

# Religion column: Promises connect us with family and friends

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I once kept track of all the promises I made in the course of a week. There were a lot of them!

Of course, none of them were major promises of the order of, say, wedding vows, but I was still surprised at how many promises I made during one ordinary week.

At home, I made promises about errands and cleaning, whether picking up a quart of milk or running a load of laundry. At work, I made promises about attending particular meetings and submitting reports on specific topics. With friends, I made promises to see them or to call them or to mail them something I thought they might like. With colleagues I made promises to meet them for lunch or read a book they'd recommended to me.

Not all of these promises were necessarily made to other people, since some of them were things I'd promised myself I would do. In many cases, though, I knew that keeping my promise was a factor in somebody else's reality, affecting their **emotional well-being** or their ability to do their own work. I realized that I was accountable to those other people, whether they knew of my promises or not.

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I also realized that I broke my promises more often than I knew, and certainly more often than I liked. Sometimes I had promised something I simply could not deliver, due to limited time or ability. Sometimes I was dependent on someone else's promise in order to keep my own. Sometimes I simply forgot or I rationalized a way to make the promise a low priority out of my own laziness or selfishness, and acknowledging that about myself was often painful.

Thankfully, I was in most cases able to renew my promise. Whether by friendship or fortune or grace, I was able to make good on what I'd promised, though not necessarily in the exact terms of the original promise. Forgiveness was an integral part of that, and was sometimes most difficult when I was the one who needed to forgive myself.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber saw the making of promises as essential to human nature. Indeed, he described humans as promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking and promise-renewing beings. This is central to the idea of religion that is about behavior more than belief, that our becoming human is a life-long process, and it is particularly instructive for faiths such as Unitarian Universalism that are based on covenant rather than creed.

The concept of covenant dates back to the ancient Near East, when sovereign nations set up treaties with their vassal states. That political idea was applied to the theological realm in the Hebrew scriptures, where covenant describes the relationship between God and humanity as a set of promises that can provide order and continuity in society. Of course, humans are finite and fallible, prone to mistakes in both understanding and action, but the good news is that when covenant is — inevitably — broken, it can be re-made through faithfulness and love.

Unitarian Universalism traces its basis in covenant to the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the declaration of religious independence by New England's Puritans and their ecclesiastical constitution. Centuries later, we have been re-discovering the power of covenant, coming to understand it as the container formed of faithfulness and love that embraces a church of different people with different beliefs. Each congregation works its own covenant between its members in the face of the demands and possibilities of reality, but the spirit of covenant asks us to act — and, particularly, speak — in ways that are truthful, that are reasonable and that are kind.

Perhaps this week you'll keep track of the promises you make. Pay attention to how you keep them, candidly notice when you break them, and realize the grace that allows you to renew them. Whatever your religious persuasion — even none at all — think about what it is that holds you in community with family and friends, with those you love and those with whom you work to lift up the character of society so that none may be deprived of mercy or justice.

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