Welcoming Second Chances in the New Year©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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I remember this interview Krista Tippett once did with Rabbi Sharon Braus, the rabbi of a Jewish Spiritual Community, in Los Angeles.

She spoke of the resistance members of her congregation have coming into the High Holy Days – they’re ready to study and decry the ills of society and rage against war and global warming – but are not so ready, at first, to connect their personal actions to those problems. They’d rather make a study of the world out there, than make a study of their personal actions. They want to hang on to that illusion of separateness. We fuel the illusion by not connecting our personal actions to the world’s problems. She thinks it’s important that the days of awe include a kind of public confession – saying collectively, we – not they, but we - have really messed things up and we are going to try to do better in the new year.

I resonate with her observation, as you no doubt have gathered by my inviting you into the litany we just sang. Which may have been hard….I suspect that many of you have come to Unitarian Universalism after rejecting the words of one creed or another, especially confessions that require an individual to declare their sinfulness.

Our early rejection of the orthodox declaration of our depravity means that we – I’m speaking a generalization of Unitarian Universalists – we can then sometimes overstate our perfection. We may not be as comfortable admitting to our own shortcomings – which may be because it is also in our tradition to take responsibility for our actions. We can’t say our sinful nature is to blame, but all too often, our good intentions. That’s hard stuff, and it’s hard to grapple with. But it’s important we do it now, so we’re not caught in a repeat pattern out of our control.

My internship supervisor, the Rev. Ruppert Lovely, told me that the ministry is like Groundhog Day. Like the movie. Perhaps you recall it:

Bill Murray plays TV weatherman Phil Connors who has to cover the annual groundhog watch in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to predict the end or continuation of winter. In the movie, Phil finds himself repeating the same day, February 2nd, over and over and over again, until he comes to reexamine his life and priorities. He gets a second chance ….and a third chance and a fourth one for that matter.

Ruppert was in his 36th and last year of ministry when he told me that. And he had seen, well, 36 starts to the church year by then – serving the same congregation as minister. And he was rightly observing that “to everything there is a season” and that what goes around comes around.

Well, we’re off on another start to the church year. Muharram and the Islamic New Year has begun, and Rosh Hashanah the Jewish New Year has begun. The school year has started – teachers and students of all ages have begun the familiar cycle. The garden is giving its last push for growth and some plants are fading and browning and dying by now. Each year it’s familiar, and each year it’s new. Of course, what’s different for you this church year is – well, me – and what’s different for me – is well, you!

This is my second chance at leading a congregation. And you have another chance to enter into a relationship with a minister. I know you’ve been doing that a lot these last few years with your interims– but this time, I will be staying. I am not, as they say, “pre-fired.” I am here until we decide I shouldn’t be.

Each year it’s familiar and each year it’s new. We return at this time of year, to examine ourselves – not only our intentions, but our actions. We step out of our daily routines to reflect seriously on who we have become
and who we may yet be. We make a turn and break with old habits, we start all over, and this is often painful. But with this new start, we can reconnect with the best part of ourselves and others. We make *teshuvah* – serious, sincere return, as we work to heal ourselves and repair broken relationships.

Last year at this time, the congregation I served in Michigan adopted a congregational covenant, something you too were working on last year and adopted in June. (see, familiar, but new?) The covenant is a great tool for examination of our common life. Who have we become and who may we yet be? Ours, like these Abrahamic traditions which birthed us, is a covenantal faith – we do not hold in common *beliefs*, but rather *ways of being* in the world and with each other.

One of the strong reasons I wanted to become your minister was that you were grappling with just this – how it is you are to be with each other. And that you were adopting, at long last, a congregational covenant. Having just worked through the process in Lansing, I didn’t really want to go back – go back to a congregation that wasn’t sure it wanted to work together in community, a congregation that wasn’t sure it wanted to take responsibility for its way of being in the world and with each other. And so, your adoption of a congregational covenant was a strong signal to me, that this was a place to do good ministry, a place where I wanted to be.

“We commit our best efforts to inspiring and supporting each other in our quest for truth, meaning, and compassionate community,” the members of this church agreed. “To that end: We aspire to practice acceptance • by valuing our differences, • by understanding each of us is acting to meet legitimate needs and • by seeking progress, not perfection. We work to nurture healthy relationships • by listening wholeheartedly, • by upholding our personal boundaries and respecting others’ boundaries and • by addressing conflict in a timely way. We intentionally join ourselves in community, for we are stronger together. Therefore, we seek to • honor the dedication and work of our volunteers, • put the good of the congregation before personal preference and • celebrate the moments when we bring each other joy, comfort, and hope.”

I think it’s just beautiful! And I think it’s a great way for me to start my ministry among you – my second chance – at leading a new group of people, who are committed to self-reflection and positive change.

This is a congregation which has had a successful Chalice Circle program for years. This small group ministry program – sometimes called covenant groups – harkens back to that covenant we just talked about – an opportunity to meet with a few others on a regular basis, to examine your life and reflect upon it and possibly change. Though the program has been ongoing for years here, this year, you might guess, will be a little new – this year, we will be exploring the same themes in chalice circles that we’ll be exploring in worship. For example, our theme for October is Courage, and those groups who meet in October, will be talking about courage. So will our youth in the religious education program. I’m excited about these changes for you. Today is your last opportunity to register for the groups beginning in October. You can read more about them on the insert in your order of service. The chalice circles are an especially great way for newcomers to get to know the community. If you’re newer here, please also note that there is a Path to Membership class taking place next Saturday from 9-12:30 that you’ll see in the bulletin.

Though the fall and new year is often a time for trying new things and joining, it is also a time of reflection – for remembering, self-examining, making changes and forgiving. What I like so very much about the story that Bonnie shared this morning, is that the forgiveness she required of her father was not for having done something intentionally bad. Her foot slipped. She did not intend to hit her father. But it could have ended oh, so much worse. And so, forgiveness was necessary – they each needed to forgive themselves and each other – for, as she put it – doing stupid stuff.
Making that study of our lives, helps us move on to the new and welcome the year. We welcome second chances. Otherwise, we repeat this year the stupid stuff we did last year - over and over and over again.

For Jews and Muslims and Unitarian Universalists, this is a time for remembering, for repenting, and for forgiving. I don’t know that it’s a given in our tradition, but I’ve always thought that this is a good time of year for Unitarian Universalists to do the work. We name Jewish and Christian teachings, after all, as a part of our living tradition. We, too, stop, remember, repent – turn – and forgive.

Perhaps it’s a human tendency to not want to do all the work involved in remembering, repenting and forgiving – or remembering, self-examining, making changes and forgiving. On that, I agree with Victoria Safford in our reading this morning, that it requires a lot of deep breathing and courage, to welcome this work and make peace with others.

And it may even be harder for those of us at the liberal end of the religious spectrum. By liberal, I refer to our reforming heretical tendencies – the challenge to orthodox religion – the fact that revelation for us is ongoing and not sealed in a single Holy scripture. That we challenge old assumptions with new ideas, tell old stories infused with new meanings. We welcome second chances.

But sometimes, we want to incorporate the new without dealing sufficiently with the old. We reject orthodoxy because it is orthodoxy, not because we’ve actually found anything defective within the conventional or currently accepted beliefs. We simply want to set the old aside without looking at it and move on quickly to the new.

Well, I sometimes want to avoid that hard work, and just move onto the new. But I know better than that, despite my desire sometimes to emotionally sidestep the process.

In order to truly welcome the new year, we need to make an accurate assessment of the last. What did I do with the gift of time last year?

Jews, at this time of year, include a Kaddish in their new year’s rituals: A remembering of all who have died in the last year: There’s nothing like a death in the family to remind us all to take life seriously.

A human life is short. By comparing the ministry to Groundhog Day, I think Ruppert was saying that to everything there is a season – and it comes again, and again to us over time. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In order to welcome the new year, we have to really notice how things really are, not how we remember them, or how we experienced things once upon a time, but how they are this second time around. And it’s hard to always notice things with fresh eyes.

Going over those prior experiences can put them to rest, and help us be present to the moment – to the power that is in us. Otherwise, we forget, and do the same thing over and over and over again, never coming to examine our lives and priorities.

In the review of the year, we should do a self-evaluation, and a self-correction – it’s an opportunity to remember and return to who we are, and what you are, and where you are – to return to the home of your soul. It usually requires some measure of repentance and forgiveness.

That’s one reason for the new year’s resolution – making conscious our intentions and stating publicly our pledge to do something different with our lives in the new year, giving ourselves a second chance.
We make room for the new year by studying the old, by dealing with it, grieving it, or incorporating it into the present such that it does not get in the way of the future, the new – that it doesn’t obstruct or prevent welcoming the new year.

I know that a part of the interim work – the ministers you had between your last settled ministry and my own – that some of that work had to do with examining your past to prepare for the future. And we get a second chance at this work. You are all invited to what is called a “Start-Up workshop” on Saturday, November 4th from 9am to 12noon, facilitated by the Rev. Duane Fickeisen, as we start up this new ministry together. I hope you will put November 4th on your calendars now and join us for that workshop!

You are invited to come study the old and help us prepare for the future. The task is ownership of our history. It’s about truth and wholeness and holiness. Restoration, to borrow those healing words of Victoria Safford. “Something yearns in us to come round right. Because now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South. For leaves and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. We have the ability to change, but these things are hard to do. Unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.” And we all could welcome a second chance.

**BENEDICTION**

Connecting our actions to the world’s problems, we study our lives and make a turn. We welcome a second chance in the new year. We refuse to fuel the illusion of separateness, by connecting with those around us, those before us and those to follow. We will not be trapped by yesterday’s ways. We welcome the new and begin anew today.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form