

“On Commitment”

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Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading I

Today’s first reading is from June Jordan, poet, activist, teacher, and essayist.

In addition to the traditional concept of true commitment that means you are willing to die for what you think is right, make equal space for the womanly concept of commitment that means you are willing to live for what you believe.

Part I: Traditional Commitment

In 2003, my mom got the idea that our family should take a long bike ride together. She had done the Lansing to Mackinaw 5-day ride the year before and she thought this would be a nice family adventure!

The annual event she had in mind is named the DALMAC for a founder, state Rep. Dick Allen, who led the first ride in 1971.

The DALMAC is an all-volunteer supported bike ride that takes place each year over Labor Day weekend. A supported ride means committed volunteers operate sag wagons, support and gear vans that carry everything, so riders don’t have to carry their supplies on their bikes. The volunteers also arrange meals, showers and campsites along the way. The DALMAC isn’t exactly an extreme sport, but it was something most of my family had never done before, including me.

So, we decided to ride: my husband, John and I on our lime-green recumbent tandem named Margarita. My brother, Greg, and his wife, Kathie. And my mom; all on single bikes.

Greg pulled their 3-month-old son, Jacob, in a trailer behind his bike. (My nephew, Jake, is almost 20 years old now!)

My stepdad isn’t a biker, but loves to drive, so he rented an RV and we were blessed with a private sag wagon and beds to sleep in each night.

We made a commitment to the bike ride, which meant a commitment to train for the ride. John & I logged hundreds of miles on Margarita in the Summer of 2003, seeking out hills so we could strengthen our legs and practice. We learned to share a bike, how to defer to the captain (the one in front) when we were the stoker (the one in back), how to stop together and how to start together. Lessons for life.

Those of us from Michigan always have a map available (hand). The ride goes from Lansing, MI to the Mackinaw Bridge. Michigan is pretty flat in the middle of the state where Lansing is, but gets hilly as you go north, and begins to look a lot like the Pacific Northwest-green, with hills and waterfalls.

Hills on a recumbent bike can be a challenge. We heard tales of “The Wall,” a steep hill on the route in Northern Michigan, just outside East Jordan. We didn’t know what the percent grade was, but the hill was legendary. We knew we needed focus, determination, and grit to meet the challenge.

Our spiritual theme for this month is “commitment.” As I reflected on this theme, I remembered this family adventure and the commitment we each made to ourselves, to each other, and to the adventure. What does it mean to make a commitment and how do we decide what we dedicate ourselves to?

When I think of commitment, I first go to a more traditional idea: that commitment means having grit, determination, focus, and endurance. It’s motivational phrases like: Don’t give up. Keep trying. Never surrender.

That’s what I remember from the bike ride. We needed endurance for riding 60-90 miles each day. We needed focus to stay on the course and to stay upright, especially on the downhills when we reached 40 mph on Margarita. We needed determination to continue when we got a flat tire, when John got stung by a bee, when it poured rain all day, and when the crosswinds just about knocked us over. This was not a commitment that we were willing to die for, but we were quite determined to keep our promises to family and to an adventure. We said yes and drew on the fire of commitment within us and between us to finish the ride.

This more traditional view of commitment, grit, determination and focus lends itself to an individualistic perspective. Each individual needs to have

grit, determination and focus to accomplish their goal. Yet none of us keeps our commitments alone. We completed the 5-day bike ride because we had support: someone to fix a flat tire, replace a broken chain, and to find a place for us to eat and camp each night. I remember that warm food, a hot shower, and a comfy bed were pure bliss.

So, while we may think that commitments are ours alone, our promises are always in context, and that context includes other people. Our commitments impact us, and they impact others. Some commitments we make with others, as part of a family, a team, or a faith community. We are interconnected and we are not alone, not in life and not in our commitments. We travel this road together.

Reading II

Our second reading is from Henry Nelson Wieman, professor, theologian and Unitarian.

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] tell us to what we belong. By doing so they tell us who we are.

Part II: Living Commitment

The more traditional idea of commitment suggests that we must be willing to sacrifice it all, even our life, for what we believe is right. Some commitments are like that; the people of Ukraine could relate. Commitments require some sacrifice, some demand that we make the ultimate sacrifice. Those of us with privilege aren't faced with that choice often, and it is real and true for some. But no matter the commitment, we sacrifice something.

Those motivational slogans like "never surrender" seem to suggest that we have only one commitment, when the reality is that we have many. Not only do we have many, but we have competing commitments. Some commitments are to people, including to ourselves. Some are to organizations, like a commitment to this faith community. Some commitments are to ideals, like the people of Ukraine fighting for their freedom and democracy.

Sometimes our commitments bump up against each other. I came of age in the 1970's during the height of second wave feminism. I grew up with the cry that women could do anything! While this was a liberating slogan, I noticed over the course of my life that it transformed from "You can do anything!" to "You can do everything!" to "You should do everything!" My generation and those younger have learned that we can do anything, and we can't do everything. We have to choose what we commit to, where we dedicate our time and energy.

When we choose, there is always a path not taken. An athlete or musician committed to their craft dedicates hours to mastering their skills and their art. That means they give up other things they could be doing, like deepening relationships or pursuing other dreams or interests.

Sometimes we choose a path that is a dead end or has twists and turns that we didn't expect. Sometimes we have to abandon our commitments, change our minds, turn around, turn back. Sometimes keeping one commitment means breaking another. These can be hard choices. When we choose, there may be regret, wondering "what if?," with grief for what could have been.

So, I believe part of the spiritual practice of commitment is noticing not only our own path, our own choices, but the choices of others and the choices of the communities we are part of. Who is suffering with a choice they had to make? Who is suffering by the choices we have made? Who is bruised and tending to the wounds of their choice, or lack of choice? Who had to turn back, either because they chose to or were forced to? We must notice and listen, offering compassion and forgiveness, for ourselves and for others.

At the end of that 5-day bike ride in 2003, my family joined hundreds of others to pedal across the Mighty Mackinac bridge at the end of the ride.

The 5-mile suspension bridge usually doesn't allow bikes and is rarely closed to auto traffic. It was a windy day, and the bridge was almost closed. We celebrated our commitment and our accomplishment.

And, on that day we remembered that there were people who didn't finish the ride, or who participated in ways they didn't expect. My sister-in-law, didn't ride all day every day-she had given birth to Jake just 3 months before, so was a new nursing mom. Her priority was commitment to her child and to her health. Others left the ride due to illness, injury or fatigue.

Their commitment was to their health and wellbeing. We can be cheerleaders for each other's commitments—and we can also be a support for rest and repair.

So yes, commitment is about grit and determination, focus and endurance. It is about saying yes! It also requires time to let go and mourn, to listen, to accept and forgive. It may mean admitting that we were wrong and trying something new. Commitment may also mean saying no, or I'm sorry, or I was wrong. In order to find our way back to our center, our home, we need compassion for ourselves and for each other.

In our reading, Henry Nelson Weiman says that our commitments, covenants and promises tell us to what we belong and tell us who we are. When we choose, we declare with our choice and our actions, who and what we value.

At its best, a faith community is where we practice who we want to be. It's a place where we can learn new skills and try them out. Where we can fail and be welcomed anyway, invited to apologize, atone and try again.

In a faith community, we are asked to commit ourselves to creating and living a vision and mission. We commit to support the community with our time, talent and treasure. We commit to be in relationship. We commit to live our covenant, to live the promises we make about how to be together.

So, this month I invite you to be courageous about your commitments. Notice what you have committed to, what you have chosen. Notice the commitments that bump up against each other. Notice what you have not chosen, the path not taken. And look underneath to notice your why, what motivates your choice and your commitment. How do you live for what you believe? How do you live your commitments?

My prayer for us all is that when we listen deeply, when we look underneath, at the center, we will find the spark of love. Love for ourselves, love for our community, love for this world.

May our choices and commitments reflect that love.