

New Beginnings
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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“Tomorrow we’ll make a garden.” Those are the words spoken by Mr. Bellavista in the story Sonja told us earlier; words of forgiveness, words of trust, words of affirmation -- words of hope, words of promise, words of new beginnings.

We are entering into the time of the Days of Awe, with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, coming up this week. And so we turn our thoughts to new beginnings. Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as the birthday of Adam and Eve, the anniversary of the creation of humankind, and in that creation, that beginning, the birth of a special bond between a people and their creator God. In Rosh Hashanah, the Jews celebrate the loving nature of a God who always allows for new beginnings, and rededicate themselves to their covenant with God, resolving anew to live up to the compelling relationship that is central to their faith.

Every year, every season, every sunrise, every morning is a new beginning. We live in a world of cycles and seasons, changes that come upon us in anticipated rhythms, or perhaps changes that appear without warning. A garden or a life has its seasons and its cycles, and so when we make a garden, when we make a life, there are changes, there are always new beginnings, new choices to make, new risks to take, new pathways that open for us. We do not have to go looking for new beginnings, because they are constantly dawning in our lives. The world changes, the future emerges around us and within us, and we must respond, whether we want a new beginning just now or not.

We are imperfect creatures in an imperfect world – we fall short of our goals, we lose track of our priorities, we fail to follow up on our good intentions and fall back into habits that do not serve us well. Choosing to make a new beginning, we wake up in the morning resolved to do better, to get back into a healthy routine, to throw out that leftover chocolate cake and check to see when the next WeightWatchers meeting is. We brush the cobwebs off the paintbrush or pen, facing again the blank canvas or blank page, determined to bring out that creative work that is within us. We make a new beginning.

Sometimes in our lives we make mistakes, we get caught up in something and do not think about its consequences or its effect on others; we walk into a situation and the unexpected happens, things go much more wrong than we could have imagined . . . it might start with just throwing a tomato instead of a baseball, or speaking a harsh word in anger, or it could be a single impetuous or wrong-headed decision, and we are left wondering what happened, how could things have turned out so differently than I thought they might?

“Tomorrow we’ll make a garden.” When the unexpected happens, when things go wrong, when we fall short, or when we make a mistake in judgment, when events spiral beyond our control, we are often left with feelings of failure, blame and loss. Perhaps we are not who we thought we were. Or we can point a finger at others – they were not who we thought they were. The world is not as we thought it was. Or all of the above. In any case, there can be regret, perhaps sorrow, a sense of loss. We have fallen out of the covenant we make with ourselves and others, or we have fallen out of our covenant with the world or with the divine, and it is time to hope for the grace of forgiveness, the grace of letting go and moving on, the grace of a new beginning.

Acknowledging the losses, accepting the regret, shouldering our share of the responsibility, we can choose to move forward – as the young man in the story did, overcoming his fear to take the initiative to make amends, and as Mr. Bellavista did, allowing himself to be vulnerable, opening his heart with trust to make a garden once more, this time in partnership, building a relationship of love.

Unitarian minister Forrest Church, in his book *Love and Death*, said: “There are so many instances in our daily lives when our fears stand in the way of our potential to love. How many ways we find to armor and protect ourselves. We sense the risk, of course. That is the main reason we act in the ways we do. Every time we open ourselves up, every time we share ourselves with another, every time we commit ourselves to a cause or to a task that awaits our doing, we risk so very much.

We risk disappointment. We risk failure. We risk being rebuffed or being embarrassed or being inadequate. And beyond these things, we risk the enormous pain of loss. . . . We pay for love with pain, but love is worth the cost. If we try to protect ourselves from suffering, we shall manage only to subdue the very thing that makes our lives worth living. Though we can, by a refusal to love, protect ourselves from the risk of losing what or whom we love, the irony is, by refusing to love we will have nothing left that is really worth protecting.”

There is a risk in new beginnings. And through the risk, there is much to be gained. Together, the young boy and the older neighbor created something of even greater value, filled with the warmth of love as well as the physical and spiritual nourishment of food and flowers produced by their own hands. It takes all that we have, it takes our mind, our heart and our will to move with all our presence and power into new beginnings, so that we make the most of the opportunity to create something stronger and better in our fresh start.

A scholar at MIT in organizational leadership, Otto Scharmer, teaches a strategy for life that he calls “leading into the future as it emerges.” A key to moving into that place of increased power and understanding, Scharmer says, is approaching life with an open mind, an open heart and open will. The open mind admits new understanding, the open heart a new appreciation of others, and the open will permits us to be called into relationship in new ways. This resonates with the implied covenant we speak in the chalice lighting each week, which comes from the founding covenant of this church, a covenant to truth, to love and service. Head, heart and will. These are the deep resources we bring to each new beginning, to each new tomorrow as we create our garden.

“Tomorrow we’ll make a garden.” Thank heavens for new beginnings, for Rosh Hashanah and for New Year’s resolutions, for second (or third, or fourth) chances. I will admit that sometimes, as I approach my new beginnings, the covenants I want to renew, the resolutions I make, I tend to think in terms of “shoulds” – perhaps I am not alone in making resolutions that don’t sound like much fun, like losing weight, exercising more, eating less chocolate and more vegetables – I can even make walking on the beach, playing the flute or spending more time with friends sound like drudgery. I’m pretty good at naming the things I should do, sometimes losing track of the joy in the things I want to do, or just getting them confused. It is all in how you look at it.

How different might it be when, rather than making resolutions based in fear or failure, we make resolutions to do grand things together, things that bring us joy, resolving to create more health, love and happiness, for ourselves and certainly for others. To live and work with an open mind, to

approach others with an open heart, and to keep our hands and our will open for the new opportunities and challenges that may present themselves in our new beginnings.

“Tomorrow we’ll make a garden.” What in our life calls for new or renewed commitment, as we make our commitments for each new year, for each new day, in each new morning? Where will we dare to take a risk, dare to be happy, dare to learn something new, being open to love and partnering with others to create something of even greater value in our lives? Where will we accept the call, where will we resolve and commit to some new beginning in our lives, not because we should, not carrying a thorn heavier than lead, not as drudgery, but in joy? In love, we respond to the challenge and the possibility to get happy and to create happiness around us.

In each of our lives, we choose what sort of garden we will make, how we will grow it, and in the cycles of seasons and life, what we will make of each new beginning. For the new beginnings do come, whether we want them or not, so it is our choice how to be with them.

Together in this religious community, we also make a garden. We commit to our life here together, to grow a community of faith and action, something precious and always-renewing. In so doing we are challenged to take risks in that partnership, in the growing of that garden, in our work to make the church strong and resilient.

Things have not always been smooth in the life of the church, as happens whenever people endeavor to create something of value, a church or a garden, together. As I gather stories from the past, it is clear there have been unexpected times when there has been disagreement and conflict, when people were challenged to find new ways to work together in this garden, and when the results were difficult to achieve. But through it all, in hope and love, they reached for their new beginning, taking the risk to create and sustain the church.

This church is now entering once more a time of new beginning, a transitional time of preparing to move toward a new ministry, a time to rediscover the power and potential of the church with open minds, open hearts and open will. The members of the Board of Trustees of this church, along with members of the Long Range Planning Committee, the Transition Team and the staff, spent several productive hours yesterday in a start-up workshop, identifying some priorities for how the church will spend the precious resource of this transitional time and take advantage of this new beginning. As they did some deep work together, looking at the strengths and possibilities of the church, they established two priority areas to work on for the coming months and years.

One priority will be to discover and articulate, with broad involvement of the entire congregation, the true and compelling identity, mission and values of this church, that burning coal of commitment that draws people together and binds them toward some larger purpose. The other priority will be to address a transformation in the structures and processes for governance, so that the church has the organizational framework it needs as a large congregation to flourish and grow. I am told that the need for this transformation has been known here for at least three decades, and now, finally, the resources, expertise and commitment are available – the head, heart and will – to strengthen the church so that it can thrive.

This transformation will include creating new pathways of involvement, decisions and communication so this church can live into its democratic values and tap its power to manifest its identity, mission and values in the world. The energy and commitment were high as this group of leaders closed their meeting yesterday, agreeing to come together again in a few weeks to define

more precisely how to engage this complex and compelling task. There is much good work to be done, and with open mind, heart and will, we will engage that work together for the future of this beloved church.

It is good, complex and compelling work when we make a garden, or when we make a church together. We risk disappointment, we risk failure, we risk disagreement and conflict, we risk being inadequate. The rewards are hope and love and power, the joy of knowing we are creating a new beginning for something important in the world. We are in a time of intentional new beginnings, in this transitional time between settled ministers. This is a time to take some risks, to discover what best use to make of this new opportunity, creating new possibilities. And by the work of our hands and our hearts, we will reap the rich harvest that sustains us, the spiritual nourishment of this community of faith.

And so the new beginnings are upon us once again. In this time of Rosh Hashanah, we make our New Year's resolutions, we commit to making a garden, again and again, as the cycles and seasons roll over us. This morning and all mornings, tomorrow and in all the tomorrows to come, let this be a time of new beginnings. Together, let us make a garden. Amen, and Blessed Be.

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