



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Seeds of Change

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This sermon has a split personality – you’ll see what I mean. So let me start with the story that ties both sides together.

There is a folk tale from India that helps us understand how one ordinary person can make a significant difference in the welfare of humanity. There was a king who ruled his kingdom wisely and who ruled well. He had three daughters. He called them together and told them he was leaving on a long journey to learn about God. In his absence, he wanted his three daughters to be in charge of the kingdom. He left each of them with a gift that would help them learn how to wisely use their power to rule. The gift that he placed in each of their hands was a single grain of rice.

The first daughter tied a long golden thread around her grain of rice and put it in a beautiful crystal box. Every day she looked at it and reminded herself that she was powerful. The second daughter took one look at the common grain of rice and threw it away. The third daughter looked at her grain of rice for a long time, until she finally understood what to do with it. She went outside and planted it in the ground. And it became a seed, giving life beyond itself, eventually turning into vast rice fields of hope and nourishment for others.

The father returned years later. He asked his three daughters what they had done with their grains of rice. Obviously, he was not impressed with the explanations of his first two daughters. The third daughter did not give an explanation but took her father to the vast fields of grain of rice and showed him how one seed could make a life-lasting difference in the kingdom. Taking the crown off his head, he placed it on hers, saying: "My daughter, you alone have learned the meaning of power even in a grain of rice." From that day, the youngest daughter ruled the kingdom. She ruled long and she ruled wisely and well too.¹

Happy New Year everyone, the 2nd year of the 2nd decade of this century. This New Year feels like a big one to me. The potential to change by turning a new leaf feels stronger than ever. The seeds of change are clamoring to be planted and nurtured!

My New Years resolutions, year after year, have had a familiar ring to them, ever since I became a very old young adult. To my mind one becomes a very old young adult when one is closer to 40 than 30. Once again, my resolutions this year have to do with taking better care of myself: such as getting more exercise, and improving my diet: more veggies, less grease, less sugar, less salt. These are standard examples of new years resolutions for many people, and they like other resolutions are in essence the breaking of bad habits. How can we get the monkeys off our backs and take better care of ourselves?

When I read the Wampanoag story, I felt this question was answered in part by what the Great Spirit told the giant who cared too much for the People of First Light:

"It is good that you care for your younger brothers, but it is not right that you do everything for them. They are like little children when you care for all their needs. They must take responsibility for their own lives or they will never grow. If they do not care for themselves, how can they take care of the rest of Creation? Their circle will not be strong."

Our bad habits are kind of like the giant in our lives. Our bad habits, whatever they may be, are our gods, they take care of us too much. As the great liberal theologian James Luther Adams said, to find the object of one's deepest loyalty is to find one's god.² Bad habits require a misguided loyalty to a poor choice of god. Unhealthy gods are ones of dependence and attachment, not unlike the absolute dependence of a young child on a parent. Healthy gods are ones that inspire us to take responsibility for ourselves, to discover and

¹ <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview/id/713274.html>

² From essay *A Faith for the Free*, James Luther Adams.

harness our power – the power that each of us has, just as an ordinary individual. Healthy gods help us to grow up.

As a parent of one and another on the way, the following notion is a good one for me to meditate on: the better I care for myself, the better I care for my creation, for my children.

For me and for many of us it's children, but how we each care for 'the rest of Creation' could be infinite in description. The quality of our care for everything in our lives depends on the quality of our self-care. We are better spouses and friends when we care well for ourselves first, we are better at our work when we are healthy. What do you look after in your life that depends on how well you look after yourself?

I think I may be more successful this year with my resolutions because I understand that it's not just me I'm trying to benefit, I'm looking to benefit my family too. Maybe the key to successfully changing is to realize it's not all about me! Not only do I see there is more at stake, but my capacity to change, to grow, to evolve, is greatly enhanced when others are included in my motive to change. Just like the youngest daughter does in the Indian folktale: to plant that one grain of rice, eventually to become vast fields of grain, changed her. To think of others is the key to discovering one's power.

All of us are in possession of such seeds, of that one ordinary grain of rice. What little idea in your mind have you left to lay around dormant, insignificant until you plant and care for it? What seeds will you nourish this year, what new life will you bring forth?

While the seed metaphor can be powerful for personal change, I also want us to think of the power of the seed itself. This sermon seeks to inspire us to plant seeds both metaphorically and literally.

I have been researching the matter of seeds themselves, and it's remarkable how much we have taken seeds for granted, and hence, really taken life for granted. When you think about changing your diet for a new years resolution, I invite you to consider your individual diet on a macro level, in the context of global food production. We will have more success having healthier diets when we think about much larger food issues, when we include others in our desire for change, especially future generations.

As you so often hear me say, we as a civilization are in the bad habit of being so dreadfully separated from the earth, from the natural environment that makes it possible to live. Nowhere can this be seen more elementally, more clearly than in the way we eat. The vast majority of Americans have no idea where their food comes from, or what goes into producing it. The food industry itself is the Wampanoag giant who does too much for us, to the point that we are like little children who don't know how to properly care for ourselves, and hence can't care for the earth.

Before I get into details, let me pause and point out that I know how un-sexy this topic is. It's much like trying to get people to care about the great peril our water supply is in. As long as there's water coming out of our tap, and it's clean and affordable, what's the problem? It's the same with food – we have never enjoyed such accessible variety of food as we do now, and in a few decades we may never again. It's the human condition and so tempting to conclude, well, we just better enjoy it while we can!

But we as religious liberals are called to resist the willful ignorance that sweeps the nation. Unitarian Universalism today exists to teach us that we are the ones we've been waiting for. We believe that we are God's hands, which can mean it's not particularly relevant if there's a god or not. If you're new to UUism, you may be learning that the closest we come to a creed is our Seven Principles – you can find those at the front of our hymnal. They're okay, they need some edits – one of you pointed out to me recently that, for example, in the first principle, 'the worth and dignity of every person' needs to be changed to 'every individual,' as in every individual living thing, including plants and animals, because we'd like to move beyond the human-centric tunnel vision that has led us into environmental crisis.

As a lifelong UU myself, I'd like to share with you what my most prized UU religious conviction is – that is, that we are morally obligated to make the world a better place for our children, for future generations. This one simple conviction can change our lives and change our world, especially when we work together. Another edit I'd recommend to the Seven Principles is that we include the 7th generation concept – that all our decisions are made with the common good of seven generations down the road in mind, a value that originates in a Native American nation. As it is now, we don't even consider the 2nd generation.

We live in an age defined by the compulsion to gamble, and so it is with our food production. Just 15 years ago, genetically modified organisms, or GMOs were “approved” by the FDA, despite a total lack of consensus by scientists regarding their safety and long-term efficacy. Studies cited were done by the same company who invented GMOs, Monsanto. Our own government railroaded GMOs into widespread use because the temptation to dominate agriculture worldwide was just too great. The result is that, currently, an average of 75% of all soybean and corn crops grown in the US are GMO.³ In turn, 70% of all food products you find in North American grocery stores contain genetically modified ingredients.

The gamble is that we simply don't know if GMOs are safe or not safe, because extensive research has never been done. The other gamble is putting all our eggs in one basket, in monocultures. It's like the stock market, when you're told to diversify your investments. We ignore nature's law of bio-diversity when farmers depend on one seed year after year. What happens when, for whatever reason, the crop fails? There's evidence that weeds are learning how to resist the Round-up (the herbicide) that the soy and corn are genetically engineered to tolerate. Much like super-bugs that learn to resist antibiotics, we have 'super-weeds' that are harder to uproot. Farmers around the world report that Monsanto's promises of greater yields have not been consistent. In some areas, results have been disastrous, yielding nothing at all because the seeds were not suited to the soil or the climate.

Monsanto owns 90% of all patents for GMOs, and the legal and political tactics they employ to maintain this monopoly are alarming. Thousands of farmers have been subject to investigations, resulting in many lawsuits and bankruptcies. Monsanto has even gone after seed-cleaners, because they encourage farmers to save their seeds for the next planting, which Monsanto expressly forbids.

All of that is worrisome enough, but it gets worse. The reason Monsanto is so Gestapo about protecting their intellectual property is because they need every dollar to fund their ongoing research to make more GMOs. I don't doubt that most of these scientists have good intentions, that they believe their inventions may make the world a better place. But there is ample reason to question the company's intentions. More worrisome than GMOs is the company's bid to own most of the seeds in the world, whether they are GM or not. Monsanto became the largest seed company in 2005, and has bought out many, many smaller seed companies. While they can't patent regular seeds, they can control their availability by controlling their prices. It may sound like a gross over-simplification, but if one corporation controls the seeds, one corporation controls our food.

So there are two very anti-American forces at play here. One, in a country founded on freedom, is our right to know. As it is, we have no way of knowing which food products contain GMOs because labels are not required by law. The second is the anti-trust value. In the past we broke up AT&T and Standard Oil because they became monopolies. Thankfully Monsanto is beginning to be subject to anti-trust scrutiny. You can learn more about Monsanto on the internet or by reading the book or watching the film by Marie-Monique Robin, *The World According to Monsanto*.

What else can be done by us, by ordinary people? I interviewed a local hero who lives around the corner from Neighborhood Church to find out: Jules DeVaes, founder of the Path to Freedom Urban Homestead. He and his family are urban dwelling eco-pioneers who have been growing most of their own food since

³ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/BiotechCrops/>

2001. On their 1/5-acre residential plot, they grow over 400 varieties of fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers, with enough left over to sell organic produce.

I told Mr. DerVaes that what he's managed to create over the course of 20 years is amazing, but what can we the average Josephine do? An urban homestead is not likely to be in our future plans. One is to consume local foods – go to farmers' markets and buy organic. If that's not in your budget, maybe commit to buying just your favorite veggie organic, like tomatoes. Your taste-buds will thank you. The DerVaes have set up a market where you can buy their products and other organic products, such as bread, coffee, and chicken. There's a chance that Neighborhood Church may become the venue for that market, so stay tuned for that, as we seek to minister to our larger community by keeping it local.

The second thing you can do is one that I'm excited about, because I'm taking it on as an assignment, and I challenge each of you to do the same. That is, plant some seeds! Plant some unadulterated, genetically unmodified seeds. No matter if you have garden space or not, you have a windowsill somewhere, a kitchen counter, perhaps a balcony. Here are all the reasons to grow some of your own food: you know it's safe food, it's healthy, it saves you money, it's environmental, and if you're outside, you're getting fresh air and exercise. If enough of us in this Neighborhood Church community did this, we could even have a harvest dinner, where we all shared the fruits of our labor together in fellowship. This church has a long tradition of celebrating with food – and fresh, homegrown food can especially connect neighbors to neighbors.

But the very best thing that planting and nourishing seeds does for us is get us in touch with nature. When you touch plants and soil you learn about them, and it changes you, and if you do it with children, it changes them too. As Jules DerVaes says, "most importantly, by working directly with nature we do the best thing to change the world – we change ourselves!"

So let us change, let us nurture the seeds of change. Happy New Year, everyone. May 2011 be the year when we wake up to this great truth: change begins with us. We can't wait for the government to do it; we certainly can't count on the corporations to be the change we want to see. WE have to be the change we want to see in the world, we have to be the ones to take responsibility for ourselves, to lead our children and lead future generations.

Let us awaken our senses, and hear the earth call. Let us touch the earth, knowing that our foresight will eventually allow us to taste the earth. May your new years' resolutions bear fruit – the kind of fruit of success that is best shared with others.