

Imagine waking up one morning to find three toilets littering your front lawn. That's what one selectman from Sudbury discovered a week after a particularly contentious town meeting a year ago. According to the account in today's Boston Globe, "What should have been a routine meeting last spring to choose the next chairman of the Sudbury Board of Selectmen devolved into a heated debate of personal attacks that left many residents shaking their heads in disgust. ... [Townspople] are upset about the acrimony that has divided this upscale town. Over the past few years, there have been accusations of open meeting law violations, suppression of free speech, using private e-mail accounts for political gain, and name-calling." (*By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts Globe Correspondent May 03, 2015*)

All of that happened a year ago, and matters haven't improved much. But hopefully that's about to change. Sudbury's interfaith clergy group called in the Harvard Negotiation & Mediation Clinical Program at Harvard Law School and asked them for advice on moving "toward more civil discourse." Residents will hear the results of the "Sudbury Listening Project" this afternoon. The Globe quotes the Rev. Richard Erikson from the clergy group as saying "My hope is for a more positive and constructive public dialogue in town. I think our clergy association models how people with significant differences can gather with great respect and even admiration for each other. There is no animosity or rancor. I'd love to see Sudbury get to that place where in no way are our differences muted, but they are discussed in a positive and constructive way."

When we gather to govern ourselves, things can get broken – and apparently stay broken for years. Why is this? Why Sudbury of all places, why in our schools and congregations? Gilbert Rendle, a well-known congregational consultant says, "[We] live in a culture that values individualism over relationship. The needs and preferences of the individual dominate; individuals see themselves as the final arbiters of what is good and true. ... In this environment, where 'my truth' outweighs 'our relationship,' we should not be surprised that we have been experiencing a marked decrease in civility. [That's right people, Rendle is saying we can't say whatever we want when we gather if we want to accomplish anything.] Congregations can easily contribute to this cultural depression by over-focusing ... on individuals' preferences and arguing about who is 'right' rather than carefully discerning [a] call to mission. (ix)

I've been thinking about McTigue's large and strong and beautiful wall because our Parish Committee has been engaged in some pretty constructive holiness this past year. In doing so, they've been paying attention to their level of discourse. In addition to making decisions on our behalf, they are also working on a board covenant, or a promise they make with one another on how they want to be together as they do our work. Corporations and nonprofits call these covenants "relationships of mutual commitment." They like them because guidelines make it more comfortable to disagree while they're setting directions and making decisions. The idea is when board members feel free to debate without rancor until a decision or a direction is made, the board avoids complacency and mistakes made out of ignorance. Everything that needs to get on the table gets on the table. No one holds back from saying something because they're afraid they'll offend someone. They've promised not to give offense or take offense, and so they can listen and understand each other. A covenant is a practical, spiritual and foundational commitment to working relationships. We are all human no matter what we do, how much money we make, or where we live. And we carry all of our hot buttons, our irritations, with us wherever we go and whatever we try to do when we gather in groups.

"There is a place for [each and every one of] us, that our gifts – the shape of our minds and talents, the angles of our interest and concern – fit the needs of the world the way my neighbor's stones anchor

themselves ... ." I like that image: mending a broken town, the broken world, mending ourselves and each other, and doing so by using balance and purpose and coherence rather than any artificial mortar. If the image of a wall is too divisive for you, think of an archway or a mosaic. Each individual piece has a role to play in bearing the weight of reality, and becoming a thing of lasting beauty. What is it that enables the wall or the archway or the mosaic to hold the shape and bear the weight? In McTigue's metaphor, that thing is our unique gifts. In my metaphor, that thing is relationship. They all hold fast because of the relationship between each of their unique parts and their unique dimensions. But the catch is, we have to want to let ourselves fit into that something that might be larger and stronger and more beautiful.

How many of you have meeting guidelines, at work or in other parts of your lives? This promise is a bold move and not to be taken lightly. And when it's done, group members agree to abide by the promises they make to each other, or not be in the group. Does every board *have* to do this? No, but it is common to do so. And those that do so tend to make better progress. Our Parish Committee has taken the year. New members to the Parish Committee will have a basic covenant to work from, and they may decide that when the Parish Committee reconvenes in the new church year, they will fashion a new promise to one another out of the foundation of the old one. They will fit themselves into a new wall that bears the weight of what we mean to be in the world. And the balance and purpose and coherence that will make that work will be keeping in right relationship with each other.

Now, you might be thinking, why do we need to be learning a new buzzword, "right relationship," why don't we just focus on our principles? What's printed in our hymnals? There are seven principles which Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote; they're printed in the front pages of our hymnals:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Heady stuff, lofty stuff no doubt. They do feel like a breath of freedom. My idea of a perfect world would be one in which all people of all faiths or no faith can aspire to live these principles. I'd plaster them all over the walls of the Sudbury Grange. There are some great words there. Respect, conscience, democracy, responsibility, acceptance, equity, dignity. Great words, righteous words.

What's missing? Obedience – that one for sure. Our faith doesn't call for obedience. But there are also other words that are missing that perhaps *should* be there and perhaps *may* be there in the future. They are the promises we will make to try and stay in relationship with each other until we work things out. Religion after all comes from *religio* or the ties that bind us together. I see one word right at the beginning and just before our principles that speaks of binding, that's covenant. There are other words that would work: words like trust, words like reconciliation, words like love. Where are the words that will get us from where we are now to that perfect world in which we live out those seven principles?

Covenant, trust, promise, reconciliation, love – these are relational words, aspirational words. What do they have in common? These are things we have to learn from one another and earn from one another. We have to learn from one another what we need to stay in relationship. And we have to earn the right to stay in relationship by committing ourselves to this "engaged holiness."

How many of you have done the trust fall exercise? [story of Tony Lorenzen and the youth group] When I'm getting ready to fall into your arms, without a backward glance, when you and I are carrying a heavy load, when we're trying to make a tough decision, I don't want you to affirm my inherent worth and dignity, I want you to catch me, I want to trust you! Our principles help us to be in the world; but what helps us to be with each other? Living in right relationship is one way to get there. And when we get there, it's the process of renewing those vows, so to speak.

What is "right relationship?" Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith: "By 'right' we don't mean 'right and wrong.' The word in this context refers to being in an appropriate, healthy... position in relationship to others. ... These relationships are characterized by honor, respect, love, and care. Right relationships are creative, mutual, and generative; life-giving things are birthed. When we are in right relationship we embody these ... ways of being with each other. ... A façade of love and the exterior trappings of civility are not enough." (7) Pretending to care about each other is not enough.

Being in right relationship means we are committed to knowing ourselves and getting to know each other deeply; knowing each other's values, trusting each other not because we agree but because we know we'll work hard to get to the best solution we can. Like Rev. Erikson says: "[to] get to that place where in no way are our differences muted, but they are discussed in a positive and constructive way." Being different is not a handicap but an asset, because we will have to work at our accomplishments. Earning each other's trust is key, and it's not as easy as it sounds. We *want* to be different. We want our faith to make a difference in our lives, we want our faith to make a difference in the world. The stakes can get pretty high. Without that commitment to right relationship, we clash and get disappointed and isolated.

The Rev. David A. Miller serves our sister church in Encinitas California. He offered his "Reflections on Right Relationship" in a Facebook post last year. Before becoming a minister, he was a management consultant. Now, imagine you are in a board meeting, or a town meeting, or a hockey club meeting and you are seriously irritated by the conversation around you. Miller says to take a deep breath and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I assuming the good intentions of the other?
2. Am I communicating directly with the person with whom I am having an issue?
3. Am I resolving issues or am I spreading them through gossip, anger and/or frustration?
4. Am I reflecting on what personal wounds, issues, and tendencies of mine that are contributing to the issue?
5. Am I willing to be an active participant and to work in good faith to clear up issues?
6. Am I projecting on to someone else through my own framework what they are thinking or doing vs. engaging them and asking them to share their thoughts and story?
7. Am I actually trying to live the principles and values of Unitarian Universalism by acting with compassion, respect and a high value of our interdependence?
8. Am I actively listening to what others are saying and not formulating a response or the next comment or question while they are talking?

9. Can I let go of my need to control the situation?

10. Can I graciously leave space for others by letting someone else speak first or by not speaking my mind if the point has been raised or made already?

11. Can I help lift up the life of another or the group in my words and actions?

12. Can I have disagreements with an individual or group, do so in love and respect, and continue to stay in community?

13. Can I take into account the importance of the task in relation to the importance of the relationship?

14. Can I reflect on how my attitude and actions contribute to the tone of our community?

15. Am I willing not to have to be right?

16. Am I being the change I wish to see in the world, and that means really acting the way I would like others to act?

17. Am I willing to be changed?

18. And finally, can I remember to ask the question, "What is the most loving thing I can do or say right now?"

Organized religion asks us to be part of something greater than we are alone. It asks that we let ourselves fit into the larger construction. It asks that we aspire to be our best selves, and in so doing that we offer up some of that in our relationships with others so that the congregation can be greater with us than it is without us. It asks that we make a sacrifice of that which keeps us apart – our pride, our hurt feelings, even some of our independence – until we reach clarity about our mission and what we need to do together.

Living in right relationship also asks that, if we are not able to do and be these things because we are human after all, then let us step back and receive the help from our beloved community until we can. There will always be another larger, stronger and more beautiful thing that must be built, and our turn will come. It will always be so.