

Intentions Set or Settled
Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church
January 7, 2018

Opening Words

To be alive: not just the carcass
But the spark.
That's crudely put, but ...

If we're not supposed to dance,
Why all this music?

~ Gregory Orr ~
(Concerning *The Book That Is the Body Of The Beloved*)

From the Story for All Ages

My New Year Wish *Neil Gaiman*

I hope that in this year to come, you make mistakes.

Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You're doing things you've never done before, and more importantly, you're Doing Something. So that's my wish for you, and all of us, and my wish for myself. Make New Mistakes. Make glorious, amazing mistakes. Make mistakes nobody's ever made before. Don't freeze, don't stop, don't worry that it isn't good enough, or it isn't perfect, whatever it is: art, or love, or work or family or life.

Whatever it is you're scared of doing, Do it. Make your mistakes, next year and forever.

Reading Annie Lamott

Oh my God, what if you wake up some day and you never got your memoir or novel written; or you didn't go swimming in warm pools and oceans all those years because your thighs were jiggly and you had a nice big comfortable tummy; or you were just so strung out on perfectionism and people-pleasing that you forgot to have a big juicy creative life, of imagination and radical silliness and staring off into space like when you were a kid? It's going to break your heart. Don't let this happen. Repent just means to change direction — and NOT to be said by someone who is wagging their forefinger at you. Repentance is a blessing. Pick a new direction and aim for that. Shoot the moon.

Reading the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, for the installation sermon of the Rev. Jordinn Nelson Long

“It seems to me that faith is not about the search for something that never fails, but rather the affirmation that the experience made possible through connection, relationship, and community is worth the pain of inevitable loss.

“I cannot prove this proposition, of course. If you were to say to me, ‘I have been there, and the pain of bereavement, or betrayal, is far greater than any joy I ever found,’ I would not argue with you — only you can know the dimensions of your own griefs and gladnesses. What I can do — what we all do, I suspect, in this strange vocation of ministry — is testify. I can tell you the stories of those who have given themselves to love and to covenant, and been so enriched that they would do it again and again, despite knowing that heartache is part of the bargain. I can bear witness out of my own life in leadership that ‘success’ is a kind of seductive phantom, ever in search of more; it is rather the shared effort, the working together itself, that satisfies both in the moment and in memory. If you really want to build community, take on a demanding project together, and don’t let yourself quit when the going gets tough. Whether or not you accomplish the goal, you will be known to each other, and changed by each other, in the process, and that is the foundation of authentic community.”

SERMON

Intentions Set or Settled the Rev. Anne Bancroft

I don’t know how many of you had a chance to read the blurb about this morning’s service. Entering this new year of 2018, we are exploring the January theme of Intention. I used a thought from 20th century Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who suggests, “the biggest human temptation is to settle for too little.” Let me repeat that: The biggest — and there are a lot of temptations — so the BIGGEST, he says, is to settle for too little.

I tried like crazy to verify that quote. One source suggested it was in a *Forbes* article from August of 1980. It took me a while to remember that Merton died in 1968, so it clearly wasn’t a live interview. But let’s just assume he did say it, and let’s assume it has some truth to it. At this time of considering setting our intentions, both personal and collective, it made me very sad — that we are ever tempted to settle our intentions rather than setting them at an aspiring height, rather than doing what Annie Lamott suggests, which is to “shoot the moon.”

I think Merton’s idea caught my attention particularly because we are in this era of diminishing expectations, or a kind of acceptance of lowering the bar. As an example: Remember when we used to bemoan the frequency of the word “like” in contemporary conversation? We used to mimic Valley girl speech: Oh, I’m so, like, bummed about my frizzy hair! And now, our President goes to the trouble of including it in his tweets! “Actually, throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart.” (That was a tweet from yesterday morning.)

He's not the only one in the public sphere who disappoints. He's just an easy target right now.

But we are, I think, in an increasingly polarized place where we have come to expect too little of each other by way of collaborating towards the common good, or even being in conversation about what the common good looks like.

At any rate, I want to share a poem for all of us by the Rev. Nancy Shaffer called *Because We Spill Not Only Milk*. I shared it once before, but it has been a while. Sadly, Rev. Shaffer died in 2012 of brain cancer. She left us much to consider.

Poem, by Nancy Shaffer

Because we spill not only milk
Knocking it over with an elbow
When we reach to wipe a small face
But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,
And also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light
How much is gone and we hadn't intended it
Because we tear not only cloth
Thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole
But also tear friendships when we grow
And whole mountainsides because we are so many
And we want to live right where black oaks lived,
Once very quietly and still
Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen
And have to go back to the room we were in before,
Remember why it was we left
But also forget entire lexicons of joy
And how we lost ourselves for hours
Yet all that time were clearly found and held
And also forget the hungry not at our table
Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze
And precious papers left in rain
But also at legs that no longer walk
Or never did, although from the outside they look like most others
And also weep at words said once as though
They might be rearranged but which
Once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless
Because we are imperfect and love so
Deeply we will never have enough days,
We need the gift of starting over, beginning

Again: just this constant good, this
Saving hope.

We need the gift of starting over . . . so here we are at the beginning of a new year – contemplating intention, KNOWING, *because we are imperfect and love so deeply*, knowing that we WILL fail, we WILL make mistakes . . . but I’m worried, because we are in this tricky era where we don’t know what’s happening, actually, and it would be easiest to do what Merton suggests, which is to keep the bar low so that we won’t continue to be so phenomenally disappointed, and worried.

But YOU know, and I know, this is not the time to succumb to that temptation. We need to keep our sights high, VERY HIGH, now more than ever. We need to be willing to engage in the gift of starting over, beginning again every day with insistence that we do not accept this diminishing. It is not OK, and I don’t mean simply the tweets of our leader or leaders, though they are no exception. We must hold ourselves to a high intention because now – as ever – there is work to be done and we should not hold ourselves apart from it. How does it serve us individually, or all together, to settle?

One of the readings earlier was from the Rev. Kendyl Gibbon’s installation sermon for the new minister in our Fairhaven church on the South Shore. Gibbons was talking about the life of congregations and how we are in relationship with each other, and how important it is to commit to the ins and outs of relationship. It is “the shared effort, the working together itself, that satisfies both in the moment and in memory.”

In the collective sphere, one might ask what the measure of aiming high looks like when we hold ourselves accountable to the work in front of us, to the work that the world needs us to attend to. Do you remember the words from Howard Thurman at the end of our Christmas Eve services, about the work of Christmas that begins when the angels stop singing and the shepherds are back with their flocks:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among [all people],
To make music in the heart.

What does it look like to hold ourselves accountable to high intention? I think it looks a bit like it might in our individual lives. It looks a bit like discomfort, because of what it demands of us, and maybe that’s why we are so tempted to settle for too little, because doing more is hard work, and it can require more of us than we are sometimes interested in committing to.

Jordinn Nelson Long, the minister that Kendyl Gibbons was preaching for, has a blog. Shortly after yet another gun tragedy, she wrote a fairly colorful piece about gun control – colorful in the use of a particular expletive that we seldom hear in religious environments, but she was angry. It’s called F-this, America, only she doesn’t shorten the word to a letter. I have only used the eff-bomb, as they say, once in a worshipful environment, and it landed heavily. But in her blog, Jordinn was bemoaning the ongoing tragedies and had little patience for polite speech. She was also pointing out the allure AND the hazards of settling for too little.

“Comfort, my peeps, is both the dream we chase and the slow narcotic drip that we use to justify all the not-seeing. And as its beneficiaries, we are loath to contemplate, much less voluntarily enter into, the discomfort that we imagine to be the permanent price of challenging the status quo that got us here.”

(<https://raisingfaith.net/2017/11/06/fuck-this-america/>)

We know this temptation, right? Life is hard enough without challenging ourselves to do more. We just want some comfort, and who can blame us?

Comfort, my peeps, is the slow narcotic drip . . . to justify all the not-seeing. What is it we don’t want to see? Anything uncomfortable! Anything and everything that’s wrong with our world, that addressing would cause us to feel sad, or frustrated, or angry on behalf of others

“And as its beneficiaries [and by that she means the status quo], we are loath . . . to voluntarily enter into the discomfort that we imagine to be the permanent price of challenging [it] the status quo . . .”

We are beginning to understand, right? The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little . . . because it’s more comfortable for so many of us – not all . . . but so many, and rocking the boat will put our comfort at risk.

AND, there is this “small” problem of not knowing exactly what to do, anyway . . . though I will tell you this – and you know it already: Not knowing exactly what to do doesn’t excuse doing too little, and it definitely doesn’t excuse doing nothing – because then, my friends, when you-know-what hits the fan (another expletive I’m not going to say out loud) we have no one to blame but ourselves, right?

Remember that poem about climate change . . . what were you doing?? What were you thinking, WHEN . . . ?

These are challenges to the spirit, friends – challenges to how we want to have spent our time in this life, that require us to be willing to make mistakes, to risk exposing our jiggly selves on behalf of a big juicy creative life that is engaged in possibility.

We had a meeting yesterday with members of the Standing Committee and the Stewardship Team, and the Finance Committee and the Vision Team and the Property Committee. That's so many teams and committees, I'm surprised you weren't all there! We were talking about the intersection of Vision and decision-making for our church – how we want to approach the next period of time in the life of this 300 and almost 6-year-old congregation. And we talked about it in terms not of fixing individual bricks or repairing particular walls, but of building the proverbial cathedral – one that we each may never see completed because the life of a congregation is, if our tenure is any example, never done! The question is how we contribute to it during our tenure here. Your Vision Team has recommended an idea: to make this church a center of community life above and beyond our worship time together, but one grounded in the same ideals and dreams and priorities. They have mentioned the possibility of creating The Parker Center for Spirit, Arts and Justice to partner with our sanctuary as continual spaces of celebration, exploration, and challenge to the status quo so that we are a home of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional growth for all who enter these buildings, not just those of us who claim membership.

In some respects, that doesn't sound too difficult. Paint a sign, put it over the door, and voila! But you and I know the particulars of the building are the easy part, right? The vision requires ALL OF US to set an intention to create a center of human activity that challenges and teaches and creates hope even in the midst of the discomfort of our learning, as we challenge the status quo. The three topical areas are things we are already engaged with – the life of the spirit which pervades everything, the practice and appreciation of the broad range of arts in our midst, and the active and ongoing pursuit of justice in its endless needs. But this could be a place that invites an extended community to grow together, to find comfort, actually, in challenging the status quo that we too often hold so dearly for fear of losing what we know, even as we recognize it is imperfect.

This is an ambitious project, **and a really great idea**. And seriously, there is no time like the present.

Gibbons reminds us, "If you really want to build community, take on a demanding project together, and don't let yourself quit when the going gets tough. Whether or not you accomplish the goal, you will be known to each other, and changed by each other, in the process"

That sounds like an intention worth setting, doesn't it? Let's aim high together. We have the gift of starting over every day, of recommitting ourselves to new levels of aspiration – this constant good, this saving hope. Let's set aside the fear of discomfort and set an intention that will aim at the moon.

And if you, like me, are just slightly uncomfortable with that expression – because who would want to shoot the moon (?!) – think of it from the card game, where you play strategically to go all out, to end up with all the cards in your basket, but for us, it would be the collective basket, and we would all be playing on the same team!

To be alive: not just the carcass
But the spark.
That's crudely put, but ...

If we're not supposed to dance,
Why all this music?

Let's sing – all on the same team – this rousing hymn of commitment to our ideals and our faith. The words are by our own Mary Katherine Morn.

Hymn 1028 Fire of Commitment