



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Walking Together,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on March 6, 2011

I chose our reading this morning because of its insistence on getting down to what matters:

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living  
I want to know what you ache for  
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon...  
I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals  
or have become shriveled and closed  
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain  
mine or your own  
without moving to hide it  
or fade it  
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy  
mine or your own  
if you can dance with wildness  
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your  
fingers and toes...<sup>1</sup>

This is what church should be! A place to be in touch and to share our deep longings and sorrows, our gladness and great joy. It's what life should be--an openhearted adventure, being in touch with what is real. How we live, how we move through our days, matters. It matters a lot. Not just for each of us as individuals, but also for the many people we have the potential to influence.

Five years ago, in the spring of 2006, I was in my first year as the assistant minister at the UU church in North Andover. I heard there was trouble brewing here in Haverhill. Then I learned that

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<sup>1</sup> Oriah Mountain Dreamer, “The Invitation.”

the minister had resigned, and the music director had been fired, and some long-time members, including most of the choir, had left the church. It sounded like a real mess.

But messes happen sometimes. Things sometimes get broken. And sometimes things have to be broken before they can be put back together again. And you who were here worked long and hard to make things better, to do what this congregation needed to do to move forward. Two years later, on April 6, 2008, I stood before you here for the first time. It was the first of two Sundays for you to meet the candidate to be your next minister. Pretty much the first thing I said to you was this:

“I hope you know that you’re not alone in what you’ve been through. It’s not uncommon for a church to fall into conflict--I’ve been there myself, at the church where I became a Unitarian Universalist, in Portsmouth, NH.

“During that challenging time, we had a number of congregational meetings, some of them painful, as people looked for someone to blame for our problems. At one of these meetings, a man made his way to the microphone. He was poorly dressed, and appeared to be someone who was down on his luck. He said, ‘I come to this church when I can, when I need to. This church has helped me. But lately you’re spending your time fighting with each other. I want you to know there are people like me who need this church; we need you to help us to just get through the week. So I’m telling you, work out your differences and get back to being a church.’ And with that he walked out.

“I’ll never forget that moment, and that man’s call to us to get on with the work of being a welcoming and caring community. It was a challenge we needed to hear, and it was a gift. In thinking about the struggles you’ve been through, I wonder if you might be able to see a benefit in them, a silver lining. You have seen what happens when people take sides, when people don’t speak directly to each other about their concerns, when people distrust one another. I hope you won’t forget what you have been through, but rather you will let this experience remind you that our actions do have consequences, that the stakes are high. Are we weaving the fabric of community or unraveling it? As the hymn says, may these walls may be strong enough to keep hate out and hold love in.

“Of course these walls are not enough. The church is not the building. It is you. It is the gathered community that gives this church its shape, its flavor, its personality, its vitality. It is you who determine how welcoming this community is to the stranger, how caring it is for those in need, how it responds in difficult times.”

That’s what I said to you three years ago. Since then we’ve done some good work together. We’re a stronger, more diverse, more vibrant community. We’re walking together, and we’re ready to take the next steps forward.

One of those steps is to develop a covenant for our congregation that articulates how we intend to be together as a community. A covenant is an agreement, a promise. It’s not a contract or a

legal document--it is statement of good faith between people about how they will be in relationship with one another.

All organizations have expectations and norms. Sometimes these are implicit, not spelled out anywhere, and you have to spend some time getting to know the system before you know what the norms are. The idea with a covenant is to make those norms explicit. We want to lift up and identify what we value and how we intend to behave with one another, and then put those expectations into a document that can be easily understood, shared and lived.

Five year ago, when things got hot around here, one of the most difficult things was that in a church, where people want to feel safe and have a sense of the sacred, hurtful things were said and done. This shattered some people's feelings of trust and security. This happens in churches sometimes, because they are human institutions. And one of the things we humans do is mess up from time to time. But it's particularly painful when conflict comes to a church, and people behave badly, because we want and expect people here to be better than that. But we're human. We make mistakes. The test is what we do next. Are we able to seek forgiveness, make amends, and repair what was broken?

I don't believe that a covenant will keep us from ever having conflict or difficult conversations here. I certainly hope not! If we aren't getting into at least a few disagreements, then we probably aren't doing our real work here. If we are going deeper, and being real with one another, we're bound to have some conflict. It's part of being human, and even a good thing.

In divinity school we used a set of guidelines for how to work in the midst of difference. One said, "It's okay to disagree--it's not okay to shame, blame or attack another, or yourself." There's a line between productive disagreement and unhelpful behavior that is destructive to relationships and the community. Our covenant will need to describe where that line is.

Will some of us at times cross that line? Of course we will. We're human. We make mistakes. The question is, what do we do once a line has been crossed, a trust broken, a relationship breached? Do we either fight or flee, or do we instead do the hard work of staying engaged so we can restore trust and get back in right relation? This is the work of covenant-making and covenant-keeping--to call us to our better and deeper selves, to create a space where we can be real with one another, and at the same time be responsible to and for the health and well-being of the community.

We don't know yet what our covenant will look like. We're just at the start. But the eight members of the covenant task force, who volunteered to be part of this effort, know that a covenant for the whole community should be crafted with the help of the community itself. That's why we're beginning today with the brief survey that's in the order of service. We want to start this process by getting your thoughts and words about what you want and value here. There are three questions--about how you think we should best interact with one another, and how we should act when we disagree, and how we might support and encourage one another to spiritual growth and deeper connections. Please write as much as you like and use the back if you need to. Please try

to complete the survey before you leave today, and put it in the box on the table in the middle of the Murray Room.

The survey asks you about words and actions, because both are important--what we say and what we do. Sometimes there's a gap between our words and our deeds. Our work as people of faith is to narrow that distance between our ideals and our actions. Our covenant will try to give us a way to both articulate our aspirations and to live up to them. I hope it will become a living document that we use in our life together. You don't have to put your name on the survey, but if you are willing, please do. It's good practice to stand behind your beliefs and opinions.

A friend of mine told me about when she was a young minister serving her first congregation. One day at coffee hour a person approached her, agitated about something, and began loudly berating her. People stopped their conversations, and turned to listen. An uncomfortable circle began to gather around these two. After a minute or two, one person stepped forward, and said gently but firmly, "We don't talk to our minister that way here." Others murmured their assent, and the person who was acting like a bully backed away. This minister tells me this was a turning point in the life of that congregation, which had tended to tolerate a fair amount of unhealthy behavior. People began to see that it was their responsibility to speak up and stand up for what was right. They began to see they had that right and that responsibility.

I hope that our covenant will help to create a culture here where you feel the right and the obligation, when someone crosses a line, to speak up on behalf of your community. To say, "We don't do that here. It's okay to disagree, but it's not okay to attack or shame anyone in this church."

My hope is that this community of deepening trust and connection will be a place where we can risk being more honest, more courageous, more loving, more trusting as we walk together. I hope our covenant will help us to take deeper responsibility for the health of our community, so when we do have difficult conversations or situations, we will be able to navigate them in healthy and helpful ways, ways that will strengthen the bonds of community rather than threaten them.

That's what it means to be walking together--not that we agree on everything, but that we agree on the important things. That we agree on what it means to be a community--on how we are walking together. And, at least in a broad sense, we agree on where we are going--toward greater depth and connection, toward health and wholeness, toward love and justice. We're on our way and we're walking together. For this community, and for this good work that lies ahead, let us be grateful and let us be glad.

Amen.