

**PORTALS AND POSSIBILITIES – 01-10-2010 – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian
Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI**

Dedication of the East Entryway follows sermon text

READINGS

First Reading

The Door by Adrienne Rich

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
And you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.

It is only a door.

Second Reading

New Year's Resolution ~ Philip Appleman ~

Well, I did it again, bringing in
that infant Purity across the land,

welcoming Innocence with gin
 in New York, waiting up
 to help Chicago,
 Denver, L.A., Fairbanks, Honolulu--and now
 the high school bands are alienating Dallas,
 and girls in gold and tangerine
 have lost all touch with Pasadena,
 and young men with muscles and missing teeth
 are dreaming of personal fouls,
 and it's all beginning again, just like
 those other Januaries in
 instant replay.

But I've had enough
 of turning to look back, the old
 post-morteming of defeat:
 people I loved but didn't touch,
 friends I haven't seen for years,
 strangers who smiled but didn't speak--failures,
 failures. No,
 I refuse to leave it at that, because
 somewhere, off camera,
 January is coming like Venus
 up from the murk of December, re-
 virginized, as innocent
 of loss as any dawn. Resolved: this year
 I'm going to break my losing streak,
 I'm going to stay alert, reach out,
 speak when not spoken to,
 read the minds of people in the streets.
 I'm going to practice every day,
 stay in training, and be moderate
 in all things.
 All things but love.

(From *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996*)

SERMON – Portals and Possibilities

Poet Philip Appleman said it well. “I've had enough
 of turning to look back, the old post-morteming of defeat:
 I refuse to leave it at that, because somewhere, off camera,
 January is coming like Venus up from the murk of December, re-
 virginized, as innocent of loss as any dawn.”

Resolving to break his losing streak, Appleman says this year he will stay alert, reach out, practice every day – and be moderate in everything – except love.

Like the poet, we too are here with another year before us, with the possibility of our lives re-virginized, too (what a great concept, eh?), wiped clean and ready for new directions. And all caused by the turning of a calendar page from year to year, from the first decade of the 21st century to the second decade, a turning that occurred ten days ago.

Is the New Year really worthy of our attention? I mean, is it really real?

History tells us that it's one of the oldest and most universal of human festivals. There's scarcely a people, ancient or modern, who have not observed the New Year in one form or another. It was even observed in ancient Babylon 4000 years ago – celebrated at the time of the first New Moon after the Vernal Equinox, for spring – when new life began to sprout from the earth – seemed like a natural time for the new year to begin. At other points in history for other peoples, the Winter Solstice was considered the year's beginning. It wasn't until the year 46 BCE that the Romans established the somewhat arbitrary date of January 1 as the year's beginning in the western calendar system that we have inherited.

The idea that time is ordinary and linear and can be measured by dates on the calendar is a construct that comes from the Romans' neighbors, the ancient Greeks. They called this kind of time Chronos – and we seem to imagine it as though it were like a long ruler, with notches marking minutes, days, weeks, months, years, even centuries... Sighting along this ruler into the past, we see the events of our childhoods, the events of history, and farther back, perhaps even the Big Bang and the creation of the Earth. Sighting along it into the future, we imagine travel by transporter (like on Star Trek), the end of aging, or perhaps something dire, like the death of our planet due to global warming. We organize our lives around linear time, even though we know that the only moment we can actually experience is the one we inhabit right now.

But there is another kind of time, the kind of time called Kairos, or sacred time, which is the home of holidays like the New Year. Kairos time moves in a cycle – it moves alongside chronological time, but it has its own rhythm. In Kairos we mark moments like the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, the commitment of two people in marriage or holy union – the moments that bring us into contact with that which is larger than we can name or fully know, with the ultimate mystery of life. Kairos is time out of time, it occurs when the time for something to happen ripens, and simply arrives of its own accord.

Holidays are Kairos times, for they are, in some sense, “holy days” – days set aside to honor the mystery of life in some way or another. This is important for human spiritual development because pretty much everything else in our lives steers us towards the linearity and obviousness of Chronos. Our western cultural fascination with progress, for example, seduces us with the notion that tomorrow will be worlds better than today. [Our middle class focus on careers and upward mobility urges us to step and strive toward the future as well. And marketers buy in too, using our nostalgia for the “good old days” to sell us products that will help ease our anxiety about the future.]

But on holidays, we shift away from business as usual. We listen to stories that connect us with the cycle of the earth, we enact rituals that connect us with our families, with our religious heritage, and with the great human themes of birth, death, and regeneration; with the themes of freedom and responsibility as well. Michael Strassfeld, a commentator on Jewish traditions, invites us to think of holidays as something like lodgings for travelers making their way through the calendar. The holidays are special hotel rooms where we not only rest from the daily round of life, but also where we pause and get our bearings and make sure that we are, indeed, on a journey, and not just going in circles. He says that holidays give us an opportunity to hear the different rhythm of sacred time pulsing in our lives. (“The Jewish Holidays,” pp. 1-2)

As we noted earlier while dedicating our East Entryway, January, this first month of the year, was named after the Roman god whose two faces, one seeing the future and the other seeing the past, evoke the idea of threshold or doorway. The call to cross a boundary or threshold is a recurring theme in myths and stories – it’s an act that throughout human history has been considered sacred, risky, an act to be accompanied by rituals of protection and celebration. At base, that’s the purpose of New Year’s parties and of resolutions. We promise to be good, to improve ourselves, in exchange for a safe transition across the boundary. Janus symbolizes the nature of the crossing – that we must first recognize the door; that we must have the courage to open the door that is before us, without knowing what is on the other side; and that we must then pause on the threshold – with one foot in each world, with one face forward and one back, seeing at the same time what is on each side; we must pause on the threshold and remember who we are, who we have been, just as everything is about to change.

This year, for the first time in many years, I have not made any New Year’s resolutions. I know that the very idea of resolutions makes some of us groan, so let’s get that out of the way right now – (pause while folks groan....) Personally, I’ve always loved resolutions. I enjoy the ritual of sitting down with myself and looking back over my experiences of the year past, and then casting my imagination into the coming year, and creating a set of promises with which to cross the invisible threshold between year and year....

But not this year. Getting ready to go on sabbatical for fourteen weeks just eight days from now has completely consumed any time I might have taken for this particular ritual.

But it’s all right. If I find I still need New Year’s resolutions, I figure I’ll have plenty of time to make them after next Sunday!

Today, though, we are interested in those threshold times, those Kairos times, in our lives when we find ourselves with a choice before us, a door before us, and we are faced with something like Adrienne Rich describes in her poem, when she says, “either you will go through this door, or you will not go through. If you go through, you may not remember your name.... if you do not go through, it is *possible* to live worthily, but much will blind you, much will evade you....” Today, we consider those times in our lives when – knowingly or unknowingly – what we choose becomes the fulcrum, the hinge upon which the rest of our lives turn.

I think about a colleague of mine, a sister in ministry whose life partner is a woman – and of how very hard they have been trying to conceive a child. In a recent newsletter column, my colleague

wrote, "...Most of my family members had their first children when they were themselves adolescents. I intentionally made a different choice. I knew when I was a child that I wanted to have children -- I just decided that I would wait until I was older. At first that meant waiting until I was done with college, (and) then ... I decided that I would wait until I was more financially stable. By the time I had achieved financial stability I was heading off to seminary. It then made sense to me to wait until I was finished with theological school. When I (went to serve my first congregation) I knew that the time (to have children) was finally close at hand.... But I figured that I'd wait a couple of years until I had established myself in my role at the church. (My partner) and I planned our first (pregnancy) attempt so that I would be due in June. I thought it would be easier on the church if I took (maternity) leave over the summer. I was confident that I would get pregnant on the first try. I never imagined that I would have the kind of trouble I have had. Each month has brought with it more heartache and discouragement...."

Oh, how her story breaks my heart! It was very nearly my story, as well. I, too, had many failed attempts to conceive a child, each one more discouraging than the last. The doorway that led to the realm of parenthood stood tantalizingly before me, as it does for my colleague, but like her, I could not seem to even crack it open, let alone get a foot across the threshold. But trusting in our vision of ourselves as parents, Young and I battled through our despair and enlisted the help of some good fertility doctors, and eventually I gave birth to our daughter, Grace.

My colleague and her partner have given up trying to conceive a child. But they have not given up on motherhood. Here is what I love about their story: the Kairos moment has come, the doorway to motherhood is opening, for they are in the process of becoming trained and certified to adopt a child through the foster care system in their state! Soon they will step across the threshold.

I love their story, because it so clearly shows who they are. Faced with despair, with the potential death of their dream, they chose to engage with the world in accordance with their deepest values. They did not wrap themselves in pain and regret. They did not sink into the awful comfort of feeling like the moment had passed, that it was "too late." [Haven't we all done that? I know I have...] No, instead, they took action with integrity and courage. Their story reminds me that the way we act, the way we exercise our human free will when faced with a door, a threshold, a powerful decision, shows our character and helps define us. The decisions we make are a part of us – and set a pattern for more such decisions.

Yesterday, in our Unitarian Universalist Orientation class, as we were discussing the history of our religious movement, I was reminded of another story of a powerful decision, one made by a man long ago, but which affects every one of us in this room.

That man was John Murray, whom we think of as the founder of American Universalism. Murray came to this country in 1770, having left his native England ready to start a new life. Murray had had a strict Calvinist upbringing, and he often found himself tormented by the certainty that he was not one of those God would choose to send to heaven; he lived with the awful knowledge that he was foreordained for damnation. He learned, in early adulthood, of a new religious idea, the idea of universal salvation – the idea that God's love was endless, boundless, and that all souls would eventually be reconciled with God.

Murray became so persuaded of the truth of this idea that he espoused it far and wide, and suffered ostracism and persecution by his friends and neighbors, who could not accept it. Without threat of eternal hellfire, what would keep people from acts of terrible greed or violence? How would there be moral order without the threat of damnation?

Murray's heretical religious convictions were not the end of his troubles, unfortunately. First his infant son died, and then his beloved wife became gravely ill. His debts grew huge as he tried to nurse her back to health. And after her death, exhausted and grieving, Murray was forced to spend time in debtor's prison. He also was kicked out of the Methodist Church because he had preached sermons about universal salvation. Deep in despair, contemplating suicide, he encountered by chance someone who encouraged him to start his life over again in America. Murray did not know what he would do in that raw, new place, but he stepped through the doorway anyway, trusting that somehow he would find his way. He was quite sure, however, that he was finished forever with religion and preaching.

And so he sailed across the sea, when suddenly, the ship in which he sailed accidentally struck a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey – in a place called the Cape of Good Luck -- and got stuck there for several days. The crew was running out of food, so Murray and some other passengers went ashore to seek and supplies, and it was then that Murray met a farmer by the name of Thomas Potter.

Thomas Potter had little formal education, but his mind was sharp and curious. He had built a small chapel on his farm, and he used to invite traveling preachers to deliver sermons there, hoping that one of them would finally preach something he could agree with. When he learned that John Murray was a preacher, he pressed him to give a sermon, but Murray refused, at first. Preaching had only brought sorrow into his life. But Potter persisted, and so Murray finally agreed he would give a sermon, but only if the wind did not shift before Sunday and the ship was still stuck.

When Sunday arrived, the wind had not changed, and so that day, September 30, 1770, John Murray gave a sermon about universal salvation for an enthusiastic and grateful Thomas Potter and his friends and family. And shortly thereafter, someone from the ship came to the chapel to report that the wind had shifted, and the ship was now ready to go.

This encounter between Murray and Potter was considered by both of them to be a near-miracle, and Murray decided that perhaps God was telling him that the gospel of universal salvation needed to be spread far and wide. To live true to his own values, he acted with courage and integrity, and delivered sermons about God's kindness and everlasting love in towns and cities up and down the Atlantic coast of America, his new home.

And because John Murray stepped over the threshold of his misery into a new life, all of us are here, now, together!

Would Unitarian Universalism even be here without him? Who knows?

It is humbling and amazing to remember that the Kairos moment of one man, occurring centuries ago, helped all of us get where we are today. [Indeed, because of the risk John Murray took in declaring the gospel of universal salvation, six new members were able to join our church yesterday at the end of the Orientation class.] His story reminds us that the way we exercise our free will, our freedom to choose, when faced with a door, a threshold, a momentous decision, not only shows and defines who we are, but it also can define and shape a whole new world.

So tell me, what doors are you facing? What threshold is calling you to cross over into a new way of being as we pause here ten days over the edge of a New Year? A relationship beginning or ending? The birth of a child, or a child leaving home? A move, a job change, a change in your health? Or perhaps it is the loss of a loved one, or of a cherished dream....

Last Sunday, Marc Gorelick spoke eloquently from this pulpit about one of the thresholds our nation faces – will we, for once and for all, own up to the fact that health care is a right that must be extended to all human beings in our nation, indeed, extended to people the world over? Will we own up to the moral truth of our obligation to care for one another? Will we cross that threshold as a nation? Will we, here in this congregation, stand up and say it out loud to those whom we have elected to create the laws of our land? It's not enough to listen to someone, and nod our heads -- we must act if the Kairos moment is to prevail over the drift of our same old, same old consumer-and profit-driven culture.

Part of our purpose as a community of faith is to help each other do these things. To help each other make meaning of our everyday lives. To help one another recognize the doors in front of us, and not rush past them. To forge bonds of kinship and caring that give us the courage to open the doors that are before us, even without knowing what is on the other side. Our purpose, too, is to hold one another when we are grieving until healing brings with it a greater sense of meaning – and to be there for each other when one of us has paused on the threshold of some great transition – with one foot in each world. Part of our purpose as a community of faith is to help each other remember who we are; to remember the truths we value most, and to encourage each other to hold on to those truths in the magical and scary moment just as everything is about to change.

The doors we face make no promises, of course. They are only doors, as the poet says – the rest is completely up to us. We are the ones who must open the door, and walk through into the possibilities that lie across the threshold. January, having swum up like Venus through the murk of December, is here, re-virginized and innocent of loss -- ready to receive our resolutions of community, of solidarity with the downtrodden and the oppressed, our resolutions to act in accordance with what we value most – our promises to live our lives with courage and integrity.

And so, may we, like my colleague, have the courage to live our dreams, even when failure tempts us to despair. May we, like John Murray, speak our faith boldly to a world in need of hope. May we, like the poet, resolve to stay alert, reach out, speak to the stranger, and share our love immoderately – our Universalist message of radical love and acceptance.

And may we, as a community of faith, step gracefully across the threshold into this New Year, ready to use our shared power for the common good. Amen!

1-10-2010 – UUCW East Entryway Dedication

SUZELLE: For Worship for All Ages today, we have something very important to do as a community of all ages.

We are called together today bless and dedicate and celebrate our beautiful, new East Entryway. Reaching from the parking lot to the front doors of the church, our East Entryway's soaring and sheltering roof is tilted at a delicious angle. It's supported by four columns of warm brick and strong steel. Copper trim encircles the roof and the tops of the columns like a crown, matching the trim that graces our original building. Clear, bright lights beckon us to come in at nighttime, and draw the eyes of passers-by on the street to its elegance. Walking up to our church, we are embraced and welcomed!

Our new Entryway is the realization of a dream. More than a year ago, in the Fall of 2008, we launched the Wellness Campaign to raise funds to remodel the entry and to repair our parking lots and the roof of the church. We longed for beauty, for greater shelter, for an entrance that reflected both our affection for our faith community, and our commitment to keeping our doors open in welcome to all spiritual seekers, and the wider community. And our longing has been fulfilled!

And so today we celebrate and dedicate and bless this new entry – indoors -- with words and sounds – but before we do, we would like to thank some of the very important people who helped make our entryway possible.

ROB Z (Board of Trustees Representative): First of all, we'd like to thank YOU. A great many members and friends of our congregation made generous financial contributions to the Wellness Campaign so that this project could take place. Many thanks to all who gave with such caring and generosity – we hope you are pleased and proud of what your gifts have helped make possible for our church.

We're also grateful for Chuck and Sally Hackbarth and their family. Chuck and Sally were beloved, longtime members here who passed away – and who remembered this church in their will. A portion of the bequest they made to the church was used to help build the East Entryway – a gift that will keep on giving to all of us for many years to come, and will remind us of their generosity.

Sue Wille, our Administrative Coordinator, and the Campus Committee, led by Mike Brown also were instrumental in the building of our new entry. Campus Committee members researched and planned and reviewed bids, as well as doing hands-on construction work, too. To all of you, many thanks – we couldn't have done it without you.

And last, but far from least, we thank UUCW member Ann Stevens and her husband Gene Guskowski, Principal of AG Architecture. Ann and Gene freely and generously gave their time and energy to this project, and Gene gave us his time and expertise, and the time and skills of his staff to design our Entryway. Gene, we are very grateful for your help and support, and we have

a gift here for you and Ann to enjoy together (restaurant gift certificate) – and one just for you. This brick comes from the wall that was part of our old entry, Gene, and we give it to you as a token of our affection. A brick is a symbol for building, but also a symbol of solidarity and respect. Would you like to say a few words to us about the Entryway???

[Gene spoke – echoing Suzelle’s words about how the Entryway project was created by us all, and mentioning how it “centers” the building.]

SUZELLE: Thank you, Gene. I’d like to call on Ruben now to tell us a bit about how we are going to bless our new East Entryway today, and then we will speak together the Responsive Words of Dedication that are in your order of service.

RUBEN (Director of Music): Music and sound are used as blessings in many different ways around the world. The sound of a bell like the one we ring at the beginning of our worship services is sometimes used by Buddhists as a focus for meditation. Blessings in Hebrew are often chanted, as are prayers and meditations from many faiths.

The sound of chimes can also be used as a blessing – the ringing of a bell can change the energy of a place – it can make it feel more calm, or more alive. And so instead of having everybody go outside in the snow and cold today to dedicate our new Entryway, we have hung three different sets of wind chimes out there, and as you leave the building today to go home after church, we invite you to gently ring one or more of those chimes to add your personal blessing for the entryway.

SUZELLE: You will notice, when you go out to ring the chimes, that each one has a picture hanging from it – it is a picture much like the one on the cover of your order of service, and on the bookmark inside it. That man with two faces is the ancient Roman God named Janus – who was, in that long-ago time, the God of beginnings, of doorways, and of change and transitions. He was the god of the New Year, too, with one face looking forward into the future, and one looking back into the past. January, the first month of the year, is named for Janus. We hope you will take that bookmark home as a souvenir of our dedication today, and also as a reminder of the blessings of our faith.

So let us complete our dedication ceremony now by reading the responsive reading in your order of service:

Responsive Words of Dedication

LEADER: May our East Entryway be a threshold that leads both ways to the blessings of our Unitarian Universalist faith:

NORTH: Community -- bringing the joy of friendship, and moving us to shape a better world for all;

CENTER: Inspiration -- opening our minds to new wisdom;

SOUTH: Caring -- to nurture and heal us and empower us to care for others;

NORTH: Social Action -- in which we work together for peace and justice;

CENTER: Learning -- urging us to grow and engage with our wider world;

SOUTH: Spirituality -- reminding us we're connected with all that is.

LEADER: May our doors be open, welcoming members, friends, neighbors and the stranger,

CONGREGATION: May our doors be open, moving us out into the world: to serve human wholeness, and act for justice; to practice compassion and care for our planet.

ALL: We dedicate our Entryway as a threshold leading both ways to the blessings of our Unitarian Universalist faith.