Of Convents and Covens
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Last time I was living in Maine and there was a school shooting the world stopped. It was 1999 and Columbine High School had just witnessed a kind of violence few could even imagine. The news covered and re-covered the story, looking for angles, explanations, anything.

Last week there was barely a hiccup. *Oh look, another school shooting. That's really too bad. Pass the salt, please.* We all know why. After repeated exposure we lose our sensitivity. After repeated exposure we are no longer shocked, just horrified, and then not even horrified, just sad. This is part of how the world is, we say, crazy and painful, but it's just like that.

I do it too. Growing up in the suburbs of New York City, drug and gang violence, murder and mayhem were part of the daily palette of possibilities. Unlike farm harvests of grain and animals, slaughter in a city has no fundamental purpose. It doesn't really sustain anything. It doesn't make the world or the neighborhood better. It just is. After eighteen years of normalizing threats and attacks and fear, watching TV and reading the newspaper, I was pretty hardened when I had to be. I arrived in rural Minnesota for college and my life started changing. When the movie Pulp Fiction came out, it sickened me. When, a number of years later, I moved in with a television again, I found that my stomach for violence was almost completely gone. I could no longer sit and watch people suffer. It made me sick.

My sweetheart will tell you that it makes finding movies to watch very difficult. But I like it. It is right for people to be repulsed by violence. It is right to stop mid-sentence and mourn. It is right. It is human.

Understanding humanity is an important part of living in community, and Benedict did it well. St Benedict was a sixth century monk whose legacy includes the Rule of Benedict and the resulting monastic communities known as Benendictines. His Rule was only one of many available in the early Christian church, but his was uniquely reasonable and even-handed. At the time, monks had taken to one-upping each other, trying for the most ascetic possible lives. You sleep sitting? Well *I* sleep standing! On a bed of nails! While holding a millstone! On a ten day fast!

Benedict rightly believed that his monks would be no good to each other or to the world if they were ill and weak from sleeplessness and hunger. So his rule calls for six hours of sleep in the summer and eight in the winter, regular meals, and a strangely socialistic concept of to-each-according-to-his-need. He believed that each person should make do with the least possible, but he recognized that the least possible would vary. For farmers, a straw mattress might be excessive luxury, while for former royalty, a straw mattress might be intolerably uncomfortable. In the section entitled, *Whether All Should Receive in Equal Measure What Is Necessary* it says,

> It is written, "Distribution was made to everyone according as he had need" (Acts 4:35). We do not say by this that respect should be had for persons (God forbid), but regard for infirmities. Let him who hath need of less thank God and not give

> way to sadness, but let him who hath need of more, humble himself for his infirmity, and not be elated for the indulgence shown him; and thus all the members will be at peace.
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> Above all, let not the evil of murmuring appear in the least word or sign for any reason whatever. If anyone be found guilty herein, let him be placed under very severe discipline.
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> --Rule of Benedict (http://www.kansasmonks.org/RuleOfStBenedict.html)

You might notice that it doesn't say what exactly constitutes severe discipline. The Rule is often flexible by omission. According to Kathleen Norris in her book *Cloister Walk* (Riverhead Trade, 1997, p. 17) the flexibility is deliberate. The written word is much harder to change than custom shaped on a written frame. We of this culture and generation like words because they help us feel secure, like the world is predictable. It's a false security, but we cling to it. Unfortunately, that can make it hard for a living tradition to breathe, because that which is written cannot be changed by common understanding—it must be subject to editing and argument. Somewhere there is a balance: Benedict did write 99 pages of rule, but it has not grown into a sixteen volume encyclopedia since his death around 547 CE. The Benedictines' restraint is impressive.

It is interesting that monasteries house people we call monks, a word which has roots in monos, meaning alone. Convents house nuns, a word which shares roots with nanny—mothers and grandmothers and tutors. And convents share their etymology with conventions and covenants and covens, all of which refer to gathering, or coming together.

At one time both convent and monastery were gender-neutral words, used to talk about religious communities for either men or women. (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php) Over the years they evolved and diverged, convents for women and monasteries for men. Women together and men alone.

Like many dichotomies, this is a false one. There is no earthly reason why women must be in community to be deeply religious, or why men must be in solitude. In fact, women like Theresa of Avila have done deep spiritual work in religious solitude, and communities like the Benedictines have become a strong standard for the vowed religious of any gender. Every so often we'll have a visitor here who tells me that the service was nice enough, but really, they're more fed by a long morning of kayaking.

Some of us really are committed to the solitary religious life, and the spiritual practices which form the backbone of such life. I cannot in good conscience judge someone for choosing a deliberate and well-considered spirit life simply because it is different from mine. So when someone gives us a good try and cannot find the nourishment here that they need, I honor their choice. That means that when people stay, I know that they are partly here for the community, for the connection and the interrelationships that undergird our very being here.

So much of our spiritual work is about relationship. The Golden Rule, found in many forms in many cultures and faiths, calls us to right relationship, not with an extraterrestrial god but with each other. The heart and soul of our work is about those around us.

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convents and covens
Leela Sinha

In 1997 I was newly graduated from college, and my then-fiancé and I were camped in the servants' quarters of the Brookline, MA parsonage, he attending his classes at Harvard Divinity School and I working through a temp agency in Fleet Bank's Copley Square offices while we looked for more permanent housing. The advantages of living in Brookline and working at Copley were readily apparent: commuting by public transit, easy access to farmers' markets, fascinating people-watching, and a wide variety of shops, should I need anything. I was also working next to the main branch of the Boston Public Library—dangerous for my lunch hours, but an incredible gift.

One lunch hour when I couldn't stand to wander the halls of corporate buildings any longer I ducked into the library lobby, only to stop in my tracks. They had mounted an enormous photography exhibit. Eight-foot-high panels were hinged into three-sided freestanding displays, each side devoted to a single artist. One photograph, I think it was from Japan, was of a transvestite, with the title, "The Nail That Sticks Up Will Be Hammered Down". Our culture here professes to embrace individualism, but as any high school student can tell you, that's not always the way it works. Convention and conformity can be critical unspoken values here. We need to be honest about our relationships with each other—we matter, our actions matter—and work for more consistency in honoring difference. Many of our congregations feel like unsafe places for Republicans or for those somehow connected to the military. We say we are very open to those who are open-minded. Are we? Can someone who passes among us for years, hiding a military background in fear, be considered close-minded? If we are not that open-minded, how do we reconcile that with our beliefs? If we are, how do we live it out better? We are a gathering of religious people, and sometimes we have wildly different values. How are we in community with those who are different from us? Are some of us so accustomed to being in the minority that we have forgotten the skills of the mindfulness incumbent on those with power? Perhaps we need to consider what power looks like when we hold it, so we can consider how we want to be when it rests in our hands.

How else would we like to be?

How else do we minister?

What behaviors would bring us closer to the ideals of this group?

It's all well and good to say that we're human, we can't be perfect, but the truth is, we can be closer to perfect than we are now, and that's compelling. That idea of approaching our ideals is a great motivator. We think our ideals are, well, ideal….so the possibilities in a world where we can get closer to our best possible selves are vast.

Ed Friedman, (Generation To Generation, 1985, Guilford Press) a rabbi and a scholar, pioneered the idea that all congregations act a little bit liked families. Previous research had shown that a family is all interconnected, such that whatever you change in one person affects everyone else. Furthermore, the group as a whole resists change, and will respond as a whole to prevent or reverse it. This will happen even if the individuals would ordinarily act very different, and even if they in theory support the change. Now sometimes this resistance can lead to very strange results, like when an alcoholic starts down the path to recovery and the whole family who says that they're concerned about the drinking acts in subtle ways to obstruct the recovery process.

Systems, more than cats even, love to stay the same, no matter how unhealthy they might be. The kinds of unpleasant behaviors that can come from what I'll call systemic inertia range from the subtlety of non-cooperation to the agony of full-on multigenerational fights and grudges.

So if we know this about ourselves—that we are vulnerable to irrational and unhealthy patterns--and we also hold ideals so high that we cannot possibly achieve them fully and still be human, then what's a congregation to do? How do we avoid the lurking spectre of good people in good faith gone horribly off-course?

We work and if we pray, we pray, we develop spiritual practices and nurture ourselves and each other, we get ourselves training and learn new patterns of behavior…and we covenant.

Covenant is an old word, an ancient word, one with a clear lineage back through English to Latin. There are a LOT of words in its family: from convent to coven to convene and convention. Every one of those words echoes two ideas that must be as old as human existence: venire: to come, and con: together.

To come together. I try not to lean too hard on the dictionary for my sermons, but this one is so compelling: to come together. Like Religion: religare, to re-bind, it is at the center of how we are religious. Unlike most other faiths, it is not a creed which binds us. We do not have a creed around which we gather. At the center of our religious life is the idea and practice of questing in community: connected, but independent, living in tension between the individual and the whole. Because this is the way we practice our faith, and because we are human, we need agreements about how we will act, agreements that guide us and call us back to our better, more holy way s of being. We must take the opportunity to let our higher selves guide us in our life together. Those agreements are nearly as old as the communities which make them. Covenanting is an ancient process.

Like most things which originated in the ancient world, covenanting should not be undertaken lightly. Like John Proctor in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, in the end all we have is our name, and the word that we give on it, because our names represent ourselves, the whole of who we are. If a covenant is something that we are going to put our name to, we had better feel as confident as John Hancock did, confident enough that if our name were recognized across a crowded room, we would be proud that people knew about it. Signing a covenant is not without some risk, for we thus voluntarily submit to the watchful eye of the group. We freely enter into an agreement to be or do things a certain way and if we don't do them, we are agreeing that the community can call us out on it.

The power of the community is strong. The covenant makes it stronger. But it also gives us authority to speak up as individuals. With one stroke we both relinquish and claim our individual power in the community context. Like Benedict, we must be very careful what we put in our agreement, and less is more. This is not a legal document. It is binding only in the court of our own hearts, and in the context of the congregation. But it is at our very core.

Covenant is at our coeur—at our heart—as a religious body. Without creed or theology to unite us, we rely on common practice. Far from allowing us to be a religion of thinking, it makes us a religion of *doing*. What makes Unitarian Universalists? Not a common faith, but a common pursuit of faith. Not a common thought but a common set of tools, and a shared commitment to using them. Not a solitary quest but a quest in community.

Our association of congregations is formed around a covenant, and our memberships are, too, although often we don't say that part. We have a responsibility to be clear about what that

covenant is. because when the covenant is unarticulated we each have our own version, our own understanding of our commitments and agreements within the congregation.
And then when the call for volunteers or money or ideas or participation goes out, it's not clear what we have to do.
Now I know, we don't want people doing things grudgingly. We want every gift to the community to be a gift freely given, and not everyone has the same resources. But it is still possible to write a covenant that requires engagement each according to her or his ability.
If we need more or can give less, let us be humbled by our infirmities.
And we need less or can give more, let us be thankful, and not give way to sadness.
But if we want this community to work, we all have to give.
Because we have this participatory process, this lay-led, congregational-polity and ministers who ask their congregations what passions we should pursue together, it starts with education. Other faiths often use the time to teach doctrine or creed, to tell people how the congregation believes and help them take it on. We instead need to give our new adults, our children, and our youth the tools and information they need: not only to explore their own beliefs, but also to participate in the conversations that make us who we are. More than most other churches, our congregations need education for the our covenants to work—or even exist. Our education ministry is critical to our religious and our spiritual lives, and it is our responsibility. In this congregation, like many others, there seems to be some kind of dichotomy: we want our children and youth to have a strong religious education and all the skills they need, but volunteerism is way down. This resistance to working with the children's religious exploration program confuses me. Are we not here to help each other grow spiritually? Do we not believe that community strengthens our faith development? Have we forgotten how to *share*? Our religious exploration program for children and youth needs a few more good people. We have been working under what I will call an "implied covenant" rather than a stated one, and perhaps that is part of the problem, but we are *all* responsible for the education that makes our religious heart beat.

So rising up before us is this infinitely complex and beautifully simple single question:
How do we dream of being together?
Because the difference between reality and imagination in this case is choice and practice and honesty and forgiveness.
Choice, practice, honesty, forgiveness.
We must choose how we want to be together. We must decide how to help our common life reflect our shared values, and put that possibility into action.
We must practice. These are learned habits of being. Sometimes they are uncomfortable, like nametags; sometimes they are obvious, like saying hello. Sometimes they are expressions of joy and possibility, like shared celebration; sometimes they are expressions of concern, like honest and graceful criticism.
Sometimes that practice leads us to hard places. And then we must be honest in ways that are challenging. Frequently we have to find the graceful words for the tough ideas. Sometimes we have to sit on anger until it becomes articulable. Sometimes we have to open our hearts to frightening change. Often we have to take risks.
And when we risk, when we try something out, we will eventually make mistakes. I make them. You will make them with me, with each other; *what did you think love would be like?* This is deep relationship we reach for here; the result of deep relationship is deep reward, but sometimes

also intense pain. In those times perhaps our first impulse will be recoil; to remain in right relationship, or in relationship at all, we will eventually have to work out what forgiveness looks like and move toward it.
If we choose a way, practice every chance we get, come from a place of graceful honesty, and respond to risk with welcome and mistakes with forgiveness, we can move into deeper, richer, more sustainable relationship each with the other.

covenants come down to six simple ideas:
what do we say, and how do we say it?
what do we hear, and how do we hear it?
what do we do, and how do we do it?
how are we intimate?
how are we private?
how do we make choices?

and all of them come down to one thing:
what do we believe, and how do we live it
--here
--now
--together.
The conversation is only the beginning.
blessed be and amen.