

## **Starting Fresh**

**A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst**

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Isn't it nice that we humans have created for ourselves these special moments, like New Year's Day – because the truth is that today really is just like any other day – to begin again, start anew, make amends, resolve to change, consider the past and the future. Out with the old, in with the new. I had a friend whose custom it was, at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, to exhale out a window on the down wind side of the house and then hold his breath till he got to a window on the up wind side of the house where he would breath in the new air that had just arrived with the prevailing winds. Actually he would gather whole groups of people together at parties at his place, running through the house looking for the open window to catch their first breath of the year. It is fun to make a ritual of starting fresh.

I must admit I am finding it difficult, though, on this particular New Year's Day, to believe that I, or we, can really entertain thoughts of a fresh start. Maybe another start, but hardly a fresh one. I feel bogged down by the multitude of worries on my mind about our country and the world and wonder how, or when, we will make the turn in a new direction. It feels like what is supposed to be fresh is somehow tainted by forces I can't understand. I wonder what the life of my grandchildren will be like.

Thomas Merton wrote something that I would like to read for you – it's from a book with a title I like, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966.

*We are living in the greatest revolution in history – a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody.*

*This revolution is a profound spiritual crisis of the whole world, manifested largely in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence, fear and hope, doubt and belief, creation and destructiveness, progress and regression, obsessive attachments to images, idols, slogans, programs that only dull the general anguish for a moment until it bursts out everywhere in a still more acute and terrifying form. We do not know if we are building a fabulously wonderful world or destroying all that we have ever had, all that we have achieved!*

*All the inner force of man is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized, he concludes, by the purest and most innocent intentions.*

Thomas Merton could be writing about events of December 2005, rather than from 40 years ago. What should feel like a time for fresh starts instead feels tainted by “a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been known” by men and women, “a revelation of the chaotic forces” inside each of our minds. There are forces at work in our world for which it seems impossible to find the antidote. Despair would be easy.

That is a problem. Despair would be easy. Hopelessness and a sense of being powerless are easy. We are so small and the problems are so big. Even in relatively good times this is the dilemma we all deal with when faced with the unfathomable amount of suffering in the world.

I love the UU minister's internet chat line. So many great discussions go by my screen every day. The Rev. Tom Schade, associate minister at First Unitarian in Worcester, wrote about the degradation of our civil liberties and the fascist tendencies of our current president and his cabinet. He said "What would it mean if we decided that our worst fears were being realized?" What would that mean we should do?

Valarie Mapstone Ackerman, another UU minister, wrote back:

*If we realized that we were unconsciously or neglectfully or distractedly or (perish the thought) willfully complying with the degradation of liberty and justice for all via seamless cooperation between political and corporate power, the new and improved fascism, then maybe, just maybe we would forgo re-runs of Desperate Housewives, remove the earbuds connected to our iPods, turn off Fox News, step outside the Starbucks, cancel the reservation at Chez Chi-Chi, forswear another junket to yet another exotic land, donate the SUV to the Girl Scouts, avoid the Mall, renew our membership in ACLU, the Interfaith Alliance, Greenpeace, the PETA, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Pastors for Peace, and so on and so on.*

*In other words, if we noticed that we were supporting and perpetuating astonishing injustice, through inaction and inattention perhaps we would decide to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to change the course of events. The price we would pay is always worth it because nothing good comes of compliance with oppression. Waiting, doing nothing, is compliance with the prevailing winds.*

*How did the story go...Thoreau was in jail for nonpayment of a poll tax when a friend asked why he was there. Thoreau replied, "The question is why are you out there?"*

Do we know what is happening around us – and why? If we have seen the truth, and it is pretty hard to miss these days, *can we still defer the grassroots organizing that always has and always will be the source of all change for the better.*

So what are some of the fresh starts, or maybe re-starts, I, personally, would like to make as the new year begins? There are, of course, the usual self care issues – more exercise, eat healthier, get into better shape. I want to pay as much attention to my family (my children, my parents, my husband) as I can. Life is brief and unpredictable. I want to find new ways to be as useful in my ministry to all of you as I am physically, emotionally, and intellectually able.

But here is another fresh start I would like to make given the fears I have about our current administration in the White House and their abuse of our Constitution, the American citizens, and millions of innocent people around the world. I want to make my voice of idealism heard. I want to write letters to the newspapers. I want to send suggestions to my representatives in Washington. I want to do more things like sign my name as a minister in support of the Interreligious Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons, which I did about a month ago. As their literature says, "we Americans are in the race of our lives, and we are not running fast enough." I already am a member of numerous social justice organizations, such as the Interfaith Alliance and the Unitarian

Universalist Service Committee, but I want to do more. Putting my money – and my name (sometimes even my body) – behind what I believe to be the right thing to do are very important to me. For years I have been studying and working to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. Now I am one and I want my ministry to clearly reflect my belief in the connectedness and interdependence of all that is. I want to be a positive force toward peace, justice and right relationship between all things.

In a related vein, here is something else I want to do that might involve you! From concepts of quantum physics to visualizations of the immense globalization we are undergoing on our not-so-big-anymore planet, I want to promote our Unitarian Universalist seventh principle. *We covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.* Our seventh principle is not just a foundation for environmental work; it applies to every relationship and social permutation and commutation you can imagine in our societies and our governments and our financial systems and even our religious institutions. In this simple statement of interdependence we can find the essence and the reason for each of our other UU principles. (Which, just in case you want to look at them again, are listed in the front of our hymnal.)

If everything is connected and depends on what is happening around it, then it follows that what we do matters! These are very religious, very spiritual truths. Everything matters, nothing is settled, we heard in our reading this morning. If we do nothing else in terms of fresh starts this New Year's Day of 2006, may it be to acknowledge that we do and can make a difference in our world. No matter what we do, we make a difference, so it would seem important that the difference we make is in the direction of something better than the way it is.

I don't want you to think that I am belittling our resolutions to lose weight or to be less angry with our children or our spouses, or to read more newspaper op-eds. I don't want you to think that I find personal fresh starts any less important than writing to your congressman or woman. After all, any change we are going to make in the larger world must begin with ourselves, you and me – and having self respect is the first step to having a larger respect. How much help can we be to each other or to the community or our country if we are neglecting to take care of ourselves? How much effort toward social justice can we sustain if our spiritual lives don't provide a deep well of strength from which we can drink when we need grounding? Religious thinking will never become obsolete.

I really appreciate the newspaper articles many of you cut out and send or give to me because you believe they are important or have something valuable to say. It makes me feel a bit like the President, who has a staff to condense the news of the day into something do-able. I can neither afford, nor do I have the time to read all the newspapers that are available and whose wisdom it would be wonderful to utilize. But I figure if you send it to me, there must be something there, so I read it. I have become particularly fond of the writing of Molly Ivins, who does not mince words. I'm not sure that I, even with my freedom of the pulpit, would have the courage to say some of the things she does, out loud.

Here is a short paragraph from a recent editorial Molly Ivans wrote about the constitutional crisis we are in.

*Let's try this again. The president is not above the law. I wish I thought I were being too pompous about this, but the greatest danger to our freedom always comes when we are scared or distracted – and right now, we are both.*

Molly Ivans brings up something very true and important for us to remember as we find ourselves thinking and talking about fresh starts. First, don't let our fear immobilize us. That is something I deal with personally, so I know how important getting past fear can be. Hold up an ideal as an antibody to fear. I know in my heart that there are some very wrong things going on in our country that few in places of power have the courage to speak up about. I will hold up my ideals and stand firm for what I believe. It has to start somewhere.

Her second point is about distraction. One of the things that distracts me is the sheer enormity of our predicaments. There are too many problems to attempt to do something about every one – all at once. So pick one, or a few, that raise your particular hackles and concentrate your efforts. We must not allow ourselves to burn out by spreading ourselves too thin.

James Ford is the UU minister in West Newton, MA. On the subject of social justice and becoming discouraged or even hateful, he writes: *If we turn to our deepest insight, which I think can be found in exploring our common intuition of a radical interdependency, I think we can find not only a basis for wanting various forms of justice, but a nourishing well that refreshes us and reminds us it is really love, not hate, that leads us to toil in the fields of hurt.*

John Shelby Spong is another person whose opinions and writing I greatly admire. About the new year, and some of what I have been speaking this morning, he writes:

*I vest my hope as 2006 dawns in the words of one of our great hymns: "Time like an ever moving stream bears all its sons (and daughters) away." I greet the New Year as one who is grounded in that transitory character of time. I take comfort from the lessons of history that it is always darkest before the dawn. Support for the war in Iraq is weakening. Global warming is beginning to be recognized as a major problem. The attempt to ignore the poor is proving too expensive to continue. Awareness of the radical interdependence of all life is rising in each of us. I see the day coming when the cry of the prophets, "How long, O Lord, how long?" will be answered by an aroused public, "No more, no more." I greet 2006 with that prayer.*

I think it is interesting how many different sources are talking about our seventh UU principle – interdependency – even if they don't realize it! As Unitarian Universalists, we are in a great position to be of help to our country and the world.

Whatever your dream for the future, in whatever ways you would like to make a fresh start, or at least another start, may you find a source of strength, some ideals perhaps, to lead you into the hard work that we all do – even, sometimes, just to get through the day.

I, and others, will be there right along side of you. None of us need be alone as we face this new year and whatever lies ahead for each and all of us. Everything matters, nothing is settled.