Reading
In words attributed to Kalidasa, a 3rd century Indian author of epic poems and most likely a Brahman Hindu priest.

Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of existence:
The bliss of growth, The glory of action, The splendor of beauty;
For yesterday is but a dream,
    And tomorrow is only a vision
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

Sermon - Welcoming the New Year, by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Unitarian Universalist minister Kathleen McTigue writes of the New Year:

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms.
Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands.

The New Year is a time most well known for making resolutions, for leaving behind the outworn and false, the bad habits or regrets of the past year — in order to create of this yet unformed year something hopeful and new. The date itself is really not important — each new day presents a new beginning, a time of possibility. But, having Jan 1st come around on our calendar each year gives us a way to mark the time, to reflect on the past and to contemplate our hopes for the future.

The month of January is named for the Roman god Janus, who is described as having two faces, one to look back and see the past, and one to peer into the future. Every year as the old year dies away, and a new one begins, we have the opportunity to be mindful of the threshold, and to take time to reflect on the past year, to remember what it held for us, good and bad. As we say goodbye to the old year, we can't help but look towards the future with our hopes for what it might bring and what we might experience in the new year.

Marking the New Year, each year, calls us to be mindful of our lives and how we are living. Let us take this opportunity this morning, not to let the new year slip away without remembering. Let this new
year begin by taking a moment to plant seeds of hope for the future.

[Does everyone has a stone? An usher will bring you one if you do not have one.]  

Let’s take a moment to reflect on the stones we hold in our hands. They are smooth stones, polished through the years by the flow of rushing water. They are hard in our hands, and sturdy. Yet, we know they are malleable. They have been shaped by the past, formed by heat and water, the passing of time and the conditions of the environment around them. If these stones could speak, they would tell of change.

It is not different with us. Who we are, where we are, what we value, what we love, has been shaped by the past — by our experiences in life. Even what we believe about ourselves, or God, or the nature of reality has been shaped by how we've experienced life. This varies among us, just as each of these stones varies from the others. And when we tell our stories, we speak of these differences, of the change, of the events that shaped and formed us. Like these stones, we are strong, and yet we are also malleable, changed and shaped by life.

To begin this time of reflection, I invite you to take a moment and look back across this past year. What were the highlights of this past year. For what are you most grateful? What were your triumphs? What brought the most joy? What went smoothly, or brought polish to your life? [silence]

Look again at the stones. Despite their polished look, there also are rough places, small scratches and cracks — signs of trauma, perhaps of being formed underneath a heavy burden.

Jill-Beth Sweeny Schulthies writes:

We are fragile.  
We are not broken.  
We are imperfect.  
We are not flawed.  
We are vulnerable.  
We are not weak.  
We are of this earth,  
And yet the divine lives in us.
When I feel I am going to break, I am the most human. When I embrace my fragility, I let you into my imperfect world.

- from Fragility/Divinity by Jill-Beth Sweeny Schulthies

"We are fragile. We are not broken. We are imperfect. We are not flawed." What I appreciate most about the distinctions Schulthies draws in the beginning of her poem Fragility/Divinity is that the adjectives fragile and imperfect convey a sense fluidity — that as human beings we are able to change and be changed by what is around us. In contrast, broken and flawed imply a more permanent state.
We are fragile. We can break a bone — but it heals. A mark may remain, but we find we can use our arm or leg again. Even when we face an illness or disability that cannot be healed, it does not mean we are broken. It does not mean that we cannot experience wholeness and joy in our lives.

We are fragile. Our hearts can be broken, and while a bruise may remain, in time we learn that we discover we are capable of love again.

The stones we hold are imperfect. They have been shaped and cut by water and heat and other stones, but not broken. In the same way, their rough places are not permanent flaws. If left in the rivers where they were found, slowly the shifts of time and the rush of water would smooth the rough places. Held in our hands, they seem frozen and unchanging, in our brief understanding of time as we measure it in human lives. But for these stones, as for us, time will bring more change, smoothing over existing scratches, even while creating others.

Our regrets, our mistakes, our imperfections do not render us flawed, in a permanent state of brokenness. At our center, we are whole, yet fragile. Capable of mistakes, yet reaching for something brighter. We say the wrong thing, act too quickly, respond too harshly, misunderstand, but we can also grow. We can learn. And most importantly, we can say we are sorry and offer forgiveness. “We are of this earth, and yet we the divine lives in us.” As we look upon the scratches, the crevasses in these stones, let us take a moment in silence to look back on the biggest challenges of the past year, the losses, the loved ones who left us this year. In this past year, with what did you struggle? Where did you stumble? Do you carry regrets or sorrows? Let us take a moment to remember these — the challenges of the year. [silence] When we look back over the year at the struggles and mistakes, we do not do this to punish ourselves, but only to see where we might hope for something different in the new year. We look back, not to dwell on our burdens but in order to let go of our burdens so they need not cloud this yet unformed year.

In her poem, The Healing Time, Pesha Gertler writes:

Finally on my way to yes
   I bump into
All the places
where I said no to my life
   all the untended wounds
[the red and purple scars
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,]
   those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy holy.

We look back to see the rough places, so that they will not continue to lead us down the same wrong
streets they have in the past. We hold them up, close to our hearts and we say "holy, holy.”

"We are of this earth, yet the divine lives within us.” We accept our fragility and imperfection with
compassion, and we learn to find peace with those rough places, that we may move along the path of
saying “yes” to our lives.

We take time to look at the struggles of the last year, reminding us not only of difficulty, but also to
remind ourselves of the strength we showed, the wisdom we gained, and the support we found from
loved ones that helped us through.

Finally, having turned our minds to the past, let us now, take a moment to look to the future. Mindful
of what brought us the most joy, mindful of the lessons of strength and courage we have gained in the
last year:
What hopes, what dreams, what choices do you want to bring with you into the New Year?
What hopes, what dreams do you hold for your loved one in this year?

There is a phrase from the book of Proverbs (29:18) “Without a vision, the people perish.” Maybe you
hold in your heart for the future a great vision of big changes, of life changes. Maybe you hold a vision
for opportunity, for calling, for clarity or direction. Maybe your vision is a hope that things around you
will change for the better, that circumstances in your life or in our world will improve for the
better. Maybe you hold in your heart a vision of great justice and peace growing in the world. Maybe
you hold in your heart a simple vision of peace in your own heart, a vision of continuing hope despite
trials, a vision of moments of quiet.

Whether big or small, worldly or personal, let us take this moment of silence to lift up the visions and
hopes we have in our hearts for this coming year.
[silence]

The poet Norma Cordell writes:

I have come to the well
Having forgotten my water jar.
I have for a moment forgotten
My self righteousness, and my pride.

I have left not only my jar,
   But everything that has burdened me.
I have climbed to the place high above my worldly life.
   I have come home to the ancient
   Stones that hold within, the
Precious life giving water.
   I open to my heart’s prayers
   That rise unencumbered to the open skies
I come thirsty, joyfully
Ready for the sweet, Pure spring.

May these stones, which you may take home with you, be a reminder of the precious, life giving water. May they be a reminder to you of your strength and courage, as well as the reality of change and our own fragility. But most importantly, may they be a reminder of the sturdy power of the hopes and dreams that you bring to this New Year.
Blessing to you on this New Year.