

Vows I Have Broken¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, idolator, worshipper of fire,
Come even though you have broken your vows a thousand times,
Come, and come yet again. Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Rumi

Readings:

(Excerpts from the readings are shown—please see the footnote to find the original reading)

Wayfarer by Antonio Machado, trans. A. Trueblood.²

...Wayfarer, there is no way,
you make the way by walking....

For a New Beginning by John O'Donohue³

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge...
...Though your destination is not yet clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;..
...Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk...

Sermon: Vows I Have Broken

The first of many vows that I have broken, was the very first vow I ever made. I was seven years old. I remember that I locked myself in the bathroom of our house—it was the only really private place—I got down on my knees, and I made a vow to God to become a nun. I don't remember exactly what that meant to me at that young age. It had something to do with learning that if you really loved God, you should become a nun or a priest. It was during that year that I was eagerly waiting for my first communion day.

Years later, in high school and college, I explored ways to keep my vow. But ironically, it was my best friend who entered the convent after graduation. I never found a particular convent that felt like a fit. And by the time I was in college, the question of sexuality had become more interesting and compelling. Could a person love God, and also find a human lover? Perhaps we were a strange bunch, but my friends and I had many conversations about that question. I think it was a Catholic thing.

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2 *Selected Poems*, trans. by A. Trueblood

3 *To Bless the Space Between Us*

What is the moral import of a vow? If we make a promise, to God or to another person, are we honor bound to keep it? Was my young adult self bound by the knowledge and choices of a seven year old self? Was it horrible to change my mind? I struggled with guilt about this early promise, but ultimately chose a different path. I broke faith with my seven year old self, to be true to the new understandings that were finding a place in my mind and heart.

Later on, I experienced a more painful broken vow. I was 25 when Gary and I fell deeply in love. We met when he became a volunteer in the house of hospitality⁴ where I was working and living full-time. We were both interested in social action and peace and wanted to devote our lives to changing the world. He was my first true love and we promised our hearts to each other forever.

And then five years later, it started to come apart. One part of our failure was that I was beginning to awaken to my own lesbian feelings. But another part of the failure was just about ordinary relationship difficulties—differences in how we managed anger and fear, dependence and autonomy, and shifting expectations as I studied at Chicago Theological Seminary. We were entangled and miserable for that final year.

I was painfully aware that if I left him, if we gave up on our love, it would mean giving up my belief that love conquered all, healed all, overcame all obstacles, and lasted forever. But there came a moment when I realized, if I didn't leave, I was giving up the possibility of wholeness in the present moment. We ended our marriage. Love did not end. But we broke our vows. It was painful, exhausting, disorienting. I remember the feeling that all of life had become slippery, that there was no ground under my feet. I remember laying right down on the actual ground—trying to find some sort of solidity. I had to make a new way out of the shambles of my beliefs and hopes and dreams.

Perhaps some people are able to break a vow without looking back, without pain or regret. But for me, each time I have broken a vow, even with soul-searching and a choice for a new direction, I have experienced guilt, bewilderment, and loss. A vow is full of hope and faith and conviction. A broken vow is unsettling at the deepest level.

And so it is that Rumi's admonition goes straight to my heart. "Though you've broken your vows a thousand times... come, yet again, come." He offers a promise of forgiveness, hope, welcome, and always a new beginning, as we face failures great and small on this journey through life.

I learned through my experience of broken vows that failure is not final. There is always a possible way forward. Even more than that, as I look back on my life, I see that those failures and broken vows shaped the direction of the road I walked. Those failures became doorways into profound and significant transformation. We think we know the way, and we commit to it, but then we are swept into a new way, through confusion, through restlessness, through the need to survive, and ultimately, through a deeper knowledge. But it isn't easy.

4 The Abrahamic Community (E. Lansing, MI) offered hospitality to homeless people & worked on peace & justice.

To find the way forward, we need to forgive. Sometimes we need to forgive other people, but mostly we need to forgive ourselves. I have been thinking a lot about this self-forgiveness. Many broken vows hurt other people. In the twelve-step programs, they talk about making amends to those we have harmed. There are betrayals of trust, violations of boundaries, mistakes that cause even the loss of life. Yet even murderers and thieves are welcomed into the company of the forgiven, if they are willing to walk a new road. There is a kind of forgiveness that is a commitment to ending the harm that we have caused in our lives, and beginning anew.

But there is another kind of forgiveness that we need just as much. We must forgive ourselves for not being perfect. We are constantly taught to judge ourselves against other people or our own ideal expectations. We hold ourselves accountable to vows we have made, sometimes not even consciously, to ourselves. To find wholeness, we must forgive ourselves for not being the smartest, or the most successful, or the one who gets the right answer; we must forgive our messy houses, our procrastination, our fatigue, our crankiness and our mistakes.

Not every mistake is a sin. When I was young, it seemed that God was presented to me as a kind of judge who wanted perfection. And no matter what we did, we were in trouble. We started out broken—that was original sin—and then got purified—that was baptism. But then our task in life was to avoid sin, to follow all the rules, and be good. There were plenty of people around to tell us what the rules were. And then there were other rules that we were just supposed to guess about. If we stayed on that straight and narrow road, we would find health, wealth and happiness. We would be accepted and loved.

But it doesn't really work that way, in my experience. Trying to be perfect only creates a feeling of judgement inside our minds and hearts, and a feeling of distance from other people. When we face our own broken vows, when we face our failures, there is room for love to come in. In the aftermath of failure, I have become less opinionated and more humble, less sure of myself, and also more courageous. I have become less judgmental, and more compassionate.

I am reminded of a story told about Jesus. He visited the house of a religious teacher, and during dinner a woman came to him, and washed his feet with her tears, and anointed them with perfume. The teacher chided him for letting a sinful woman touch him. But Jesus told a story.

He said, "There were two men who were in debt to a money lender, one for 500 coins, and the other for 50. Neither could pay him back, and so he canceled both debts. Which do you think loved that creditor more?" The teacher replied, "I suppose the one whose debt was larger." Jesus then said, "When I came into your house, you did not give me water to wash my feet, or kiss me in greeting. But this woman has washed my feet with her tears, and has not stopped kissing them. She must have been forgiven much, for see how much she loves."⁵

⁵ From the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 7.

It is when I have felt most broken, in those moments of my worst failure, that I have most experienced being loved. Without those broken vows, I might never even have imagined that. We all have our inner demons, and maybe this one isn't on your list. But it was and still is one with which I struggle—that feeling that I must get it right, to be worthy of love. But it's not true, not at all. We need self-forgiveness to understand that being loved is not dependent on being perfect.

It can be difficult to face the past. It can be difficult to face the memory of the broken vows, the failures. Some of them perhaps opened up new journeys, but others may linger in our hearts as regret or sorrow, guilt or remorse. Thorn Coyle suggests that we must embrace our failures, embrace all of our memories, and bring them into the wholeness of our lives. We must face them with emotion and thought, courage and softness, and most of all, with forgiveness. We must forgive ourselves for our own mistakes.⁶

There are moments when I really get it now. When I can see how foolish it is to be overly upset about mistakes and failures. I watch our little kittens exploring a room. They leap up to a table, miss the mark, and slide down the edge, falling onto the floor. But then they shake themselves off and leap up again. They stretch up under the shade to examine a lamp, oh yes, and run madly away when it falls crashing over the edge. But then they come right back to see what that clamor was all about. They squeeze themselves into small spaces and look into everything. They keep expanding their territory and stretching their capabilities. And human beings are like that, too, if we are alive. Why wouldn't we be curious about trying everything in life. Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new."

Kathryn Schulz recently published a book about our relationship to error, called *Being Wrong*. She comes to the conclusion that "embracing our fallibility not only lessens our likelihood of erring, but also helps us to think more creatively, treat each other more thoughtfully, and construct freer and fairer societies." She encourages us "to see error as a gift in itself—a rich and irreplaceable source of humor, art, illumination, individuality, and change."⁷

She says, "To err is to wander, and wandering is the way we discover the world; and, lost in thought, it is also the way we discover ourselves. Being right might be gratifying, but in the end it is static, a mere statement. Being wrong is hard and humbling, and sometimes even dangerous, but in the end it is a journey, and a story. Who really wants to stay home and be right when you can don your armor, spring up on your steed and go forth to explore the world?"⁸

When I look back on the vows I have broken, when I look back on the failures, I notice that some moments, though painful, were moments of great freedom and self-creation. When we break free of a prescribed way of being in the world, we venture into the realm of mystery and the unknown.

6 Thorn Coyle, *Kissing the Limitless*, p. 223.

7 Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, Harper Collins, 2010, p. 24.

8 Schulz, p. 42-3.

One especially difficult break in my life was the choice to abandon the Christianity of my youth. Later, I would describe it as an awakening—beliefs I had held firmly for many years I came to experience as oppressive to my value as a female. I needed to let them go. In this transformation, I felt an element of adventure and even prophecy. I was reminded of stories in the Bible (which was still my reference point at the time) when people were called out from their old way of life and into a new way of life. Abraham was called to leave his family's traditions in Ur, and start a new nation. Moses was called to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt to search for a promised land. And so I experienced my feminist transformation as a new spiritual calling.

During that time, I came upon a goddess in the Navajo tradition whose name in English was "Changing Woman." She was a goddess who could transform herself with the seasons, from young to old to young again. She was the creator of the Navajo people. The idea of this Goddess was tremendously liberating to me. Instead of a God who was considered to be eternally the same, holding up an ideal of perfection which we could never reach, here was divinity in motion. Here was divinity as transformation.

Kathryn Schulz begins her book with an epigraph by Benjamin Franklin. He wrote: "Perhaps the history of the errors of mankind, all things considered, is more valuable and interesting than that of their discoveries. Truth is uniform and narrow; ...But error is endlessly diversified; it has no reality, but is the pure and simple creation of the mind that invents it. In this field, the soul has room enough to expand herself, to display all her boundless faculties, and all her beautiful and interesting extravagancies and absurdities."⁹

Despite all this, I still struggle over mistakes. It doesn't feel good to make a mistake. But I wonder now whether it is the divine energy itself that breaks our vows, the divine energy that shakes us loose from our neat little predictable calendars. Perhaps our attachment to limited beliefs and structures cannot withstand an authentic spiritual journey. That authentic journey leads us further and further outside of dogma, into mystery and wonder and tenderness.

It was Rumi who said,
Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about
language, ideas, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.¹⁰

In the end, mistakes will not matter. Vows will not matter. Failures will not matter. That is part of our own Universalist heritage. The Universalists believed that ultimately all souls would be gathered together into Love, by the power of Love. In the meantime, on this journey through life, may we find adventure, wonder and learning.

9 From Report of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, and Other Commissioners, Charged by the King of France, with the Examination of the Animal Magnetism, as Now Practiced in Paris, 1784. Quoted in Kathryn Schulz, p. ix.

10 From *The Essential Rumi* (1995) translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A. J. Arberry and Reynold Nicholson.

Meditation

I invite you now into a time of silent meditation, to reflect on your own story—to recall your own failures and broken vows. Your life now would not be possible without all that you have been. Can you see your life as a journey of exploration and discovery. What have you learned from your mistakes and your failures? Can you let yourself be cherished, just as you are?

Let us remember again the words of Rumi:
Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
Though you have broken your vows a thousand times,
Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.