



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Setting Intention, Speaking Intention, Living Intention”

A Sermon for Fire Communion

Delivered 9 January 2022

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“I was sure that I would never forget. I had forgotten how easy it is to forget. There was no intent to betray what seemed so sure at the time.” These are words from our reading today from Howard Thurman. They felt especially prophetic to me this week, a week that felt like a rerun of bad times. The increasing prevalence of the newest covid variant and the hard toll it is taking on the resources of our community - the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual resources. The one year anniversary of the insurrection at the United States Capitol, straining at our memories, our heartstrings.

It’s not exactly that I had forgotten what these things felt like, but the time had stretched. I had not intended to betray what seemed so sure, but keeping hold of memories, of what it felt like in a certain time and place, and what those feelings did to my resolve... I had not, perhaps, forgotten. But I fear I had set them aside. Time had stretched, like time does.

Time stretches, time contracts. I can’t even speak to the games time is playing during this pandemic, the twists and turns, the rewinds and fast-forwards.

But here we are, dear ones. Two thousand and twenty-two years into what we label the Common Era, which has felt anything but Common of late.

I personally gave up on New Year's Resolutions long ago. I remember impassioned conversations in college - "Calendars are arbitrary! Time is a human invention! Reject the cultural paradigm calling for conformity! Every day is the start of a new year!"

Oh.

IS every day the start of a new year?

Yes.

Every day is the start of a new year, every day is the END of another year.

Into this world we're born, every day is a birthday.

Out of this world we're thrown, every day is a deathday.

Every day, the beginning and the end.

So is it meaningless to take a look at time? At what has gone before in our lives and what is to come? Of course that could be argued. But I would counter with this: if you did deep enough, most of the meaning we find is meaning we have created, or meaning that others have created before us and left us as signposts along the way. When we make a signpost - like New Year's celebrations in so many cultures - we are saying something to the future. "We tried this, and we found something of worth in it."

I gave up resolutions because I found no worth in them, but I didn't give up on the idea of considering the new year, of taking time with the idea of what this flip of the calendar page might mean for me, for others I care about, for society at large. Activist, poet, and doula adrienne maree brown has written, "What we give attention to, grows." It is meaningful work to give attention to the start of cycles and to the end of them. Choosing a particular idea or behavior to focus our attention on, to grow and to tend, can be an effective and meaningful practice any day of the year. Part of the extra power of the start of a calendar year is the fact that many of us choose to engage in this effective and meaningful practice at the same time. In some instances, as we'll invite you during today's Fire Communion ritual, we choose to engage in this effective and meaningful practice together in community.

The imagery in our chalice lighting today - “out of the flames we rise” - is based on the legend of the phoenix, the bird that is said to be born and reborn again, each time from the ashes of its predecessor. Another cycle, whose end is the beginning, and whose beginning comes only at the end.

When we consider all that has gone before, when we consider all that may possibly be to come, it is far too much. This kind of attention to the self, to dreams and ideas and changes and hopes, may be done daily, or weekly, or monthly, or whenever one wishes. But when many of us are all choosing to do it - when the calendar year turns - it feels to me like a way to honor the cyclical nature of our lives and the year as it passes.

There’s a newer cultural practice that has gained popularity in recent years -you may have seen friends sharing this on social media- choosing a single word that will be a kind of signpost for you in the year to come. Some people reflect on a word that is aspirational, a word that is a reminder, a word that feels grounding or safe. There are people who select their word prior to the start of the new year. When I learned of this practice, I liked it better than a resolution, but I personally didn’t like the idea of picking a word before the new year. It felt like too much pressure! December is already a very busy month, am I also supposed to try to craft an idea for the entire year to come, too?

I let words come to me. My word in 2020 was “invitation.” My word last year was “community.” I don’t have one for 2022 yet. The words I choose are things I would like to give my attention to, that I would like to grow, to strengthen, to examine in more depth. They are sometimes words that demand my attention.

Soon we will have the first of our four seasonal, elemental Communion rituals of the year - our Fire Communion. You will have a chance to share some words of your own, and we will commit them to the fire, to release them and to lift them into the year to come.

Right now, we'll reflect on the meaning of that sacred fire within us all: "Let inward love guide every deed; by this we worship, and are freed." Let us join in our beloved hymn number 34, "Though I May Speak With Bravest Fire."