



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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Resolutions Revival!

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This past Thursday evening, my husband Kit was driving back from the grocery store, about a quarter to six, heading north toward the San Gabriel mountains. He noticed a strange light gathering behind a mountain ridge, an eerie glow that was gaining in momentum and brightness. While it looked like it could have been a close encounter with another kind about to arrive on the foothills of Altadena, it was in fact the full moon, about to rise over the mountains. When Kit got home he showed me the gathering light, and I carried my baby outside so our whole family could watch the moon rise. Minutes later, a sliver of light crested the mountain top as the moon poked up its head. It was a special thing to see on New Year's eve – from the front yard of the home we moved into only in July, seeing full moon rise felt like the birth of a new year. 2010 was saying, here I am, and I said to myself, I am home.

Of course, since it was the 2nd full moon of the month, this made it a blue moon to boot. A blue moon occurs about once every two and a half years, so the end of a decade usually gets a blue moon send-off. I thought, aha! How perfect for my sermon topic today, since most people can only keep a new year's resolution once in a blue moon.

Happy New Year, everyone . . . I'm happy to be presenting a two part sermon series at the start of a new decade, on the topic of new years resolutions. Today I aim to inspire you to revive resolutions that are personal in nature, and next week we'll reflect on resolutions that are more public in nature.

Now let me hazard a guess at what some of you are thinking: resolutions schmevolutions. Most people don't bother making new years resolutions because the rate of success is actually less than the blue moon cycle. The London Guardian ran an article about it a few days ago, reporting that "making resolutions is a near pointless exercise, psychologists say. We break them, become dispirited in the process and finally more despondent than we were before." Oh, how British to be so dreary. But – they do cite a study.

Less than a quarter of those asked for a university study had managed to stick to their resolutions – of 700 people who made resolutions such as losing weight or giving up smoking or starting a better relationship, 78% failed. But the 22% who succeeded had a few strategies in common: they broke their goal down into smaller steps, and told their friends about their goals. They made a plan.

My mother has a good story about how having a plan can boost the probability of success. In 1977, as the mother of a four year old and a seven year old, she decided to go to business school. This may be considered a matter of course nowadays, but back then, it raised eyebrows that a mother of young children would go after a degree. During her admission interview, she was asked, "How are you going to pull this off?"

She answered that her husband was going to send the children off to school so that she could be in the library when it opened and take early morning classes. Then she was going to avoid the mid afternoon class periods to be home about the time 2nd grade got out. The admissions officer nodded and said, "my impression is that when people have a plan they usually succeed."

My mother never forgot how much this off-hand comment increased her confidence. It's remarkable how much the affirmation of another can boost our resolve to succeed. Let's apply the strategies of resolution success to a religious community, such as this one. There are so many reasons we gather on Sunday morning, not the least of which is simply to talk to one another, face to face. On the patio after the service today, I encourage you to share your New Year's resolutions with one another – why it's important to you, and what are the steps you're planning to take to succeed. Perhaps whoever listens to you may remember to ask you how it's going later, as the weeks of 2010 unfurl.

It's the same kind of philosophy behind why 12 step programs work – in community we share with one another the personal aspirations that mean the most to us. We can see that with the support of one another our rate of success is

enhanced. And allowing a significant change in our lives to unfold as a process, as a series of bite-size steps, rather than a cataclysmic event, increases the chances that the change will become reality, rather than remaining a fantasy.

Of course, many of us have no intention of launching a resolution campaign, and I count myself among you. Personally, I love the concept of making a change, a fresh start, a recommitment to some personal betterment. I used to love the first day back to school after the summer or winter break – these times always focused my attention on how I was going to be a better person in some way. I don't miss school, but I miss that back-to-school excitement. At this time, I know I need to resolve to exercise more, I need to take a parenting class to meet other new parents, I need to give my spiritual life some kind of kick in the pants . . . I suspect everyone here can name a similar laundry list of personal improvement endeavors that ya *ought* to do, and yet . . . I know it's unrealistic to take on any additional project at this time. To borrow a few catch-phrases of 2009, none of these projects are 'shovel-ready'; the amount of stimulus funds available, or my personal desire, has no bearing on making them happen if they are not shovel-ready. I choose to lack a plan.

But there's a difference between waiting for the timing to be right to make a plan, and what I'd like to suggest now, which is allowing a paradigm shift to take place, no matter how full we perceive our plates to be. This paradigm shift is spiritual in nature, and perhaps will allow me to cross off that kick in the pants resolution off my list. While taking on a concrete, personal improvement project can be overwhelming, what is far less overwhelming and even appealing is to see how the various moments of my day-to-day living already offer a spiritual practice.

My mother gave me a book for Christmas that speaks well of this, called *Momma Zen* by Karen Maezen Miller. As you might guess, it's a book about how to be 'Zen' about motherhood. The author was a follower of Maezumi Roshi before he died, one of the first Japanese teachers to bring Zen to the West. She writes,

"Maezumi Roshi said many marvelous and inscrutable things, but one I remember most vividly is 'Your life is your practice.' Like nearly everything I heard him say, I thought it meant something else. Something deep and beyond mere mortal comprehension. It does. But it also means just what it says. Your life is your practice. Your spiritual practice does not occur someplace other than in your life right now, and your life is nowhere other than where you are. You are looking for answers, insight, and wisdom that you already possess."

In other words, I have no excuse for not making this sort of spiritual resolution for 2010, to recognize that my life as it is now *is* my spiritual practice. As this new decade dawns, we are reminded that we live in fragments. We have a tendency to want to categorize different areas of our lives – this is my work life, this is my family life, this is my spiritual life, this is my social life. And yet the most spiritually sound person is one who recognizes we don't live in silos – ideally we are the same, centered person in every situation, particularly the mundane situations, as they are the ones we experience the most. Each action and exchange and quiet moment is an opportunity to choose the right thought, the right action, the right speech.

So you are still on the right track if you have no other resolution than to actualize this: what we say and do every minute of the day matters. Because all these moments comprise the totality of who we are, and who we are affects the world in which we live. We are what we do and say and think, and every choice we are presented with is an opportunity to exercise this awareness. If everyone resolved to cultivate this awareness, New Year's Resolutions might become a catch-phrase of the past.

We also live in a culture where it's acceptable and even encouraged to beat ourselves up for falling short of perceived adequacy; it is a symptom of a culture that prizes perfection. We can easily blame it on our Puritan roots but in fact, Unitarians have their own heritage of glorifying the ascetic ideal, the ideal of rigorous self-improvement. The Transcendentalists of the 19th century had a fondness for the term self-culture, but paradoxically this could translate into unworkable self-denial. A stark example of this was when a few groups of idealist Unitarians during the mid 19th century started utopian farming communities in New England. The reason one of these didn't work out wasn't perhaps because most of the well-educated folks had no clue about sound farming practices, but because they had the strange notion that each person should be able to thrive off of eating only a few potatoes a day – or, the meager fruits of their

farming labors, in order to be totally self-sufficient. I suspect the farming failed because they denied themselves the calories needed to actually farm.

My point here is that we mustn't starve ourselves of the basics, when it comes to taking measures to improve our lives. A resolution doesn't *have* to signify a great personal sacrifice, where the extent of our suffering signifies the measure of our success. In order to go somewhere different in our lives, we don't actually leave home, but we do return to ourselves. It's a process of redemption. The many ways in which we seek to return to ourselves has a name in traditional, Jewish spirituality, and can be seen in the story about the tailor I read earlier in the service.

It's *teshuvah*, return. According to Norman Fischer, "Teshuvah is the spiritual effort we must constantly make to come back to the depth and truth of our living, from which we are constantly straying simply because we are normal human beings living in a normal, distracting, human world." Special times of the year are set aside for teshuvah, during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. These holy days come the closest to resembling the secular ritual of new years' resolutions. But as Fischer points out, teshuvah is worth practicing year-round, ". . . the deeper sense is that teshuvah – this leaving and having to return again and again – is the constant shape of human consciousness . . . in other words, fall and redemption didn't only happen long ago in the characters in the Bible: they are happening all the time in us as well."

All of us fall short of who we think we ought to be, whether it's real or imagined. Whether we redeem ourselves or not depends on how well we can forgive ourselves of falling short in the first place. I often wonder if we avoid making changes in our lives or avoid committing to a resolution because it's too hard to forgive ourselves for going astray to begin with. But why is this? Why is forgiveness so hard?

Rachel Remen, the medical doctor who writes wonderful stories, tells about her experience hearing a rabbi speak about forgiveness at a Yom Kippur service:

" . . . he walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and, carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the podium. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon . . .

The baby girl, feeling his attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued the sermon. After a few minutes, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled . . . Looking at us over the top of her head, he said, 'Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?' Throughout the room people began to nod in recognition, thinking perhaps of their own children and grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud.

Retrieving his eyeglasses . . . Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came, he asked, 'And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?'

Forgiveness could be a new year's resolution in itself. Forgiveness is often a requirement of any beginning, a way to let the past die, a way to clear out the clutter in our hearts to make space for something new, something that makes us feel happier and more at home.

It is a cycle we see reflected in the natural world around us over and over again: renewal and death, death and renewal. Life is in constant flux, and we are wise to mimic what we see in nature in our personal lives, in our spiritual journeys. We are on a continual cycle of letting go, resolving to prepare ourselves for something new, receiving new life, then letting go again. "We begin at home, we leave home, we return home."

As we let go of 2009, what are the ways you can return home in 2010? This time of year, the commercial world explodes with hints – there are countless ads for the best ways to lose weight, or quit smoking. But there are countless ways to improve our lives, whether it's a new spiritual practice, a new attitude, a new routine, or a new course of study and learning. It starts with letting go of our old ways of being. It can start with forgiveness. And if you share your

resolutions with your family and friends, if you make a plan, if you integrate a new awareness into the fabric of your daily life, you are more likely to return to your better self before the next blue moon arrives.

May your journey home begin in 2010, and may you see how your returning home can be a blessing to those around you. Happy New Year!