



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Looking to the Future”

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Centering Thoughts:

He [Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma II] held it for certain that, as his prophets and soothsayers had predicted, his state and wealth and prosperity would all vanish within a few years through the actions of certain people who would arrive...to overthrow his good fortune. Bartolomé de las Casas

It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future. Yogi Berra

Our human compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future. Nelson Mandela

The mystery of life is that we don't know how our story ends, but we can plant seeds today for the future we desire and we can find comfort in our hopes for tomorrow. Randi G. Fine

Reflection: [Following the offering]

Thank you for all your gifts that support this Fellowship and this month support our connection to Unitarians in Oklánd, in the Transylvania region of Romania. Our partnership began nearly 30 years ago, and when it was begun, I don't think anyone could have predicted how long it would last. We have Heather Kleiner and Michelle Leebens-Mack to thank for their commitment.

Our relationship with Transylvanian Unitarians ties us to our past, to the foundational religious reforms that gave birth to Unitarianism. It also places a reminder before us that Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism are expressed differently around the globe.

When Francis David founded the first official Unitarian Church in the then kingdom of Transylvania, he envisioned a future where all religions are tolerated and where none are coerced into practicing a faith they don't believe. Regretfully, that hoped-for future is not yet a global reality.

Two hundred years later, Thomas Jefferson predicted that one day all of America would be Unitarian because ours was such an enlightened, reasoned tradition. Regretfully, from the standpoint of wanting greater religious tolerance, that prediction also is not yet a reality.

Prophets, seers, oracles, psychics, and others have been making predictions about the future for thousands of years, long before the dawn of history. Traditionally, prophets and such were thought to speak for a god or gods, or be connected to unseen supernatural powers. They shared a

divine, or divinely inspired, message often warning of what would come if immoral ways weren't changed. Others advised whether victory in war was assured. It is from these godly connections that we refer to many of their activities as *divination*. That most predictions, especially apocalyptic ones, don't come true hasn't stopped diviners from making them. Nor has it stopped people from asking what the future holds.

Some predictions are more reliable than others. We rely on scientists to predict certain futures based on facts and statistics, rather than on a reading of tea leaves. They also warn we must change our ways or climate change will create a world we're not prepared for. We also rely on weather forecasters to tell us if we should carry an umbrella or cancel school because of a snowstorm. We act accordingly, even while knowing full well that some science-based predictions, including political polling, are sometimes no more accurate than their divine or psychic counterparts. (Personally, I trust climate change predictions because I see it's evidence, and ignoring the evidence is foolish.)

We also believe our teachers or parents who warn of predictable consequences if we don't do something we're told to do. We make many choices, like lying, stealing, or even committing murder, that have predictable ends.

Whether in our work or play, we make predictions about what the future holds. Even more significantly, you and I predict every day that we will live another day. We buy new clothes and food for days ahead because we trust that the future includes us. We depend upon the idea of material continuity and continued life; an illusion of the future.

But some of us want more than the illusion. I think the very uncertainty of our daily lives prompts some to seek knowledge of the future. We fear great tragedy lies around the bend. Especially when times are violent, undergoing great change, stress-filled, and generally chaotic, as many of us feel describes our present time, people turn to prophets.

In his book *Prophecies*, Tony Allan writes, "People simply cannot contemplate the terrible uncertainties of the future without [fore-knowledge or assurance], and in the last resort will regularly turn to false prophets rather than have no prophets at all." (*page 4*)

Assurance that all will be well provides psychological relief. We want to know, will my child live a long, happy life? Will I find true love? Will there be another world war? Will the stock market crash? Are my retirement savings enough? Will Democrats and Republicans ever get along? Our lives can be filled with such angst, it would be a comfort to know the future and if we need to change our ways.

But if we know all will be well, might that mean you and I can relax and do nothing because the future will take care of itself? And if all will NOT be well, will it motivate us to change or try harder to make our lives and the world better? Or, might it motivate us to give up and accept things as they are? Might we lose hope?

I think we need hope, so I don't want to know the future. I don't want to believe that the little I can do will make no difference. I don't want to think that the future is already determined, good or bad, and that nothing can change that future.

I believe there are more than a thousand and one futures awaiting us, depending on the choices we make. Each and every moment, we create new possible futures. I believe nothing is pre-ordained, though certain outcomes are more likely than others, depending on the choices we make.

If the future is not already written, then each of us must work for the future we want to realize. We must vote to elect the officials we think will work towards the future we want. We must live our Unitarian Universalist values as expressed in the Seven Principles by respecting one another, listening to one another, and working hard to get along with people who hold different beliefs or values. We must take care of the planet so that it will continue to sustain life. We must look out for the least, the lost, and the left behind whose voice is silenced by those with power and privilege.

Spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle agrees. In *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, he writes, “The power for creating a better future is contained in the present moment: You create a good future by creating a good present.”

I need to believe that what you and I do will make a difference. Even without knowing the future, even without the assurance that it will get better, I need that hope. Perhaps it’s false hope, but gazing into a crystal ball isn’t any more reliable and comes with greater risk.

Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, “Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear hardship today.”

The future is a mystery and the uncertainty and unknowingness creates anxiety. But worrying changes nothing. Worrying about the future takes us away from living in the present. Taoist sage Lao Tzu said, “If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.”

So let’s not be anxious about what is unknown. Let’s consider the future a blank slate, full of possibility and waiting for us to write upon it. Let us write that we’re helping each other get through the hard times and that we’re loving our neighbors as ourselves. Let our descendents in the future look back to our present and be glad for how we worked for that better future.

To close, I share a poem titled “A Vision,” by Wendell Berry. It speaks to the work of the legacy we leave behind. [Access here: <https://books.google.com/books?id=xxo9aSD49jsC&pg=PA102&lpg=PA102&dq=Wendell+Berry+If+we+will+have+the+wisdom+to+survive,+to+stand+like+slow+growing+trees&source=bl&ots=nPo6uiFKCr&sig=KuYGMWBehfbGJ3NSxfoV3M5Re0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi-o-LGofLdAhWNm-AKHQT7ANAQ6AEwBXoECAMQAQ#v=onepage&q=Wendell%20Berry%20If%20we%20will%20have%20the%20wisdom%20to%20survive%2C%20to%20stand%20like%20slow%20growing%20trees&f=false>]

May the hardship of possibility be ours to bear.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you want to know what lies ahead for you or the world? Would knowing the future make a difference to you, and if so, how?
2. If your future self could come back in time, what do you wish it would tell you?
3. What do you fear most about the future? What do you hope for or anticipate most about it?