

Theme of May - Discipline:
The Practice of Keeping Promises

“Self-respect is the root of discipline: The sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself.” - Abraham Joshua Heschel

Introduction

The free, covenant-not-creed orientation of Unitarian Universalist often means that our congregations attract those who are skeptical, or at least ambivalent, about ‘organized religion.’ So, a theme of spiritual practice that asks us to reflect on the discipline of keeping promises may seem counter-intuitive. However, if we understand ‘faith’ as being ‘faithful’ to the covenant promises we make together every Sunday (*Love is the Spirit of this Church and Service is our Law. This is great covenant: to dwell together in peace, seek truth in love, and help one another*), then the question of how we stay disciplined enough to keep these promises is a weighty religious question for us, indeed!

Discipline is both a private practice (self-discipline) and a way we enforce rules on others. We discipline ourselves to be more accountable to ourselves and others.

The practice of keeping promises is an act of self-discipline, recognizing the inherent worth of keeping our word with ourselves and others. “Keeping our word” with others is something valued because it raises our ability to count on each other.

Keeping promises can also be very difficult because life has a way of getting in the way. It is inevitable that we will “break” a promise and when this happens, it matters even more how we treat ourselves and others. By acknowledging a broken promise, apologizing and/or re-promising, we bring ourselves back into relationship with the other person.

Discipline asserts willpower over desires and demonstrates self-control. We make promises to ourselves to exercise, diet, meditate because we believe these things will help us in our lives. Discipline is how we define what’s important to us. Without discipline, these practices are very difficult to maintain over a long period of time.

Making and keeping promises is also a way to be effective in the world. At the same time, it’s important for us to be gentle when our partners doesn’t follow through on something, when we forget to do something. It’s too easy to treat ourselves and other harshly and carry a big stick when something isn’t followed through on. Forgiveness is key when we lose our discipline, mostly so we can decide if we want to recommit to a practice or promise.

“I feel keeping a promise to yourself is a direct reflection of the love you have for yourself. I used to make promises to myself and find them easy to

break. Today, I love myself enough to not only make a promise to myself, but I love myself enough to keep that promise”

— Steve Maraboli, *Life, the Truth, and Being Free*

Questions for Discussion and Discernment on your own, around the table, or with each other:

1. Is our UUAC covenant a promise? Do you hold our covenant as a promise?
2. Are you choosing the promises you make?
3. Is keeping your promises a good thing? Is not keeping them a bad thing?
4. Is there a higher power associated with your disciplines? promises?
5. Does a promise have to have two directions? Is a promise unilateral?
6. Does discipline require choosing over and over again, on some regular basis?
7. What about assumptions as promises?

Personal stories of discipline from church members:

“The author and relationship coach, David Deida writes, “The secret is to discipline your life so that you support your deepest purpose and minimize distractions and detours.” This has really rung true in my life for many years. After coming to learn my deepest purpose, I realized that my actions would have to shift in order to fulfill it. While I have one purpose in life, discipline is necessary in all areas. For example, to fulfill the spiritual aspect of my purpose, I attend church almost every Sunday, meditate on a regular basis, make a conscious contact with my deeper power each morning, and read. On the physical side, I eat a consistent diet and workout regularly. These and the other disciplines, acting as promises to myself, support my life and fulfillment of my deeper purpose.”

“I do remember at one of the earlier covenant group meetings I attended that someone said that "Discipline is knowing what it is you want to do." Fascinating as I think our daily lives are filled with choices and figuring out the priorities for the day, including what you want to do, can be a challenge. If we don't keep our promises to ourselves we may not have the emotional resources to keep promises to other people. I found this to be true in the last year or so of my Father's life when he needed someone with him at all times. I promised myself that I would always be there for him, would never demonstrate impatience, frustration or exasperation, but would always show love and caring. The

only way I could do this was to set aside time for myself everyday and it worked! I never let guilt interfere with keeping myself strong because taking care of myself was the best thing I could do for both of us.”

Quotes and short readings:

For every disciplined effort there is a multiple reward. ~ Jim Rohn

True discipline is interior and personal. It is something more than just learning a certain kind of conduct and possessing coherent religious justifications for that conduct. It is one thing to say that when I make a profound bow I intend to express love and adoration for God, but another to really grow and develop in that love and adoration. - Thomas Merton

For Aristotle promise-keeping is mandated by the virtues, in particular honesty and justice (as well as liberality in cases of purely gratuitous promises):

Let us discuss them both, but first of all the truthful man. We are not speaking of the man who keeps faith in his agreements, i.e., in the things that pertain to justice or injustice (for this would belong to another excellence), but the man who in the matters in which nothing of this sort is at stake is true both in word and in life because his character is such. But such a man would seem to be as a matter of fact equitable. For the man who loves truth, and is truthful where nothing is at stake, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it even for its own sake; and such a man is worthy of praise. He inclines rather to understate the truth; for this seems in better taste because exaggerations are wearisome. (Aristotle - *Nicomachean Ethics*, iv. vii, 1127a-1127b)

“The best way to keep one's word is not to give it.”

Napoleon Bonaparte

“If we take vows all our actions become more powerful...Vows are the basis for accumulating a great amount of merit. If we take a vow and keep it purely, then even when we are asleep we are practising moral discipline.” – Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, Joyful Path of Good Fortune