

**Standing on the Side of Love Within Our Church and Beyond**  
**A Sermon On A Covenant of Right Relations for Countryside Church**  
Offered on February 14 by The Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia  
with Vix Axel duRee Bryant, and Gina Gardner  
(duRee's words were read by another...)

***Vid Axel***

Over the course of the last five years, I've been blessed with the opportunity not only to join the membership of this congregation, but also to learn about – and to fall passionately in love with – the process of communicating compassionately.

For me, it began with my participation in a series called Speaking Peace, from which I first learned about Marshall Rosenberg and his process of Nonviolent Communication. From there, I started a Communicating Compassionately Skills and Practice group, and two covenant groups focused on the same theme.

Since then, I've taught courses here and elsewhere; given many, introductory presentations; offered consulting; and I've been elected chairperson of the CCRC – our congregation's panel for supporting those who might encounter difficulty when navigating a conflict.

Today, I want to share why I am excited about the idea of our congregation adopting what's called a Covenant of Right Relationship.

Some might ask, "Why would we want an extra covenant like that? Isn't our existing covenant enough?" I answer this way. As much as I resonate with our church covenant, I'm convinced that it can be supported and strengthened by an additional covenant that focuses on how we can relate to one another in the most fulfilling ways.

Some may ask, "But what's the point? We're all adults, here, aren't we? Don't we relate to each other well?" To which I reply: indeed, we do - at least most of the time. Yet that's one reason why I favor having a dialogue about a Covenant of Right Relationship – and, as soon as we understand its purpose, adopting it as a congregation.

I like the slogan that says, "The best time to start marriage counseling is one year before the wedding!" Likewise, in my judgment, with a Covenant of Right Relationship, now is our wonderful opportunity to move forward.

In my opinion, such a covenant isn't about finger-pointing. Rather, it's about setting and clarifying beautiful intentions to which we can refer as reminders. We can communicate about these with visitors and potential new members; deepen our commitment to living our principles as a Welcoming Congregation; and, rather than losing our composure, understand more fully how to embrace conflict with our constructive welcome.

Some might say that "Mere words do not an atmosphere make." I agree. The mere words won't enact themselves.

If, however, we as a congregation engage in education and dialogue about the proposed Covenant of Right Relationship - and if we embrace it with an enthusiastic, congregational vote - I predict that long into the future, we will look back, and feel deeply grateful that we did.

I feel profoundly confident that such a covenant can help our church to establish the atmosphere in which our dreams for our evolving future can unfold – and with wonderful vitality.

### ***Gina Gardner***

About a year and a half ago, I found myself suddenly unemployed, newly single, two kids in college, and my retirement savings had been halved from a 401K to a 201K. I literally balled up in a fetal position for days and wondered what I had to show for my life. I came across an article in UU World that set me right – it got me out of my jammies and into the shower. William Schulz, who headed Amnesty International for 12 years, wrote these words:

*"The way to value our lives is not by the legacies we leave, for they will inevitably be forgotten;  
not by the tasks we accomplish, for they will eventually fade away;  
not by the wealth we accumulate or the honors;  
but by the extent to which we live our lives with tenderness and integrity.  
What is important is not that we master the world but that we allow the world's graces to master us;  
not that we be well known but that we be known well;  
not that we gather applause but that we work and rest kindly in the presence of the world."*

This quote woke me up and reminded me of what I had -when I thought I'd lost everything - and what I'm in control of - when I felt completely powerless. I have the choice of how to show up in relationships and, ultimately, that is the measure of a life.

How we relate to one another is largely a function of the family and community into which we were born. The rules of communication and connection become a part of how we operate without us ever knowing that other people have completely different systems and points of view.

We bumble along in the world. In good times, we interact with people who seem to be like-minded and things are swell for a while. But, inevitably, we hit snags ... tension, fear, misunderstanding, uncertainty, loss ... a myriad of things that can cause us to become sensitive, hurt or unwilling to be open. Perhaps we become insensitive to the experience of others. In any event, there are times, for all of us, when we struggle with how to be effective in relationship with others.

### ***duRee Bryant***

As someone who has taught in the children's Sunday School program for many years, I am familiar with a common practice that occurs in the various classrooms at the beginning of the church year. This process happens at all different age levels of our children's religion education program. Yes, we all might go around and say our names and something fun we did over the summer; we might decorate our nametags and play some kind of getting acquainted games. But what I am referring to is that the children and their teachers, early on in our year together, have a discussion about what our classroom rules should be: our guidelines for how to treat each other, how to work together as a team, how to best get along. What comes out of the mouth and mind of a 3-

year-old in his classroom might be worded differently than what is expressed by a 13-year-old in hers, but the end product is basically the same: a set of agreed-upon practices to guide us in our dealings with each other so that these dealings represent our best selves. As these rules are determined by the class, they are written down, generally on a large poster board, and then they are displayed in the classroom for the remainder of the church year. As inevitably happens whenever a group of people get together, during the year there are times when something goes awry: Sally refuses to share the crayons, Ben and Sam keep talking to each other while the teacher is trying to read the class a story, Valerie makes a hurtful comment to Jake - - you get the idea. Often when something like this happens, the teacher refers the class back to the poster board, as a reminder of the guidelines agreed upon by the students. This usually serves as an effective correction device and life goes on, at least until the next reminder is needed.

When I was asked to address the question of why I think it would be a positive thing for our congregation to have a Covenant of Right Relations, I was reminded of the power of having a set of agreed-upon principles to refer to when things get tough - - when we find ourselves in strong disagreement with someone, or we're trying to decide how to respond to someone whose behavior we experience as hurtful, or we are upset about the direction something is moving. A Covenant of Right Relations can serve as a touchstone for us to refer to - - when faced with a challenging interaction, I can ask myself, "Am I listening carefully with an open mind and open heart to what this person is saying? Am I taking responsibility for my speech and actions? Am I working toward solutions using available resources?" Just like the poster board in our children's RE classrooms, a Covenant of Right Relations can help guide my words and deeds as I interact with the members of my church family.

A Covenant of Right Relationship provides clarity about our intentions with one another. With it, we can challenge ourselves, and others, to push past the patterns we've learned and have the courage to be extraordinary in our relationships. It can, like William Schulz's powerful words did for me, wake us up to our potential.

A desire to give our best gifts to the world, and have them respected and appreciated is, for me, at the heart of the human experience. A Covenant of Right Relationship can help us bring a level of compassion and sweetness into our interactions with one another, and helps us walk gently, but authentically, into the wider world.

Many years ago, during theological school, I read a book that changed my thinking about congregational dialogue. It had an awful title but the contents awoke something in me - something that reminded me of my highest hopes for congregational life. The writer was Gil Rendle - former consultant for the Alban Institute. And he was writing about the ways that our increasingly isolating society was causing people to forget basic civility - to abandon the kind of dialogue that produced truly great presidential debates or allowed members of congress to actually hear one another and learn from one another and actually change their minds. He talked about the fact that people travel more often alone - in cars - rather than in the many forms of shared and public transportation that people used to use. And he was suggesting that because people traveled together more - literally and figuratively - they studied what sort of ways they could behave together that

would make travel more pleasant make the world a more harmonious and civil place. It was really more of a metaphor – that in our increasingly buffered world we are less inclined to turn to manners – to commonly held expectations of behavior. I reminded me of all the times I have pulled up to a stoplight and felt my car thrummed, vibrated by the loud bass beat from someone in another car listening to heavy metal, hard rock, hip hop or rap. I used to have a habit of listening to classical music really loudly and cranking my windows down. It was my own rage against the machine. But it wasn't a solution to the way that I could be happily in my own world, driving along and then have the peace of my seemingly solitary vehicle disturbed by some raucous person – usually very young. According to Gil Rendle and other social commentators we have lost the fine arts of fine conversation and of getting along in our common space. We have lost the ability – or perhaps just the motivation to change our own behavior to accommodate the others with whom we share that space. Rendle's book touched on the ways that the loss of this ability has affected even our congregations. And I have surely witnessed in other congregations at other times, that the joy and productivity of a congregation can be terribly undermined by the unwillingness to be together like travelers on a common journey. Here at Countryside, that has seldom been the case. Instead this is one healthy congregation with healthy habits of being together. Now – I won't fool myself or fool with you by thinking that we are always at our best – but it appears to be an aspiration that we share. Outside these walls we can tune in Glenn Beck or Jerry Springer – if he is still on the air – we can turn on Survivor and or American Idol witness people trash talk each other. We can find plenty of places like the halls of congress where talking can be used to filibuster legislation and people routinely talk at or over each other – using conversation like a sport for scoring over opponents instead of finding common ground or learning from one another. Inside these walls we aspire to something better.

It's why I have some passion for the adoption of a Covenant of Right Relations – because I believe in the capacity of our healthy, balanced, caring connections to make possible all that is best from congregational life. It excites me. There are many Unitarian Universalist congregations that have adopted such covenants of Right Relations. You can look them up on line and read covenant after covenant. A lot of them adopt these covenants after there has been a terrible congregational conflict – when the lack of good communication, the lack of agreement about what we hope for and expect from one another has lead to hard feelings, broken trust and fractured congregations. It is easier, at those times to reflect on what a congregation might need to agree upon – easier to see what happens in the absence of what Gil Rendle calls holy manners – not to be confused with holier than thou manners.

Countryside is very healthy congregation – that means we have open ways of dealing with things, we hear one another and care about what we hear, we have long patterns of choosing direction communication instead of plotting and subterfuge, we enjoy being a congregation together and encourage rather than discourage one another. Frankly, the health of this congregation is what sends me home, day after day in a state of deep gratitude.

So why think about a covenant of Right Relations?

Well – for one reason – it puts into words the values that are important to us – it says to each person who enters here that we don't take our values for granted and we don't keep them hidden either. A covenant of right relations says that we recognize the need to remind ourselves of our best and highest. It says that we want to set an example – verbal – written and visual – for our children. It says that we aspire to this positive relation with one another and from and with everyone who comes here.

A covenant of Right Relations reminds us to live up to our values. That they are not concepts but realities – talks we walk – or talks we talk. That we are willing to practice our highest values here – beginning inside our hearts, extending to our relationships with one another and therefore being fit and ready to move outside our walls.

Such a covenant enables us to act in ways in all ways that affirm our values. UUs tend to be people for whom religion is not a habit but a process of meaning. Therefore we work hard during the week to be the people we aspire to be on Sundays.

Such a covenant creates the sort of safe container – the sort of place that creates enough safety between us together that we can talk about, learn about, and explore anything together – even the most controversial and risky issues of the day and the most delicate issues that religions has to offer and know that we will come out with different viewpoints – having learned from one another, perhaps changing one another, having grown together and without belittling one another. And out of that safe container – come amazing possibilities. The better the ways in which we communicate, the more comfort we feel together, the closer we are able to become in our communication and connection the more we are able to be creative together – and that creativity is what I long to support here. Without a doubt this congregation has been in a holding pattern for a number of years – with many unchosen transitions. And now there is so much new promise here – energy and vision, new companions and old companions – that things are happening – some of which Chris Smith spoke about before. This is a time of great creative promise and the ways that we decide to move forward together will help to shape us as the warm, positive, creative, justice seeking, love affirming, Unitarian Universalist congregation we aspire to be. To covenant means to walk together – to have a covenant of right relation is to commit to walk together in ways that our paths are worthy of our goals and that our paths embody our principles and – above all keep us talking, walking, being, and standing on the side of love.