

WHAT'S NEW FOR THE NEW YEAR?

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

January 3, 2010

The arrival of a new calendar year usually generates mixed feelings for me. Finally alone after several days of socializing, Renee and I watched the Dick Clark New Year's Rocking Eve program. With each passing year, I recognize fewer and fewer of the performing celebrities. And there was Dick Clark himself, the man who had ushered a whole generation of American youth into adolescence, bravely struggling with the lingering effects of his stroke, as he haltingly counted down the seconds to the beginning of another new decade. As we watched the exuberant revelers in Times Square, I felt a strange mixture of envy and sadness—envy for their boundless enthusiasm and sadness about the relentless passage of time.

January is named after the Roman god Janus, whose two faces look both backward and forward. Even though I don't care much for the contrived enthusiasm of many New Year's Eve celebrations, I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the past year and look forward to the coming year, both as a congregation and as individuals.

As we look backward and forward as a Fellowship, what do we see? As the church year began, I expressed the hope that 2009-2010 would be a time for **revitalizing** our Fellowship. I was particularly concerned at that time about an apparent lack of commitment as indicated by a shortfall in pledging and volunteering for leadership positions, as well as the need for our Fellowship members to become more directly involved in local community service projects. I'm happy to report that we have made significant progress in all of these areas. The gap in pledges has been closed, thanks to the generosity of both long-term and newly joined members. We have attracted many new and prospective members from our area whose talents and energy hold great promise for our future. And once again our long-term members have demonstrated their commitment to making our Fellowship the caring and creative faith community that we all want.

Our rejuvenated Social Action Committee has moved forward with new plans for community service projects. Our Fellowship has joined the local interfaith soup kitchen for

needy families here in Waynesboro. In December a group of us went to the Second Presbyterian Church to learn how it's done, and I want to thank Helen Cloud for volunteering to serve as the coordinator of our team. We will be asking for volunteers from our members who are willing to help out with this worthy effort. Since many of our members live in Staunton, I am hopeful that we can also join in similar programs in that community. For the past several years, members of our Fellowship have participated as individuals in the annual observance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in Staunton. This year we plan to have a more organized group presence by meeting in the lobby of Central United Methodist Church before the march begins at 6:30. This is a wonderful opportunity for families to participate together in demonstrating our commitment to social justice for all Americans. And so, as I look backward and forward this January, I am once again filled with optimism about our future and gratitude for the privilege to serve such a healthy and vibrant congregation.

Let me now turn to the opportunity that a new year offers to us as individuals. Many of us, myself included, have become cynical about making New Year's resolutions that prove to be unattainable and consequently a source of self-reproach rather than self-improvement. Nevertheless, I would like to pass along a bit of guidance from Forrest Church, who was minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City until his death in September after a long battle with cancer. In his final book titled *Love and Death*, he shares some of the practical wisdom he gleaned from more than 30 years as a minister and amplified by his imminent death. Here is his advice for those of us who want to make a positive change in our lives.

1. BEGIN HERE. How deeply you would long for all the things you take for granted, if suddenly you lost them. So much of what we want we have already, so want what you have. BEGIN HERE.

2. BEGIN NOW. You have everything you need. Everything. Plus the bonus of today, one day more than you will have if you wait until tomorrow. BEGIN NOW.

3. BEGIN AS YOU ARE. At your fingertips is a treasure trove of memories and dreams. Put one good memory together with one good dream and you are ready to begin. (Good memories

are memories that make you feel good about yourself. Good dreams are the stuff of which tomorrow's good memories are made.) BEGIN AS YOU ARE.

4. BEGIN BY DOING WHAT YOU CAN. No more, but also no less. Don't throw yourself against the wall. Walk around it. You can't do the impossible, but so much is possible. So many of the things you haven't tried you still can do. To get around the wall, you can set out in either direction—the wall has two ends. The important thing is to start walking. BEGIN BY DOING WHAT YOU CAN.

5. BEGIN WITH THOSE WHO ARE CLOSEST TO YOU. They can cheer you on only if you let them. Invite them to give you a hand . . .lend you a hand . . . and to take your hand—no one can take your hand if you bury it in your pocket. You say they won't cheer you on, help you out, or take your hand? Maybe not, but how will you know without asking? BEGIN BY ASKING.

6. BEGIN BY TURNING THE PAGE. Today you can open a new chapter of your life. If you are trapped in your story (stuck in place, botching the same old lines), revise the script. Practice a new line or two. . . Resist the temptation to wallow over some dark passage until you know exactly what went wrong. You never will. Besides, perfection is not life's goal. Neither is unnecessary pain. If you are stuck, open a new chapter. TURN THE PAGE.

7. BEGIN BY CLEANING UP YOUR SLATE. Don't erase the past. File it by experience, to keep it handy should you need it. But don't obsess over it. Ticking off a growing list of grievances gets you nothing from life's store. As for the things on your "To Do" list that you'll probably never do, place them under a statute of limitations. When they serve no longer to inspire but only to haunt you, [cross] them off. . . BEGIN BY CLEANING UP YOUR SLATE.

8. BEGIN BY LOOKING FOR NEW QUESTIONS, NOT OLD ANSWERS. Answers close doors. Questions open them. Answers lock us in place. Questions lead us on adventures. . . THE MORE QUESTIONS WE HAVE, THE FARTHER WE CAN SEE.

9. BEGIN WITH LITTLE REGARD FOR WHERE YOUR PATH MAY LEAD. Destinations are overrated. And never what we imagine. Even should we somehow manage to get where we are heading, we won't end up there. Until life ends, no destination is final. In fact, the best destinations are those we look back upon as new beginnings. Good journeys always continue. So don't be driven by desire (that empty place within you), never to rest until you reach your goal. INVEST YOUR JOY IN THE JOURNEY.

10. BEGIN IN THE MIDDLE. Our lives will end mid-story, so why not begin there? Don't wait around for the perfect starting pistol. Or until you are ready. You may never be ready. No reason to wait in the grandstand for some official to guide you to the gate. Jump the fence. ENTER THE RACE IN THE MIDDLE. . . . [Forrest Church, *Love and Death*, pp.]

As we look backward and forward at the beginning of a new year, let me invite you to focus not on your regrets from the past but on your possibilities for the future. Renee and I have a dear friend named Ann Bugh, who has been generous in sharing her insights with us. In her annual holiday message, Ann offers this bit of wisdom drawn from Melodie Beattie:

During those times when your world doesn't match the mythical images of Norman Rockwell, take a breath and give thanks for the amazing person you are.

You are both the carrier of unique gifts, and the outlet through which they are meant to be given to the world.

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough.

It turns problems into gifts . . . the unexpected into perfect timing . . . and mistakes into possibilities.

Gratitude offers a way to make sense of our past, bring peace for today, and brighten our vision of tomorrow. [Melodie Beattie & Cherie Ray, www.trueyoucreativity.com]

Who are you as a gift to yourself? Who are you as a gift to others? With those provocative questions in mind, on January 13th we will be starting a new small group called Heart to Heart, which will offer participants an opportunity to share their experiences and opinions about significant life issues such as gratitude, forgiveness, loss and grief, and doubt in an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. The first three sessions will meet here at the

Fellowship. After that, those who want to continue meeting as a group will decide when and where to meet—hopefully taking turns meeting in the comfort and privacy of their own homes. As a faith community, we are committed to supporting one another in our shared journey toward wholeness. As your minister, I am honored to lead the way. In that spirit, let me wish you not so much a “happy” new year but a **meaningful** new year. Let me conclude with these words of T. S. Eliot:

What we call a beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.

[T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets”]

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 128 “For All That Is Our Life”

CLOSING WORDS # 456 [led by Lay Leader]