

“The Power of Commitment”

A Sermon by Alex Jensen

First Parish in Wayland

Sunday, May 30, 2021

About eight years ago, I found myself standing at a large pulpit under a glow of blue and purple strobe lights. Before me sat two thousand Unitarian Universalists, the beams of the lights bouncing off of a sea of heads. As I took those small, heavy steps to the pulpit to give the Invocation opening the Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly that year, my knees shook, feeling the weight of this exciting and terrifying responsibility. Just a high schooler at the time, I was charged with writing words to open this momentous service, the largest-attended Unitarian Universalist service each year in our country.

This is an important service for many reasons; it’s the service that ministers and other credentialed religious professionals mark important milestones in their lives. Ministers who are just starting their careers as well as those who are retiring are seated up on that stage together. Likewise, ministers who have earned Full Fellowship as well as those who have died in the past year are celebrated, with their names and photos projected for the entire gathering of thousands of people.

While my knees shook that day as I stood at that pulpit, delivering my opening words, they shook for another reason besides my own nerves. For me, this was the recognition of a commitment I was making, or even a commitment I had already made. It was a moment when I realized that I’d one day hope to be back up on that stage, recognizing my call as a Unitarian Universalist minister. My knees shook with the power and weight of what this service meant, of what our callings mean to us. Callings not just in the sense of us ministers, but our callings for all of us who are Unitarian Universalists.

This was a service to honor the Living Tradition we all share in; a service to mark the commitment we’ve made to this faith, as well as our commitments to making a better future for our shared world. While I still have yet to take my place back up on that stage next year—*only this time as an ordained minister!*—I’ve learned that these sorts of hard and challenging moments help me to understand more about what’s underneath the surface when I’m faced with difficult decisions. I’ve learned that for me, shaking knees often point to something for me to look at in greater depth.

This moment of standing up there, knees shaking, is an experience that I’ve carried with me on my journey within this faith. When I’m faced with hard choices, I’m reminded of that moment, gripping to the sides of the pulpit as I take in the weight of what it is that I’m committing myself to.

In our lives, we are faced with hard decisions that don’t always have clear answers. Many of you have felt a similar shaking-knees moment when faced with thinking about an upcoming move, or choosing between new jobs or positions, or even deciding on undertaking a big project with many different ways for where it could all end up. This time of pandemic has only made these decisions harder to navigate. As if these hard choices were not challenging enough, now our choices carry with them the shadows of these times, the challenges of the virtual worlds we navigate; of needing to make difficult, sometimes gut-wrenching decisions where we sometimes don’t know where the path is leading.

Some of us might approach it very methodically, putting all of the data we can gather into a spreadsheet, listing out our pros and cons until we've looked over every detail. Some of us might prefer to just trust the process, to go with our gut, making the best choice that feels right. The only challenge with these types of decisions are that *there never are really easy choices*. With hard decisions, there's no single, right answer hidden in the answer key at the back of some manual on how to live your life.

Even after listing out all of the pros and cons, or even going with our first gut impulse, hard decisions are *hard* because it isn't clear where the path is leading. Anything from choosing schools to deciding on larger life plans can sometimes bring us back to those moments where we find our knees shaking, unsure of what the future might hold. It can feel like there's this immense weight hanging overhead, with no knowledge of how it all plays out, or knowing if the choice we've made was the *right* one.

Our reading this morning that Andy read for us highlights this challenging landscape for decisions. In it, authors Meghan Keene and Sylvie Douglis¹ name for us why these decisions feel so impossible. They draw a distinction between *big* decisions and *hard* decisions. On one hand, some big decisions can feel easy, especially if their outcomes are clear. These decisions are *big* choices, but not ones that leaves us in that place of internal wrestling and discernment. Instead, hard choices are, well, *harder* to navigate.

As they write, "One alternative is better than the other in some respects; the other alternative is better than the other in other respects; and neither seems at least as good as the other, overall."

This lack of clarity is what makes it as tough as it is to decide. It reminds me of standing up at that pulpit at General Assembly, or other moments on this journey, like making the decision to start this ministry with you all as your Ministerial Intern almost two years ago. I ran through the hard choices in my mind. On one hand, I could just wait until later, doing a full-time internship after wrapping up my coursework. While in school, doing it part-time for two years while also carrying many other classes and responsibilities. I still remember standing before you all on my first Sunday, my knees also shaking as I realized the commitment I was making to this special community.

In thinking about what made me decide, it was realizing and noticing where commitment was calling me. It was noticing the power of commitment in choosing this path, in choosing to serve these people at this time, even with not knowing what the future might possibly hold. It involved peeling back the layers of my thoughts until I could see clearly what it was that I valued, and who it was that I was pledging myself to become. Ultimately, commitment helped me to decide to be here, with you all, even with all of my trepidations and wonderings about whether I was ready enough or up to this task. Commitment is something that I return to over and over again when I feel like I'm stuck and don't know where I'm going.

¹ Meghan Keane & Sylvie Douglis, "[Faced With A Tough Decision? The Key To Choosing May Be Your Mindset](#)".

In your life, where do you find yourself called? What calls you to act? What commitments are do you hold close to your heart?

Perhaps some of you feel commitment to family or to loved ones; to children, parents, or even people in your chosen family. Perhaps social justice and reforming harmful systems is what calls you to action and keeps you going. For some of you, maybe it's a commitment to this place, to this sacred community to which you've covenanted with one another to nourish and sustain with your care and support. Moments of making hard choices about our lives reveal to us what it is that we've pledge ourselves to. In making these impossible choices, we learn about the fire deep inside each one of us; we see where our hunger and our passion meets us as we face our journey ahead.²

To revisit a meditation that I shared with you to open this service, titled "Spilling the Light," Rev. Soto—who identifies as nonbinary and uses "they/them" pronouns—asks us this important question: "*To what have we promised ourselves?*"

They write:

[We've pledged ourselves] 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. [...] what flame we keep inside us cannot light the way. The light must spill to shine.³

To what have we promised ourselves? And where can we spill out our light to shine?

In our Time For All Ages that Ginny shared with us, Jabari was also asking himself these questions.⁴ Standing there at the edge of the diving board, he notices how far above the water he is, with the great distance between himself and the ground below. He spends a lot of time deciding on what special jump to do, taking his time... Making sure he's stretched enough and taking lots of breaks. Overall, *Jabari was scared*. He wasn't sure he was ready or up to the task to make that hard choice to jump off that diving board into the deep. In the end, Jabari is reminded of his commitment to himself, to trusting what he knows about himself to be true, resulting in his great, big splash!

This story offers us a reminder for when we're faced with looking off of big diving boards, with a hard decision ahead for us to make. At times, we might feel scared, too, like Jabari with whether we are making the right choice, or even taking the right risk. We learn through Jabari that his commitment to being himself, to trusting that choice to jump, makes his decision clear. We learn that trusting our commitments helps us to make our own, big splashes in the world around us, shining out this light from our commitments and values for others to see and witness.

² This line is a reference to the hymn "The Fire of Commitment," *Singing the Journey #1028*, by Rev. Jason Shelton.

³ Rev. Theresa Soto, [*Spilling the Light: Meditations on Hope and Resilience*](#).

⁴ Gaia Cornwall, "[Jabari Jumps](#)," Candlewick Press.

We are at a time in our faith and world where we must be prepared to ask ourselves this tough question: *To what have we promised ourselves?* Unitarian minister Rev. James Luther Adams, a Harvard professor and instrumental leader in our early UU faith, also believed heavily in our promises and commitments.⁵ He explained that our deepest commitments are often the hardest for us to evaluate, especially when faced with difficult choices about who we are and who we are becoming. In his book, *An Examined Faith*, he explores what our religious commitments mean to one another and to society at large.

He writes:

The first characteristic of human collective existence is commitment, that is, making... a promise. Promising is a feature of meaningful human existence... The covenant is for the individual as well as for the group... The covenant of social responsibility... is one that is rooted in... the meaning of human existence...⁶

When you are next faced with a hard decision, whether staring off of a diving board or standing there, knees shaking, undertaking the quest of figuring out to what it is that you've promised yourself... My hope is that you'll return to your commitments; that you'll return to what it is that holds you close and sets your mind and soul ablaze.

As we continue to wrestle in the midst of these strange times, may we not lose sight of what calls out to us. May we not be daunted by the challenges and hard decisions that lay before us, both within our own lives and in the lives our shared future. May we remember our covenants, our promises to ourselves and to one another. May these commitments be the fire in our minds and hearts, bringing us deep assurance of that flame that stirs within.

May this always guide our spirits home.

May it be so. Amen.

⁵ In my preached sermon, I said that Rev. James Luther Adams had been a former UUA President. This is not correct, and I was mistaking him for another minister in our history.

⁶ Rev. James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith*, pp. 239; 241.