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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Stay in relationship.

Given Us To Love

I'd forgotten that our opening hymn doesn't contain Rumi's entire poem. We sing "Come, Come, Whoever You Are" lustily and happily, but that other line turned up in a video this week: "Though we've broken our vows a thousand times, though we've broken our vows a thousand times." Sobering, like a gong tolling the truth.

What words could ring more true, more serious, more sad? Oh, the vows we've broken. Vows to ourselves. Vows to each other. Vows to be our best person. Vows to rise above being triggered. Vows to be kind first. To see the good in each other. Our UU principles (in the back of your order of service) seem so common-sense, so "Of course that's what I believe." We've broken those vows, too, a thousand times.

Rumi—poet, Sufi mystic, scholar of Islam in 13th century Persia—wrote religiously. His broad theme was union with what he called the Beloved, from whom he saw himself as being cut off. We know that distance. Distance from the love we need to live, and distance from one another. Whatever language and beliefs we hold, Rumi calls us to a unity of being that we readily understand.

Try Googling the "wanderer/worshipper" poem. Up comes not Rumi but a string of sermons, all from Unitarian Universalist churches! Sermons about welcome, religious diversity and living in joy—"Ours is no caravan of despair, hey, come on in!" How curious that this song, a favorite in our churches, celebrates key aspects of UU theology yet leaves out the line that tugs at our heart. This is the actual poem:

Come, come, whoever you are
Wander, worshipper, lover of leaving
Ours is no caravan of despair
Though you've broken your vows a thousand times
Come, yet again, come

It's said that we UUs don't address the dark side of humanity enough and that we avoid talk of sin and evil. We may not go to confession or pray for forgiveness of our sins, but that doesn't mean we are unfamiliar with brokenness or with letting ourselves down or with letting others down. It doesn't mean we don't know about how hard it is to love well, even as we thirst for love. Integral to this faith—Unitarian/One Mystery, Universalism/One Love—is living into our best selves and rising to the challenge building Beloved Community.

We start out with such optimism! The best of intentions. It's an old story. You meet someone—maybe a special someone—and only see their beauty. You move into the house of your dreams—and in that moment it's perfect. You walk into a UU church, and it feels so good. Like coming home at last.

Life can bring us a person or a place or a roomful of people that feels just right—comfortable, safe, an answer to our longing. What draws us in is hard to put in words, though the word “love” comes close. After all, as the song goes, “Love is what you’re after.”¹

I felt an “Aha!” when I first walked into a UU church years ago. I later described it as freedom—the casual atmosphere open, the absence of doctrine exhilarating, the down-to-earth language like a fresh breeze. The poetry unleashed longing and delight I didn’t know was in me. I didn’t miss a Sunday after that. Many of us not lucky enough to have been born into this faith tradition feel blessed to have found it. That sense of ease. Drawn in. Curious if not incredulous. Could church be like this? Was this a place to try...to stay...to receive? To belong?

What is this place we’ve come to? Who were you when you first came up the double staircase into this sanctuary?

You who are broken-hearted [writes UU Rev. Kathleen McTigue],
who woke today with the winds of despair
whistling through your mind, come in.

You who are brave but wounded,
limping through life and hurting with every step, come in.

You who are fearful, who live with shadows
hovering over your shoulders, come in.
This place is sanctuary, and it is for you.

You who are filled with happiness,
whose abundance overflows, come in.

You who walk through your world
with lightness and grace,
who awoke this morning with strength and hope,
you who have everything to give, come in.

This place is your calling, a riverbank to channel
the sweet waters of your life,
the place where you are called by the world's need.

Here we offer in love.
Here we receive in gratitude.
Here we make a circle from the great gifts
of breath, attention and purpose. Come in.²

At some point, reality sets in. Things you once loved in your most perfect companion become

¹ Kate Wolf, “Give Yourself to Love,” 1982.

² Kathleen McTigue, “This Place is Sanctuary,” *Shine and Shadow Meditations*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011, 54.

challenges: their calm unflappability begins to look like a cold distance, or their warmth and energy begins to drive you crazy. And the dream house—who knew that those beautiful old windows don't hold heat or that the car doesn't fit in the charming driveway when it snows?

And church? It gets complicated, too. More than a well appointed, classically beautiful building in the village center, more than the light and the views of the mountains, more than the grand piano or the new attic insulation that's keeping us warm, this is a place of people. People exploring their spirituality, wanting to make a difference in the world. People not always agreeing. People looking to get their needs met. People looking for love, and people given us to love. What makes this place tick is *you*.

We have joyful moments. Social justice moments: a new member was thrilled about the upcoming Nashua event about dismantling white privilege—scholarship money is available if you want to go. It will be a timely follow-up to the Book Group's service inspired by the book "Waking up White." And this just in—UUFES will be welcoming an acclaimed anti-racism educator to our pulpit in April!

We had a moment of joy the other day when Annie Provenzano came having finishing creating our new banner. The subject of this historic building came up. "I almost bought it once," she said, apartments on her mind, "and am so glad I didn't because then...I wouldn't have *this*." The joy of community.

We weather challenges, too, like any other community. With the best of intentions—and we're all good people—we misunderstand other. Hurt each others' feelings. We struggle with change and don't always know where to put our energies for the good. While we strive to use our best grown-up skills, we sometimes call up old tricks. We speak hurtful words. Sometimes we want to just run away from it all. I certainly have more growing up to do. How about you?

Boston family therapist Terry Real talks about five losing agendas for people in relationships.³ They're as relevant to communities of faith as they are to couples. The first losing agenda is *the need to be right*. As good as being right feels, no one wins "when the discussion...tips over into self-righteous indignation." The second losing agenda for people trying to get along is *controlling* the other person—controlling doesn't bridge the gap, it widens it. *Unbridled self-expression* is the third losing agenda in relationships, sharing "everything that crosses your mind, without reflecting on the impact it will have on [others]." The fourth losing agenda is *retaliation*. Right? And the fifth is *withdrawing*, running away—painful and more damaging than staying in relationship and communicating. Sometimes, we need to take a break. Know that if you do, we will miss you and welcome you when you return.

A story about staying in relationship. Picture a crowded workshop in a convention hall, the moderator a middle-aged woman. She stands in front, beckoning—a hand outstretched, palm up. It's General Assembly, the annual gathering of any and all UUs. I look up to this activist, a leader who works tirelessly for racial justice.

³ Terry Real, <https://clintonpower.com.au/2013/06/biggest-losing-strategies-used-by-couples/>

The topic of the workshop is the Black Lives Matter banner which many of our churches display. Panel members representing different churches tell their stories. Then the moderator opens it up to the floor, inviting people to come forward if they wish to speak into the mike. Hands go up. Though most participants are white (most UUs are white), she calls on the people of color. If only white hands go up, she waits.

You know, giving people time and trust, giving them space creates an opening.

By the end of the hour and a half, we have heard only from people of color. How rare to witness the white majority, used to commanding available air space, in the background and to feel the impact of simply making space for everyone in the room.

The image that remains is of the leader leaning in, as if in offering. To each person coming forward to speak, she offers a hand of gratitude afterward, subtle and easy to miss. I doubt many people notice, the gesture small and not about her. Occasionally someone responds with a handshake or nod. Mostly, they walk right by her.

But her stance says volumes. “I am here for you. You can count on me. I will stay in this work with you.” All has faded, the stories and opinions, but for that image of offering, of the person with the most power in the room giving herself to the possibility of connection—giving herself to love.

A circle of local folks recently gathered here to remember a friend who had died. Katy Thompson, owner of The Other Store down the street, later commented on the quiet of this space, quiet in the center of this village. A few days later, pianist Ellen Schwindt offered an evening of music as meditation here—this place, as she put it, “outside the commercial space.” Yes, this building is quiet, lifted, away from it all.

But UUFES is more than the building. It’s what happens when the singularities of everyone here find expression. Together, you create something greater: community. People given to one another to love.

Rumi’s field comes to mind: “Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing/and right-doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” May this be that place. That place where we learn to be together, in community. Here, we take off our armor at the door. We climb the stairs hopeful, curious, open to possibility.

Here we gather. We bring our joys, our pain, our rough edges. We bring our patience and passion. Let us stay in relationship—in our homes, in our relationships, in our work for justice, and right here in our dear Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes—firm in intention, our hands outstretched in love.

So may it be.