



November 5, 2023
Generous Accountability

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Rev. Mary Gear

Opening Words

Our opening words are from the report of the Article II Commission of the Unitarian Universalist Association which was published last Spring. The report fulfills the Commission's charge to revisit and revise Article II of the UUA bylaws that defines the purpose and values of the UUA. This part of the Association's Bylaws is the covenant between UU congregations that are members in the association. The Commission's work identified 7 core UU values, one of which is generosity. The Commission defines the core UU value of generosity this way:

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.
We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources.
Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

In the spirit of gratitude and generosity, come, let us worship together.

Story For All

“Too Much of a Good Thing” by Aaron McEmrys

Once upon a time, when the world was young, there was a great forest. The trees grew so tall and close together that the forest floor was always very dark. In that dark place, there lived many animals: squirrels, picas, skunks, possums, and near-sighted moles. The animals never went hungry, even in that dim world where almost nothing grew, for way up high in the canopy grew the most amazing berries.

The berries grew at the very top of the very tallest tree, where the Sun shone close enough to touch. Every night, the berries fell whenever the West Wind blew. They

dropped like soft rain on the dark ground below, and the animals ate to their heart's content.

Raven, who was between adventures, happened to fly over the great forest. He was tired from flying and from the beat of the warm sun on his shiny black wings. So he landed on the highest branch of the tallest tree to take a rest. His bright eyes, which were keen enough to count a single line of ants from the top of the world's tallest mountain, noticed the plump red berries almost immediately.

Now, he might not look like it – he's only two feet long from the tip of his beak to the end of his tail feathers – but that Raven can *eat*. By nightfall, he had gobbled down pretty much every tree berry he could find. When the West Wind started to blow, the animals of the forest waited in vain for the rain of berries to begin.

After a few hungry days, the animals of the ground sent a delegation of squirrels up to the canopy to see what was going on. On the very tallest tree they found Raven, his beak stained with berry juice. "Dear Raven", said the squirrels, "You are new here and so probably don't know it, but we all depend on those berries. Help yourself, but please leave some for the rest of us!"

Raven looked at them blandly. "Silly squirrels, don't you know who I am? I am Raven, Stealer of the Sun, Trickster of the Moon. Surely I, being so much more important than you, do not need to share! I will eat as many of these delicious berries as I please."

"But Raven! We will starve!" said one squirrel.

Raven sighed. "Well, I am not a monster, you know. Here is what I will do. I, generous Raven, will eat my fill of berries, but never fear! When I am full, I will let the extra berries fall to you."

"You will let the food we need to survive ... *trickle down* to us?" asked another squirrel. His brothers and sisters chattered nervously.

"Yes! In effect the berries will *trickle down*" Raven replied. "Don't worry, dear squirrels, there will be enough. This is the way of the world."

In the end, the dejected delegation had no choice but to turn tail and go back down to tell the rest of the animals what Raven had said. The next few weeks were hungry ones. Raven meant to not eat them all, but the more he ate the more his stomach stretched and the more berries it took before he felt full.

Soon, Raven's body didn't look Raven-like at all. From a distance he looked more like a bowling ball with wings. The slender branches that Raven perched upon began to droop under the bird's growing weight.

One day, as Raven saw just One More Berry he Had to Eat, he leaned out to get it ... Snap! Crack! Went the branch, and suddenly Raven was falling as fast as only a feathery bowling ball can fall. He flapped his wings desperately, to no avail. Raven fell and fell and fell, squawking "*Heeeeeellllllppp meeeeeeee!*" all the way down.

He hit the ground like a cannonball. The impact forced the loudest, longest burp in the history of the whole long history of the world out of his overstuffed body. This burp was so powerful that all the berry seeds that were in his overstuffed gullet – and there were hundreds of them – burst out of him like candy from an exploding piñata.

When the berries hit the ground, something extraordinary happened. Remember, Raven may have been a selfish fool, but he was also a *magical* selfish fool. The now-magical berries almost immediately took root and began to grow into mighty bushes all over the forest floor, each covered with delicious berries.

"Hurrah!" cried the squirrels and possums and picas and skunks.

"Yes, indeed, most definitely, hurrah" croaked Raven weakly as he climbed to his feet, his stomach empty once again. "Hurrah for Raven, Stealer of the Sun, Charmer of the Moon, and Bringer of the Berries. Hurrah for me , I absolutely did that on purpose."

The animals saw how embarrassed Raven was, and promised they would never tell anyone the real story of how it all came to pass. Raven flew off to seek out new adventures, and his story grew ever more outlandish. The animals of the forest never contradicted him, as they enjoyed the bounty of the berry bushes down low enough for all to reach. But Raven had learned at least one lesson – that sometimes you *can* have too much of a good thing, and that the good things of life are best when shared.

Reading I:

From writer, educator and activist Mia Mingus from "Dreaming Accountability."

For most of us, we have been taught to fear accountability and struggle to know how to conceive of it outside of punishment or revenge. Accountability does not have to be

scary, though it will never be easy or comfortable. And it shouldn't be comfortable. True accountability, by its very nature, should push us to grow and change, to transform. Transformation is not to be romanticized or taken lightly. Remember, true transformation requires a death and a birth, an ending and a beginning. True accountability requires vulnerability and courage, two qualities that we are not readily encouraged to practice in our society.

What if accountability wasn't scary? It will never be easy or comfortable, but what if it wasn't scary? What if our own accountability wasn't something we ran from, but something we ran towards and desired, appreciated, held as sacred? What if we cherished opportunities to take accountability as precious opportunities to practice liberation? To practice love?

Part I: Accountability

Can you imagine a community where accountability means something other than punishment? I admit that I had a hard time imagining it. My life experience has taught me that being held accountable usually means getting punished, kind of like getting feedback often means being criticized. Those of us raised in white, middle class US culture have been steeped in punishment that we call accountability. Think about the news lately of a former president and his legal difficulties. Many in the media say that they want him to be held accountable; what they mean is that they want him punished. We live in a culture of punishment, and we call it accountability. No wonder we have a hard time imagining that accountability could be anything different.

I started really thinking about accountability in seminary when I learned more about racial justice work. Much of the recent thinking about accountability comes from restorative practices in racial justice advocacy, although it applies everywhere. And I took a deeper dive into accountability after the experience of working with this congregation on a behavioral covenant last year.

We speak of Unitarian Universalism as a covenantal faith: we don't tell each other what to believe, we support each other on our spiritual journeys, and we make agreement about how we will be together on that journey. We call our agreements covenants.

This congregation has a covenant that was written many years ago in response to conflict. My first memory of the covenant here was of the entire gathered assembly reading it together at my first congregational meeting in December 2019. It had been a practice to read the covenant out loud together to begin these meetings, a practice that

was also in response to previous conflict. I remember it as the droning sound of people reading something really long, working hard to get to the end and get down to business. Don't get me wrong—the congregational covenant has some beautiful aspirational language. It's just not something that is easily remembered or is very concrete regarding how we agree to behave together.

So, last year I suggested we develop a behavioral covenant with specific language about how we will act with each other. A writing team drafted a behavioral covenant, and we had two after-service forums last Spring to talk about the proposal. Thank you to Martha Nicoloff, Jenee Wolfram, Helen Henry and Rich Kalman for their work.

The feedback on the proposed covenant was helpful, and the writing team made some changes. What was even more helpful was the discussions and questions: Why do we need a behavioral covenant? What is the intention? What happens if someone doesn't agree to the covenant? What happens if someone breaks a rule in the covenant?

There was a fair amount of pushback about adopting a behavioral covenant. And I must confess that I was surprised at first; I'd thought this process would be simple and quickly done. It was these questions that finally led me to this realization: Oh! We are afraid of accountability. This should not have been a surprise to me--of course we are afraid of accountability! It means punishment! Thank you for asking the questions. I so appreciate learning from you.

So, today I want to talk a bit about accountability and why it is a spiritual topic worthy of our attention as a faith community.

Mia Mingus, who offers our readings for today, has outlined a 4 step process for accountability. Mingus is a writer, educator and trainer for transformative justice and disability justice. She is a queer physically disabled Korean transracial and transnational adoptee who was raised in the Caribbean. I think it is important to name Mingus's identities so we understand that we are learning from people who have been hurt by people and systems. People on the margins know something about repair and restoration in ways that those in the center may not.



The first step of accountability according to Mingus is self-reflection. Mingus says that we must have enough initial self-reflection to know that we have done something hurtful or harmful and, most importantly, to know that we genuinely want to address it and make amends. Step one is to turn inward.

The second step is to apologize. This is how we demonstrate to those we have hurt that we understand what we did and what the impact was. For step two, we turn outward.

The third step is repair: making amends and rebuilding trust. We build or rebuild right relationship with those we have hurt. This step must be done in relationship; we turn outward. This step takes time, patience and intention, because restoring broken trust is not quick.

And the last step is changing our behavior. This is the hardest part of accountability, and it is the step that shows others that we really mean our apology and desire to be in right

relationship. It's the step where we need the most support, because we all know that changing what we do is hard, and may lead us to explore our own history and experiences. In this step we turn inward once again.

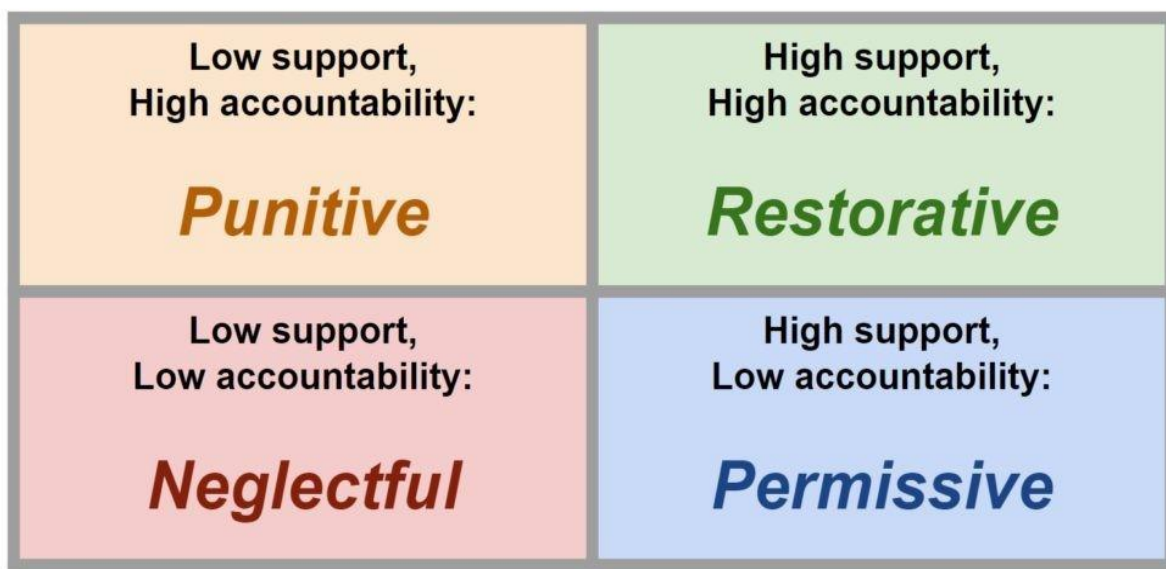
Each of these steps takes vulnerability and courage, for us as individuals and for us in community.

A hard thing about accountability is the uncomfortable feelings that arise in us. Our culture has a tendency to shame us when we make mistakes. Researcher Brene Brown has done a lot of work with the difference between shame and guilt. She describes it this way: shame is "I am bad"; guilt is "I did something bad." Repeat: shame is "I am bad"; guilt is "I did something bad." It's the difference between who we are and what we have done. The thing about shame is that it never leads to change behavior. When we feel shame, we shut down, put up walls and protect ourselves.

Guilt, on the other hand, can be a powerful motivator for change. When we have hurt someone, it is human to feel guilty and to want to do better.

The difference between shame and guilt is important in how we talk to ourselves and how we talk to each other. When we make a mistake and hurt someone, does our language suggest that we are bad or that our behavior was hurtful?

"Social Discipline Window"



Here is a model that I have found helpful for understanding more about accountability. It's called the Social Discipline Window and was developed by Paul McCold and Ted Wachtel, researchers with the International Institute for Restorative Practices. The framework is a way to show power dynamics in groups and communities.

Most of us are familiar with the Punitive box—high accountability and low support. We expect people to admit when they have caused harm, be punished, and repair the damage, but we give them little or no support to do so. This is our legal system, and it is how many organizations practice accountability. It's what I was taught—accountability is punishment.

One response we sometimes have to punitive systems is to increase support and decrease accountability. We offer support and we give a pass on being responsible for any harm someone caused. That's a permissive culture.

What restorative practices seek to do is offer high support and high accountability. For example, a restorative response would be: How can I help you acknowledge the hurt that you have caused, make amends, and change in the future? How can I help you restore trust and relationship?

Whenever we are in relationships and in community, we will disagree, we will make mistakes, we will hurt each other. That is part of being human. If we really want to create a community where we learn and grow, where we live ethically according to our values, and abide by our covenant, we must offer both support and accountability so we can restore trust and stay in relationship.

The more I reflected on accountability and our worries about a behavioral covenant, the more I realized that our worries are really a sign of our desire to be in relationship. And, I think that is good news.

I think that at the root of it all, we worry that if we make a mistake, if we hurt someone, we will lose our relationships, we will be banished from our community. Accountability as punishment activates our deeply human fear that we will not belong.

Safety + belonging + mattering = TRUST



Image by John Hain

I've shared before that we humans ask three questions in any situation: Am I safe? Do I belong? Can I matter? We fear accountability because we've known it as punishment, and we fear the punishment of not belonging. We humans are made for connection, so being disconnected is the worst sort of punishment. When we fear accountability as punishment, our basic human need for connection is threatened.

So, what if accountability wasn't punishment? What if accountability came with support?
What if we ran toward accountability as the sacred practice of restoring relationships?
What if accountability was the chance to practice liberation and love?

Reading II

Also from writer, educator and activist Mia Mingus on “How to Give a Good Apology.”

We need to move away from “holding people accountable” and instead work to *support people to proactively take accountability for themselves*. It is not another person’s job to hold you accountable—that is your job. People can support you to be accountable, but no one but you can do the hard work of taking accountability for yourself. Don’t wait until someone else has to bring up your behavior. Whenever possible, work to proactively

take accountability for yourself. Say something the moment you know you've made a mistake, caused hurt or harm, or acted out of alignment with your values. Check in with someone about your behavior *before they have to say something to you*. Communicate well. Build a strong moral compass and get clear about your values.

Part II: Generous Accountability

As a covenantal faith, we must understand that our agreements, our covenants, are different from laws and contracts, and that whenever we are in covenantal relationship with each other, we voluntarily agree to limit our behavior in service to the relationship.

Domain of Law

- Actions prescribed by laws
- Conformity to group
- Consequences keep people in check
- Centers on rules
- Can be policed and enforced

Domain of Covenant

- Actions demonstrate moral behavior
- Conformity to shared values
- Discipline to do what is right
- Centers on moral behavior
- Supported and reinforced by community

Domain of Free Will

- Actions are freely taken
- Conformity to the individual
- Individuals do what they want
- Centers on preferences
- No oversight or monitoring

Our culture and legal system work in the domain of law: actions are prescribed by rules and laws, actions are policed and enforced, and consequences keep people in check. This system is based on a belief that people are bad and need to be kept in line with

clear laws and punishment. Our Universalist ancestors challenged this theology centuries ago.

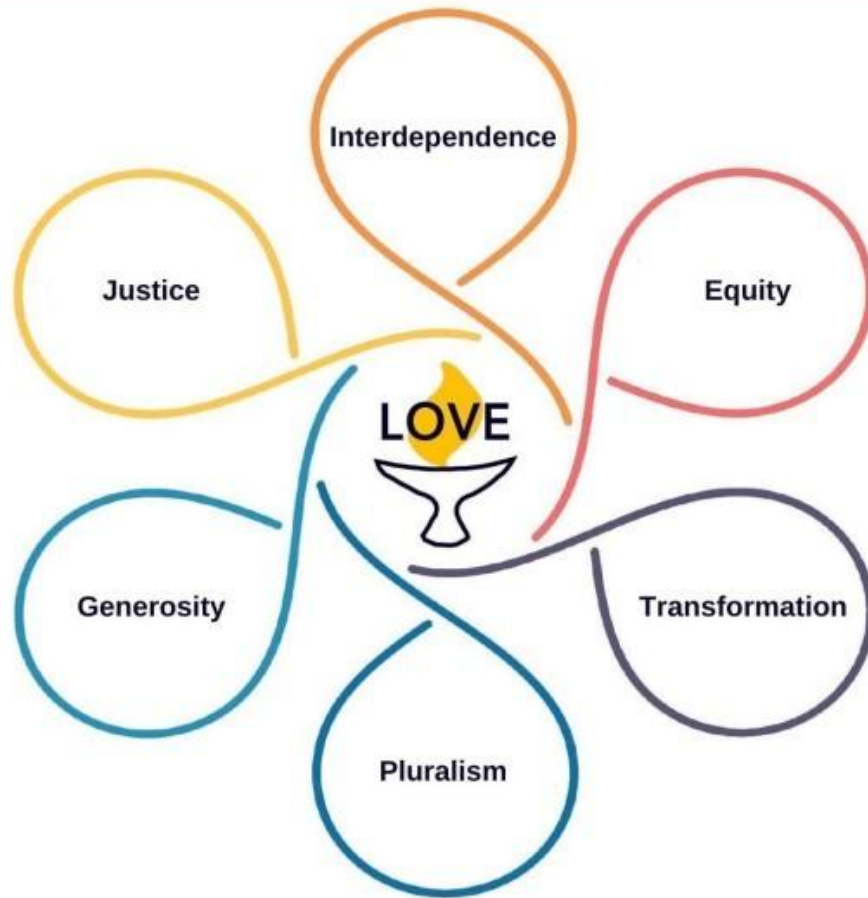
A common response to the domain of law is the domain of free will. This system says that people should be able to do whatever they want without oversight or consequences. It is a permissive and harmful perspective often used in service to those with privilege, and a part of our society that puts the individual at the center of things.

Unitarian Universalism is a system of covenant, based on shared values, centered on moral behavior, with the discipline to do what is right, and right action is supported by the community. Covenant is how we hold ourselves accountable and offer support for each other to do so.

A covenant is a way that we demonstrate our first and seventh principles: support for the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the reality that we are interconnected. It's how we balance the individual and the community, how we act as individuals in relationship.

So, a behavioral covenant is how we, as a community together, define what we think is moral and ethical behavior. In our covenant, we say that we expect mistakes and offer a path to repair and restoration. Liberating covenants allow us to engage conflict creatively and lovingly and move us toward beloved community.

In our story today, Raven ate all the berries and didn't listen to the other animals in the forest who were afraid of going hungry. The animals had no agreement about how they would be together, and Raven had a lot of power with no self-reflection. He certainly didn't hold himself accountable, and the other animals couldn't do that for him. There were consequences to Raven's behavior anyway, and Raven's magic helped make things OK. But I'm guessing there was no trust between Raven and the animals, and I wonder if Raven learned anything at all.



I began the service today with words about generosity from the Article II Commission of the UUA. The Commission identified seven core UU values: Interdependence, Equity, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, Pluralism, and Love. These are core UU values that we bring to our covenantal relationships.

We will focus on one of these values as our monthly spiritual theme for the next seven months.

Our spiritual theme for this month is "Generosity." So, what if we were generous in our accountability? What if we were generous with our forgiveness and grace for mistakes? What if we were generous in our support for each other as we hold ourselves accountable.

What if we could say, "Ouch. What you did hurt me. And I want to be in relationship with you. Can we talk about this?" What if we could say, "Can I support you as you reflect on what happened? What are your deepest held values? Was what you did in alignment with those values?" What if we could say, "There seems to be hurt and mistrust here.

Can I help hold space for you to express what happened, who was impacted and how, and explore what needs to happen next?" What if we could say, "I'm sorry for hurting you and I will do better."

Can you imagine a community of generous accountability? Now I can begin to imagine what that might be like. Two Sundays ago, I made an apology to this congregation about my over functioning, and I promised to do better. I can attest that the self-reflection, apology, and repair were hard, and that changing behavior is even harder. I received a lot of support as I prepared for that sermon, and I appreciate the comments I've received from some of you since.

I made an attempt at repair because I am certain that our relationship is worth it; you are worth it and so am I. I want to honor our interconnection. I believe that the relationships in this community are worth our time and attention, they are worthy of our commitment and love.

This can be a place where we identify our core values, offer support as we each hold ourselves accountable to those values, and restore trust and right relationship as we build beloved community. This can be a place where we cultivate gratitude and hope, sharing our faith, our presence and our resources. This can be a place where we accept the challenge of generosity and accountability.

After the service a month from now on December 5, the Healthy Congregations Team and I will host another discussion of an OUUC behavioral covenant. We'll bring the latest draft for more conversation about how we define ethical behavior here and how we build a community based on generosity, gratitude, compassion and trust. I hope you will bring your generosity, courage and vulnerability to the conversation.

What we practice here is what we bring out there. When we practice covenantal relationships with generous accountability, we are helping to build a world that is loving, just and healthy. May we help make it so.