

What's in Your Backpack? by Rev. Doug McCusker

I won an award once for packing a backpack. I took a class on how to give effective presentations, and for my final presentation I demonstrated how to pack a backpack. I won the Best Presentation award. At the time, I was an avid backpacker. I had mastered the art of discerning what to take on a trip into the wilderness. I also had learned through trial and error how to most effectively load a backpack so that things could stay dry and the weight was evenly distributed.

As I packed my backpack in front of the audience, I explained that when you have to carry all your belongings on your back, you learn to value every item. Nowadays camping gear is made of extremely lightweight materials that use the latest technology. Equipment has been designed to take up the least amount of space. And yet there is still a limit to what one can bring on a trip. The most important consideration for a backpacker is still what to leave behind.

Sometimes, you regret that you left something at home. And sometimes you take things that you never use because it is unsuitable for where you are going. The idea is to be as self-sufficient as you can be with the least amount of baggage. In our spiritual journeys we go through the same process of finding the right balance between keeping and letting go of what we absolutely need in order to be true to our values and purpose.

Too often we don't know what is in our backpack or how we got what we have. No two backpacks are the same, and we all must carry our own burdens. But that doesn't mean that we are stuck with what we have been given, or that we travel alone.

Today, we are playing with the metaphor of the backpack. We asked all the students in the congregation to bring their backpacks so that we could put inside our hopes and dreams for their education and spiritual development. The talismans that we gave them are symbols of our support.

The ritual of blessing their backpacks is a way for them to know that they are part of a community that cares about them. We want them to know that they aren't alone. We are always in their backpacks with them. When the bully steals their lunch money, we too have been robbed. When their team scores the winning run, we cheer with them. When they struggle to grasp a concept we love them just the same. When they have an aha moment in class, we share their sense of wonder and awe. They are held by this community because they are one of us.

In this sense, we are all students with backpacks that carry our community's blessings. Our formal education and our informal lessons in the school of hard knocks are all opportunities to unpack and repack our backpacks. And let's not forget the importance of spiritual development within a loving community. These are all experiences that shape us into who we are meant to be.

This month, we will be exploring the concept of covenant. I think it is appropriate that as we return from our summer sojourns, we talk about one of the most important concepts of a free faith – covenant. In our opening reading this morning, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray tells us that Unitarian Universalists sometimes wrongly think that freedom of belief and the absence of a creedal test is the distinguishing characteristic of who we are.

But we could do that in isolation or as a secular organization. What holds us together as a religion is our shared commitment to join ourselves to something greater, to become a part of a community that is working to practice love, to dwell together in

peace, to seek knowledge and wisdom together, to find better ways to live our lives and live in the world. She says, "This, even without a creed, even without shared beliefs, is sacred, religious work."

The testament to a free faith is not our beliefs, but our shared loyalties and commitments; the promises that we make to one another in the pursuit of our lifelong learning. Religious freedom is not of much use or value unless it is used to explore together, the realities in our lives that we find most worthy of our faithful love.

Our task as a free church is to love one another so well that in our own study, discussions, disputes, consultation, care and more discussion that we might learn together how our actions jive with the universal flow of love that guides all life.

The real talisman that this Fellowship puts into all our backpacks is faithful love. It's that simple. We bless each other with our mutual love as we travel together toward a vision of Beloved Community. As committed members of this Fellowship we join into covenant, sign a book and pledge our loyalties to the spirit of love working in our own hearts and minds.

This summer, I had the chance to be a part of a covenanted community that taught me about the power of mutual love. In July, I was part of a delegation from this Fellowship that attended the Southern Unitarian Universalist Leadership Experience at the College of William and Mary. There were over 80 people in attendance.

On the first night that we met, we developed a shared covenant that everyone signed. It declared our shared loyalties, how we would treat each other, hold each other accountable for our actions and bring us back into covenant if we ever faltered. We recited the covenant every morning during worship.

All of the attendees were assigned to a covenant group of about 10 people that met each night to share our personal reflections on a particular topic. Here at UUFF, we call it Chalice Groups. They are an excellent way to get to know one another at a deeper level within a safe environment of mutual trust and accountability.

On the second day, one of our covenant group members decided to skip our meeting without telling anyone. The facilitator tried texting him, but he was nowhere to be found. Apparently, he drove off campus to do some shopping in town. Well, one of the things that we all agreed to in our covenant was to attend all meetings and to be on time.

The next day, our facilitator called this person to task for violating covenant. Everyone shared with the person that we were worried about him and that we missed his presence among us. He apologized and asked the group to accept him back into covenant. I thought, wow this is serious. The covenant isn't just a bunch of words; it's something to which we really pledged ourselves.

The following evening, a male member of the group came in after we had started and sat down on the lap of a young lady without asking. He laughed it off and then took his seat. About 10 minutes later, another member of the group who was clearly bothered, asked the group if she could share what she was feeling.

She called out the behavior of the person who sat on the other person's lap and expressed how hurtful and disrespectful it was to her. It dredged up painful memories of sexual harassment. Others agreed with her that his behavior was inappropriate. Unfortunately, the person who violated our covenant took umbrage with our criticism.

He said he didn't mean anything by it, he was just playing around and how dare we accuse him of being inappropriate. It didn't go well.

Apparently, he was a Vietnam vet who had been treated badly upon his return the states after the war. He shot back that we had no idea of what the real world was like and to care about such a minor thing showed how sheltered we were. He stormed out of the room. We were all speechless. We tried to resume our discussion, but a big elephant was hanging around in the center of the room.

About 15 minutes later, he returned to continue berating us. But no one took the bait. Remarkably we all explained to him that we loved him for who he was and we were sorry about what he had to go through in his life. But being in covenant means holding each other accountable for our actions, however uncomfortable it might be. Eventually, we wore him down with our love. He took his seat and shared some of the horrors that he experienced in Vietnam. We all listened and then one of the members suggested that we hold hands and then we all started singing the hymn *There is More Love Somewhere*.

He was carrying a very heavy load in his backpack from years of feeling rejected by his own people. We showed him acceptance and love. He apologized and we brought him back into our circle of covenant.

Someone else in the room shared that 4 years to the day he witnessed the tragic shooting at the Knoxville, Tennessee UU church, and that several of his friends had been killed. We never got back to the material that we were supposed to be discussing. Suffice it to say, there were a lot of tears shed in that room. The real lesson that evening, which I will forever carry in my backpack, was that covenant starts with words, but is forged with trust, accountability and love.

A truly covenantal relationship transcends separation and cultural differences. It is hard, sacred work to ground a covenant group, a congregation or even an entire society on such a foundation. We carry in our backpacks deeply personal stories of pain, disappointment, and rejection. We all long for a place where we can be among fellow travelers who will listen without judgment, lovingly hold us accountable and helping us through with trust, compassion and love.

In many cases, we can't even imagine the load that others carry. I can't imagine being a young girl in Pakistan who is denied an education for no other reason than that she was born a female; or worrying about whether my child will be detained by police just for being black; or living in a constant war zone; or calling the street my home; or having to deal with violence and abuse from the very person who says that they love me.

As a white, heterosexual male, I have privileges that I don't even understand. My backpack has all kinds of invisible treasures that came along just because of the circumstances of my birth. I have blind spots where I cannot objectively see things that are outside of my narrow perspective of the world. A fish has no idea what water is unless it one day jumps out and catches a glimpse of the sky.

But it is my task, to be in loving covenant with others who are different than me so that I may broaden my field of view. In doing so I become more aware of what is actually in my backpack. When I was 13, I visited my mother's home country of Colombia and I saw up close a level of poverty that I had never experienced here in the United States. Oh, it was here, in urban ghettos and native American reservations, but it

was invisible to me. I learned that we don't all start with the same items to take along on our life journeys.

That is why we as Unitarian Universalists covenant to work toward a Beloved Community in which accidents of birth or institutional barriers don't prevent people from sharing in the abundance of life. As an association of congregations, we covenant to affirm and uphold seven principles that define our vision for the world.

1. Inherent worth and dignity of all people
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
5. The right of conscience and democracy in our congregations and society at large
6. World community of peace, liberty and justice for all
7. Respect for the interdependent web of life of which we are a part

These are the loyalties and commitments in our lives that we find most worthy of our faithful love. Being a Unitarian Universalist is not a spectator sport or an intellectual exercise. Being in covenant means putting our faith into action and working in solidarity with those who share our vision of Beloved Community.

Being conscious of what we carry in our backpacks and what we have chosen to leave behind allows us to understand the struggles of others. Think about those items in your backpack that you would like to leave for the next generation. Think about the things that you will graciously retire as no longer helpful for the children of tomorrow. Live today with gratitude for all that you have inherited so that you may be a good curator to the living story of humanity. Blessed Be.