

No Regrets

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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Story: Waitressing in the Sacred Kitchens

from *The Rock of Ages at the Taj Mahal* (1999) by the Rev. Meg Barnhouse

I love for a waitress to call me “Hon.” It’s comforting. She doesn’t know me and I don’t know her, but we fit into well-worn, ancient categories: I am the Hungry One and she is the One Who Brings Nourishment from the Unseen Source.

When I was younger, I worked as a waitress in Philadelphia and New Jersey. I learned useful things while serving food to strangers. I know how to rush around with my hands full, thinking about six things at the same time, which has stood me in good stead as the working mother of two small sons. I know that people are not at their best when they’re hungry. That knowledge helps me to understand world events. If the citizens of the world were well-fed, we’d have fewer wars and less mayhem.

The most helpful thing I grasped while waitressing was that some tables are my responsibility and some are not. A waitress gets overwhelmed if she has too many tables, and no one gets good service. In my life, I have certain things to take care of: my children, my relationships, my work, myself, and one or two causes. That’s it. Other things are not my table. I would go nuts if I tried to take care of everyone, if I tried to make everybody do the right thing. If I went through my life without ever learning to say, “Sorry, that’s not my table, Hon,” I would burn out and be no good to anybody. I need to have a surly waitress inside myself that I can call on when it seems that everyone in the world is waving an empty coffee cup in my direction. My Inner Waitress looks over at them, keeping her six plates balanced and her feet moving, and says, “Sorry, Hon, not my table.”

First Reading: A Year Begins Today

This meditation is from a book published in 1963 called *Seasons of the Soul*, by Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Robert T. Weston. The ‘winter of the soul’ and its other seasons, he assures us, “have no necessary relation to the calendar.”

A year is gone.
It matters not when it began
For it has ended now.
There were other years,
And some began with a birthday
And some with a death;
Some with one day of the month and some with another.
Some began with a song and others with a lament,
But today I start another year, whatever the month or season;
It is what lies before me that concerns me now.

There will be decisions and tasks;
There will be drudgery, achievement and defeat:
There will be joy and grief,
All the raw stuff of experience
Waiting for me to shape, to fashion as I will,
And it will never become just what I planned.
However it may appear to others
I can turn it to knowledge and wisdom
Or folly.
If it be hard, I can make of it strength:
It may become bone, sinew and steel
Or ashes and waste.
Some one might say, "It all depends on what the year may bring,"
But what I make of it depends on me.

Second Reading: I Would Take Counsel

A second reading by the Rev. Robert Weston, also from *Seasons of the Soul*

I would take counsel of myself.
I would stop and look within,
And looking within, look back, also,
That I may look ahead with clearer understanding
Of the way I have been moving, and in what direction.
I need to know if I am going forward or retreating,
Whether I have been wasting, or enjoying
The precious moments of eternity
Which are not going to be
Eternity for me.
There have been frictions, annoyances and downright wrath,
But were they because I was right and others wrong?
Have I had my eyes too sharply focused
On that which pleased me, served my self-esteem,
Undergirded my security,
Of which I did not inquire whether
It served or hampered others?
Have I been trying to stop the clock
To hold the world
In perpetuation of what was, and is already slipping away?
Have I been critical of others
For what really needed changing in me?
Let me indeed take counsel of myself

And get my directions straight.

Sermon:

“No Regrets” by the Rev. Anne Bancroft

There was a little girl – maybe around six years old, or seven – whose bed was an antique. She had been taught that it had belonged to her mother, and her mother’s mother, and the mother before that, when they were little girls! These facts were considered very important – a part of her history. So, that one day, when the little girl’s mother discovered the child’s name carved into the side of the bed, it was not a good thing.

“I didn’t do it,” the little girl insisted. “Well, then how did it get there, because I’m quite sure it didn’t carve itself!” the mother responded. And they went on and on – and the little girl would not budge and the mother was not happy.

So, the mother – out of desperation, I suppose – called her own mother, expecting, perhaps, support for her disgruntlement – and maybe some way out of what had become an impasse. But the little girl’s grandmother, who was not known for her forgiving abilities and who had slept in this same bed much of her own life, said, “Well, now we know who’s sleeping in it these days! It’s her bed. Forget about it.”

I had made such an issue of it – I regret to this day that I had not had the wisdom to let it pass the way my own mother suggested. It was many, many years before I discovered who really did the carving . . . a young friend with a penchant for paper clips on wood, who my child was protecting from discovery.

I regret my behavior. I regret my sense of priorities – which is to say – with this very small example – that unless I’m an exception to the rule, I don’t believe we can live a life of No Regrets, even though that’s the title of this sermon. We are, as I appear to fairly regularly point out (and apparently fairly regularly exemplify!) imperfect beings . . . we make mistakes, and we will likely continue to make them, for better or worse.

We offend our potential all the time, and it would not serve us to deny the attending regret. It’s not that we’ll hold it indefinitely or without learning from it. But, it happens.

“we need the gift of starting over,” Nancy Shaffer’s poem (from *Because We Spill Not Only Milk*) reminded us in the e-news several weeks ago,
“beginning
again: just this constant good, this
saving hope.”

So here we are, with a New Year before us.

“There were other years,”

“And some began with a birthday
And some with a death;
Some with one day of the month and some with another.
Some began with a song and others with a lament,
But today I start another year. . . .”

And since this day is one we celebrate as our mutual beginning, it behooves us – on our own, AND together – to pause and think about how we might craft our intentions to **minimize** our regrets – or even to make an effort to live this year with No Regrets. What might THAT look like? What might we do differently such that our look-back in early 2018 might reveal a year with No Regrets?

2017. Wow.

We are moving into a year that will be filled with unknowns for so many reasons. We make plans, and God laughs, they say. The truth is we never know what life will bring. We have now. Right now.

But this year feels especially tentative, I think – hopeful for some, perhaps, but for many of us a time of concern. There’s an adage attributed to either Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr – both 20th century theologians – that a good preacher should hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Since Unitarian Universalists ascribe to the prophethood of all believers, I can assume that each of you should each be similarly encumbered!

Bibles, of course, are not considered the single source of wisdom here, nor are newspapers necessarily today’s go-to choice for updates, for that matter. But, to me the adage suggests that all the wisdom in the world is irrelevant unless it is situated in the affairs of the day; and, **also** (and I suspect this part is equally if not **more** important) – that the bulk of the day’s challenges, whatever they are, are more adequately addressed in consultation with our souls’ journey – be it in the Bible, or the Bhagavad Gita; the Koran, or simple koans, which are mostly not simple at all. When we are facing the world as it shows itself to us, in the newspaper, on Facebook, even on our Twitter feeds – maybe especially on our Twitter feeds now – we need the stories and the places of exploration, of questioning, of grappling; the places of the heart and soul where we acknowledge our frailties and our failures; where we forgive ourselves and each other; and, where we face the unknown with hope together – like this, like this church. We need this.

I think it’s no small surprise that our priorities as a culture got way out of whack when affiliation with religious institutions dropped – when we stopped imagining that there was something more, when so many of us decided the New York Times, or running errands, or playing sports was more useful than spending an hour or two at church or wherever it is we went to remind ourselves that we human individuals are not the be-all and end-all. It’s not the theological certainties we need. It’s the willingness to grapple, to journey, to be pilgrims on this amazing planet together with our hearts engaged in its meaning. Our penchant for intellectual rigor does not serve us adequately alone – we

need the environment of question and doubt, of humility, of soulful imagination. You know that. You're the choir I'm preaching to.

But in early 2018, we will not want to regret a lack of effort to understand the world as we are experiencing it and how we can engage with it on behalf of the love we know we want to abide in and with. We need this. Everyone needs this. Let's get our families and friends and bring them in the door.

Let us be intentional about **that** as we face this New Year ride.

And then – I'm thinking – we need to do a great deal more listening: to the inner song, and to each other. We need to be coming to the proverbial master's table with an empty cup instead of one full of our own truths.

Again, from Rev. Weston . . .

“Have I had my eyes too sharply focused
On that which pleased me, served my self-esteem,
Undergirded my security,
Of which I did not inquire whether
It served or hampered others?”

I was so certain – those many years ago – that the pristine nature of the age-old furniture was the most important thing . . . silly me. It's just furniture. I came to the table of learning with a very full cup, indeed.

We need to be listening.

For me and I imagine for many of us, a gift to this new year has been a renewed and invigorated sense of clarity around the issues that we, as people of faith, hold dear and work to promote. I wonder if it has felt that way to you? I was ready to relax after the election last November. I was prepared to settle back into a hammock of trust that the progressive voice of social well-being was sufficiently, if not perfectly, in charge. And, oh – how that hammock turned and landed me you-know-where! Oh, how my attention has been riveted to a new reality! Suddenly, there is a list as long as my arm of battles to be fought, that I had deluded myself had already been won.

Sometimes, it appears that moving forward requires that we overturn some rocks, expose the soil and everything that lives there – good, bad and ugly – to the light of day, and then at least we know what we're working with, and right now, it's a lot. The view from the dirt under the hammock assures me we have work to do together. We have to get busy this year.

Thoreau reminds us, of course, “It's not enough to be busy; so are the ants . . .”

Which is where intention comes in, again – setting our intentions to take care of the world in front of us.

We can't all solve every problem, or clean up every mess. At some point soon, we each get to summon our inner waitress and determine which table or tables are ours, and which are not. What can you manage in your life this year? What are the priorities that will help you determine that?

The things we may have thought were important – like antique furniture, or white supremacy – may ultimately reveal themselves as not just insignificant, but wrong, in the face of a complicated and ever more nuanced world.

We need to set our intentions for this year with care and thought, hoping that we will serve our own tables well and trusting that others will serve the ones we cannot. We need to have a little faith, my friends – faith in our capacities, faith in our imaginations, faith in the mystery that unfolds before us – that we are moving forward even when, on occasion, it may feel otherwise.

Four things:

1. Show up for church – and bring your friends.
2. Listen more carefully than ever before – which is to say, be open and vigilant in mind and spirit.
3. Choose your table or tables – but not too many.
4. And, have faith – not in the certainty of the outcome, but in the possibilities inherent when we pay attention to numbers one through three!

Happy New Year, everyone. Let's jump into 2017 with gusto – making each day a thing complete.

Rise in body or spirit for Hymn 350, "The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time."

Closing words (683) by Theodore Parker

Be ours a religion which like sunshine goes everywhere;
Its temple, all space;
Its shrine, the good heart;
Its creed, all truth;
Its ritual, works of love;
Its profession of faith, divine living.