

Reflection

The UU Perspective on Making a New Year's Resolution: Building Our Heaven on this Earth

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This is our first meeting this year, and as such, it seems only fit we spend our time together to reflect on the coming of a new year. In December's service Rev. Karen Tse reminded us that the Mayan Calendar was heralding "the end of the world," and we discussed that this could also mean the beginning of a "new world," which fits well with our western tradition of setting resolutions on 31 January.

I only started to take setting of resolutions seriously a few years back. I found that if I set only one resolution a year, I would actually accomplish it. That year, my resolution was to start bringing my own bags grocery shopping, so I would use up less plastic. It was something I wanted to do, for love of planet earth, but in the urgency of every day matters, putting into practice my lofty adorations always evaded me. It took about 3 months to "get in the habit" but I am now firmly grounded in it, and it's empowered me to become an avid composter too! I now realize it is good to keep a regular ritual of forcing myself to make self-improvements, especially those that I know would help me put into practice my ethical compass, but would not happen unless formally resolved.

As I pondered my resolution for 2013, I kept thinking back to what I see as one of the central tenants of our UU faith: That it is in this life, on this earth, now, this year, that we are called to build a heaven. UU's all have their own personal ideas about Heaven/what happens when you die/the afterlife if there is such a thing/reincarnation, etc. I myself do not believe in a life after death in a place called heaven, that is in the clouds, and we get to go there if we win enough "brownie points". Rather, I believe that our time on earth is all we have. In this context, UU's spiritual response to this "dual reality of being alive and having to die" magnifies the importance of the here and now, as compared, for example, to my previous faith, catholicism.

One of our foremost UU leaders, the late Rev. Forrest Church, states, "Knowing we are going to die... gives a special intensity and poignancy to the time we are given to live and love." I must say, the urgency and high stakes introduced by UU theology is one of my favorite aspects of this religion. It does not let us off the hook easily, it gives us no loopholes, no second chances, no magic to hide behind. UU theology, to the extent there is one, says to us: you said you were going to be spiritually serious, so start now, and actually do it—don't just meditate and pray about how you might do it in the future.

In today's reflection, I thought I'd walk us through a menu of potential "resolutions" which are consistent with the UU "theology", so to speak. Perhaps one of them will resonate particularly with you and provoke you to take heretofore not considered or uncommitted action in 2013.

Option #1: Want What You Have

Some of you may have seen a signature at the bottom of my e-mail. It is the mantra of the aforementioned UU minister, Forrest Church, who, as he was dying of cancer, wrote his treatise on the reality of having to die entitled “Love and Death, My Journey Through the Valley of The Shadow”. The mantra starts with a quintessentially Buddhist concept: “Want what you have.” Rev. Church writes, “wanting what we have mutes the pangs of desire, which visit from an imaginary future to cast a shadow on the present, which is real.”

It is, it turns out, not so easy to find happiness and fulfillment in that which we already have. But this seems to be recognized among most religions as a critical first step to finding spiritual fulfillment, even here on earth. Many religions thus teach us to practice gratitude, to give thanks. Psychologists too have uncovered that happy people are those who are satisfied with what they have. So, making a commitment to give thanks for and appreciate that which we have, is a valid and challenging spiritual endeavor.

The Book of Hebrews states, “Some have entertained angels unawares.” Rev. Church reminds us that “If angels may be defined as the incarnation of the divine in the ordinary, awakening to the miracle of life entails not so much a discovery of the supernatural, but rather a discovery of the super in the natural.”

It is relatively easy, I think, to detect the divine in the great outdoors, in our loved ones and small children (when they are sleeping), in good food, in a fantastic UU service! It is more difficult to muster gratitude for those people in our lives who hurt us and the things we care about, for the job that just isn't what it “could” be, in our ailing and aging body. Or how about rejoicing in the hard work we begrudgingly do day in and day out? In tearing ourselves out of bed, exhausted, to do something we would rather not? To be thankful that we have enough heartbeats left in our chest to do even that?

In DC, we used to attend a fantastic meditation group. Our guru, Tara Brach, regularly lead us in a “loving kindness meditation” to expand our capacity for gratitude and love. It went something like this: close your eyes. Take 3 very deep breaths, exhaling any thoughts that may be visiting you. Now, ponder something or someone that gives you great joy. As you focus your mind on this, pay attention to how this makes you feel, physically: Warm? Relaxed? How is your throat, your chest, your facial muscles? Take a moment to savor wanting what you have. Now, bring forth to your mind that which causes you pain and unhappiness. Is it a person? Your mother-in-law, perhaps? How does it make you feel? How is your chest, throat, facial muscles now? Your hands? Now, take 3 more deep breaths, and try to replicate the loving kindness feelings in this context.

Option #2: Do What You Can

Now that we are a step closer to internal nirvana, let us consider the second side of the spiritual coin—the UU obligation to impact our world. It is our UU belief that we have a duty to leave this world a better place than how we found it. Rev. Church writes that “awakening” to a UU view on the duality life and death “lies in waking up to the fact that all of life is a gift. The world does not owe us a living, we owe the world a living, our own.”

Hence, the second component of his mantra is “Do What You Can.” He explains this phrase in the following way: “Doing what we can focuses our minds on what is possible, no more, no less, thereby filling each moment with conscious, practicable endeavor.” He argues it is such practicable endeavor that will outlive our own lives, linking us to eternity, worldly eternity.

What kinds of endeavors does the UU faith speak of? Here’s a few concrete examples:

In his book, Rev. Church posits that it is not *life* that continues past death, but the *love* we have the courage to dispense freely while here on this earth. Hence his famous phrase “love after death.” He argues that to love requires courage, as the people we love may die before we do. “Dare to love, and we instantly become vulnerable,” he writes. When we love the people we fear losing, “at such moments the courage to love is nothing less than the courage to lose everything we hold most dear.”

I look around this room, and I see a group of people who I believe have great capacity for love, especially for the love of family and friends. So let me up the ante—how about loving our planet or our human society, and putting that love into action, even though we are only individuals, and the risk of failure is large?

Let me read you from the Chapter “Deeds not Creeds” in the book “A Chosen Faith, an Introduction to Unitarian Universalism.”

Though far from exclusive to UUs, the principal sin besetting many of us today is the sin of sophisticated resignation. This sin is particularly insidious because it comes with its own veil. That is, it appears respectable. It allows us to feel strongly about injustices without prompting us to do anything about them. This sin is tailor-made for many of us because it is fed by knowledge. We know so much about the world’s problems, and their enormity, that however much we want to do about them, we feel impotent. What could we do to affect hunger, homelessness, AIDS, or the threat of nuclear annihilation? How much easier it is to watch our diets and tone our bodies. For many of us, self-improvement (both physical and spiritual) has displaced the transformation of society as our principal moral concern.

Our heritage reminds us that we are a faith of deeds, not creeds. “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Many of our UU forbearers did precisely that. But what about us? What does this pride of identity avail us, if the extent of our own moral exercise (in addition to jogging) is limited to clucking our tongues, throwing up our hands, and—when we do finally act—issuing an occasional smug and ineffectual manifesto.

We are therefore left with two choices: One is to climb off our moral high horse; the other is to learn how to ride it. Both are preferable to high-minded posturing and sophisticated resignation, but only the latter represents the promise and fulfillment of our faith.

I think this passage says what it needs to, forcefully enough that the point is made loud and clear. Let me leave you with a prompter question and a practical suggestion for one way to put our faith into action.

The prompter question comes from Rev James Reeb, a UU minister who was murdered in 1965, after joining the civil rights march in Selma Alabama. In his first sermon to the congregation of “All Souls” in Washington DC, my home church, he had said: “Is there nothing worth risking one’s life for? Are there no dreams or goals so important that we risk our own destruction to gain them?”

As I conclude today’s reflection, I’d like to put on the table a small, practical suggestion for one way to put our faith into action. As many of you know, Deb has now multiple times mentioned the need to develop a regular practice of making offerings to our congregation, as even use of this room has its costs. Till now, a single member of our congregation has been generously covering these costs, but this is neither appropriate nor will it continue.

We are a small group, so the idea of passing around a collection basket or even asking for annual pledges seems a bit aggressive to begin. However, I understand that we all recognize the need to put into regular practice the act of making an offering to our spiritual community, so that we can sustain it and—who knows—perhaps even help it grow!

Thus, for this week, I’d like to suggest an activity that marries our theme with giving us the opportunity to visit the kitty discretely, at our own pace. After about 5-10 minute time for any comments and discussion of the reflection, I’d like to introduce you to a Polish tradition, which is usually practiced on the eve of Christmas day: It is modeled on the catholic ritual of breaking of bread, but in this context each person takes a piece of bread, approaches another person, and feeds them a piece of their own bread while wishing them all the best in the upcoming year. I brought some bread, and thought we could take the time to break bread together with well-wishing for the new year. As you wait for your next well-wishing “victim,” you can take a trip to the kitty, and feed it the bread of francs or euros!

Please be aware that, assuming 10 adults per service, paying for today’s use of this room costs roughly CHF 10 per adult. If you are feeling visionary, and would like to see us host more ministers—as will happen next month, or maybe a gospel choir, or to organize group activities or events, feel free to increase your offering. If you are like me and have no cash on hand, we’ve prepared a pledge card that you should feel free to fill out and drop in the kitty, so that you have the opportunity to give what you would like to today, but at a later time. Think about it, you’ll leave today knowing you took practicable spiritual action already, putting you ahead for 2013! Here’s to building heaven here on earth!