

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

To Thine Own Self Be True

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, January 3rd, 2016

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

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READINGS

The Year as a House by Jan Richardson

Think of the year
as a house:
door flung wide
in welcome,
threshold swept
and waiting,
a graced spaciousness
opening and offering itself
to you.

Let it be blessed
in every room.
Let it be hallowed
in every corner.
Let every nook
be a refuge
and every object
set to holy use.
Let it be here
that safety will rest.
Let it be here
that health will make its home.
Let it be here
that peace will show its face.
Let it be here
that love will find its way.

Here
let the weary come
let the aching come
let the lost come
let the sorrowing come.

Here
let them find their rest
and let them find their soothing
and let them find their place
and let them find their delight.

And may it be
in this house of a year
that the seasons will spin in
beauty,
and may it be
in these turning days
that time will spiral with joy.
And may it be
that its rooms will fill
with ordinary grace
and light spill from
every window
to welcome
the stranger home.

The Low Road by Marge Piercy

What can they do to you?
Whatever they want.
They can set you up,
they can bust you,
they can break your fingers,
they can burn your brain
with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember,
they can take your child,
wall up your lover.
They can do anything you can't
stop them from doing.
How can you stop them?
Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back
can cut through a mob,
a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon,
an army can meet an army.

Two people
can keep each other sane,
can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.

And from William Shakespeare

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell, my blessing season this in thee!

Three people are a delegation, a
committee,
a wedge.

With four you can play bridge
and start an organization.
With six you can rent a whole
house, eat pie for dinner with no
seconds,
and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and
your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power
and your own paper;
a hundred thousand,
your own media; ten million,
your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again
and they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean,
and each day
you mean one more.

SERMON

It almost always starts with a sigh; a realization; a frustration; a need for change, a need for improvement – better health, better heart, better head or hands or hope.

A resolution for a New Year, a new day, a new time in life – in its oldest sense in the 14th century, the word resolution meant to break things down into smaller parts – a process of reducing things to more simple forms. Thoreau was on to something when he wrote *Walden*, writing, “*I went to the woods to live deliberately - I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.*”

Perhaps you’re similar, but I don’t get up each day feeling like a Spartan – maybe some of you do, God bless ya; but I rarely wake up with the fierceness and energy to look life in the face and drive it into a corner.

But I do feel a longing – to shave close and reduce life into its lowest, most simple terms. To take simple steps – baby steps, as in a Bill Murray movie; baby step out of the office, baby step out the door, baby step onto the elevator – baby step to the coffee – and then back to the coffee again.

At best, it seems the day to day life is about the small tasks and lists all mixed in with brief glimpses, fleeting moments of reflection about deeper questions, and reminiscing of old stories – amidst the hustle and bustle of the day.

Poet C.D. Wright says it like this in these excerpts from her poem *Living*:

*If this is Wednesday, return library books,
pick up passport form, cancel the paper.*

If this is Wednesday, mail B her flyers and K her shirts.

Doctor appt. at 4. After last month with B’s ear infections, can’t bear sitting in damn doctor’s office. Never a magazine or picture on the wall worth looking at. Pack a book.

Ever since B born, nothing comes clear. My mind like a mirror that's been in a fire. Does this happen to the others.

If this is Wednesday, there's a demo on the green at 11. Took B to his first down at Quonset Point in August. Blue skies. Boston collective provided good grub for all. Long column of denims and flannel shirts. Smell of patchouli made me so wistful, wanted to buy a woodstove, prop my feet up, share a pot of Constant Comment with a friend. Maybe some zucchini bread.

[If this is Wednesday], meet with honors students from 1 to 4. At the community college I tried to incite them to poetry. Convince them this line of work, beat the bejesus out of a gig as gizzard splitter at the processing plant or cleaning up after a leak at the germ warfare center. Be all you can be, wrap rubber band around your trigger finger until it drops off.

Call N for green tomato recipe.

Mother said she read in paper that Pete was granted a divorce. His third. My highschool boyfriend. Meanest thing I could have done, I did to him, returning a long-saved-for engagement ring in a Band-Aid box, while he was stationed in Da Nang.

No matter where I call home anymore, feel like a boat under the trees. Living is strange.

If this is Wednesday, it's trash night.

Living, in C.D. Wright's words, is the back and forth, the internal dialogue – task, thought, task thought.

There's something about the threshold of the new year – a new beginning, filled with possibility and potential in the midst of deep winter, when light is slowly coming back, holiday decorations being put away – it is like a clearing.

A clearing and clarity for questions about how we are living, what we hope ourselves to be, what a new year, a new start, might bring. And like holding each day in the common, simple form of task, thought, task, thought – there is a tradition, too, in our religious heritage – of looking at each day, every night and every morning, as an ending and a beginning, as a, in the old language, a death and resurrection. Every day – rising to new life, or the potential of new things, new ideas, visions, perspectives, dreams – for healing, for wholeness, for happiness, for hope.

Temple Grandin, whom you may know from a recent film about her life, reflected quite a bit about thresholds. She grew up in a culture and climate that rarely appreciated the unique gifts she offered from living with autism.

She writes,

Personal relationships made absolutely no sense to me until I developed visual symbols of doors and windows.

It was then that I started to understand concepts such as learning the give-and-take of a relationship.

In order to deal with a major change such as leaving high school, I needed a way to rehearse it, acting out each phase in my life by walking through an actual door, window, or gate. When I was graduating from high school, I would go and sit on the roof of my dormitory and look up at the stars and think about how I would cope with leaving. It was there I discovered a little door that led to a bigger roof while my dormitory was being remodeled.

When I walked out, I was now able to look up into the partially finished new building. High on one side was a small wooden door that led to the new roof. The building was changing and it was now time for me to change too. I could relate to that. I had found the symbolic key.

I had to actually practice going through this door many times.

I no longer use actual physical doors or gates to symbolize each transition in my life.

Each door or gate enabled me to move on to the next level. My life was a series of incremental steps. I am often asked what the single breakthrough was that enabled me to adapt to autism. There was no single breakthrough. It was a series of incremental improvements...each door was only one step in a whole series.

Step by step – small moments – that’s what a resolution can be about at best. To be tuned into the rhythms of the heart, the longings of one’s spirit – to dwell at the threshold of whatever is to come, and see what that space might be able to teach us.

I think for many these spaces of transition are about identity – personal and communal. Those nagging, pesky questions of – who am I, and what is my place in the family of things, in this world?

Just think about some of these moments, these transitions in people’s lives – how much they define who they are – thresholds around sexual identity or orientation, religious or social belief, role within a family structure, jobs, homes, age – sometimes expected, sometimes unexpected, they define who we are.

I like to joke around with my 2 year old daughter – she’s at an age where I can mess with her mind just a little bit, hopefully without discrediting my trustworthiness – my elementary educator spouse helps keep me in line. She’s also at an age where I can reference her in a sermon without permission.

So a recent game I like to play is asking her what she is – *are you a...frog?* No! *Are you a dinosaur, are you a door, are you a car, are you a train, are you a TV, are you a book, are you a cat?* NO!

Well, what are you?

I’m Weeza! (short for “Louisa”)

Right you are.

That's an identity I want to be strong in her. To know who she is. To get as much affirmation about her strength or smarts as about how cute she is – even though, I mean, really, she's pretty cute. But I want her to know most of all – she is Beloved. And that every person, every thing she greets is Beloved – Holy – worth of love. And what we call each other, the names by which we are known, the identities we hold – matter so much to be affirmed and supported by our wider circles.

That's why many of our groups now begin with preferred pronouns along with names – because we live in a culture that doesn't affirm, or even recognize, gender fluidity, ethnic fluidity, among others – we open our doors and set our intention so that we might see and honor and name and love and come to know one another as our full selves – always in process, always becoming – but always beloved and worthy of loving hearts seeking to name each other – as holy.

And we fail at times. We actually fail all the time. That's why resolutions keep coming back. We fail to be our best selves or live our values 100% all the time – we fail to notice and name each other in ways that are 100% respectful and mindful all the time – we fail to fulfill the huge expectations of our New Year thresholds, our daily chores, or highest vision of what we might be.

And you know what – it's ok. I think cognitively we know this, but this is still a radical message of liberal religion – it's okay. You're okay. It's all ok. I mean, keep trying to be better – let's not forget that – but it's ok. You're ok. Because we begin again in love. And hope. And heartache and joy and sorrow and resolve. We rise to the new day.

Carol and Corinne beautifully sang to us these words – *for the heart with no companion, I greet you from the other side.*”

Part of defining ourselves, re-defining ourselves, re-solving to bring life down to manageable terms where we can resolve to be our best selves, and we can fail and be okay – part of being *true to thine own self*, as Shakespeare wrote – is defining ourselves as part of the whole.

And all of the sudden the principle of our liberal faith that wisdom speaks from many sources – begins to all collide together, in beautiful ways:

Shakespeare says *to thine own self be true*; and then Rilke says, *I live my life in ever widening circles*, and then the Dalai Lama says, *the purpose of life is to be happy* and then Ralph Waldo Emerson says, *the purpose of life is not to be happy, but to be useful, honorable and compassionate*, and Marge Piercy says – *it means knowing who you mean when you say “we”, and every day, it means one more.*

To be true to yourself, to be honest with ourselves, is to know that resolutions don't happen in isolation – we learn from many voices. Because life doesn't happen in isolation. Life happens in the messiness, the complexity, the constantly bumping into each other – like a massive game of bumper cars, we just try to stay in our lane, but then we figure out there are no lanes – and we're all careening into each other, careening into nature, careening into our shared futures, all tied up, messed up, tethered and connected to each other whether we like it or not.

And it is our hope we each have the proper safety equipment – the bumpers on the car, and the helmets on our head, to protect us from flying out of control and injuring ourselves – mind, body, heart – or another. Because when we injure ourselves, we injure each other.

Because we are kindred with one another – we are family with all that is – like it or not, we come from the same place – the brilliant light of stars, the dusty ground of earth, and the very image of God.

You may remember, in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* – George Bailey, when the town is afraid of the banks closing down, defends his building and loan cooperative with the words –
*“you're thinking of this place all wrong.
As if I had the money back in a safe.
The, the money's not here.
Well, your money's in Joe's house...
that's right next to yours.
And in the Kennedy House, and Mrs. Macklin's house, and, and a hundred others.”*

That's kind of like truth – and community – and church – we can't just show up here on a Sunday morning when the world seems daunting and exhausting, looking for individualized answers as if they are pre-packaged and ready to go - we are not isolated silos of the individual, but our identity is with each other – our wisdom, our truth, our hope, our dreams – live in the homes, the hearts of one another.

Truth and wisdom – we don't keep them behind me in the secret room – if we did we would charge entry fees – truth and wisdom don't just live here – they live in Helen/Jess's house, they live in John/Jane's house, they live in your house and my house – and we lend to each other what we need, when we need it, and as we can, we give back from what has nourished our heart.

Resolution leads to revolution – to know that everyday we say “we”, and know who we mean, and each day it means one more. Let us remember who we are – and the roaring seas between use may ebb closer, and closer still, as we remember that we means we.

For part of our sermon today, Carol will lead us in *Auld Lang Syne*, which means *for days gone by* – it is a phrase to remember our connections – to remember that, although the seas have been broad and roared, we ought to remember we are kindred – to tell our stories and remind each other – we are all kindred. Let us sing together,

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and old lang syne?*

CHORUS:

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

*We two have paddled in the stream,
from morning sun till dine;
But seas between us broad have roared
since auld lang syne.*

CHORUS

*And there's a hand my trusty friend!
And give me a hand o' thine!
And we'll take a right good-will draught,
for auld lang syne.*

CHORUS

Think of a year, a week, a day – a decade – think of the times when the seas between you and someone – between you and some thing, some idea, some vision, some dream – were distant – were broad and roared and it seemed nothing could bridge that gulf. What hands reached out to you? What souls, hearts, hopes reached out to you, with your heart so vast and shattered – what souls reached out to you from the other side; what trusty friend did you join hands with, or what hands did you wish would have been there?

May it be resolved,
That we will tell the stories of our people.
That we will remember who we are
That when we fail, we will be gentle with each other,
That when we rise again, we will rise together.
May it be resolved
That I becomes we, that my becomes ours
That we will cross the roaring seas between us
To raise a cup of kindness, yet
And remember the days of our beginnings,
And our becomings,
Where out of the brilliant light of stars,
the dusty ground of earth, and the very image of God,
We were made – and named – kindred.

The hymn is *Come Thou Font of Every Blessing*.