I belong.” To be honest, creeds are not always obvious at first glance. Even some varieties of humanism and certain secular philosophies come dangerously close, at times, to
creedalism. It is creedal religion that Unitarians and Universalists have most clearly rebelled against in the course of history.

Nevertheless, even while rejecting creedal approaches to religion, Unitarian Universalists have affirmed that, in the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, “It matters what we believe.” But while recognizing the importance of belief, Unitarian Universalists have been reluctant to exclude people from their religious communities on the basis of belief alone.

That brings us to the “belonging” traditions. Judaism and Shinto stand out as two important examples of religious traditions that emphasize the importance of shared identity, spiritual kinship, and belonging to one another, beyond what we may believe or how we may behave. Belonging to one another is what is most important in such traditions. There is at least a kernel of this sense among the Mennonites and in ethnic churches in general, where the creeds often bow before the altar of ethnic cohesiveness.

**In recent times, it can perhaps be said that Unitarian Universalism has overemphasized belonging, sometimes to the exclusion of behaving and believing.** I sometimes wonder if we UUs have come to emphasize belonging so strongly because—collectively, at least—we wish to avoid accountability for what we believe, not to mention the things we do. Yet there is something holy—well, at least wholesome—in the quality of belonging that we seek to nurture.

But we seem to lack much of the richness or depth of “belonging” possessed by our friends in the Jewish community or other ancient traditions. Ours is, after all, largely an association of converts. Nonetheless, we do have a glimmer of this sense of belonging—an intuitive sense that we belong not only to one another, but to the whole of humanity. The human family is, indeed, one great kinship.

**I would argue that all three aspects—behaving, believing and belonging—are essential to any religious group that aspires to integrity.** At different times and in differing circumstances, a religious movement might emphasize one aspect or another, but an ongoing emphasis of one to the exclusion of the other two is idolatrous (*given to blind or excessive devotion to something*). If behaving, believing and belonging are not held together in some sort of creative tension then we risk falling into the same sorts of idolatry that have led many a religious movement to the rubbish pile of human history.

Earl Morse Wilbur’s classic threefold slogan of Unitarianism—freedom, reason and tolerance—reflects our ways of behaving, believing and belonging. Our behavior is characterized by freedom. Our beliefs are built upon reason. Our way of belonging is characterized by tolerance (*here I would add acceptance*).

It does matter how we behave. It does matter what we believe. But it matters, more importantly to us, that we maintain a sense of belonging to one another and to the larger tradition, the cloud of witnesses who have testified to the enduring ideals and vision of liberal religion.

**There may be something incredibly naïve about the notion that we can have meaningful human relationships without any mandated behavior or commonly-held belief.** Perhaps if it were more easily accomplished, divorce lawyers would find themselves out of work. Yet we try as a religious community to live into this noble ideal. **We do not say that behavior and belief are unimportant, but we do say—through word and deed—that our distinguishing characteristic is that we are a people who belong to one another. We covenant together,** making voluntary commitments
with our spiritual neighbors, viewing one another as kindred spirits, and interacting with love and compassion.

It is interesting and inspiring to see how that sense of belonging can transcend the differences of time and place. To meet a Unitarian Universalist from another community (whether a rural crossroads or a large metropolitan center) or with a different theological perspective (be it Christian or humanist, theist or eclectic) is to immediately recognize a kindred spirit. It is almost like coming across a cousin—say, a second cousin, once removed—who turns out to share many of our own values and behaviors, idiosyncrasies and passions.

When we encounter a kindred spirit—a person to whom we belong and who, in turn, belongs to us—we are reminded of the **holiest of religious truths: all of us are sisters and brothers in the things that matter most.** We are one great human family and those religious traditions that find their distinctive emphasis in recognizing that we belong to one another are, in fact, those religious communities that are best positioned in a broken world to bring healing to the Earth and a sense of kinship to all who dwell here.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed Be and Amen.