



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Greet the New Year”

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A sermon reflection delivered on January 1, 2017

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Centering Thoughts:

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. Seneca

*If you have the least desire to be something better than you actually are,
if you hurry up to the slightest degree in your search of something,
you are already going against the unborn [what might be].* Zen Master Bankei Yōtaku

Sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together. Marilyn Monroe

*What we call a beginning is often the end and to make an end
is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.* T.S. Eliot

Sermon:

[this followed a telling of the story *Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like* by Jay Williams]

Have you already made your New Year's resolutions?

I know it's only the first day of the New Year, but have you broken them already? It wouldn't be unusual if you had.

At this time of year most people make some kind of resolution or commitment to themselves. We assess our past, consider our present, and then make a promise to improve or create a future we hope for. By taking time to stop, reflect, and make a new commitment we give our lives new focus or direction.

No matter how well-intended we may be about keeping our resolutions, most of us don't keep them very long. It is as hard to change our behavior as it is to fundamentally change who we are.

Sometimes I feel like my resolution-making is a bit like the cartoon character Charlie Brown always hoping Lucy won't pull the football away at the last minute. I'm always hoping my resolution-keeping will have a different outcome. I imagine your ability to keep your resolutions is no better than my own, regardless, we still make them. We still hope this year will be different.

Fortunately, although stick-to-it-ness remains a faint hope, there is still value in our making resolutions. Whether we succeed in changing our behavior or doing whatever it is we resolve to do, we at least gain something through our annual review and refocus.

As the Sufi mystic Rumi advises us in our opening hymn, even though we break our vows a thousand times, we should not despair but ‘come, yet again come’. In these few words Rumi acknowledges we are not perfect, we will fail to keep our promises, but we should keep trying. More importantly, we shouldn’t give up on ourselves. And so we make New Year’s resolutions.

American New Year traditions are not unique. In Jewish tradition, the Days of Awe that occur between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement provide a time for similar reflection on one’s past behavior and an opportunity to make things right before it’s too late—before God closes the Book of Life.

And in Buddhist tradition, the New Year also marks a time to reflect on one’s past behavior. Many Buddhists, along with Hindus, understand that bad actions or behavior contribute to negative karma. Within these traditions, people should be concerned about whether they collect more good or bad karma during the year because this determines future existences. If people believe they’ve increased their bad karma, then they make a New Year’s resolution to counter this by increase actions that create good karma, such as being more generous, kind and compassionate, and less greedy, mean or self-serving.

Unitarian Universalism also shares the same values expressed in these major religions. Our UU Seven Principles encourage treating others well and being less self-centered because we understand we are one, we are connected to all that exists. And that means whatever we do, good or ill, comes back to us. Karma, in this sense, directs our present lives, not just some possible, reincarnated future lives.

No matter what religion we identify with, the New Year, therefore, provides a good moment to stop and reflect on who we are, what our behavior has been, and who are we becoming as a result. And, it also provides an opportunity to start over, or begin our lives with new intentionality. That means we have to commit ourselves to change. And that’s not easy.

Often, our goals are too big. Instead, if we focused on making small changes on a day to day or week to week basis, these changes might be more likely and might add up to something big. For example, simply wishing to get more exercise this year is too vague. More specific and more manageable would be a commitment to add 20 minutes of walking each week. That’s my resolution.

In the story I told you earlier, the Mandarin and his councilors held certain expectations about what a dragon looked like. They all thought the dragon that would save the city ought to look like each one of them. They couldn’t see the dragon in the small, fat man because he didn’t fit their preconceived notions of a savior. They put themselves at risk because of their blindness. Their desire to save themselves by running and hiding rather than doing what they could to save others showed their lack of concern or compassion for others.

But the young gatekeeper was willing to be open to the possibility that this man really was a dragon. And because the boy’s nature was to be kind to strangers, he was kind to the old man, a kindness that was rewarded. The boy increased his good karma with every action and he didn’t need to wait for a future life to receive its benefit.

Like the councilors, sometimes we’re attached to certain expectations of who we are, who others are, and how the world must be. And those expectations blind us to new possibilities for ourselves and the world. Our own expectations and biases might be in need of change, too, not just our behavior.

To help us make a stronger commitment to change, many UU congregations engage in a particular spiritual practice at this time of year—a fire ceremony. Many Buddhists communities do so as well. In a short while I'll invite you to participate in our annual fire ceremony by letting you burn away anything from the past year you wish to let go of or reject. It may be bad karma, bad behavior, or even bad ideas and commitments that haven't served you well.

We'll also give you a chance to transform into smoke a message, New Year's promise or commitment to God, the universe, or to the spirits. By physically enacting a symbolic letting go and promise-making you engage your whole self in this commitment, not just your mind. Perhaps this whole body and mind effort will help you fulfill your resolution, whatever it may be.

So, as you reflect on your past year in preparation for our fire ceremony, consider whether you hold expectations that might be preventing you from being the best you can be. Might there be thoughts, feelings, or ideas you hold onto that may not be serving you well? What might you let go of to make room for something new to emerge, something you might not even know is possible?

Whatever your assessment of your past year and whatever resolutions you may feel are in your best interest for this coming year, may you have the best year possible.

May you enter into the New Year ready for what may come, open to new possibilities in whatever guise they may appear. And may all your resolutions be met.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What was your biggest personal growth or change during the past year (emotional, spiritual, or physical), and how do you feel about this change?
2. As you look back to the past year, how well did you meet your commitments, vows, or promises to yourself, to others, or to the larger world? What helped you and what held you back?
3. What will help you let go of old or unworthy expectations for yourself in order to make room for something new to arrive? What do you hope for in the New Year?