

## Organic Integrity in Covenant and Community

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Lay-led service by Nora J. Bird, The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro

For those of you who may not have noticed, for some of the Sundays when Reverend Lansdale is off, a member of the worship team is tasked with assembling a few members of the congregation to speak on the theme of the month. For me, this was a bit of a task. When I took on this assignment the theme was forgiveness and I thought I had something to say about that topic and I was sure that I knew others who had something to say, too. But the theme for this month changed to integrity and I said uh oh! I am not sure that I know what that means and how it has applied in my life. And some people that I talked with had the same reaction. One person contemplated it for awhile but ran into a problem with time. Another said – “well I don’t think I can talk on that because I try to live with integrity but I come up short.”

So, today you have my interpretation of integrity as mediated by these other conversations. Obviously, Reverend Lansdale did set the stage for this topic last week with her thoughts on whole wheat faith. Some of what I will say today will echo what she talked about last week.

See, the problem with the word integrity, is what we have done with many words. In the sound bite/twitter/instagram era, the richness of our language is being lost. You see integrity has three related but distinct meanings.

- 1a.** The condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety.
- b.** Something undivided; an integral whole. Synonyms – wholeness (c1225); intactness, haleness, inviolacy, infrangibility.

This meaning survives in some contexts like structural integrity and the fact that whole numbers are called integers. But even though the Oxford

English Dictionary tells us that this is the oldest meaning, it is not the one we think of every day.

2. The condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted condition; original perfect state; soundness.

In some sense wholeness is implied here but there is more a sense of perfection – unimpaired and uncorrupted. Can something be whole and impaired?

3. In moral sense.

†a. Unimpaired moral state; freedom from moral corruption; innocence, sinlessness. *Obsolete*.

b. Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue, esp. in relation to truth and fair dealing; uprightness, honesty, sincerity.

Interestingly, unimpaired moral state is actually marked as an obsolete meaning but it is the one that was top of mind for me and at least one of my respondents when I asked. “I try to live with integrity but I come up short.” Said that person. In other words, using the synonyms for this meaning of integrity, the person felt that they were not Unblamable, unreprouvable, impeccable, irreproachable, unimpeachable or the one that reminds me of the pirate story: unassailable.

And that is what I thought of – what is a time when I failed to be sinless and unimpeachable and lost my sense of uncorrupted virtue? But that would not be the **whole story**. The story that I want to tell is what happened after I lost my sense of integrity and how I moved beyond that to a sense of wholeness.

Like Frodo says in the film, ““How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on, when in your heart you begin to understand... there is no going back?”

Many of you know that I was raised Catholic in a small (900 people) town in Vermont. I was not a beauty - overweight and awkward and brainy – no dates in high school but lots of male friends. And no Our Whole Lives

curriculum to help me feel that my body was a part of me. So, I ignored it – tried to hide my shame of that in being holy and following the rules.

Until, I went to college in Boston, the big city. I was thinner by then due mostly to walking miles every day on Boston streets. In those days 18-year old's could drink and men (not other 18-year old's, but men, found me attractive). Being attractive to someone else is powerful – it lowers your inhibitions and your sense of self. I slept with some of those men.

Meanwhile, I went to church every Sunday, I sang in the folk group, I helped with worship. Outwardly, I was still a good Catholic – inwardly I was not. So, I went to confession – one on one confession with a young priest. I had an awkward conversation with him about what was happening in my life and he gave me absolution there must have been a penance though I have no idea what it might have been.

Many non-Catholics believe that absolution allows you to feel fixed and then you can sin again and then you get absolution – in an endless cycle. And maybe it does work like that because the problem is that confession to a single person does not make you feel whole. The sinner to the priest to God does not work. I left that priest's office as broken as when I went in. Because I did not feel that I was accepted back into the "community of faith". Maybe those actions were "forgiven" but not by the wider community – I would never feel impeccable again.

I realized later that other Catholic friends and relatives live their lives that way, too. Their secular life is one thing – their church life is another.

After awhile I could not live that way. I no longer wanted rules that I did not agree with.

When I read the UU principles and participated in a service I felt that I could be fully myself here. That there would be room for growth and a flowering into a whole rose.

I embraced the idea of a covenantal faith. One where there is agreement about how we are going to live with each other. My relationship to this faith would be through the understanding and affirmation that the covenant binds us to each other. With the principles as guides we move forward together.

Uuism is not a cobbled together religion. It has ancient roots. As Reverend Lansdale said last week our Unitarian forbears gave us the certainty that our relationship to the divine is not mediated by a priest or a power structure. And Universalism truly embrace the fact of universal love. It was always there in Christianity as Paul of Tarsus tells us so clearly *“And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.”* But so many traditional Christian churches simply get it wrong. In my mother’s funeral mass, the priest was still hedging his bets. She **may** go to heaven. Well, I knew that the heaven she believed in was waiting for her with open arms.

Uuism is not perfect – it is organic and whole. It is a living, breathing organism. Our participation and membership give us ownership and responsibility. The principles can be added to, debated, and changed. They are living ideas and each of us and the community has a relationship to them that can change and grow over time.

Our senses can be awake to new ways of understanding how the principles work in the world around us. We “take not for granted our privileged place”. We are whole beings bringing to life a whole community through covenant and affirmation.