

On This New and Ancient Day  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Happy New Year! You all look resolute, positively renewed and beautiful. Did you make resolutions this year? ...because I did, in my way. I resolved to finish a book I've been writing this year. I resolved to nurture my heart and learn to love in the best way possible. I resolved to be ok, not know what in the world that could possibly mean. And I resolved to be more courageous.

The first of January is the time for New Years resolutions. We set out on paths to lose weight or to quit smoking cigarettes or stop eating meat or to cut back on wine and whiskey—at least, for a month. “Dry January” is what they called it on NPR the other day. I got the sense that the story was half a public interest story and half an advertisement. Apparently, there is a whole line of alcohol-free spirits these days. Now, there are beers with no bad consequences. There's a market for these things these days and they were talking all about it on the radio.

Did you make resolutions this year? I really want to know. Call or text me, if you are so inclined. Personally, I did not resolve lose any weight this year but I will exercise a bit more. I want to feel a little stronger. I want to feel a little bit better about being in my body. And I didn't resolve to quit cigarettes. I didn't want to have to start smoking in order to stop. And I won't go vegetarian but I will eat more salad (Mom, I promise)...and I won't “cut back” on wine and whiskey. I don't drink often enough for that to be meaningful. I do resolve to tend the deeper issues. I will unmask these resolutions. For example, for me, the weight loss resolution is a mask for the deeper issue of self-esteem. I resolve to tend to things like that.

Most deeply, I resolve to say what is on my mind. And poor Joelle was made to suffer the consequences of my resolution yesterday when she called and raise a question about social justice. Forty-one minutes later, I stopped answering that question and came up for air. I hope that I did not burden you, my friend, with my response. I am so grateful, Joelle, for your experience, for your gentleness and for your willingness to work with me and with North Chapel. I am excited about what we will create together. This will be fun.

Incidentally, the TEDTalk Hartland Hill Series is going live very soon. My TEDTalk is going public. Just got the news. I will send the subscription link out in the newsletter and we will all have a chance to review it. I haven't seen it myself (so, I'm a little anxious). It will be as it will be. So, stay tuned.

In any case, if I am resolved about anything this year, I am resolved to say what is on my mind. It feels risky to me but failing to do so seems even riskier. So, in the words of the poet Ric Masten, “Here are my hands. Do what you will.” Ric Masten wrote,

i think of my poems and songs  
as hands  
if i don't hold them out to you  
i find i won't be touched

if i keep them  
in my pocket  
i would never get to see you  
seeing me  
seeing you

and thought i know from experience  
many of you  
for a myriad of reasons  
will laugh  
and spit  
and walk away unmoved  
still  
to meet those of you  
who do reach out  
is well worth the risk

and pain

so here are my hands  
do what you will

I resolve to be that kind of honest. I resolve to say what is honestly on my mind to those who are willing to listen...and I resolve to invite your honest responses. This is how community deepens. This is how we grow more deeply within ourselves and closer as a community. How could it be otherwise?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, January the 8<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is On This New and Ancient Day. It is a reflection on the resolutions that we make in this good season and it is a forecast of that which soon may be. It is both a looking forward and a retrospective glance into the rear view mirror—a coincidence of opposites, if you will.

And so, I say good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. I hope that this new year finds you well. What a start we're off to so far!! ...with the sun coming up all fresh and new this morning and with warmth in our hearts on cold winter days and with a new year here unfolding!!! I have to tell you that I am feeling optimistic. I'm feeling positively about the days ahead—genuinely, partly (I'm sure) because I have agreed to be more honest with myself...and therefore, more honest with those around me. I've been afraid to do that for sometime. I have held back some important things...even from you, things that I haven't been ready to share. I have been far too shy and nervous. I have been far too anxious and afraid. Can I tell you why? I would like for you to know.  
[response?]

I believe very deeply in what we are doing here. It frightens me to talk about it. I believe very deeply in this tradition of faith and all its measures—even the ones that drive me crazy...and even the ones that make me mad...especially these...and this makes life both difficult and deeply beautiful...and truly sacred. I believe very

deeply in the art of small group sharing...and I believe in just, responsible and unified action...and I believe in honest and candid debate in service of the common good. I believe in these things so dearly that I defend them with all I have. The gesture of doing so is risky. And it starts by showing you my hands. So, I'd like to offer you examples of each of these.

I believe in the art of small group sharing—in covenant groups and supportive gatherings, healing circles, poetry shares, mediation sessions, yoga classes, cooking classes, choir (of course, the angel voices we have), learning workshops, spiritual explorations for all ages and the like. We turn inward toward one another and we listen, soul-level deep.

Believe it or not, the art of small group sharing reminds me of music. It reminds me of Miles Davis. You know, this famous trumpeter, don't you? One of the greatest jazz musicians in the history of the world... He was an innovator. He was a genius, a creative energy second to none. And at one point in his career, long after he was able to draw large audiences, he turned his back on the crowd during a live performance. He turned away from those he was singing to through his trumpet. I see this spiritually. I believe that he turned away from the observing crowd and turned inward to face both himself and the other creative artists on the stage.

Some people objected. They had purchased their concert tickets to see Miles Davis and they were offended by his actions. "How rude!" they cried. "He's ignoring his own audience!!" But I don't believe that he was doing that. I believe that he was turning away from them in order to improve the art. He turned inward toward the other artists so he could listen, soul-level deep. I believe that he was listening for the beautiful and for the sacred. And if those who had purchased concert tickets to see Miles Davis were offended, those who had purchased tickets to hear Miles Davis were not offended. They were amazed.

When we turn away from the crowd, when we turn inward, toward one another, we have the chance to become more honest. We don't always take advantage of that opportunity and we don't always have to but we always can. The choice is available to us, one of the gifts of small group gatherings.

I believe in just, responsible and unified action. And there is poetry in this. There is theater in this. Miles Davis turned away from those he was singing to. He turned inward to face himself and the other artists on the stage and he created something that was beautiful, something beautiful that happens inside of us, sometimes without our knowing. I wonder if you might indulge me...so I might show you what I mean. ...so that we might have a first-hand experience of it. Will you allow this?

[sit at the stool and turn away]

Seated in this way, I would like to "share my hands" with you. If you remember, Ric Masten thought of his poems as hands. In this spirit, I would like to share a different poem with you...a poem by Leile Chatti, I Went Out to Hear...

The sound of quiet. The sky  
indigo, steeping  
deeper from the top, like tea.

In the absence  
of anything else, my own  
breathing became obscene.  
I heard the beating  
of bats' wings before  
the air troubled above  
my head, turned to look  
and saw them gone.  
On the surface of the black  
lake, a swan and the moon  
stayed perfectly  
still. I knew this was  
a perfect moment.  
Which would only hurt me  
to remember and never  
live again. My God. How lucky to have lived  
a life I would die for.

I Went Out to Hear...The sound of quiet. [] I knew this was a perfect moment. [] My God. How lucky to have lived a life I would die for.

I don't know what you are experiencing right now. I hope that you are not offended. I can assure you that I am not being rude. I can share that in my heart...in my soul, I have not turned away from you in any way...have not decreased my connection or lessened engagement with you... I have only turned toward the beautiful. I have only turned toward the sacred, toward the flame which, in our tradition, is the sign of the light of reason, is the symbol of the warmth of community, is the emblem since World War II of religious liberty and political resistance in the face of oppression.

Okay. I am turning back around right now. In a sense, I am repenting, in the ancient sense of this word. In the common sense of this word, the definition with which many of us are more familiar, to repent is "to feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin." Before this definition, though, the word "repent" meant to rearrange one's entire way of thinking, one's way of feeling and one's way of being, if you will, in order to forsake that which is wrong. It's a religious thing.

So, in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, Jacob's son, Joseph was betrayed by his brothers. He had a lot of them. From the eldest to the youngest, they were Reuben, Simeon and Levi, Napthali and Isaachar, Asher and Dan, Zebulun and Gad, Benjamin and Judah. And, according to Estera Weiija, a journalist online, "Judah and his brothers showed remorse, but more importantly, they showed transformation."<sup>1</sup>

Repentance is more meaningfully about transformation than it is remorse and regret. They showed transformation. This is the important part. This is the part that guides us as we begin to explore the idea of just, responsible and unified action.

I spoke with Matthew Friedman about this just yesterday and he wants to help us, moving forward. Now, such beautiful, powerful things are falling into alignment. This happens when we all turn and face things together.

We don't always see things in the same way. So, we fight a lot these days. I fight a lot—with the radio, with books and magazines, with my television, with the newspaper, with the internet. I almost had a shouting match with my laptop computer the other day...as I was following the news as it was unfolding in the House of Representatives.

When we disagree, we need transformation. All of us do. We need each other. We need repentance in the ancient sense of the word. We need transformation. We need to rearrange ways of thinking, our ways of feeling and our ways of being and forsake what is wrong. We need the ancient meaning of the word "repent" which meant "to turn on one's heels" in order to meet our challenges of our day.

In the Hebrew Bible, to repent is to come whole about, to spin entirely around, to turn around completely on one's heels. As far as I know, the Hebrew Bible makes no mention about the meaning of turning on one's tuchus which is all I've been able to demonstrate for you this morning. But be assured, we need transformation, however it comes and especially in light of what's unfolding in Washington.

We are all so tired and traumatized. We're all so twisted and triggered and terrorized. Is it any real surprise that we lose our way every now and then? Maybe we should all repent a bit. Maybe we should all turn full around as soon as possible so we can stop ourselves from getting to where we seem to be going.

After fourteen failures, having suffered a baker's dozen defeats plus one, Kevin McCarthy finally won the vote to become the Speaker of the House. You know what they say: If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try, try again. After many days of trying, Kevin McCarthy finally rose up from his chair at 1:15am, in the wee hours of January 7<sup>th</sup> in 2023. He rose to address his weary colleague as the duly elected Speaker.

I bristled at certain parts of the speech that he delivered, horrified by some of the things that he said. But after saying some offensive things and some divisive things and after taking grossly partisan swipes at the heart of Left-wing politics, Kevin McCarthy spoke about the famous painting by Emmanuel Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware. The painting describes a real event that took place on Christmas Day in 1776. It is an artistic achievement that was completed seventy-five years later. McCarthy encouraged us to look at the painting in a particular way. He said that we shouldn't look at Washington. Instead, we should look at the other people in the boat. He said,

The second rower [is] Scottish. The person directly across from him [who is] rowing in the exact same cadence is an African American. [He said that the person in] the middle, the person who's rowing the strongest is a woman. And [that the person] in the very back is a Native American. [What] I believe [the artist] is saying is, "Here we are, battling for the creation of the idea of freedom...on our holiest of nights with a hand reached out and asking if you would join us. That's as true today as it was then. If we let everybody in the

boat, if we row in the same cadence together, there is no obstacle this body [can't] overcome for this nation.

It was an applause line and everyone rose in affirmation. The right side of the aisle rose immediate and the left side of the aisle begrudgingly...but everyone rose in the end.

Conversely, after saying some offensive things and some divisive things and after taking grossly partisan swipes at the heart of Right-wing politics, Hakeem Jeffries, the minority leader for the Democrats, had this to say:

We believe in America our diversity is a strength. It is not a weakness. An economic strength, a competitive strength, a cultural strength. Our diversity is a strength. It is not a weakness. We are a gorgeous mosaic of people from throughout the world. As John Lewis would sometimes remind us on this floor, "We may have come over on different ships but we're all in the same boat now." We are white, we are black, we are Asian, we are Latino, we are Native American, we are Christian, we are Jewish, we are Muslim, we are Hindu, we are religious we are secular, we are gay we are straight, we are young, we are older, we are women, we are men, we are citizens, we are dreamers. Out of many we are one. That what makes America a great country. And no matter what kind of haters are trying to divide us, we're not gonna let anyone take that away from us. Not now. Not ever. This is the United States of America.

So it is that the American political leadership is both deeply entwined and deeply divided—Kevin McCarthy, looking backward over his shoulder at the ship of history in the rear view mirror and Hakeem Jeffries, looking forward, like Washington, from the bow of the boat we're all in today.

Our political experience is divided. American consciousness doubles over upon itself. We are as Shakespeare mused in *Romeo and Juliet*. We are like star-crossed lovers—given to one another in deepest measure but gripped the unresolved tensions that are governed by our respective families. We are like two opposing houses, "both alike in dignity."

Of the black American experience, a man named W.E.B. DuBois described an unresolved tension of another sort. In 1903, 120 years ago, DuBois wrote about what he called a doubled consciousness. In a book called *The Souls of Black Folk*, he wrote,

One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Perhaps, we are all experiencing something of this today.

The task before us is clear. It is that of using our dogged strength to keep ourselves from being torn apart.

Two years ago, we broke down and we made a mess of things on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of January in 2021. Lives were lost. Our dignity was compromised. Our sense of the whole was shattered but I believe that it is possible for us to rearrange ways of

thinking, our ways of feeling and our ways of being in order to forsake that which is wrong. I think that it is possible for us to turn ourselves round. The water is wide but we can cross over and we know well how to do it—by turning away from the din of the daily news and speaking deeply with one another...about the things that matter to us most, about that which vital to us; by dreaming, defining and developing just, responsible and unified action that we as a church can engage in fully. Next weekend, if I'm not mistaken, is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Roe v. Wade. Keep an eye out for ways in which we can engage. I think that Norwich is taking the lead on this. We're working together. We'll be sending something out.

We can create beauty and grace in this good and complex world of ours by engaging in honest and candid debate in service of the common good. What happens in a small church in Vermont will echo in the halls of Washington, D.C. if we become as loving as we are called to be right now. And I have no doubt that we will. We will rise to meet the challenge of our time. Be it resolved.

This is the time for making New Year resolutions. If I am resolved about anything, I am resolved to say what is on my mind. It feels like a risky thing to do but failing to do it is even riskier. I've not always done this. I've been a bit afraid—you are all so very scary—but I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid to say how deeply I believe in we, the members of North Universalist Chapel Society. Flowers of thy heart, one and all.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

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<https://firmisrael.org/learn/what-did-jesus-mean-by-repent-the-hebrew-meaning-of-teshuva/>