

## **The Value of Commitment**

Below are the readings, prayer, song, and sermon from the Thoreau Woods UU Church service on June 27, 2010, Huntsville, TX. This service was written and delivered by James Moore, the 2010-2011 president of this UU congregation. Also below is a brief bio of James Moore and the Rite of Seven Steps, the ceremony that James and his wife Annie Glenney used to renew their wedding vows on their first anniversary.

### **Wisdom of the Fortune Cookie**

Commitment is the stuff character is made of; the power to change the face of things.

### **Wisdom of the Cardinal Family**

I was walking by the College of Education at SHSU a couple weeks ago and came upon a beautiful male cardinal perched on a railing. Upon seeing me, he quickly flew up into the branches of a nearby tree where I saw a female cardinal not far away from him.

As I listened to them chirp back and forth, it became apparent that they were mates. Then came another, softer tweet. I turned to see a baby bird, flapping its wings on the ground, trying in vain to take flight. It dawned on me that these adult cardinals were watching over their offspring that had fallen prematurely from the nest.

For awhile, I stood and looked on as the mother cardinal gathered food from the ground and fed it to the baby. I gazed in wonder as the father cardinal went to a nearby puddle and picked up water to take back to his offspring. Both of the parents took turns standing guard over the little one as curious squirrels wandered by in search of a meal.

Birds have long been stereotyped as dumb. When a person is perceived to have low intelligence, they may be called a “bird brain”. But these two cardinal parents have a high IQ when it comes to commitment. They understand this vital concept that escapes so many human parents today.

### **Prayer of St. Francis**

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon:  
where there is doubt, faith ;  
where there is despair, hope  
where there is darkness, light  
where there is sadness, joy  
O divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Amen.

## **Imagine**

**by John Lennon**

Imagine there's no Heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people

Living for today

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one

## **Sermon**

Commitment is not a virtue unto itself. We must first ask, “What am I committing to?”

We engage in commitment to three different entities – social groups, partnerships and ourselves - with each successive form of dedication becoming increasingly personal and precious. Whether or not commitment of any kind is righteous depends on its nature. Just as in any facet of life, there are elements of good and bad to this issue.

We commit to social networks through faith groups, charities, political organizations, academic disciplines and professional entities that share our goals, values and perspectives. Just being part of a community of like-minded peers is not in and of itself a desirable practice. Members of the Ku Klux Klan practice commitment to their organization, which is based on fear, bigotry, intolerance and violence. Unitarian Universalists have the Seven Principles that guide our congregations, which embrace love, respect, compassion, equity and peace. It is not sufficient to simply be an active member of a group; we must think critically about the purpose and objectives of the affiliations we have within the community. The Unitarian Universalist Association partners with other organizations that have similar values and objectives to our own, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Anti-Defamation League and the Sierra Club, to name a few. Committing to participation in any of these entities does not mean that we must agree with every action and every position taken by the group. When the UUA issues position statements, they are approved by majority vote, not unanimously. One of the key values of our denomination is respect for diversity of belief and opinion, even within our own groups. As a local UU congregation, this church has been a voice in Huntsville for the last 27 years, working together in fellowship to better understand people from faith traditions

and academic backgrounds other than our own. We regularly hear from representatives of various major and minor world religions as well as secular speakers who are experts in their respective fields, whether physics, philosophy, history, psychology or geology. Our principles guide us to support charitable organizations in the area, such as the SAAFE House, Rita B Huff Humane Society, Good Shepherd Mission and Court Appointed Special Advocates of Walker County. Each of these groups helps those members of our community who are the most abused, neglected and in need of support. By committing to social networks such as these, we are able to achieve feats that we could not do alone.

**A social network**, much like the synapses of the brain, must start with a connection between just two entities. By pursuing and forming partnerships with others, we can forge better communal relationships. UUs encourage people to commit to one another in ceremonies, regardless of the partner's gender, race or religious background. This is a mutual understanding and devotion between two consenting adults to live life with and for one another. The UUA offers a program for couples called Principled Commitment that includes 11 workshops on topics like covenant, trust, collaboration and love. But once again, we must consider the nature of these partnerships to determine if such a commitment is beneficial. Is it better for a married couple to torment one another for a lifetime rather than separate and pursue a more positive partnership? Commitment for the sake of commitment is not a good reason to remain together. Rather, couples should continuously reflect on the quality of their union to determine how it can be better and stronger, and failing that, how can it be ended in the most amicable way possible. In no way am I saying that people need to be married or otherwise in a committed relationship to be good members of society or that this is a necessary condition for

everybody. Not all partnerships are of a romantic nature. When two people enter any enterprise together in partnership, whether passionate or professional, this is a commitment that must be upheld. To betray the trust of a partner is to violate a sacred concept of interdependent reliance that is the heart of our UU principles.

The final and most important form of commitment is when we live by a personal promise maintain our own unique set of values independent of any other entity. Without a commitment to the principles we each hold dearest in our hearts, how can we dedicate ourselves to anybody else? What values do you hold dearest in your heart? Do your actions reflect those sentiments? Nobody is perfect. Everyone has ideals that they fail to live by from time to time. Enlightenment is not a destination, but a journey down a long and winding path. Along the way we may get lost, but what defines our level of commitment to ourselves is how we handle such situations. Do you sit down in despair and give up trying to get back on track with your life? Or do you continue struggling, searching, seeking the path to follow once again? Throughout our lives, we learn from a wide variety of sources, from philosophical leaders and texts to our own conscience and intuition. During this process, people develop a system of understanding that helps them determine whether their deeds are keeping them on the path of enlightenment or leading them into darkness. The most significant influence on my own values has been the five principles of Jainism, an Indian sect that mixes elements of Hinduism and Buddhism. My daily struggle is to commit to each of these principles with every thought and act.

Ahimsa – Houston Jain Society, Avoidance of Harm Intended by Mind, Speech or Action Whereas one of the Ten Commandments assert, “Thou shall not kill,” Ahimsa goes further, saying that we should not think, speak or do anything that would result in harm, whether physical or psychological, not only to humans but animals as well.

### Satya – The Search for Truth

When Mahatma Gandhi was struggling for human rights through passive resistance, first in Africa and then in India, he called his movement Satyagraha, literally the force of truth. The Ten Commandments tell us, “Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” The value of Satya requires more stringent commitment to truth in all of our daily encounters, but beyond mere words, with actions that show a deeper understanding of the truth and righteousness in supporting equality, justice and liberty.

### Asteya – To Not Steal or Desire the Possessions of Others

For the most part, this principle is identical to the Commandment, “Thou shall not steal” but it also incorporates another Commandment prohibiting coveting thy neighbor’s goods. However, Asteya identifies immoral purchasing decisions as stealing just the same. For instance, if a product is made by forced or coerced labor practices for the effect of selling for a lower price, then buying such a good would be considered stealing.

### Brahmacharya – Control of Sensual Desire

In its extreme form, practiced by Jain monks and nuns, Brahmacharya results in the practice of complete abstinence from sex. But it is important to recognize that in Jain society, this is meant to be a later period in one’s life, after growing up, raising a family and taking care of the household. The core sentiment of this principle is to preclude the mind from concentration on fulfillment of physical desires to please the senses, thus going a step beyond the Ten Commandments admonition to not commit adultery.

### Aparigraha – Detachment from Material Possession

For monks and nuns, this principle means complete renunciation of all worldly attachments to material goods and family connections. In other words, there is no need to elevate the importance of one object or person over another. For everyday practitioners, Aparigraha means owning goods without attachment to them. It is a recognition that all ownership is inherently temporal and fleeting; therefore, we should not define ourselves by what we have and who we know.

In their homeland of India, Jains have higher than average literacy rates and maintain some of the oldest libraries in the country. You might say that Jains are the UUs of the Eastern world. So, in conclusion, commitment to community, partners and self can be a virtuous and righteous experience depending on the nature of those commitments. Thank you for hearing me today.

(congregational response)

## **The Rite of Seven Steps**

### Step 1 – Devotion

Groom: Annie, our love has become firm because you have stayed by my side through all hardships.

Bride: James, I promise my everlasting devotion to our family's wellbeing.

### Step 2 – Fidelity

Groom: My bride, I will love you and you alone as my wife.

Bride: My beloved, I love you like no other. I will treat all other men as my brothers.

### Step 3 – Strength & Courage

Groom: My beloved, I will always fill your heart with strength and courage to face any hardship.

Bride: My husband, at all times I shall fill your heart with courage and strength.

### Step 4 – Righteousness

Groom: My love, you have brought fervor and sacredness to my life. May I do the same for you.

Bride: My dearest, in all acts of worship and charity, I promise to always be with you.

### Step 5 – Celebration of Life

Groom: My darling, may we create life and educate our children well in the divine Truth of existence.

Bride: My one and only, your love gives me reason to celebrate life every day.

### Step 6 – Peace & Joy

Groom: My partner, you have filled my heart with happiness. May I fill your heart with peace and joy.

Bride: My love, God shines the light of divine love upon you. May I fill your heart with joy and peace.

### Step 7 - Union

Groom: My goddess, as we have walked these seven steps, our love and friendship have become firm.

Bride: My groom, my promises to you have been spoken with a pure heart. I shall love you forever.

Bio - J.K. Moore

Born and raised in Houston, TX, James (J.K.) Moore has lived in Huntsville for 2 years, and attended the Unitarian Universalist church there (now Thoreau Woods) during that period. This was the first religious organization that he ever joined, finding it through an online search engine. As the coordinator of the English Language Institute at Sam Houston State University during the past 2 years, James has interacted with a wide variety of people from cultures around the world. Currently studying for his Master's in Education, James looks forward to continuing as an active member of the campus community as well as the Thoreau Woods UU Church for the coming year as president of the group.