

Into the New Year
Rev. David A. Morris
UU Congregation of the Outer Banks
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It's pretty hard to escape the subject of New Year's resolutions right now. It's kind of an industry in the news and entertainment media. Everywhere you look there are articles about how to keep your resolutions, or how to make the kind of resolutions that it's possible to keep. Then there's the whole genre of people writing about why they don't make New Year's resolutions, and why nobody else should either; on the other hand, there are the people who write about why making resolutions is a sign of hope and integrity. Given how much of that kind of thing there is around now, it's a pretty good bet that if you look back you'll find that at least some of the anti-resolution people probably wrote pro-resolution pieces within the last couple of years, and vice-versa.

Something about moving into a new year seems to set us thinking about changes we'd like to make in our lives. I suppose that makes sense: It's a big landmark, and the custom of seeing the new year as a moment for new beginnings has been around for a long time. People will ask if you've made any New Year's resolutions, and the tug of the seasonal current is hard to resist. There's always something that could use a little improvement, isn't there? My procrastination, my language, my sleep habits, the amount of time I'm giving to community work . . . Now is as good a time as any to put our intentions and aspirations into words, right?

Besides, it only comes along once a year, so if things don't move in the direction we're hoping, maybe no one will notice, or at least no one will bring it up until this time next year.

Because of course, now that the holiday is over, the season of broken resolutions has begun. As the demands and routines of everyday life return, the vast majority of the resolutions that get made this time of year are forgotten by February or March. To be fair, though this pattern isn't only true of New Year's resolutions. It's a pretty common experience any time of the year for most people I know to decide that something about ourselves or our lives needs to be different. So we declare ourselves publicly or privately, and we make a start in a new direction; then for one reason or another the old ways reassert themselves. Diets, exercise programs, systems for keeping better track of how we spend our time, plans for improving our relationships, decisions to be more engaged in social justice issues—there's no end to the new beginnings we make. I can tell you I'm no exception to this. The story of my life has an ample supply of good starts.

It isn't just personal change that comes to mind as a new year dawns. The end-of-year commentary out there is full of assessments of the year gone by in the wider world, and predictions for the year to come. For many of us, stepping into a new year is also a time to think about what we're hoping to see change in the world. Here, too, we come face to face with the reality that change is often hard and slow to happen. Even in areas where there's been positive movement, like healthcare and marriage equality, there's been backlash, and resistance to change in many other areas is very high. The tone of the current conversation on immigration and the settlement of Syrian refugees is only one all-too-obvious example.

But sometimes it turns out differently. Sometimes enduring, sustainable change really does come. Even in the hardest of circumstances—even when we’re trying to escape an addiction or to change a habit that’s kept us in thrall for a lifetime; even in the most polarized of political arenas—sometimes the cricket really does jump to the moon.

What makes the difference?

The literature of self-help tends to focus on strategies. “Ten steps to keeping your New Year’s resolutions” is a typical title this time of year, although you can find a new technique out there any time that’s going to change your life for the better in just a few simple steps. But it hasn’t been my own experience that strategy is really the deciding factor between change that starts and change that stays.

That isn’t to say that strategies and systems aren’t useful. Some are very helpful; some have insights and steps that make a real difference for people; some have saved lives. I read a good example just a couple of days ago, by a health economist named Austin Frakt whose blog on the topic was picked up by the New York Times. Frakt talks about identifying as clearly as possible the barriers to change. “Why don’t I do this already?” is his first question about something he wants to change, even before he asks, “Why do I feel I need this now?” in order to identify his emotional motivation for changing. After we answer those two questions, he says, we should develop a few concrete steps to remove the barriers, and commit to them for a set period of time like a month in order to see if they work, and to decide if whatever change happens actually makes our life seem better. It’s a practical, simple system, and like a lot of others out there, it’s probably worth trying. Yet even the most powerful set of strategies, when you get right down to it, either works in a given person’s situation at a particular time—or it doesn’t.

Why is that? If it’s not just the effectiveness of the strategies, and assuming, with my Unitarian Universalist hat on, that it’s also not just that some people can do it and some can’t, what is it that makes change sustainable? It seems to me there’s something about how we see ourselves in relationship to the change we want to make or to see that has a powerful effect.

William Murray’s words which I shared a few moments ago, often attributed to the German poet Goethe, suggest one reason why the same strategy can work sometimes and fail others: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back,” he writes. “. . . the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.” This deep commitment is more than just a decision or a resolution. It means taking definite, practical steps toward the change we seek, steps that make turning back difficult if not impossible. Have you ever done this? Buy the plane ticket; clear space in the calendar for the play rehearsals; send in the application for the school or the job; make the dinner invitation. That’s what can open the way, as Murray says, for “all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance.” I’ve seen this happen, in my own life and in others as well. In fact, it happened for me when I decided that this was the congregation I wanted to serve, and I can’t begin to say how glad I am that it did.

Marianne Williamson, who writes about spiritual dimensions in many aspects of public and private life, named another important source of energy for sustainable change in a talk I heard a few years ago. “Your joy about the way things can be is much more powerful and persuasive than your outrage about the way things are,” she said. Trying to “fix” something we hate,

whether it's something about ourselves or something about the world, locks us into a place of rejection, anger, or fear, and when it fails, or when delays seem unbearably long, it leads toward bitterness and despair. Working to cultivate and nurture something new that we desire for ourselves or for the world moves us into a place of affection, compassion, and appreciation. If it doesn't immediately succeed, we are far less likely to give up the effort, because the effort itself feels like a joyful participation in change rather than a dutiful burden.

Another way we can sustain change is to be compassionate toward our own resistance. No matter how much we want change, it always means giving up something familiar. Some part of us always clings to the familiar, and we can feel real loss when something in our lives is truly changing, even if it is something we're sure we don't want. Often that fear of loss can trigger resistance in us, and we'll sabotage our own effort. Accepting that the fear is real, and allowing ourselves to grieve for what feels like it's being lost, can help us step past the resistance and stay on the path toward what we desire.

The combination of deep commitment, compassion, and joy helps us to approach any kind of change with patience. Making changes in our lives or the world can be frustrating, with repeated attempts, lost ground, and seemingly false starts. Our own resistance can feel incomprehensible, and if other people are resisting the change it can be infuriating. We need patience for ourselves and for others. Toni Morrison once described progress toward racial justice with a phrase of her grandmother's: "a slow walk of trees." Change, she said, comes as slowly as the movement of a forest across an open meadow or up the side of a bare hill: each generation grows where it is and drops the seeds of the next generation a little further on the way; then the next generation does the same, and eventually, the long slow journey is complete. It's hard to wait for this to happen—but it's a lot less hard if we're sure of what we desire, and if we're waiting in anticipation rather than in seething anger, dislike, or dread about the way things are now. Patience can also help us see our partial attempts and false starts not as signs of failure, but as evidence that we are keeping faith with our commitment to change.

There's something else, something intangible that I think is a critical component of making real, lasting change. At some level, the difference between change that starts and change that stays is mysterious. People who have worked to free themselves from addictions will often say that they don't know why one attempt worked after another, or dozens of others, didn't. All they know is that one day, something felt different. William Murray calls this "something" Providence; some might call it good luck; some might call it the support of others, or simply the work of our own best selves. In twelve-step programs this is the "higher Power." In religious language it's most often called "grace." Grace is the alignment of circumstance, intention, and fortune that suddenly makes possible what was impossible before. Where it comes from is mysterious, but whether it's real is not. It is always, always there waiting when we seek the best for our lives and our world. We can make space for it, we can invite and hope and even pray for it, we can put ourselves in its path, but we can't make it happen. We can only allow it to happen.

As we move into a new year, where is the change you want to see? Is it in the mirror, or in some measure of your body's health and well-being; is it in the activities of your days or evenings? Perhaps it's in the state of your mind, or the quality of your relationships. Perhaps the change you most seek is in the life of your neighborhood, or an association or community you're part of;

or maybe it's in the state, the nation, the world. Whatever it is, place yourself in the path of grace. Plan whatever strategies seem best to you, but above all, take the first step, the step of commitment. And then take another, and another, and another. Treat yourself and those around you with compassion and patience, and never forget that your joy about how things might be is your greatest source of hope, and your greatest strength.

And remember: Grace happens. Whatever is going on in your life, whatever changes are thrust upon you; whatever changes you seek in yourself or in our world, there is a power of love that can help you hold your fears, hold your doubts, hold your weariness, hold your resistance. There is a power of love that can help you hold your hope and hold your joy. It is within you; it is around you in this beloved community and in your other circles of kinship, circles of love, circles of commitment.

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it.” Let us lift each other up to the Light of Change.