

Promise



“Promise is a big word. It either makes
Something or breaks everything”

- Anonymous

UUCH - September 2015

This is the first in a series of monthly “magazines” on the topic of the theme for the month.

Each magazine will contain inspiring words, questions to ponder, articles to read and further resources to explore.

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What Does Promise mean in Your Life?

“Say Yes. Whatever it is, say yes with your whole heart & simple as it sounds that’s all the excuse life needs to grab you by the hands and start to dance.”

-Brian Andreas



There is power in a promise. Maybe the greatest power of all. This is arguably the most foundational claim of our faith.

It is common for UUs to say we were born inherently good and powerful rather than inherently weak and depraved. What is not so common is remembering that this capacity for strength and goodness is rooted in our ability to make promises. Whereas other religious traditions focus on confession or right belief, we’ve always placed our hope in the act of making and keeping commitments. This is what is at stake in proclaiming that we are covenantal rather than creedal faith. If a new day is to come, it will arrive not when we all think alike, but when we all follow through on our commitments to love our neighbor as ourselves. If salvation is possible, it will be realized not from us noticing our need to be cleansed, but from waking up to our need to be connected. If divinity is real, we will know it not in the form of a supernatural moment, but in those everyday miracles when we look into each other’s eyes and say, “You can count on me to...” Grace is not a reward for good behavior, it is the sacred and creative power that arises when two or more entwine their lives in mutual commitment. Again, there is power in a promise.

And what about the promise that life itself makes to us? This too is central to our faith. From our beginnings, we have declared life to be full of promise and potential, even when darkness seems to dominate our days. So we commit to keeping our eyes open. Trust in life and others, and life and others will prove themselves trustworthy. Shift your gaze from what you *want* to what you *have* and suddenly life is generous rather than a threat. To paraphrase Brian Andreas, say yes and life will start to dance.

So who needs a promise from you this month? What commitment is it time for you to renew? What power is waiting to be released by the simple phrase, “You can count on me to...”? And maybe most important of all, are you ready to say yes and watch life dance?



Our Spiritual Exercise: Keep A Promise...To Yourself!

It's the promise we most often forget, or maybe it's better to say it's the promise we most often sacrifice. We are often so good at keeping our commitments to others and yet fall flat on our face when it comes to the commitments we make to ourselves. And if we can't keep our promises to ourselves, how will we ever keep our promises to each other? The commitments we make to ourselves serve as the foundation for the pledges we make to those around us. If we break our commitments to personal physical health, we sacrifice the strength to support others. If we cheat on our promises to personal spiritual health, we lose our ability to serve and see needs greater than our own. Those who can't promise kindness and forgiveness to themselves are rarely able to extend kindness and forgiveness to others.

Cont'd on page 3

Our Spiritual Exercise cont'd...

Our spiritual exercise this month honours this sacred interdependence between staying true to oneself and staying true to those around us.

Here is a suggested spiritual practice for the month:

- ♥Consider each of the 11 potential promises listed below and on the next page.
- ♥Identify one of the promises mentioned that most resonates with you. Which promise calls to you the most? Which promise is your heart most hungry for? Which promise have you wanted to keep to yourself, but regularly break?
- ♥Find a way to keep that promise front and center. Print it out and tape it to your office desk. Put it in your wallet or your purse. Write it in lipstick on your bathroom mirror.
- ♥Spend the month keeping it! Give yourself the gift of finally following through.
- ♥If you are part of Small Group Ministry team, come to your group ready to share your experience, what you learned about yourself and how the month was different because you remained true.

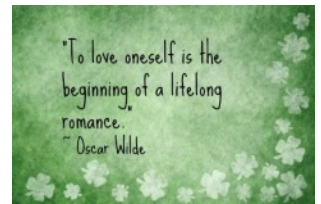
*Build on
your strengths,
work on
your weaknesses*
- Minh Tan

1. "I promise to myself that I will accept my strengths as well as my flaws."

Remember that you are here in this world to serve a purpose. You are worthy of existing, of believing and of living. For you to feel sincerely worthy, though, you should get rid of all your low self-esteem and instead adapt a self-loving and self--approving attitude. You can only do this if you display an unconditional acceptance of yourself.

2. "I will speak lovingly to myself."

A lot of people in this world take joy in bringing you down and destroying your sense of self-worth: don't be one of them. Be your biggest fan, not your number one critic. Speak encouragingly to yourself. Help yourself get up each time you're struck down; when worse comes to worst, you are going to be your own life coach.



3. "I will always keep in mind that I cannot control everything."

The idea that you can control everyone and everything in your life is utterly wrong. You can never live a happy life unless you accept this fact. People always have their own battles, businesses always have their own agendas and everyone has his own priorities. Don't despair too much, though. The reality is that you don't really need to control your external surroundings in order to live your life to the fullest. You just need to control your own way of thinking.

4. "I will forget the pains of the past but remember their lessons."

There's no use in re-living the pains, frustrations and anxieties of the past. You'll only make yourself feel worthless if you do this constantly. Instead of moping around and stressing about your mistakes, look at your past objectively and find out what you could have done better. Yes, you can't go back, but you can always move forward.



5. "I will learn to live in the moment."

Savor that bite and let the flavors melt in your mouth. Aim to listen and really understand what your best friend is talking about. Lend your presence to the people you love. Don't rush things and don't take them for granted either. Life isn't a competition—it's a wonderful adventure best taken at your

6. "I promise to myself to always see the fun and fulfillment in every activity I partake in."

Taking yourself too seriously can burn you out and frustrate you to no end. You're not supposed to end up tired, stressed and mad, are you? No way. Seek balance by combining discipline and play. In the long run, though, working for the sake of happiness is infinitely better than working for the sake of preconceived success.



7. I will make a point to notice when life is good.

It's easy to dwell on the dreary days, the bad workouts, the broken coffee machine and the horrible fights, but the antidote isn't incessant rumination. Practicing gratitude in spite of the negative is the best way out. Expressing thanks -- whether it's just calling the good to mind or writing it down -- can help you deflect bad experiences and cultivate a happier attitude. By promising yourself you'll look at the good side and being

thankful for it, you're automatically setting yourself up for joy.

8. I will listen to my body and my mind when I'm stressed out.

As HuffPost President and Editor-in-Chief Arianna Huffington points out, burnout is the disease of our civilization -- so how can we prevent ourselves from catching it? When something's wrong, our bodies tend to scream louder than our minds. It's important to tune into the warning signs of stress -- physical and mental. That includes paying attention to out-of-the-ordinary symptoms like upset stomachs, tight muscles and recurring dreams, and making a promise to tap into those red flags. You may be able to stop (and ultimately avoid) burnout.



9. I will strive to be aware of my facial expression and smile more often at everyone and anyone I meet.

Giving a friendly grin isn't just a simple gesture -- it's an instant wellness booster. Studies have shown that the simple act of smiling can increase your mood, and flashing those pearly whites to a stranger can help you feel more connected. By promising to smile at someone once a day, you're not only helping yourself, you're boosting the morale of others. And

doesn't that feel good?

10. I will be kind to myself.

Whether it's your appearance or your abilities, you deserve to be treated respectfully -- and that includes the thoughts you have about yourself. Research shows that self acceptance is paramount to a happier life, but it's the habit we tend to practice the least. Make a vow to be kinder to the person staring back at you in the mirror. Don't know where to start? Try saying these phrases to yourself each day.



11. I will give myself the same space to be human as I allow for others.

We're often our own worst critics when it comes to estimating our abilities, so make a promise to yourself today that you're going to take control of that

criticism. Shame-based thoughts get us nowhere, and soon they affect more than our capabilities at work. As licensed psychologist and author Margaret Wehrenberg points out, the labels we give ourselves are the ones that stick -- and it's better to accept what your best is than put down what you're not. "Observing without judgment can move you to see yourself in new, objective terms and can lead to greater understanding and acceptance of yourself without the negative labels," she wrote in a recent Psychology Today blog. "A consequence will be greater compassion toward others and more positive relationships."

Your Question



*No need to treat these questions like “homework.” You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find **the one** that “hooks” you most and let it lead you where you need to go. And then come to your Small Group Ministry Team meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.*

1. It's been said that our very humanity lies in the way we carry out our promises. How have you made yourself more human through a promise? What promise is asking you to renew your humanity right now?
2. What promises have you made to your spiritual life? We keep our commitment each day to work and earning cash? Why do the promises to our soul and spirit often take second seat?
3. What promise in your life needs to be broken? Are you keeping a commitment that is keeping you in a cage?
4. Do you still need to forgive yourself for breaking a promise?
5. When promises are broken, how good are you at "beginning again in love"? Has your ability to trust survived all those promises that went unfulfilled?
6. It's been said that we promise according to our hopes, and perform according to our fears. Is there a fear in your life right now that is getting in the way of a promise you want to make?
7. Do you over-promise? When you offer others your commitment, do they take it with a grain of salt? Are you ready to do something to change that? Do you even know why you do it?
8. Has time and age changed how you think about making promises? Are you slower or quicker to make commitments? Have your commitments grown narrower or more broad?
9. When was the last time you said “Yes!” and then watched the world take your hand and dance?
10. Do you identify with the concept of “covenant” as a commitment or promise between members of our congregation?
11. Treaty Day in Nova Scotia: October 1 marks the annual celebration of Treaty Day in Nova Scotia, commemorating the treaties between the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq peoples between 1725 and 1761. Given our theme for September of “Promise” it is an appropriate time to reflect on the connection between treaties and promises. These treaties were enshrined in the Canadian Constitution in 1982 and as such the treaties document promises made between the Mi'kmaq peoples and the government of Canada. What if anything does this require of you? Do you feel an obligation to see the spirit of these treaties upheld?

Recommended Resources

The pages that follow are not required reading. They include quotes, articles, on-line resources and a bibliography. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to jumpstart you, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “be a people of promise.”



Wise Words

promise n.

1. a declaration that something will or will not be done, given, etc.
2. indication of future achievement

synonyms: word, pledge, oath, covenant, commitment, potential, talent, possibility

promise v.

1. to afford ground for expectation
synonyms: pledge, vow, agree, commit



“Human beings are at our best when we make solemn promises to one another and try hard to keep them. We are the only animal that makes promises: we are a promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures. Our very humanity lies in the way we carry out our promises to our families, our coworkers, our neighbors, and our fellow members of the human family...to be genuine, a covenant must be a covenant of being. It’s not just about good words, but about *actions*.”

-Dennis McCarty on James Luther Adams

Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian and process theologian, wrote of religion and faith as being not simply ultimate concern but ultimate commitment. Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives. Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another: These are the things that relate to the deepest meanings of membership. They tell us what we belong to. And by doing that they tell us who we are.

At some level a statement of purpose contained in the bylaws, or even an affirmation read in services every Sunday, is nothing more than words on a page. More significant to the life of any community than the words it says it lives by are the affirmations (and negations) it actually lives by, expressed by its accustomed behaviors, customs, processes, and traditions. Implicit covenants are communicated almost

subliminally, primarily by the real leaders—who may or may not be the nominal leaders—of the community. These folk are the gatekeepers, the matriarchs and patriarchs, the people who are continually teaching “how we do things here.” This applies to all communities, not just congregations, but it certainly applies to congregations.

UUA Commission on Appraisal 2005

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a book on Christian fellowship entitled *Life Together*, has addressed this subject theologically. He writes, “Only that fellowship which faces such Disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both.” He calls the idealization of community a “human wish dream” that “is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive.” A commitment to building real religious community together is one of the significant meanings of church membership. How one reacts to one’s first disillusionment (and all the other disappointments that eventually follow) is an indicator and test of that commitment. Adversity is an aspect of every process of growth. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer only slightly, “Those who love their dreams of community more than the community itself become destroyers of the latter, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

“We must find ways to access knowledge that is in danger of being lost. ... We’re living in an age when our daily life is dominated by the [dullness of the] marketplace. ... The awareness that our intimate relationships are filled with meaning, that we are connected to and depend on the earth, that we have interests transcending our own personal lives – these dimensions are not factored into the values of the marketplace. [We must resist this.] We must remember...that we have received abundantly in our lives and that our presence matters. We must remember that we are a blessing- [that we are full of promise.]”

-Rev. Rebecca Parker

When did the future switch from being a promise to being a threat?

~Chuck Palahniuk

We promise according to our hopes, and perform according to our fears.

~François VI de la Rochefoucault

The one who promises everything is sure to fulfill nothing.

~Carl Jung

Those that are most slow in making a promise are the most faithful in the performance of it.

~Jean Jacques Rousseau

And that is just the point... how the world, moist and beautiful, calls to each of us to make a new and serious response. That's the big question, the one the world throws at you every morning. “Here you are, alive. Would you like to make a comment? [or a commitment? A promise?]”

-Mary Oliver

“Say Yes. Whatever it is, say yes with your whole heart & simple as it sounds that’s all the excuse life needs to grab you by the hands and start to dance.”

-Brian Andreas

You Reading This, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember?

How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?

What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world than the breathing respect that you carry wherever you go right now? Are you waiting for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this new glimpse that you found; carry into evening all that you want from this day. This interval you spent reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now, starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

~ William Stafford

“...[There is promise and power in those that have gone before us.] When we allow our spiritual forebears to speak,... we will discover potential mentors for our own religious pilgrimage. ...in every generation, each individual must discover and embrace those truths in his or her own way if they are to evoke the power to transform. This is the miracle of a ‘living tradition’ – the ability to create anew the wisdom of ... those who have come before us that can guide us as we encounter our own future.”

-Rev. Tim Jensen

Albert Einstein’s wife was once asked if she understood the theory of relativity. She replied, “No, but I know my husband, and I know he can be trusted.”

Unless commitment is made, there are only hopes; but no plans.

~Peter F. Drucker

When promises are broken, “we forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in Love.”

-Singing the Living Tradition, #637

It always seems impossible until it is done. Nelson Mandela

Articles



Bound in covenant

Congregational covenants are declarations of interdependence.

Rev. Victoria Safford 7/1/13 UU World Magazine Summer 2013, published by the UUA
Feature: Congregations, Personal Inspiration, Spiritual Practice, Theology

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law; this is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

James Vila Blake, 1894

In the first weeks of my first ministry in an old New England congregation, a woman came to see me. Nearly 90 years old, she was a lifelong member of that church; her parents had joined in the late nineteenth century. She didn't like change, she said. She wasn't sure that she liked me, or what she called my "point of view."

"Just remember," she said. "I have outlived all of your predecessors, and I will probably outlive you."

This woman was a dedicated political conservative in what had become a progressive community; she was a liberal Christian in a congregation that had known gracious eras of theological diversity and also some fits of intolerance; she'd worked for the U.S. State Department through three wars and for the American Unitarian Association through the merger with the Universalist Church of America. In this church of her childhood, which she'd never left, most votes at most annual meetings had not gone her way for the past forty years. She was no stranger to discord. In the end she did outlive me there: she died shortly after I accepted a new call in another state, and I was saddened by the news.

Over ten years we cultivated a fierce, respectful love for one another, and what I loved in her most was her commitment to that church, no matter what; her fidelity to it; the ferocity with which she paid her pledge each year, no matter how wayward the budget or insufferable (in her humble opinion) the sermons. She kept her covenant with that people, with their proud history and the bright promise of their future, and with the free faith tradition they embodied. I was a young minister then, and her way of being in relation, her integrity, taught me more about Unitarian Universalism than anything I'd learned in seminary.

Illustration (above): "The Search for New Myth (Broken+Radiant)," © 2004 by Daniel Nevins (Oil on wood).

I think of her often on Sundays, when we welcome our people each week, saying, “This is a congregation bound not by creed, but by covenant.” We are bound by covenant, each to each and each to all, by what theologian Rebecca Parker calls “freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence.” The central question for us is not, “What do we believe?” but more, “What do we believe in? To what larger love, to what people, principles, values, and dreams shall we be committed? To whom, to what, are we accountable?” In a tradition so deeply steeped in individualism, it becomes a spiritual practice for each of us to ask, not once and for all, but again and again, even over ninety years of life: How do I decide which beautiful, clumsy, and imperfect institutions will carry and hold (in the words of one congregation’s bond of union) my “name, hand, and heart”? The life of the spirit is solitary, but our answers to these questions call us to speak, call us to live, in the plural.

Seeing ourselves as bound in covenant is an old practice among us. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the *Arabella* toward a new life in New England:

Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. . . . [W]e must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other’s burdens as their own, to subvert their “superfluities,” for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of England’s rocky shore, but of establishing this commonwealth, failing in their errand to their “city on a hill.” The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”—to make and keep a sacred covenant together.



England’s rocky shore, but of establishing this commonwealth, vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of England’s rocky shore, but of establishing this commonwealth,

The organizing statements of the early Universalist and Unitarian congregations in New England echoed this Puritan ideal. The theology changed—Unitarian beliefs about the nature of God, Universalist beliefs about the nature of human beings—but the essential premises of covenanted community, the foundation of their polity, did not. What the Lord required, and what the people needed from each other, was willingness to meet their struggles in the plural voice. The church of which my 90-year-old friend was a member broke from the town’s Congregational church in 1825, and its founding statement carries a trace of its Puritan ancestry: “We covenant to walk together in the faith and order of the gospel. . . .”—even if that “gospel” was in fact a most radical reinterpretation of Jesus’ most radical message; even if by “order” they meant the relative chaos of religious pluralism. The covenant remains, in that particular church and deep in Unitarian Universalist tradition, to walk together across disagreements, dissent, and difficult discernments, cherishing the way we walk as dearly as any outcome. This is no easy aspiration.

Ethicist and theologian Margaret Farley makes this observation in Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing:

Civilization's history tends to be written in terms of human discoveries and inventions, wars, artistic creations, laws, forms of government, customs, the cultivation of the land. . . . At the heart of this history, however, lies a sometimes hidden narrative of promises, pledges, oaths, compacts, committed beliefs, and projected visions. At the heart of any individual's story, too, lies the tale of her or his commitments.

What covenants order our personal lives? Farley wonders about our daily human-scale commitments, about what our promises imply:

What did Sheila *do* when she married Joshua? What will actually *happen* in the moment when Karen vows to live a celibate and simple life within a community dedicated to God? What does Ruth *effect* when she signs a business contract? What *takes place* when Dan speaks the Hippocratic Oath as he begins his career as a doctor? What *happens* when heads of state sign an international agreement regarding the law of the seas? What *happens* when Jill and Sharon pledge their love and friendship for their whole lives long?



To act in these ways is to give our word. We send it out and it carries our integrity, our fidelity, our faithfulness, our truth. Our word is still ours, but it calls back to us from the heart of another person, or a circle of people, within which it now dwells. Such a commitment does not predict the future or set it in stone. It makes a certain kind of future possible.

Not long ago, I sat with a woman just a week before her wedding. "I can't speak those words," she said, referring to the well-worn text she and her partner had chosen months before: "Love is patient, love is kind, . . . love is never irritable, . . . love endures all things." "I'm none of that," she said, "and everybody knows it. I'm impatient, crabby, selfish. I didn't 'endure' my first marriage; who will believe me now? I don't want to stand up there and be a liar."

Underneath her nervous jitters she had uncovered a serious, essential tension: Would her vow be intended and heard as a statement of fact, mapping the future in one incontrovertible way, or as an honest, open aspiration? In the end she and her partner added a second reading, from Wendell Berry's book *Standing by Words*: "We can join one another only by joining the unknown . . . [Your union] is going where the two of you—and marriage, time, life, history, and the world—will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way." In making their promise, making their vow, giving their word, entering this holy covenant, they described not what they expected or needed to happen, but how they intended to walk hand in hand, the way they intended to go, and to be.

A covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping or guarded under glass in a museum. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas. . . . Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced by consequences but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we mess up.

Every Sunday in my congregation we repeat in unison the affirmation the Unitarian minister James Vila Blake (1842–1925) wrote for the church he served in Evanston, Illinois, in 1894, "Love is the spirit of this church . . ." Each week, quietly, aloud, I promise that I will "dwell in peace," and then I don't live peacefully at all: by Monday afternoon or Tuesday at the latest, I'm living fearfully again, or acting meanly or self-servingly. I say that I will "seek the truth in love," and then proceed to act quite otherwise, closing my ears and shutting down my open mind and heart, seeking instead the validation of my own narrow, safe opinion. I say, "Our great covenant is to help one another," and then I forget to do it.

I love singing the round in our hymnal based on Rumi's invitation, "Come, come, whoever you are." Whenever I sing it, I think of one line that doesn't appear in *Singing the Living Tradition*, however: "Though I've broken my vows a thousand times." Yet, because I am held in and hold to a covenant—with the people in my church and with others whom I love, with convictions I cherish and principles I mean to practice—I turn to a different page in the same hymnal. I sing the line, "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love," and I remember: a covenant is an aspiration to go deeper in relation to ourselves, to our best intention, to our God, and to each other.

Someone said to me not long ago, "Covenant is a promise I keep to myself, about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I mean to have, together with other people, and with all other living things." When we welcome babies in our church, when we welcome new members into the community, when we celebrate the love of beaming couples, when we ordain new ministers, we speak not in the binding language of contract, but in the life-sustaining fluency of covenant, from covenant, to travel together. We will walk together with you, child; we will walk together with you, friend; we will walk together with each other toward the lives we mean to lead, toward the world we mean to have a hand in shaping, the world of compassion, equity, freedom, joy, and gratitude. Covenant is the work of intimate justice.



Videos and Online

What Country Does the Most Good?

http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_anholt_which_country_does_the_most_good_for_the_world

The promise of a better world perhaps lies with the "Good Country Index" that Policy advisor Simon Anholt developed. Check out this talk about national behaviors and how we measure the good we do for the promise of a better collective future.

UU Sanctuaries, Washington, DC Video: The promise of love reaching us as we reach out to each other. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvlPa28cVfA>

Movie Clip On Protecting the Promise and Potential Within: *Will Smith with the best advice a dad can give to his own son. Don't ever let somebody tell you, you can't do something...*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPEdwaLQLag>

20 Promises to Your Dearest Sister

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/20-promises-you-can-make-your-dearest-sister.html>

Join our Soul Matters Facebook group to be established for Canadian UU's
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

We are already in paradise

There is no land promised to any of us other than the land already given, the world already here.

Rev. Rebecca Parker | 6/28/2010 | Summer 2010

UU World Magazine Summer 2010, published by the UUA
Reflections



“Where are we going?” “What is the purpose of existence?” “What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented?” Eschatology, from the Greek *eschatos* (last) and *logos* (word), is the theological term for “speaking of final things,” and popular forms of Christian eschatology abound: The end of the world will come in a cosmic battle of good and evil, and God will rescue the true believers. Popular versions of this eschatology capture the interest of millions of people, as evidenced by books such as the Left Behind novels.

Progressive people of faith have critiqued this version of Christianity and have created positive alternatives in three major forms. For handy reference, these three alternatives can be identified as Social Gospel eschatology, universalist eschatology, and radically realized eschatology. Each can be captured in a sentence: “We are here to build the kingdom of God on earth,” “God intends all souls to be saved,” and “Paradise is here and now.”

When I was a child, the Social Gospel meant that we as faithful Christians campaigned for integrated, nonrestricted neighborhoods to counteract racism in our community, marched for civil rights, and worked to end the war in Vietnam and advance economic self-determination for people around the world. Immersed in this tradition of Christianity, I

learned firsthand its strengths—and limitations. The hoped-for future perpetually condemns the present. The failure of the world to conform to God’s vision of justice and abundance is laid at humanity’s feet: We have not yet worked smart enough, been well-enough organized, convinced enough people, or corrected the flaws in our approach. Social Gospel Christianity has had a home in the heart of mainline Protestantism. It is a great vision, but perhaps it has flagged in zeal because weary spirits have labored for an ideal world but have neglected to attend to their own soul’s thirst. In the absence of a divine wellspring in the present, when the going gets tough, there is nothing to fall back on.

Universalists hope for the earthly realization of God’s dream, but they get there by a slightly different theological route: Their path responds to the ultimate inclusiveness of God’s love. “We are all going to end up together in heaven, so we might as well start learning to get along now,” the contemporary Universalist minister Gordon McKeeman explains. Heaven could be found in this world wherever love prevails and the gifts of life are stewarded with reverence and respect. But Universalist eschatology still places its ultimate hopes in God’s long-term intentions.

Radically realized eschatology offers a third way—one that holds promise especially for those who have found idealistic belief in progress too fragile a foundation for sustained social activism. It begins with affirming that we are already standing on holy ground. This earth—and none other—is a garden of beauty, a place of life. Neglecting it for some other imagined better place will be a self-fulfilling prophecy—it will make earth a wasteland. There is no land promised to any of us other than the land already given, the world already here.

If we can recognize this, our religious framework can shift from hope for what could be—for a “better world” to come—to hope that what is good will be treated with justice and love and that what has been harmed will be repaired. This is a different kind of hope. It could be called *responsive* hope, hope grounded in respect for what is here, now. “There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground,” Rumi wrote. Our framework of meaning can begin with appreciative and compassionate attention to *this* world, rather than imagining an ideal *other* world. Our first prayer can be one of thanks. Instead of striving to get somewhere else, our goal can be to fully arrive here and greet each day of life with gratitude, expressing hospitality for the mysterious goodness that is new every morning and engaging in compassionate care for the present realities of suffering, injury, and injustice that call for our active response.

Western culture’s eyes have followed Adam and Eve, clinging to each other, cowering and half-naked, turning their backs on the gates of paradise and wandering into an exiled existence. Those of us shaped by this culture can sometimes feel as lost as they and long to be readmitted to life as it was promised, somehow, somewhere, by someone or something. But what if it is we who have walked away? In our mad dash to get somewhere else, what if it is we who have separated from each other, from the garden, from God calling our name in the cool of the day?

From the perspective of a radically realized eschatology, the problem for Western culture is that we have become disoriented and think we are outside the garden when we are not. We are treating life here and now as if we were in a

barren wasteland, but we have profoundly misjudged our location. It is possible to reorient our imagination—as early Christianity did—and to see that the garden is neither closed nor lost but rather is open and present. We can wake from disillusion with a world that poet Matthew Arnold said “seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams” with “neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” With Moses, we can see the world lit up from within by the fire of God’s spirit and hear a voice calling out to us, “Take off your shoes. The ground on which you stand is holy.” We can recognize that the call to resist oppression arises from an epiphany of divine presence in the midst of life’s present realities.



Several summers ago, when Rita Brock and I were beginning to work on [Saving Paradise](#), we joined my brother’s family for a weeklong backpacking trip into the Ansel Adams wilderness, on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. To get to the trailhead, we took a Forest Service bus from Mammoth Lakes up to Agnew Meadows, and while the bus switchbacked up the narrow road through the pine forest my seatmate struck up a conversation with me. He’d overheard my brother talking with Rita and me about our theological work. He asked if we’d written any books, so I told him about our first book, [Proverbs of Ashes](#), which exposes how Christian ideas that the death of Jesus saved humanity have sanctioned domestic violence, sexual abuse, racism, homophobia, and war. He nodded. He said that he had been raised Catholic and that his wife was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Church was important to him.

“I can’t believe all the doctrines,” he said. “I never was comfortable with the bloody crucifix hanging over the altar—I couldn’t understand why we would be worshipping it. But I learned a way of life from the church that I have not rejected.”

“What is that way of life?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s simple,” he said. “Love your neighbor as yourself. Try to help, not harm. Do what you can to make a difference.”

He went on, “We do foster care for kids.” He said it was heartbreaking to see some of the violence, abuse, and deprivation these children have experienced. But he and his wife welcomed them into their home and did what they could. “Not even love can repair the damage sometimes,” he said.

He asked what book topic I was working on, and I answered, “Paradise.”

“Paradise,” he mused, and looked out the window of the bus for a few moments at the bright sky, the deep green pine forests, the alpine meadows coming into view, and, rising above them, the sharp peaks of the Minarets.

“Do you mean ‘paradise’ like where we are right now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Like where we are right now.”

We both gazed out the window for a few moments, breathing the pungent fresh air.

“This is enough,” he said.

“You know that because you help kids,” I said.

A cloud of thoughtfulness passed over his face.

“Yes,” he replied, “that’s right.”

We come to know this world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity and mutual care are the pathways into knowing that paradise is here and now. This way of living is not utopian. It does not spring from the imagination of a better world, but from a profound embrace of this world. It brings hope home to today, to this moment and its possibilities for faithful love.

Our hope need not be that New Jerusalem will descend from on high, into the smoking ruins of an earth destroyed by self-fulfilling prophecies of violence. Even less need our hope be that a righteous few will be raptured to another world. Nor do we need to look only to the future, laboring to serve an idealized vision of what *could* be. Our hope can be that from within the heart of *this* world paradise will arise. It will arise from the seeds of Eden sown everywhere; from the life that is within us and around us in our communities and cultures; from the gifts of our resistance, compassion, and creativity; and from the very stones crying out their praise for the presence of God who is here, now, already wiping the tears from our eyes.

Books

Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy

By Joanna Macy

A celebration of promise and hope over powerlessness

Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times

By Paul Rogat Loeb

Another celebration of promise and hope over powerlessness

The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book

By Don Miguel Ruiz

Four promises that can transform how we live our lives