Reflections on the Old and the New

Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray
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Reading
I wish to begin with a poem that a member of the congregation shared with the Living By Heart class this past week. It is one she just discovered. It is called Many, Many, Loves by the poet Marge Piercy. When she introduced it before she read it to the group she commented that the poem starts off in a pretty straightforward way, but then it turns and ends in a very moving and powerful place.

Many, Many Loves by Marge Piercy

So many things we can love:
a man, a woman, a friend, a cat.
We can love a sugar maple
turning orange from the bottom up;
we can love a weeping beech
with its twisting arms, the lush tent
branches make sweeping the ground.

We can love a pond, a shore, a boat.
We can love a painting, a flag,
abstractions like honor and country.
We can love icons and temples.
A house, a yard, a woods, a path
that leads us wandering toward
the place we’d most like to be.

Some can love a car - I never could -
a book, a doll, a necklace or ring.
Some can love family and some can’t.
Some - the luckiest - can love
themselves without narcissism,
just saying, Well, I am this. I could do
better now and probably I will.

Sermon Reflections on the Old and New Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

Welcome 2013! Happy New Year! Have you ever noticed how the time between the end of one year and the beginning of a new one -- a transition that happens in one day’s time -- can feel like a long time? Even though we are just a few days into the new year, I find there are ways in which last year feels like quite awhile ago. This kind of makes one wonder about the real power that our spiritual and religious imaginations have on time, the way meaning -- and giving meaning to particular times -- can change our perceptions of the passage time. On the one hand, January is just another month on the calendar. On the other hand, January invites a feeling of newness, of rebirth and new beginning. A time of possibility and of setting our minds on the hopes we hold for the new year.

Fittingly, the month of January was named for the Roman god Janus, the god of beginnings and transitions, of doorways and gates. Janus is often depicted as having two heads, one that looks behind to the past and one that looks ahead to the future.
The new year naturally presents a time for reflection, a time to contemplate the past, to look back upon the previous year, to remember the joys and sorrows we experienced, to see where we fell down, or fell short, where we lived true, where we were mindful of gratitude and attentive to blessings. Where we struggled, where we felt loss or fear, and where we knew heart break.

The transition from one year to the next, even though it occurs over the ordinary passage of one day to the next, also invites us to bring greater attention to our lives in the coming year. The magic or the promise of the new year lies in the way it invites us to mark this time and to name our hopes for our own lives and for our world.

After the festivities of Solstice, Hanukah and Christmas -- each a holy day that calls us to welcome hope, joy, peace and renewal into our lives -- the new year invites us to ask, how will I keep these alive not just in this season but all year round? What, of those reminders to love, to give, to be kind, to build peace, will I take forward with me and how?

For some of us the changes we hope to make, the resolutions, the new beginnings may be small -- a promise to take more time to appreciate loved ones, to be kinder to ourselves, to begin a spiritual practice, to begin a gratitude practice. For others, transitions in life may open up major changes, changes like retirement, marriage, divorce, new love, our kids growing up, illness that stops us in our tracks. Sometimes, life brings us big changes -- some good, some filled with opportunity, some frightening and awful to bear. And with these changes we are forced into -- or invited into -- new ways of being in the world.

But how do we really make a new start? How do we (if this language works for you) make resolutions we can keep? If the changes we face are especially tough or significant, how do we find our way through those changes and into the new day before us?

It begins by honoring the past. One problem with many new year’s resolutions is that they are are lofty wishes too far removed from present reality. Or, just as likely, they are actually disguised self-negations, promises that don’t honor who we are and worse that draw attention to the things about ourselves about which we feel most self-critical.

There is a danger in the practice of looking to the future without an acknowledgment, an affirmation and acceptance of who we are. These kinds of resolutions can set us up for failure when they don’t involve an acceptance of who we are and the limitations of where we are right now.

This is not to say change isn’t possible. People can change: we can change our behaviors, we can create new habits and let destructive ones go, we can improve relationships, we can leave unhealthy ones, we can free ourselves from guilt. But all of that takes work and time and intention. It doesn’t happen over night.

The first step is coming to terms with the past. Not denying it, nor refusing it, nor losing ourselves in negative rumination of what we wish we would have done differently yet cannot change. Rather, we need a way of looking at the past that allows us to see ourselves honestly, in our vulnerability, and in our limitations. In the places where we wish we would have done better, we can acknowledge the wrong, be honest, but then accept that now, we can probably do better. As Marge Piercy writes, “Well, I am this. I could do better now and probably I will.”

In places where we were hurt, offering forgiveness to ourselves or others allows us to free ourselves from doubt and guilt so that we might not get stuck in the past, but rather be present to the opportunities and reality of the present moment. Forgiveness allows us to make a new start.

Whenever we look to the future, whenever we seek to make a new start -- whether it is the desire to spend more time with our family, to find better ways to manage our stress or anger, to begin an exercise routine, or to quit smoking or drinking, or maybe life has opened up in new ways and we have the chance to chart a new course for ourselves, or maybe something like illness is forcing us to find new ways to live and new priorities -- whenever we seek to make that new start, the key is grounding the hopes we carry in an affirmation of who we are and where we are. We must discern a new path by first reflecting on what gifts, what passions, what limitations we bring. This way our hopes become not promises to be people other than who we are, but commitments to build on who we are -- drawing out our strengths, our loves, and the best parts of ourselves. In the whole process, the goal is not perfection, the goal is to better appreciate the gifts we have been given and from that appreciation to share them more fully in our lives.
That’s what the rock you’ve received today is for. (I know -- pretty dangerous for the minister to give the congregation rocks!) It is to remind us of the strength that comes by building on our journeys, not forgetting them. It is a reminder of the value of what has come before and a symbol of our recognition that the visions and hopes we have for our future arise from a core that in many ways remains unchanged with us. Sometimes we just need help rediscovering it.

So, take a moment and consider the rock in your hand. The rocks we hold are not perfect, they are not without blemish -- they show signs of wear, rough edges, cracks, some breaks now smoothed over, some more recent. As you consider the stone, think about how the cracks, the seams, the broken places are reminders of the journey your life has been: the losses suffered, the grief known, the risks taken, the rewards gained, the love given and lost, the burdens carried, the way we have grown from all of these, the rough edges becoming smooth, time -- like the ultimate rush of water -- dulling the edges of previous pains and helping us to begin again.

Take a moment to remember this past year, its joys and sorrows, celebrations and struggles -- some of which may continue into the new year. Take a moment to consider the milestones, both difficult ones and joyful ones of the last year.

Silence

Now notice the weight of the stone -- heavy with life, with matter, with truth and trial and experience. The firmness of it -- like perseverance, reflecting a certain steadiness -- teaching us that despite the way life and its experiences shape us, the ways we struggle, recover and grow, there is also some certainty, some core that remains, some essence within each of us, our gifts, our passions, our inner knowing, reminding us who we are.

Our work is to learn to love that core of who we are. To say, Well, I am this and to love ourselves without narcissism, to know we can do better now and probably we will. Our work is to know our past, to understand and accept it, to free ourselves from past mistakes or hurts so that we might become aware of today, of what is now, of who we are today and what we can do today.

Meditation and Silence

These stones give us a concrete way to look over the past year, to look over the journey we have each had in our lives. Now, I want to invite you into a time of extended silence to plant the seeds of our hopes for the new year.

Silence is a gift and a rare one at that. By silence, I do not mean the absence of noise. For the sounds of life -- from the cough that wells up in our chests, to the gurgle of babies, to the birds chirping just outside our doors, to the sounds of our bodies shifting in our chairs -- an awareness of these sounds of life is a part of opening ourselves to meditation and stillness.

The time of silence we take every week is not about the absence of sound, but about listening to a deeper voice -- what some call the still, small voice. It is about listening in a different way, it is about attention to our breath, and through the breath, attention to life.

Whenever we find ourselves in a place of discernment, seeking out a new path, or the next step in the road we have been walking, making time for silence and meditation can be a key piece of that discernment. Our conscious minds are prone to over-thinking, to loops, to worry, to fear. In the silence, we let go of all that. We stop long enough to let a vision, a hope, a phrase, a feeling of peace unfold within us. Over time, the intentional practice of making room for silence -- maybe first, just once a week in the service, slowly expanding that to other times -- awakens a deeper knowing and a calm within us.

In times with a busy and hectic pace (which can accompany the start of a new year), having a regular practice of stopping, even for just a moment, to breathe allows you in times of frustration, conflict, difficulty, stress, to stop, to picture yourself in the moment of silence, and to retrieve the feeling of being in the silence, even though you might currently be in a chaos. One of the key benefits of any practice, whether it is sitting meditation, yoga or prayer, is that in moments of stress, you can actually retrieve the feeling you have during your practice and invite that calm and clarity to you.
So, at this time, I invite you to get comfortable in your chair, try to sit in a straight posture with your feet planted solidly but comfortably on the ground. And let us share a few minutes of silence together. In this extended time of silence, you may wish to reflect on the question, what hopes do you bring for yourself in the new year? What new start or next step will you take in this new year? Or, you may wish to just relish the quiet, bringing your attention to your breath and the presence of peace that fills this room.

**Silence** - several minutes of silence followed by this responsive reading by Kathleen McTigue (#544 from *Singing the Living Tradition*).

New Year’s Day

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms,

> With or without our calendars to name a certain day as the day of new beginning, separating the old from the new.

So it is: everything is the same, bound into its history as we ourselves are bound.

> Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands.

What shall we do with this great gift of Time, this year?

> Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year,

We are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of the best visions of our people.

> The new year can be new ground for the seeds of our dreams.

Let us take the step forward together, onto new ground.

> Planting our dreams well, faithfully, and in joy.