The Promise of Universalism

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I don't pretend to be a historian, or a theologian, or an expert on the concept of covenant. What I am, however, is a proud Universalist. I have been for longer than I've been a Unitarian Universalist—for longer than I've known that Unitarian Universalism existed.

And it seems to me that when Unitarian Universalists begin talking about the concept of covenant, when we focus our energy on the religious promises that we make to one another, the promises that bind us together as a faith, we often leave behind the Universalist part of our heritage.

Our Unitarian ancestors, and their predecessors the Congregationalists and the Puritans, after all, are the source of our notion that religious community is defined by the commitments we make to one another. It is from our Unitarian heritage that we get the foundational belief that authority in our religion comes from the gathered congregation, and not from a hierarchy or a contrived connection to a secret source of holiness.

And while the history of covenant in Unitarian history is a complicated one—covenants have been used both to keep people out as much as welcome people in—we don't spend a lot of time talking about the Universalist contribution to our Unitarian Universalist notion of covenant.

As a Universalist, I think that means we're missing something important. Our religion became something new when Unitarians and Universalists consolidated their faith traditions. We inherited promises and commitments, contributions to the covenant we cherish, from both our Unitarian and our Universalist ancestors.

So as we gather here in Louisville to examine and renew the promises we make to one another as Unitarian Universalists, I think we need to include the promises of Universalism in our discussion.

Further, I think it's important that any discussions of the promises inherent in our faith tradition must come with a consideration of what these promises require of us.

Here are some of the promises that come to us from Universalism:

- We are all forgiven.
- We will all end up in the same place when we die.
- Paradise is possible, right here
- Love is the answer.

What's the question? We'll get to that.

We are all forgiven.

The first promise that Universalism gives us is that all of us are ultimately forgiven. Our spiritual ancestors could not imagine a loving God worth worshipping who was not able to forgive even the most egregious evil perpetrated by humanity.

Now, I know that many people have a problem imagining this kind of forgiveness being readily available, especially for acts of great evil and people whose lives seem to embody a readiness to commit evil deeds. And yet, that's precisely the point—that the love of God is greater than we can imagine. Bigger than the human imagination. Almost unfathomable.

Some people put it this way: we are held by a love that will not let us go. A friend of mine whose ministers say this in church most every week to explain Universalism thinks this is creepy—as if the tentacles of the universe had wrapped themselves around us, or as if God were some sort of cosmic tractor ray. So for his sake, let me try to unpack this a little.

Universalism promises us that we are forgiven, whether or not we want to be, whether or not we can forgive ourselves. We live in a society that encourages us to see all that's wrong in ourselves, and then promises us that if we buy enough stuff we can make it right. Universalism asks us to see past the harmful messages of self-loathing and judgment to feel the spirit of love and wholeness flowing through us all.

Universalism promises us that our brokenness—however painful it might be in the moment, however long we have lived with it—our brokenness is impermanent.

Last week, I met with a congregant who has had a really rough road. Born to two conservative Christian ministers in a place not known for its open-minded acceptance of all kinds of people, this young man was rejected by his family and subjected to violence—physical, emotional and spiritual violence—when he came out as gay.

We talked about forgiveness, and the Universalist understanding of an all-loving God, and he admitted he had a difficult time with that concept. The God that he was brought up to believe in—the God he has rejected—is a narrow-minded God. A God of judgment and exclusion. A God that condones violence against those who are different, those who commit sins seen as too egregious to reconcile, even when those sins involve only the act of loving another. A God that instructs his followers (and the God of my congregant's parents is most definitely male) to reject others.

I told him that I can't believe in that God, either. Human beings have a woeful tendency to create deities that replicate all of our pettiness and smallness. Time and again—in different cultures around the world—we've developed views of the ultimate that are have within them the very worst human traits. That's sad to me.

Universalism gives us the possibility of something larger. Something, maybe, too large even for our human imagination. Something deeper than we can fathom, stronger than we can summon, wiser than we can know.

Universalism promises us that the love in our midst is big. Really, really big.

Furthermore, Universalism promises us that our weaknesses—however big or small they are—are immaterial in the light of that love. I'll say that again: a Universalist theology of forgiveness promises us that whatever is wrong with us is of no consequence to the ultimate source of life in our universe.

There are, to be sure, implications for this promise.

The first is that we are called to reject a consumerist culture that encourages us to focus on our brokenness.

To be clear, I believe that Universalism confirms for us that buying stuff won't fill the holes in our souls. No quantity of stuff, no quality of stuff.

Our very real psychic and spiritual pain is being used to convince us to consume. We must resist those messages. We must stand as a strong, counter-cultural, moral voice that says that the wholeness we seek is not found in a big box store or at a checkout counter. It is found in community. It is found in relationship. It is found in connection to something larger than ourselves.

Another implication of the Universalist insistence that we are surrounded by love is that we can heal our brokenness in spiritual communities, which calls on our congregations to be healing communities.

Now, I'm sensitive to the criticism (voiced by many) that Unitarian Universalism has become, in too many places, a hospital ward for the spiritually wounded masquerading as something deeper and more relevant to our world.

I understand that criticism and agree that our congregations need to be more than that.

And yet, part of our promise is that our hospital wing remain open and accessible. Any vital community needs a space for those in its midst who are hurting, who are bleeding, who are broken to heal. Universalism promises us that healing is possible—and asks us to create the space to do it.

Creating healing communities for spiritual wounds is, I believe, part of a larger whole. It is connected to other sorts of healing—the healing of our bodies, the healing of our society.

If we are to understand ourselves as part of the world and simultaneously commit ourselves to healing the world, we must see healing ourselves as part of that process.

Jewish feminist new-age storyteller and cancer survivor Deena Metzger writes about this connection. Metzger understands the healing of the self—be it from diseases of the body or wounds of the soul—as integrally connected to the healing of our society as a whole. She writes:

> "In my mind, there is a direct relationship between the healing of my body and the healing of the world. Where healing and peacemaking are one, they are the bridge between individual healing and the healing of the community. I do not ask for my healing without committing entirely to the healing of the other as the small possibilities of the healing of the world are sacred gifts extended to me as well. The world's body. My body. The same. This is the very nature of healing."[1]

Baptist minister Margaret Kornfeld, in her book entitled *Cultivating Wholeness,* also looks at how issues of healing and wholeness play themselves out in communities of faith. In summarizing her philosophy of how congregations need to address these issues, Kornfeld writes:

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[1] Metzger, Deena, "Healing in the Community," http://deenametzger.net/healing-in-the-community/ (link active as of 6/28/13)

> "Communities that are healing places accept and respect the differences of their members, and also recognize when their fears of 'the other' blind them from true community. Congregations are urged to not only to do pastoral care but to challenge the political and social institutions that manipulate through fear. They try to put into action the 'perfect love that casts out fear.'"[2]

In my view, too many Unitarian Universalist congregations focus only on the internal healing of the individual *or* the external healing of our world. We too often understand these processes as separate from one another: pastoral care and social justice somehow become separate functions of both the congregations as a whole and the ministers who serve them.

Pastoral care and social justice can and should be understood as essential parts of the same whole. It is my hope that together, we can recognize the interconnection between inner spiritual work and the transformation of oppressive power structures in our society. I have hope that in our communities of faith, a different outlook can prevail.

The peace that we seek for ourselves as we gather in religious community is not different from the peace we all seek for our community and our world. Our ministry to and with each other needs to engage healing on all levels: individual, family, neighborhood, city, nation, and world.

Universalism promises us that we are forgiven—and that the love with which we are held is beyond our imagination. We are promised a love that transcends all brokenness, and called to manifest that love in healing community.

What are the consequences of that forgiveness? They are the second and third promises I will explore today.

We will all end up in the same place when we die.

Another of the things that Universalism promises us is that all of us share a common fate. Universal salvation once meant that all of us would be rewarded by an eternity in paradise. Perhaps it's time to think of heaven in a different way.

Before I became a minister, I was a scientist. And though I feel very comfortable talking about God, my own theology is decidedly naturalist. That is, I don't find much

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[2] Kornfeld, Margaret. *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.

reason to think about God as a supernatural entity, but rather as an immanent force in the natural world. I don't think of heaven as a realm for the soul that is outside of what we know—I think of it as right here, in the midst of the world that we know.

Frankly, if I were to take this promise literally, I would agree that we all end up in the same place when we die—I believe that our substance is returned to all of nature and all of creation. Your being, mine, and everyone's—all part of one, interconnected, closed system. If I were to take this promise literally, I would be stopped in my tracks by the unfathomable beauty of this notion that we are inextricably bound to one another.

So let's take it literally for a moment or two. Let us ponder what it means that all of our being ends up in the very same place when we die—the same place it came from in the first place, the same pool of atoms and energy that has created all life since the formation of our Earth, the same protons and neutrons that will create all life for the duration of our planet's existence.

I believe that Universalism promises us that we are all part of the same stuff. We all come from the same stuff. We're all ending up as the same stuff. Universalism gives us a distinct theological framework for affirming and promoting the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The promise of our connectedness requires us to realize our unity with all of creation.

In his 1945 work *A Religion For Greatness*, Universalist minister and theologian Clarence Skinner emphasized our religious call to work toward the unity of all beings, which he defined as "the coherence of what may seem to be separate, into a oneness. Unity," he wrote, "means an operative harmony, a functional relationship which belongs to all the parts of a whole."

Later in this work, Skinner also wrote, unfortunately using gender-exclusive language common in his era, that:

> "This great religious experience of the unities and the universals, however, tends to direct man outward toward what is greater than the atomistic human.
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> "Love, service, unselfish devotion to the common good, are all in line with the expansive experiences, but they are definitely limited in scope. Even at best their horizons are narrowly confined. But the religion of the universals and the unities has no felt limitations. It leads out to the

> infinite and thus tends to make the largest possible type of human personality. It would be hard to imagine a person with an habitual cosmic 'mind-set' descending into the bitter and exclusive partialisms which divide men. The point of view and the psychological disciplines of the Universe-Man are inclusive and integrating."[3]

Clarence Skinner pushed to expand the notion of Universalism that his spiritual ancestors had developed. He called us to a "cosmic mind-set" in which we all realized our connection with—indeed our unity with—everything that is, everything that has been, and everything that ever will be.

We are one with the stars. With the planets. With the oceans and mountains and ice caps. With the forests and the deserts and the fauna running through them. We are also one with one another—but I'll get back to that later.

This unity of existence has profound implications for how we live. We need to learn together to make decisions that take into account the other beings with whom we share our fragile planet.

As I type this, a somewhat humorous illustration surfaces. I note that Microsoft Word insists, with its little squiggly green line, that those other beings are "which" and not "whom," which I think is part of the problem.

As in eco-feminist and process theologies, the spiritual traditions of many Native American and Hawaiian/Polynesian cultures see humans as intimately connected to all other entities in the universe. These traditions depart from much of Western philosophy in accepting their connection to entities not thought of by that tradition as "alive."

Native Hawai'ian philosopher Michael Kioni Dudley writes that,

> "The chants of the Hawai'ians told them that they had descended from the cosmos itself and from its many plant and animal species. They felt a kinship with nature not experienced by people who see a break between humankind and the species of nature which have preceded them in the evolutionary advance.
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> "In the Western world, where the cleavage is most pronounced, animals are disdained as having senses but no reason; the plant world

[3] Skinner, Clarence Russell. *A Religion For Greatness.* Boston: Murray Press, 1945.

> is recognized as alive, but in no way even aware; and the elements of the cosmos are treated as inert objects that follow mechanical laws. Hawaiians, on the other hand, view all these beings as sentient ancestral forms that interrelate with them as family. Therefore, they experience reality differently because of these views."[4]

This worldview is not unique to the native people of Hawai'i. Native American people from many different cultures express similar thoughts about their connection to non-human entities in the universe.

J. Donald Hughes writes that, for example, the Zuni people see "everything in nature as alive, not just animate, but fully alive in the way people are alive, conscious and sentient. The Zunis… [call] everything, whether it be a star, mountain, flower, eagle, or the earth itself *h'oi*, a 'living person.'"[5]

The famously misattributed Chief Seattle of the Suquamish people of the Pacific Northwest coast was quoted in an 1887 edition of the Seattle *Sunday Star* as having said, "even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people…."[6]

Navajo, Choctaw, and Haudenosaunee oral traditions, to name a few, also have teachings that closely parallel these.

I believe that all things in the universe are connected to one another.

I believe that these connections exist whether or not we know they do.

I believe that humans are an intimate part of nature, that nothing we do can be understood as outside of the actions of all of creation, and I believe that non-human creation is imbued with the same energy that pulses through our cells, the energy that makes us alive and gives us agency to act as moral beings.

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[4] Dudley, Michael Kioni, "Traditional Native Hawaiian Environmental Philosophy," in Gottlieb. Roger, ed. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

[5] Donald Hughes, J. Donald, "American Indian Ecology" in Gottlieb.

[6] Chief Si'ahl of the Duwamish Nation, as quoted by Smith, Henry, "Chief Seattle's 1854 Oration," *Seattle Sunday Star,* October 29, 1887. Found at http://www.halcyon.com/arborhts/chiefsea.html (Link active as of 6/28/13)

I also believe that we must honor the agency and experience of non-human entities in whatever ways we can. In doing do, we show them respect and honor our connection to them.

And I believe that all of these things—this unity, this connection, this call to act in ways that honor our planet and fellow beings—are supported by a Universalist theology that tells us that we all end up in the same place when we die.

Universalism promises us that we will all end up in the same place when we die. I believe that to be literally and incontrovertibly so. But as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I also have to not be so literal all the time. I have to ask myself what happens when we understand the promise that we all end up in the same place when we die in a metaphysical sense. What it means that all of us are promised paradise.

And this brings me to the next promise of Universalism.

Paradise is possible right here.

In their wonderful 2008 book Saving Paradise, theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker unpack the troubling development of Christianity from a religion concerned with creating the kingdom of God on Earth to one centered on crucifixion and suffering, and led by that focus to build and maintain empire. And in the midst of that change in focus, Christianity relegated the notion of paradise to something available only after our death.

I think that's a shame. According to Brock and Parker, in the world of early Christianity, "paradise had both a 'here' and 'not here' quality. Christians taught that paradise had always been here on earth," that sin closed off the possibility of its manifestation.

They continue: "While Christians could taste, see, and feel the traces of it in ordinary life, they arrived most fully in paradise in community worship. With its art and buildings, the church created a space that united the living on earth with the heavenly beings and departed saints, who surrounded and blessed the living."[7]

Universalism promises us paradise. Further, I believe it promises us the possibility that such a paradise can be achieved right here—on Earth as it is in Heaven.

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[7] Nakashima Brock, Rita and Rebecca Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

Now, if I were a theologian, I might break out a phrase like "radically realized eschatology" right now. But I'm not, so I choose instead to think about what it means to make this world the paradise written of in Scriptures instead of saving it for a realm we can visit only once we die.

Universalism offers us a view in which all of our souls share a common fate. Universalists have for many years argued about how it is that our souls get there. What is the pathway that leads us to this reconciliation with God and with each other?

I believe that such a pathway can only be constructed by our own hands.

There's an old religious joke, available in many forms (so many that I couldn't find an attribution for who first thought it up) that goes something like this:

> A man was sailing with his friends when a great storm came and washed him overboard. Treading water in the ocean, he prayed to God to save him. His friends on board threw him a life preserver, but he waved it off, saying, "No thanks—God will save me."
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> They sent a life raft, but he sent it away, saying, "Don't worry about me—God will save me." Not long after, a Coast Guard helicopter appeared over head, sending down a basket and rescue worker. The man refused the help of the rescue worker, claiming that his prayers would soon be answered, and God would save him.
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> Eventually, he tired of treading water and drowned. When he got to heaven, he saw St. Peter at the gates and asked him, "What happened? I prayed and prayed, and was always taught that God would answer my prayers? How could he let me drown?" St. Peter looked at him, shrugged, and replied, "Well, we sent a life preserver, and a raft, and even a Coast Guard helicopter. What more did you want from God?"

I don't believe in a God who acts outside of natural systems—so I am left understanding that if there is such a thing as "God's work," it is for us to do. I believe that we each have a choice to be agents of holiness or not. And I believe that Universalism gives us a glimpse at what that means—a glimpse at how we can discern what is, indeed, the work of the holy.

A theology of universal salvation, in promising us a common fate for our souls, suggests to me that the divisions that humans create amongst ourselves are

impermanent—that they are all social constructs that prevent us from living in the unity that is available to us through the love of God.

I believe that goodness in our world is a result of connection, of real and right relationship that helps us act not as individuals but as a community. When we see ourselves as connected to others, we are more likely to do things that make their lives better.

I believe that evil happens in our world when we break those connections—or refuse to form them in the first place. When we separate ourselves from others, we are more likely to do things that affect them badly.

Small bits of badness come from broken relationships between individuals. I say something on purpose that hurts your feelings. Siblings strike each other in anger when they're frustrated. People tell lies to one another because they think they won't be caught. Someone steals from another who has something they want or need. These things can be healed when the relationships are healed.

Larger systems of immorality and wickedness come from severely harmed relationships between groups, sometimes magnified through time and history. We allow people in our very midst to go without shelter, food, medicine in a nation of riches. Oppressions are handed down from generation to generation—racism, sexism, classism and others. These things take serious amounts of work to overcome—whole networks of relationships need to be rebuilt.

And unthinkable acts of evil come from true brokenness. Murder, rape, war, terrorism. I honestly cannot imagine how someone can be so completely disconnected from the feelings and experiences of another to even contemplate something like those kinds of acts. I certainly cannot fathom what goes into the hatred that makes someone do some of the things that stun and shock our society on a regular basis. Such evil can only be faced and destroyed with unthinkable amounts of love—amounts of love that we are not be capable of by ourselves as individuals, amounts of love so great that even one gathered religious community is not enough; we need to enlist others in creating it as well.

It falls to each of us to engage in the work of creating connections and love in our world as a response to the immense evil we witness on an ongoing basis.

Each of us is asked to respond to the pain and suffering in the world by sharing some unique part of us with others. Perhaps we see systems in a way that helps us

dismantle injustice. Perhaps we grow vegetables that nourish others. Perhaps we express ourselves—or help others express themselves. Perhaps we make ourselves vulnerable by sharing our own experiences of pain and loss. Perhaps we have (or make) the time and patience to listen.

Each of us is asked to do the work of the holy by reaching out to another. By reaching across difference. By working to connect.

I believe that we do the work of the holy when we overcome the things that separate us one from another, and that the barriers that humans erect to make that separation real are the sins that block us from manifesting paradise in our midst.

As Unitarian Universalist historian Mark Harris has written, "from its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church [of which John Murray was the first minister] included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry [with full recognition], beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown."[8]

Having experienced a love from God so strong that it could overcome any wrong, any sin, any transgression, and having learned from that powerful love that all people were equally and unconditionally loved by God, Universalists came to call for a radical equality of all of humanity.

We must insist on that radical equality. We must insist on tearing down the walls that separate "us" from "other." We are all "us."

The newly-pregnant woman in rural Arkansas wondering who gets to make decisions about her body is "us."

The mother of the teenage girl shot on the streets of the Bronx is "us," and so is her daughter, struggling to learn to walk again with a bullet in her spine.

The people dying of thirst in the desert south of Tucson as they migrate across their people's ancestral lands are "us."

The hunger strikers in the Pelican Bay Prison seeking recognition of their basic human rights are "us."

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[8] Harris, Mark. "Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith," pamphlet published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston.

The family being separated by our government because their same-sex marriage is not recognized by our Federal immigration laws is "us."

The people living in the toxic doughnut in south Chicago, fighting for clean air and soil and housing for their neighbors are "us."

The people demonstrating in Istanbul against an increasingly repressive and theocratic government are "us," as much as the people demonstrating at the state capitol in Raleigh, North Carolina against *their* increasingly repressive and theocratic government are "us." And, furthermore, the Prime Minister of Turkey and the state legislators in North Carolina—they're also "us."

The people in the mountains of western Pakistan, cowering to avoid bombs dropped by American drones, are "us." And the officers charged with operating those drones, struggling with their moral compass in a high-tech war, are also "us."

The poor people in the hollows of Appalachia whose water is poisoned by upstream coal mining are "us," and the miners whose only hope of putting food on their children's plates involves breaking their backs in the dangerous mines are "us," and the executives who line their pockets with the blood of the people and the land are also "us."

The corn farmers in rural Illinois, the buskers in the New York City subway, the line cook in New Orleans and the longshoreman in Long Beach are all "us."

Recognizing that Universalism promises us radical equality from the perspective of the most holy and sacred calls on us to tear down human-made barriers wherever they are found. Wherever they are found. To tear down the walls and replace them with love.

Love is the answer.

Finally, Universalism promises us that love is the answer.

How do we overcome separation? Love.

How do we learn to forgive? Love.

How do we heal our brokenness? Love.

How do we care for our Earth? Love.

How do we learn to respect other people? Love.

How do we come to value non-human beings? Love.

How do we come to a place where we can be exactly who we are, where we allow ourselves room for growth, and where we cut ourselves slack when we fall short? Love, love and love.

Perhaps I'm oversimplifying things a bit, but not by much.

Universalism promises us that the perfect love of God overcomes even unthinkable evil. Universalism promises us that each of us—whatever our background, whatever our identity, whatever our problems—each of us is equally loved by the most sacred energy in our midst.

Universalism promises us that however bad we feel about ourselves, we are loved.

Universalism promises us that however isolated we feel, we are loved, and that we are held by the same love that holds every other being and creature on our planet.

The individualism that has for so long plagued our faith must be replaced with an ethic of engagement, a theology of relationship and a commitment to community.

The isolation that has burrowed deep into our souls must be replaced by a wholeness and love that allows us to be in relationship with others.

The barriers that have for so long plagued our society must be replaced with an understanding of the radical equality of humanity, a realization of the all-powerful love of God, and a commitment to justice.

I believe that the promises of Universalism pulse at the core of our faith tradition today—even as we talk about covenant in distinctly Unitarian forms. We do well to remember them. We do well to keep these Universalist promises alive.