

The Risks and Rewards of Belonging
Rev. Hannah Petrie
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I'd like to begin with a story of belonging by Rachel Remen. Dr. Remen is the author of two books, "Kitchen Table Wisdom" and "My Grandfather's Blessings," that I regard as Bibles, as some of my "sacred texts," because they contain so many healing stories and much wisdom. With me as your minister, you'll be hearing a lot from her. These books were given to me as part of a huge stack I received on my 30th birthday, nearly 13 years ago, when I had just begun my parish internship in Austin, TX. My supervisor was the Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, and in the years that followed, he became not only beloved mentor and colleague, but also dear friend and 2nd father. I'm lucky to belong to him.

He inscribed every book he gave me. In the one that contains the story I'm about to share, he wrote, "Hannah, I want you to 'meet' this amazing woman who speaks from the brave – and forgiven – soul of life. Happy 30th! Davidson." This inscription will be important later on. Here's the story by Rachel Remen:

Connection strengthens the life in us. Sometimes the life in us is strengthened by discovering that others need us. Other times we are strengthened by discovering beyond a doubt that our love matters to someone more than we realized possible or that someone loves us just as we are.

Celia, long recovered from breast cancer, told a group of other women about her husband. "Richard is my blessing," she told us. This was a second marriage for both of them, and they loved each other and each other's children dearly. Richard was a widower when they first met; his first wife had suffered a long and painful death from cancer.

Less than a year into their courtship, when Celia found a lump in her breast, she had gone to the doctor alone and was alone when she received the devastating news: The lump was not like the others. This lump was malignant.

Almost her first thought was of Richard and his children. They had been profoundly wounded by cancer only a few years before. They were still healing from it. How could she bring this terrible thing into their lives again? She had called Richard immediately and, without telling him why, had simply broken off their relationship. For several weeks she had refused his phone calls and returned his letters. But Richard had not given up and had continued to pursue her, begging her to see him.

Finally she had relented and arranged to meet with him and tell him good-bye, thinking that perhaps this would help him go on with his life. Richard appeared to be under great strain. Gently he had asked her why she had broken with him. Almost in tears, she told him that she had found a lump in her breast and that it was malignant.

“You and the children have lived through this once already,” she told them. “I won’t put you through it again.”

He had looked at her, openmouthed. “You have cancer?” he asked. Dumbly she nodded, the tears beginning to run down her cheeks. “Oh, Celia,” he said, beginning to laugh with relief. “We can do cancer . . . we know how to do cancer. I thought that you didn’t love me.”

In this story, we see that Celia thought she could not belong to Richard and his children, that the risk of disappointing them was too great - but she learned she belonged unconditionally.

To whom do you belong unconditionally? These relationships really are the deepest blessings of our lives, but for too many in our culture, the experience of unconditional belonging is rare and often fleeting - impermanent.

Think of a time you truly belonged, and how good that felt, those fond memories. Maybe it occurred among a community of friends, in the workplace, or as part of a volunteer commitment. Maybe it’s belonging to this church, or to your immediate family. For me, my memories of 3rd grade come up – at age eight I knew who I was, and the other kids liked me as I was, half-introverted, half-extroverted, like I still am today. I could make other kids laugh with my silly sense of humor, or, be in the corner with my nose in a book, and I belonged either way, and it made me a happy kid. So it was jarring when my family moved across town mid-way through 4th grade, and the girls were mean to me. NOT belonging felt terrible, and I didn’t have a secure sense of belonging again until I reached high school.

Another time I belonged were the summers when I was a camp counselor at the overnight-YMCA camp I also attended as a camper in Michigan. Most of the community was from a suburb of Chicago called Evanston, but I came from Northbrook, a suburb further north. So I had to break into that more urban, cool kid network, and eventually I did. It was a process of overcoming the risks of becoming known. In order to find belonging, I had to be myself, and feel good about that person, be authentic and confident, even as I feared rejection. In our youthful years, such risks are often profoundly felt, but that sense of risk and fear of judgment follow us into adulthood, don’t they – will I be accepted and appreciated for who I am, or won’t I be?

This is where covenant comes in. It can make this process of offering and finding belonging easier. Like my colleague Rev. Gretchen Haley says in her reflection about covenant, we accept from the get-go that we’re not going to do it perfectly, that we will screw up and disappointment will be part of the mix - but that the *most* important thing about covenant is this *returning* to it. Even if we break our promises, we nevertheless return to these commitments we belong to, and try, try again. We risk again.

If you hadn't already sung it, like four times in the last month, I would have selected as one of our hymns today *Come, Come, Whoever You Are*, the short one that borrows from Rumi. Because so many of you know it, let's sing it once through just for fun – *Come, Come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair, come, yet again, come.*

These words are the invitation back to covenant – we may not be perfect, but there's no despair here! Not even for the lovers of leaving, for those who say, "this is too much, the risks aren't worth it, I've had it." Rumi says in the full body of his poem, "even if you've broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come."

What does it take to risk, be brave, and come back again? It takes courage and a forgiving heart. It also takes putting the consumer mind-set aside. "I'm not getting what *I* need, so to heck with it." But expanding our view may sow seeds that reap rewards later. It's like the President Kennedy aphorism: ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for your church. Because no, in the end, being a community of covenant is never exclusively about the needs of a single person or individual. It's about honoring the needs of the whole community, and the first way we do this is by showing up, by being present as best we can – even if we're not so sure, even if it's anyone's guess what's going to happen next. It's only in our faithfulness and in our participation that this can change. It's only in active relationship and connection that well-being can be restored.

Rachel Remen says, "on the deepest level, service is an experience of belonging, an experience of connection to others and to the world around us. It is this connection that gives us the power to bless the life in others." In our covenant, we say "service is our prayer." So to be in mutual connection and belong to this community, we emphasize service, because service is one of our prime liberal religious values and teachings.

This church's covenant, which you've now heard three times, either spoken or sung today, and is printed in your Order of Service, is older than any of your most long-standing members can remember. I have another wonderful mentor who's also retired, the Rev. John Corrodo, who is not only a Minister Emeritus but also a brilliant musician and composer. He wrote on my favorite hymns in the hymnal, *Voice Still and Small*. I asked him if he knew where this covenant came from and he responded,

First let me say that there have been many iterations and variations on this . . . The true source -- and mother lode of all subsequent variations -- is James Vila Blake (1842 - 1925). It is from the covenant adopted by the Church of All Souls, in Evanston, Illinois in 1894.

Context is important here. Blake worked with two Unitarian colleagues, Frederick Hosmer (the pre-eminent UU hymnist of his generation) and William Channing Gannett (the great unifier of the Unitarian movement in the post Civil War years when the

perpetual humanist/theist conflict was about to pull it apart). These three men collected and edited a hymnal, UNITY HYMNS AND CHORALS, in 1892.

The historical significance of this covenant is that it was something that both theists and humanists could agree on (not to mention that it is succinct, strong and not bound to any era).

Many UU congregations share this covenant, and you only changed two words of it – at some point, you chose to say, “Love is the *spirit* of this church” rather than “Love is the *doctrine*.” And instead of saying “Service is its *law*,” you chose “Service is its prayer.” How UU of you. We UUs today are not crazy about the rigidity that *doctrine* and *law* imply, or how static is creed. But there was a time when affirming that “love is the doctrine” and “service law” was bold and radical. It was very Universalist, and affirmed that *this* was the purpose of religion, of God, of doing church at all – love, alone. “Love is the doctrine.” Not judgment, not penance, not suffering like Jesus or whatever saint or martyr. Just love - and service an expression of this love, as it creates belonging.

I’m humbled by the implications of how far back this covenant goes – the UU Church of Studio City does not stand alone, but is connected to the ages of American liberal faith, sharing a common language, a common promise, to uphold our ancestors’ conviction that love, truth, and service are what we most strive for when belonging to a liberal, religious community, and indeed affirms what our very lives strive for. Love, truth, and service. It means our mission and role as a liberal church *today* in the dawn of the new millenium is *important* as the keepers of this dream.

Even as, or especially when, we fail at it!

My predecessor, the awesome Rev. Nica Eaton-Guinn, did so much good work for this church last year, that as successor I’m indebted to her. One of the things she did was to assist you in establishing another covenant, the Covenant of Right Relations. This document basically fleshes out our first covenant, and details what it actually looks like to make “love the spirit of this church” and “to dwell together in peace.” Because the risks of belonging are so great, a covenant of right relations helps guide us.

So helpful can this document be in times of uncertainty in the life of a congregation, that one wonders if other entities of belonging could use one. Who here thinks their immediate families, or marriages or primary relationships could use a Covenant of Right Relations? We all do at times, right? Being in any long-term relationship, whether it’s with our church, our spouse, our parents or children, involves ups and downs. A covenant gives you a home base to which to return, a map when we get off-track. What did we promise to do again? And – are we forgivable?

A covenant says, yes, you can be forgiven for being human and breaking covenant, and returning is the first step. The potential for renegotiating relationships is

always there. Come, yet again, come back into relationship and we may find that we can forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love. That's what I love about my mentor's inscription in the Rachel Remen book: his emphasis of the "brave – and forgiven – soul." Perhaps as we weigh the risks of belonging, it can help us find our courage to know we are forgivable.

For the rewards of belonging, especially hard-won belonging, are great. We cannot belong unless we open ourselves to others, so we may become known. The first step is an individual choice, but the longer-term goal is for our mutual benefit – to belong to a community in which we love and are loved. It starts with a promise that we'll do the best we can to be faithful.

Rev. Gretchen Haley says, "our UU covenantal theology affirms that being human comes down to the commitments we make to and with each other - the relationships we keep. We become human through our promises to and with each other."

The rewards of belonging are to come to our full humanity, with an imperfect yet forgiving love, a love that might live on - and not be so fleeting.

So what do I covenant, or promise to do, as your new Consulting Minister? For those of you who are confused by that title, it means I'm here to be of service to you as you come to know yourselves in the next era of ministry, as a loving, creative, and exciting liberal religious community. This year is a chance for us to get to know one another, and so I promise to allow that to happen. That I will listen deeply and come to know who you are, and that I'll share who I am, too. Like you, I'm not perfect, but I believe in right relationship as a cornerstone of our being together. So I promise to tell the truth, and be a religious leader for whom what you see is what you get. It is in the truth of this freedom to be ourselves, as we are, that we are going to have a wonderful year together.

All you guys need to do in this partnership is do your best to honor your covenants, and let your faithfulness not only enhance church life, but all areas of your life.

We live in a world that doesn't always value promise-keeping, or real follow-through, or honesty and truthfulness. Perhaps especially in Los Angeles, when someone tells us, "I'll call you," and it doesn't happen. Covenant is no old and dusty thing. It is as relevant as it's always been, and radical in its courage. Covenant counters the extreme individualism and consumerism that we have, sadly, grown accustomed to in our day-to-day lives.

And so, as service as our prayer, may we counter these successfully, one agreement honored, one promise kept, one day at a time. And when we mess up, let us return, again and again - Amen.

And now, let us celebrate! with our last hymn, #301, Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky!

