

Individualism, Covenant and the Social Contract

One of the core challenges of any institution, from marriage to religion to national politics is maintaining a structure that ensures individuality and freedom, yet also encourages empathy and shared purpose. How do we leverage Unitarian Universalism to help steer the ship of state or at least our own lives through rough seas?

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Deer Isle Town Manager

HYBRID WORSHIP SERVICE!

*** Sunday, July 12th at 10:30am** **Individualism, Covenant and the Social Contract**
Jim Fisher Worship Leader Karen Volckhausen, Worship Associate

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7/12 Worship Service:

[Spotlight on __; Haydee shares info in chat]

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS __, UUCE Board of Trustees

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS __, UUCE Board Member

CENTERING THOUGHT

This has been a difficult week for people of liberal religious, social or political belief. It has been a difficult 18 months, of course, but Maine has been a lighthouse in a tempest.

We have seen Maine's leaders, most of them, stand up for the poor, for immigrants seeking a better life, for the natural environment, for international aid, for all races, for all gender identities, for diversity and inclusion, and democracy. We are on the side of love.

We of liberal religious faith will need to come together. It won't be easy. It never has been easy. An apt metaphor may be 1,421,310 people dancing together. Some feelings and toes will be hurt. If we keep the rhythm in our hearts and tread carefully, I think we will succeed.

[Jim Fisher Introduces Prelude]

PRELUDE

Paul Kelly Andante Concerto #21 W. A. Mozart

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jim Fisher and Rumi

Come, come whoever you are.

Thank you for permitting me to spend the next hour with you. I am Jim Fisher, a born Unitarian Universalist of parents that were leaders in the UU Church of Arlington (UUCA). My father was the National Moderator for the Unitarian Universalist Association and led the General Assembly during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. I don't know all of you, but I am quite sure you are going to be a vital part of this service, whoever you are.

Wander, worshiper, lover of leaving.

Donna and I have been members of the UU Church of Ellsworth for 26 years, a remarkable amount of time in one place after we joined no less than seven and probably more UU Churches over the prior fifteen years. We have attended Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Pagan, Jewish, Sikh and multi-denominational religious ceremonies around the world. All have been fulfilling. All have had great merit. Even so, we have always returned.

I am a lover of leaving. I want to wander, to escape the burdens I carry, but with the exception of a 1 year sabbatical with the Peace Corps in Colombia, we have stayed these 26 years to work as we can for the common good in Downeast Maine.

Ours is no caravan of despair.

All of us are in a caravan together as we move through time, through momentous changes in our environment, technology, politics and society, and through our own lives. We have reason for despair, we have reason for joy, we who believe in reason as a way to understand the deepest meaning of our lives, not just how this crazy, mixed up world works, but also why. But ours is no caravan of despair. Ours is a caravan of great covenant, of love, service, peace, truth and helping one another..

Come, yet again come.

For those who are lovers of leaving, let this be our point of departure. A chance to reflect on our place in the cosmos, to escape the pressures for everyday living. Come into this house of worship, this sacred space, this cosmic caravan.

Come, yet again come.

[Jim Fisher Introduces Opening Hymn]

OPENING HYMN

Woody Guthrie This Land is Your Land

[Karen Volckhausen]

CHALICE LIGHTING

A Reminder of What We Share

Karen Volckhausen, Worship Associate

The chalice is a symbol of our faith:
Like our faith, it is not magic
nor is it mysterious.
We light it
as a reminder of what we share
as a community
and of who, each of us, is called to be.

When we feel lost in a chaotic world
May the light of our chalice show us our path.
When we are afraid of the times we live in
May the light of our chalice give us courage.
When we despair at the injustice and cruelty around us
May the light of our chalice recall us to a faithful hope.

Our chalice is a symbol
of our commitment to each other
and to ourselves.
We light it today
as a gathered community
that we may understand more completely
and act more boldly
and hope more fiercely.

By Pat Uribe-Lichty

[Karen Volckhausen; TECH shares PP slide]

AFFIRMATION OF COVENANT

[Jim Fisher]

Words by James Vila Blake (1894)

Love is the spirit of this church
And service is its law.
This is our Great Covenant
To dwell together in peace.
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.

TIME FOR ALL AGES

[Jim Fisher]

The Veil of Ignorance Game Show

OFFERING

All Voices

Karen Volckhausen

In our world, many voices are silenced. Many truths remain unspoken because the speaker fears rejection, judgment, or worse. Our financial offerings today help sustain this congregation as a place where all voices can be heard, where truth can be spoken without fear, where vulnerability is met with compassion. We give in gratitude for this beloved community, and with hope for a world where more voices can speak their truth.

By Jo VonRue

OFFERTORY:

Paul Kelly Polovetsian Dance A. Borodin

[Karen Volckhausen, then Haydee spotlights folks on ZOOM and summarizes]

Sacred Sharing

Karen Volckhausen and Haydee Foreman

[Jim Fisher]

PASTORAL PRAYER

Jim Fisher

Morality by Margaret W. Fisher Living Religion 1993

I must suspect the honeyed voice
that boasts its own morality,
that claims to cherish unborn cells of life
yet turns to gall and vinegar
when faced with human need and want.

I must suspect self-righteousness
that boasts religiosity,
that finds its strength in prejudice
and feeds upon intolerance
and sanctimonious bigotry.

I must suspect those patriots
who tout the ownership of guns,
who hide themselves behind the flag
yet show no genuine concern
for life and freedoms they proclaim.

This sham they call morality,
this sanctimonious bigotry,
this pseudo-patriotic talk

must be revealed for what it is:
myopic immorality!

REFLECTION

Karen Volckhausen

Reflection for July 12, 2026, Service

Around 1970, shortly after we moved to Ellsworth, the Maine Times's summer issue focused their whole newspaper on organic growing. I read it cover to cover and was reborn, convinced that this was the way to go for the earth and for our health. I started reading- Scot and Helen Nearing on homesteading, other authors on companion planting , mulching, and more and then planted my first garden. I won't tell you how it turned out but I did learn that organic gardening was more than turning over the soil and throwing in the seeds. The next year my friend and neighbor Lorreta Tilden and I partnered together and grew beautiful vegetables that fed both our families. I continued to make gardens wherever I lived.

Eventually Paul and I decided that we wanted to find land and create a farm. It took a while but eventually we found Happy Town Farm, were captured by its spirit and beauty. We knew this was the place we wanted to be for the rest of our lives. From the beginning we made a covenant which to us is a living commitment, a sacred promise that we would be stewards of this land, farm it organically, build community, and pass it on to be farmed into perpetuity. In 1986, we received organic certification through the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. We were green but jumped in with both feet and with time became skilled farmers.

In those early days, organic farmers were not taken seriously. They were looked at as hippies, growing an inferior product that wouldn't pass muster in the market place. It was never the truth. Over time, the organic movement made leaps and bounds. MOFGA can be thanked for this. This organization is a national leader and instrumental in the development of an amazing organic farming movement in Maine which continues to grow. There are 495 certified farms and processors in Maine currently, 40 of them in Hancock County alone. Farmers markets, food hubs, and appreciation of organic food are flourishing. The right to food is now part of our state constitution. Thanks to MOFGA's apprenticeship and journey person programs, Maine has the highest percentage of young farmers in the nation. We should be proud!

This is not to say there are no pressures on organic farming. Large commercial growers see us pests that they would love to squash. This was actually said by the then agricultural commissioner at a meeting at the annual Agricultural Trade Show in Augusta some years ago. The 2026 farm bill focuses on the big guys, forbids states from having stricter rules than the feds, and has frozen funding or flat funded some vital organic programs. The bill passed in the House, is currently in the Senate, and it is questionable whether it will pass or not. In addition, large agricultural corporations have representative on the National Organic Standards Board and push for practices that don't meet organic standards, such as hydroponics, forgetting that the basis of organic is the soil. What about size? Does an "organic farm" of thousands of acres meet the philosophical ideal of organic farming while it pushes out smaller farmers who can't compete against them? I don't think so! And

MOFGA itself has lost important funding and has had to decrease staff to survive. And still, they go forward with commitment, energy and imagination for the future.

We retired as of January 1, 2025, passing the farm on to a passionate, capable young women who will carry on our work. We look back and know that we remained steadfast in the covenant we made decades ago. One last act that is almost accomplished is to complete and sign the paperwork to put our farm into an agricultural conservation easement through Maine Farmland Trust and a Recreational Trail easement through the Great Pond Mountain Conservation Trust. The farm will be a forever farm and a place where the people can enjoy the beauty of this space. This is our legacy.

[Jim Fisher]

READINGS

Jim Fisher and Karen Volckhausen

Come, Come, Whoever You Are

Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.

It doesn't matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times

Come, yet again, come, come.

~ Jalaluddin Rumi

As I went walking I saw a sign there,
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing.
That side was made for you and me.

Woody Guthrie

Eban Robey went down to the Tremont Temple in Boston one Saturday night to hear Norman Thomas speak. Next Monday, he was preaching Socialism to Enoch Turner over the back fence.

"You know, Enoch," he was saying, "Under socialism a person shares everything."

"You mean to say, Eban, that if you had two farms, you'd give me one of them?"

"Ayuh, Enoch, if I had two farms, I'd give you one of them."

"You mean to say, Eban, if you had two hay rakes, you'd give me one of them?"

"Ayuh, Enoch, if I had two hay rakes, I'd give you one of them."

"Or...if you had two hogs, Eban, you'd give me one of them?"

"%#&@ you, Enoch! You know I got two hogs!"

Marshal Dodge

SERMON

**Individualism, Covenant and the
Social Contract**

Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and the bad times too.
Let it be a dance.

A Sermon on individualism, covenant and social contracts could be mighty dry. There are some very powerful, and in equal measure, very challenging ways to approach my basic questions.

Hyper-Individualism ←-----→ Hyper-Collectivism or Despotism

- How do we, a society, find a middle ground between the anarchy of extreme, anomistic individualism and equally extreme rules-based totalitarianism?
- When do we reject social norms, rules and laws?
- When do we impose them?
- What do we do with rules that are made to be broken? How do we distinguish “good trouble” from plain old trouble?

These are big, amorphous questions, and they don’t seem to fit our current national debate. There can be no doubt that the tri-ecta of control in the administration, congress and the courts, ignited by a populist movement, has resulted in a shift of power to the presidency. This is in line with a shift away from individualism and toward greater rules-based collectivism. With the:

- Federal Government taking partial ownership of industry,
- Exerting national control of mineral resources here, in Venezuela, with threats to New Zealand, Iran, even Canada,
- Massive borrowing to fund the military, ICE and other security organizations
- Unpredictable gamesmanship of import tariffs on imports and restrictions on exports
- Profiteering from political position, insider information and political messaging,
- Control of movement of people,
- Scapegoating women, racial groups, ethnic groups, LGBTQ identity, immigrant status - and calling that a new form of civil rights.

- Using the military forces in US Cities against US citizens,
- Eliminating independent counsels, independent courts, oversight organizations
- Attacking the free press
- Attacking allies,
- Defunding and controlling arts organizations,
- Defunding domestic and international public health and welfare,
- Attacking the environment
- Attacking free elections

This version of collectivism is racing headlong toward despotism. How ironic that this same administration is leveling that epithet against the mayor of New York City who is trying to assure health, education and welfare. But, the MAGA movement has been chaotic, perhaps intentionally so. It is destabilizing and is itself destabilized. This is not a conservative movement.

I am sorry that I have painted a grim picture. Rather than wallow in the mire, we can apply our optimistic UU reason to place this moment in social and historical context and look for rational and spiritual paths to put our ship of state on a better course. Better still, let's use the metaphor of dancing. Dance is a part of every culture, yet dance varies over place and time. We may learn to dance together, or we may at least appreciate watching others dance.

We come together each Sunday for a higher purpose, to seek the truth in love, to help one another, to serve. This is our great covenant. We come to communicate, really communicate. We join in a caravan, or perhaps in a dance in a caravan. Each of us dances a little differently, but we try to make it all fit.

I believe that covenant is a path forward, if not to salvation at least to a better manifestation of our place on earth. Consider my original question. How do we strike a balance between individualism and collectivism?

Early philosophers including Hobbes ([*Leviathan*](#), 1651), John Locke ([*Two Treatises of Government*](#), 1690) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755; *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*) argued that the human race transitioned from a pre-history of individualism to a voluntary social contract, sacrificing autonomy for greater security. Each posited a very different starting position and prescribed a different outcome:

- Hobbes "brutish" individualism leading to the need for a sovereign power.
- Locke's insecure world need a Government as a neutral arbitrator that, failing in its mission, should be overthrown

- Rousseau's egalitarian pre-history and his critique of the Social Contract as an instrument to protect capitalists.

These century old theories could not be considered empirical. Nevertheless, they resonate with our current dilemma. The basis of populist movements is a critique of the status quo being deeply corrupted, unresponsive to current needs, a failure of democracy. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau come to very different conclusions, opting, in turn, for a sovereign power, an exit clause from the social contract or perhaps a better social contract where we trade some of our independence and private capital for the common good.

I began my sermon with a broadside against our current social contract. I would agree with Locke that we have reached a point where our effort to preserve a contract that protects us, and particularly our most vulnerable, has been badly damaged. Perhaps John Locke would agree with John Lewis that this is a time for "good trouble".

I want to introduce two modern philosophers who I think will help us to see how we can move from our current deeply flawed social contract to a better place.

John Rawls' A Theory of Social Justice (1971) questions the underpinnings of our Social Contract.

- Our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution did not grant equal rights to women and slaves. Slavery was condoned for another 88 years until the passage of the 13th amendment. Whose social contract was this?
- Rawls asks if each of us could wear a "veil of ignorance", not knowing our own status or how we would benefit from a social contract; if there was a chance that we would be at the bottom most rung of society, untouchables in the American caste system, how would we vote to distribute opportunity?
- Would we not choose a social contract that maximizes the well being of our lowest rung? After all, it might be us.
- Would we not strive for equity, programs that provide adequate health care, housing, education, employment, and a sustainable environment. The solutions, according to Rawls, require us to look at how our current contract disables and exploits some and favor others. Policy change is essential.

One last Philosopher, I promise. Jurgan Habermas died earlier this year. His book A Theory of Communicative Action (1981) argues that we must base our Social Contract on interpersonal linguistic communication rather than instrumental or strategic reason. This is a heady concept, a lot to unload this late in my sermon. Recall that Rawls has covered us in a veil of ignorance in which our rational action is to maximize the welfare

of our lowest class or caste. Habermas suggests that communicative competence will enable us to rewrite the social contract. A failure of shared symbols may result in ongoing misunderstandings, resulting in a failed contract. Consider the US-Iran negotiations as a case in point.

Habermas had an evolving relationship with religion, from his early Marxian critique, to a final embrace of religion. He recognized that, at least for those raised in the Judeo Christian world, we have some shared linguistic building blocks for achieving a better social contract. It is up to us to understand similar religious, moral and ethical principles in other cultures if we are to build a better world.

["For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic [egalitarianism](#), from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk." (1999 Interview)]

So we circle back to Covenant. In this crazy, mixed up world, our fire of commitment, our new social contract, will be fueled by our ability to communicate, to really communicate, to campaign for what we feel is right and to vote in the November election. And in our church, to communicate with shared meaning and a commitment to love, to service, to justice and to dwell together in peace.

May it be so and blessed be.

[Jim Fisher]

CLOSING SONG/HYMN

311: Let it be a Dance by Rick Masten

[Jim Fisher]

BENEDICTION

Jim Fisher

May we write the future in the clouds
To hold for a moment our lofty dreams
And to watch our dreams disperse into the heavens
As will our short time in this earth
Be recorded for eternity.

[Jim Fisher]

POSTLUDE Paul Kelly Hungarian Dance J. Brahms