



I would like to take a minute to discuss the image that is on the cover of the order of service. Regardless of your background, you likely had a reaction to the pentacle. The pentacle is a symbol used by many who identify as pagan. One of the primary reasons for this is because pagans honor the five elements: earth, air, fire, water and spirit. Each element can be placed on a point of the pentagram while the circle that connects the points represents unity. Of course, any grouping of five can be placed on the points. One that has a great deal of significance to me, and shapes my personal ethics, is called the Pentacle of Autonomy. It was developed by one of my teachers, T. Thorn Coyle. I'd like to share a bit of what she has to say on the Pentacle of Autonomy.

Autonomy is a hallmark of the self-possessed human. When we have developed autonomy of spirit, we live from the pentad of commitment, honor, truth, strength and compassion. These become the base for our ethics, our magic, and our lives. These five qualities are necessary to live full, adult, human lives. When they are integrated, we become engaged with ourselves, our communities, and with the culture around us. Once integrated, we are makers and actors in the world rather than simply reactors.

Pretty heady stuff, right? I first encountered the Pentacle of Autonomy in October of 2005 and I was at the beginning of a 2-year grieving process. My 18-year old cousin had passed away the month before from a brain tumor. I was 26 and devastated. Friends of mine offered me the opportunity to come to their retreat center where a friend of theirs was presenting for the weekend. I had attended a workshop that Thorn put on the year before and I have to admit I was more than a little in awe of her. At the time, I said I want to be Thorn Coyle when I grow up. I managed to show great restraint by not accepting immediately but I knew in a moment I was going to say yes.

I wish I could say that I remember every moment of that weekend. Really, there are only a couple things that stand out now. One was standing around a large fire with those in attendance and honoring our beloved dead and the other was knowing that I would do whatever it took to study with Thorn in the future, including organizing classes here in Missouri. This was a big deal for me because I was at a place where I had been overcommitted for a long time. My commitments were things that were either group activities that had been fun for a time or things I felt I should do. Then there were also the everyday things like work, walking the dogs and doing laundry. The first thing I had to figure out was what I was choosing to commit to, which is the first point on our pentacle. I'd already started pruning away the things that brought more stress than joy. At that point doing anything but meeting friends for coffee was pretty stressful. So the prospect of finding 25 people willing to commit for a two year period and pay \$1,600 per person to bring a teacher from California to Missouri took resources I wasn't sure I had. One brave friend had the guts to say "perhaps you aren't the best one to do this? Perhaps this would be better served by someone else." It gave me a moment's pause because he was right. I was nowhere near the top of my game. However, I knew if I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done. For

me, this training was one of the things I knew I had to do. So I had to ask myself, what things was I willing to do? I had found my equivalent of The Little Prince's rose and now needed to decide which caterpillars to slay and which to leave to turn into butterflies.

I had a rough blueprint to follow when it came to the Bring Thorn to Missouri Project. Really, "all" I needed was a location, which I had, and people willing to commit. It was the people willing to commit where the crux lied. 2 years is a big chunk of time to pledge to something, especially when you think how much can change in 2 years. Is this where you thought you'd be 2 years ago? I can honestly say, no. Remember, I've only been a member here for a little over a year. From commitment we move to honor.

The first UU Principle is to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person. There are a lot of concepts in that statement. I think it was easier to understand honor when I was a kid. If you said you were going to do something, you did it. As I grew older, honor, like most things, got more complicated. Although, it's not really honor that gets complicated. It's the use of shame in conjunction with questioning of one's honor that makes things complicated. I'm sure we've all been told at some point that an action we were considering would be an embarrassment to someone else. I think that part of the reason why *Sam and the Firefly* is still one of my favorite stories is because Sam doesn't use shame on Gus. Sam teaches Gus a powerful and important skill; Sam teaches Gus how to write. At first, Gus has great fun just writing random words that we all learn: cat, dog, up, down. Then he starts using them to influence other people. Gus doesn't care that other people are getting hurt, he is high on the power and influence he has. Sam is upset that Gus's tricks are hurting other people. It isn't until Gus's actions get him trapped in a jar by someone far bigger than him that he realizes that maybe he should have acted differently.

And sometimes being honorable means going back on our word. During the course of the twoyear training there were several people that had to drop out. One woman who was engaged in the work and with the group had to shift gears, so to speak, when her partner was severely injured in an accident. None of us questioned her honor when it came to leaving the group. We were sad to have her go but she felt she needed to withdraw in order to focus her time and energy to her partner. A sentiment that most of us would agree is honorable.

When it comes to truth it is more than just a lack of deception. Have you ever been asked "what do you know to be true?" Since one of the UU Principles is the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" I'll give us all credit for having it cross our minds at least once. But what truth do you guide yourself from? What is your "true" north? Personally, I try to align my actions and words by what brings me joy and does not harm others. This two-fold answer has sometimes put me in a sticky situation. About half way through my two year training I found that it was not bringing me joy. Anyone who has done personal growth work knows that it can be a messy, wrenching and glorious experience. I was stuck in the messy and wrenching and had little joy. The thought of organizing another carpool or housing arrangement made the prospect of seeing my friends and community joyless. In fact, it really sucked. My truth at that point in time was "I can't keep doing this." It turns out that when I finally spoke my concerns to the group, it turned out the statement should have been "I can't keep doing this as it is." Thankfully, another member was able to take the responsibility of organizing 20 adults, their luggage and put them all into 7 cars. He viewed it as a real life game of Tetris. As for where everyone was sleeping, it turns out that people over the age of 25 can figure out where an appropriate place to sleep is.

Allowing others to quest for their own truth, especially when it differs from ours, can be rather uncomfortable. Being UUs, we've made a commitment to allow each other the room to search for our own truth and meaning. By being strong in our individual belief system and holding firm to the principle of acceptance makes it possible for us to make room for one another at our common table. Often when people speak of strength, especially strength of character, there is almost always a reference to trees that bend but don't break in high winds. About 3 years ago, I worked at a place that tested my resolve on an almost daily basis. My job as a compliance officer doesn't always make me popular in my work place. If someone has to be told no at work, I'm usually the one

to do it. So 3 years ago, I spent a lot of my time and energy locked in battle with some of my co-workers sometimes arguing over what the exact shade of green the grass was to meaning of a particular law. In other words, we'd argue over everything and nothing. I was at my wits end and was upset that I was doing all the "grown up" things one should do in a tense situation. I'd tried talking to them. I tried to explain how the situation made me feel. I proposed solutions. I was using all the tools in my arsenal but none of it seemed to matter and I was tired of being the adult. I lamented about this to Thorn and she looked at me matter-of-factly and said "you're using all of your tools for you." It was like a light was turned on. The situation was unpleasant, the outcomes nothing that I wanted but I could feel good about the fact that I had handled the situation in the best manner possible. It was living the C.S. Lewis quote "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching."

I learned to have compassion for myself during that time. Sometimes I didn't handle things as well as I would have liked. I had to learn to cut myself a break and try again. Compassion is another concept that is found in the Pentacle of Autonomy and the 7 UU Principles. The UUA puts compassion as the 2nd principle while it is found last in the Pentacle of Autonomy. This is not to say that compassion is the least of these points. While it is important to have compassion for others, we need to remember to start with ourselves. If we cannot grant ourselves forgiveness for the mistakes we make as we try to improve ourselves, we won't be able to show that honestly to others. I have found that by working on my "stuff" in the previous points, that I am better able to have compassion for others. Having struggled to find what I was committed to, how best to act in a manner that is honorable, speaking my truth, and discovering my own strength I am able to have compassion for those going through the same.

While a pentagram has 5 points, it is not truly a star until the fifth and first points are connected. In this case compassion must be connected to commitment. Once this occurs, we are able to reevaluate that which we have committed to and decide if we wish to recommit. Thus, the cycle begins again.

If you look again at the image on cover of your order of service, you can see how all these points are all connected to each other. Commitment is not only connected to honor and compassion but also to strength and truth on the circle. Commitment connects to truth. How does your commitment affect your truth and how you speak it? Does your truth leave room for compassion? How does your experience of compassion influence the honor in which you act from? How does your honor guide the way you exhibit, or contain, your strength? What do you commit to?