

1999 UUA General Assembly
302 Fulfilling the Promise: Congregational Covenants
Toward a Common Vision
Fulfilling the Promise Committee

Script by W. Frederick Wooden

Note: Staging and Directions are italicized and bracketed and centered. Spoken words are indented only.

"Narrator" can be one or several people (speaking in alternation.) Identity is not important for the first section.

The "Symphony of Our Promise" section uses people from the Fulfilling the Promise committee.

1. Opening:

[Recorded Music, Ashokan Farewell ("Civil War" theme) During solo verse, one couple starts to dance, waltzing. A voice over reads words from Anne Morrow Lindbergh that describe dancing.]

Narrator: Anne Morrow Lindbergh said: "the only continuity possible, in life and in love, is in growth, in fluidity - in freedom, in the sense that dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern. A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but happy and swift and free. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endless changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back - it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it.

[Other couples join the dance. They change partners at the same time.]

She said this about personal love, but it could just as surely describe spiritual community. Her words describe the promise of faith. But just as her words point to a dance, so the promise is more than words. It is more, even than a dream. It can be experienced.

2. New music, a reel, and a group dance.

[Dancers create a contra dance, an elaborate pattern of many couples. Some dancers are of the same gender.]

Narrator: The dance is the promise in movement, working together but not fused. Working for the pleasure as well as the result. Freedom and connection, individuality and belonging. Each is vital but the whole is also more than the sum. And each dancer happily works with every other dancer to make this greater thing happens. That's what the Promise of our Faith is.

The Promise sometimes seems only a far away dream, but if you can feel it, know that it is more than an idea, then it becomes real in a whole new way.

3. Other Experiences of the promise

[Lights down on dancers, music fades to out, dancers leave stage.]

Narrator: Touch is only one form of experience. Taste is another.

[Screen shots of potluck suppers, picnics, fellowship times]

Narrator: There is a spiritual reason we eat together. Because it is the way we most often experience the Promise. Think of how often religion uses food and drink.

[Pictures of communions, seders]

Narrator: But go beyond the symbol to the actual act. Look at all the food, how pleasing, how nourishing, how various and delightful. The full table is an image of the Beloved Community. And our pleasure in eating from it is the real act of being strengthened by it. We give, we get, we are sated.

[Music has now faded completely away. The screen shots of eating blur and are replaced by buildings, windows, banners, etc.]

Narrator: Sight is another way we experience the promise. These are the way we say who we are to ourselves and the world. This is our Holy City, sometimes with steeples and towers, sometimes with slopes and huts, but always saying something about the ideal human community.

What does your space say about the Promise of our faith?

[During this montage bring up soft music, preferably from the hymnbook, in the background, rising as the narrator moves on]

Narrator: Sound is perhaps the most obvious way we experience the promise.

[Pictures of people singing, reciting affirmations, lighting chalices, etc.]

Narrator: Not only music, but words are sounds, their meanings given through the air but preserved in the mind, and then given back to others.

Liturgy is the repetition of important words, sounds, week after week, year after year, until their constancy is as powerful as their meaning.

One of our great legacies to the world has been sounds: poems, books, sermons, hymns.

[Unitarian Universalist examples in the common culture, names or fragments, should be displayed here: faces, book jackets, poems, songs.]

Narrator: Every week Lutherans sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," a translation from the German by Unitarian Frederick Henry Hedge. "The tender hopes of "Nearer My God to Thee" were fashioned by the British Unitarian, Sarah Flowers Adams." The lyric word has been our great gift to each other and the world.

[Video of people singing hymns, from Opening Night if possible]

Narrator: Lyric words are lyrics, the words of songs, words made music. Nothing evokes the promise more for us than singing. Like dance it is rhythm, pattern, play and pleasure. The music that moves our bodies also carries our voices. In singing, our voices dance; the words are the steps. In song we feel a connection that cannot be fully described. It is this sensation that is often the best approximation of what the Promise is really about.

[Soloist sings "Winds Be Still," arranged for 2 solo voices and piano Third verse, entire assembly sings, words on screen]

4. The Symphony of Our Promise

[As song ends and lights focus on podium, narrator is joined by several others on stage, those who will speak their stories presently. There is now (if not before) a second podium for someone to use]

FTP Chair: "Sounds that become full symphony." Wildred Cantwell Smith, Professor at Harvard Divinity School, in his effort to articulate a World Theology, speaks of "symphonic theology." He means the word in its original form "voices-together." He also means the result of such voices, music that is more than the sum of its parts. What image could better describe the spiritual hope of our Unitarian Universalist faith?

I am Kay Aler-Maida from the Fulfilling the Promise Task Force. Our charge is to help our community of congregations toward a greater covenant where we live more consciously by the personal and collective dream of Unitarian Universalism. It is very much about the promise of a symphonic world, of a community and a world where every voice belongs, every voice counts; where every life is made for greater good, the greater truth, and the greater beauty.

(Material describing FTP is inserted here. It leads to the introduction of stories. That part may be introduced with the following language.)

FTP Chair: Sometimes that voice is a single person. Sometimes it is a group within a congregation; sometimes an entire congregation. Sometimes it is even a community of congregations.

[First speaker begins from a second podium. No introduction. During each story use illustrative slides during the story. The story should last no more than 6 minutes. No transitional comments between stories. They should move like a documentary, allowing the listener to make the connections. If possible, slides should accompany the stories.]

First Story

Second Story

Third Story
Fourth Story
Fifth Story
Sixth Story
Seventh Story
Eighth Story
Ninth Story
Tenth Story

5. The Meaning of Worship

[Following last story an FTP member takes the empty podium. Lights focus on that area to allow previous speakers to leave without distraction.]

Speaker 1: Every week we do something that makes no sense in itself. We sit on uncomfortable chairs or benches, say unusual words, sing in public, sit still without a screen to watch. We almost go out of our way to be uncomfortable.

[Montage of worship scenes, except this time they are on screen longer and change less frequently. A meditative atmosphere is the idea.]

We worship. And this act, strange as it is, is where we renew our promise. It is not so much what we say or what we sing, but that we say and that we sing that is important. It is the experience that matters. Worship is our dance. In our saying and singing we experience a tiny bit of what a symphonic world is about. That is what renews us and reminds us and recalls us to our faith.

Speaker 2: Worship is thus central because it is the ritual experience of the promise. The actual words are not the promise, nor the tunes, nor the buildings, nor the chalices and candles and everything else. But through them we transcend them and ourselves to sense with our bodies and minds the power of the promise.

Speaker 1: As many of us know, the English word worship involves two words, worth and shape. Sometimes we assume this means we are the ones who are shaping. But maybe it is worship that shapes us. The Promise of Unitarian Universalism is what is of utmost worth to us. When we worship, it becomes real through song and word, touch and taste, sight and sound. We may create it, but in another sense it is also creating us, the congregation, shaping our collective and even our personal lives.

Every week we literally recreate the promise, much as when we light the chalice we rekindle the eternal flame. Worship is fulfilling the promise.

Speaker 2: So **Fulfilling The Promise** is fundamentally an act of worship. We shape ourselves to that which is most worthy of us, shaping ideal into reality, abstract into concrete, the possible into the actual.

From this worship comes the only other thing we do, transformation. Once we know the promise, everything we do is to fulfill it. That means the other side of worship is witness. If worship is

where we receive the promise, witness is where we give it. And everything we do : newsletters, committees, canvasses, petitions, education, lies along a spectrum encompassed by worship on one end and witness on the other.

[Montage shifts to scenes of activity chosen from the early montage.]

When we hold meetings and create programs and send newsletters we are trying to equip ourselves to witness more thoroughly in daily life to the promise. When we educate ourselves and our children, we are trying to plant the promise deeper in ourselves, to make it part of who we are.

When we raise money and spend it, plan buildings and build them, seek out leaders and follow them, we are building the promise into the world beyond our personal lives. When we work to end injustice it is because voices in the symphony have been silenced, banished, and distorted. The result is something less than what could be; something less than "full symphony."

Speaker 1: Like it or not, every week we are fulfilling the promise. *The question is not whether we are, but whether we know we are.* Fulfilling the Promise is no more nor less more than grasping what has always been there, week after week. It means shaping that which is worthy, but being shaped by that worth. It means grasping the promise and being grasped by it, making it happen and letting it make you happen.

Speaker 2: Are you willing to do this? It is risky. But if you are, then we can begin now.

Speaker 1: Let me ask a question. You need only answer to yourself. Did you feel anything like the Promise in the last hour or so? What made it happen? Was it a sound, a song, a sight, a memory? Whatever it was. Think about that moment right now. *(Pause)*

Speaker 2: You know the feeling well. It is that sense of poignance, of power, of presence that is larger than what is there. Grab that moment in your mind. Lift it up. Why did it move you? Chances are, it was more personal. Perhaps that earlier moment was the birth of a child, the offer of true love. Maybe it was the presence of great beauty, or the moment of great decision. Hold that moment in your mind now. *(Pause)*

Speaker 1: Now, reach back even further. Why did that personal moment touch you? You may not know fully, but part of it was that thing we call transcendence. When something becomes more than it was, when its meaning is greater than the sum of its parts, that is a transcendent moment. Such a moment is when the Promise is real. *(Pause)*

Speaker 2: Now, let's go a little further yet. What would need to happen for that moment to be present again? Many things, many of them beyond your control, but what did you bring to that moment? Remember, transcendent moments do not merely happen, they are made. *(Pause)*

Speaker 1: What did you do to shape, to make that moment? That is your promise. Lift that up in your mind. Wrap your thoughts around it. Hold it in your inner hands. *(Pause)*

Speaker 2: And now, write it down. Your card says: 'This is My Promise.' What you write will be your pledge of faith, your declared gift, your vow to yourself and to your congregation, that will bring the promise closer to fulfillment. Make it a phrase, a sentence at most. Make it something you want to give. Make it something everyone, including you, can receive. (Cue musicians)

[Long pause, 2 minutes, with music to discourage chattering]

Speaker 1: Don't sign it. You know what you wrote. As we leave, place these cards in the ***Fulfilling the Promise*** kiosks like the one you see here. They will be gathered, transcribed and shared with everyone in the coming months. This will serve to remind you of your promise, but also to call forth like promises from those not here but certainly present.

Speaker 2: Now read your promise. Is it right? I hope so. Is it true? I know so. Is it strong? I believe it is. Is it alive. It must be. And if you are fortunate, it is not just alive. It is dancing.

[Music begins, "Come Thou Fount," #126 "Singing the Living Tradition," instrumentally, as a waltz tune. FTP members and/or other dancers take the "floor" for one or two verses. Solo voice sings first verse as dancers dance. She/he is joined by another vocalist and assembly is invited to sing or dance as they wish, for the last verse. Music continues, instrumentally but quieter. Dancers continue to dance. Music dwindles to a single instrumental line, quietly ending. On stage dancers bow to each other. Lights out.]