

## What We Promise Ourselves To

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Saratoga Springs

“To what have we promised ourselves?”<sup>1</sup>

In a recent piece published in *The New York Times*, the writer Mychal Denzel Smith shares that his depression has been especially difficult to ward off the past four years.<sup>2</sup> He says, “I’m haunted by thoughts of the tens of thousands of migrant children who have been held in detention and away from their families, 100-degree days in Siberia, people dying alone of Covid-19 and the astronomical infection rates among American Indians and Black Americans.” He has been feeling despondent, and showing what for him are the usual signs of depression: “I wasn’t answering phone calls. I was taking days and weeks to respond to texts, if I responded at all. I slept infrequently, fitful and afraid.” These are usual signs of depression for lots of people. Mychal Denzel Smith, like lots of us, needs renewal. And where does he find it? He writes:

I can imagine coming out of this depression when I think of examples of people acting together to make the world better and fairer for themselves, but also for strangers. It’s not unlike when I have to make myself return texts and phone calls — I can lift myself out of misery by remembering that I’m part of a collective. And that we care about one another.

The main thing—the big thing—that Mychal Denzel Smith has learned from the last few years is that

We need one another. We need the bonds of community, political solidarity and collective action if there is any chance of alleviating the darkness of this era. We can prevail — we can protect our democracy, our planet and our emotional well-being — only if we do so together.

We will protect and nurture our spiritual well-being if we do so together. We need one another.

The chalice that I use at home is one of a pair that my wife, Kristin, found at a garage sale. It’s a lovely gold chalice. I use tea lights for the candle that I light to create the flaming chalice that is a symbol of the Unitarian Universalist faith. But if I just put a tea light in the cup, and even if I lit it, you couldn’t see the flame. So I put a rock in there to lift the tea light candle so that we can see its flame. In her poem “Spilling the Light” which we used as our reading for chalice lighting this morning — in that poem, Rev. Theresa I. Soto writes:

... The chalice is a reminder

that what flame we keep inside us cannot light the way.

The light must spill to shine.

If we keep the light to ourself — if we don't return texts and phone calls or cut ourselves off from each other, it does no one any good. Light is about abundance, and life is about connecting to those around us. Mychal Denzel Smith says "We need the bonds of community..." Being part of a community is about commitment. It's about what we have promised ourselves to. It's about promising to be there for each other.

In the Inca people, being part of the community requires making a promise to work to strengthen, to renew what the community depends on to thrive. One of the things they would do is renew the bridges that the people—that their economy—depend on. These were—and in some cases still are—bridges made of grass that span these frightening crevices. These bridges seem amazing to me. For a bridge made of grass to span any divide requires that many people come together and many individual long blades of grass are woven together. Weave enough grass together and you can make a rope strong enough to hold people up. Since this is grass that the bridges are made of, they are taken down after a year and they are re-made. Left alone, they'd just deteriorate. They need community attention and community effort. They need the people to fulfill their promise to one another.

In her poem, Rev. Soto asks "To what have we promised ourselves?" and she answers:

... To this  
moment in time and place. To this community and even,  
tenderly interconnected, this planet.  
We promise ourselves to the idea that we  
are each and all human beings. We promise that there  
is something moving between us that we cannot tame  
and cannot measure.

We need one another. For us to be renewed—which is the nature of life—we need to renew our promise to one another. The "something moving between us that we cannot tame / and cannot measure" will not emerge without our commitment to one another. The word *religion* is related to the word *ligament* and describes a bonding together. This bond is the vital source of a faith community. We are made of and renewed by our pledge to one another.

Describing the covenanting — the promising and pledging that is a key part of Unitarian Universalism, the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley wrote:

Though our knowledge is incomplete,  
our truth partial and our love uneven,  
From our own experience and from

the witness of our faith tradition  
 We believe  
     that new light is ever waiting  
         to break through individual hearts and minds  
         to illumine the ways of humankind,  
 that there is mutual strength  
     in willing cooperation,  
 and that the bonds of love keep open  
     the gates of freedom.  
 Therefore we pledge  
     to walk together in the ways  
         of truth and affection  
     as best we know them now  
     or may learn them in days to come  
 That we and our children may be fulfilled  
 And that we may speak to the world  
     with words and actions  
     of peace and goodwill.<sup>3</sup>

What brings tears to my eyes is when I feel the depth of a pledge to walk together, the commitment to be there for one another. I see it in our community in the recent organizing for racial justice and reformation — dare I say *renewal* in that sense of change, something different — of and for what policing looks like in Saratoga Springs. And I see it in this congregation in so many ways. In the cards that get sent when some experiences a loss. In the meals and masks made for one another. In the willingness to learn new skills with technology so that we can continue to gather for worship on Sunday mornings and so that we can continue to gather in all the many small groups and web camps that are so active. We promise ourselves to each other. That is how we will make it. By promising ourselves to each other, that's how we'll nurture the transformation is renewal — that's how we will “prevail,” to use Mychal Denzel Smith's word.

And part of that promising is financial. To support the staff and infrastructure that provides the network of support that enables and nurtures this congregation requires a financial pledge. It averages out to about \$2000 each to create this liberal religious congregation. I know most of you are on your computer or smartphone now, so right now you could go to <https://bit.ly/UUSaratoga2021> and make your pledge to enable this congregation to be the source of relief, renewal, and inspiration that it is. Go ahead, right now. Open up that web page — you can leave filling it out for after the service if you like. Open the page so that it is ready for you.

Promising together, pledging ourselves to one another — that is what enables the light to spill out to one another. Pledging ourselves to one another is what enables the light to spill out so that we are a source of light and inspiration for our larger community and our neighbors. Pledging ourselves to each other is how we will support one another in this changed and always changing world. Pledging ourselves to each other is how we will create for ourselves the transformation that is renewal. In the words of Rev. Theresa Soto,

... together, we will chase away  
the sickness, the secrets, and leave only the open  
Possibility that the future is a space for growth.  
May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa I. Soto. "Spilling the Light." from her book *Spilling the Light: Meditations on Hope and Resistance* (Skinner House Books, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Mychal Denzel Smith. "A Biden Win Won't Cure My Trump-Era Depression." *The New York Times*. September 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/opinion/trump-biden-2020-depression.html>

<sup>3</sup> Alice Blair Wesley. "The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant". Lecture 4: The Theology and Anthropology of Our Liberal Covenant. Mines Lecture series, 2000.