



"Resolving to be Whole"

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Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

## Sermon

January brings a new year, and with a new year comes a host of messages telling us we need to be new people for the New Year. I don't know about you, but by the 10<sup>th</sup> of January I have usually already started to lapse on my resolutions. It seems that no sooner do I get back into the routine of life than all my noble ideas and lofty goals for change go right out the window, swept away by the tide of dishes and paperwork, phone calls and clutter.

Some people even question the idea of New Year's resolutions, claiming all they do is make us feel more guilty when nothing changes. Certainly I can see how hard it is to keep these promises to ourselves, but rather than dismiss the idea out of hand as a pipe dream, I am compelled to ask why it is so hard to change, and what our faith can offer us as tools to aid in the process of becoming our best selves.

Evaluating the process of New Year's resolutions, I came up with some major reasons why I think our resolutions have a tendency to fail. For each of these, I believe our Unitarian Universalist faith has something to say, and perhaps even a solution. So, starting with the basics, one of the problems we often have when making a resolution is that we make it to please others. So many resolutions are nothing more than an attempt to win the favor of others, and they fail because we are not being true to ourselves.

Unitarian Universalism is about the quest for wholeness, for truth about our deepest selves. We know the anguish that comes from trying to be someone we are not when it comes to the big issues. As a congregation we agree to disagree so long as everyone involved is seeking to live in love and truth. Outsiders often look at this and say "Oh, you all just believe any old thing"; while UU's will tell you it is much harder to think faith through for yourself than just accept a package deal given to you by somebody else. Harder, but much more committed and faithful because we believe what we believe to our very core, we are dealing with the inconsistencies and difficulties, and have found within our souls a faith that directs and guides our life, regardless of the changes that may come. The problem we have is that a lot of the time we forget to apply this deep, life altering faith to the day to day working of our lives. I am hopeful that each member here could articulate what they believe is important about gay marriage, abortion, and inter-religious dialogue; I am less convinced that we could each articulate why losing 10 pounds is a religious issue. And it is. In our faith we take seriously the belief that there is no difference between Sunday at church, Monday at work, and Friday at a party. We are always who we are, and if we are to be whole we need to be true to our highest self in every situation. So if our faith teaches us that everything has spiritual meaning, what about New Year's Resolutions? Can they be spiritual? If they are, how can we live them out?

New Year's Resolutions are often about surface issues. I mean they only take into account a specific action or occurrence, instead of looking at the person holistically. Unitarian Universalism tries to see everything that goes into a human life as one package, guided by our principles and purposes. Instead of trying to be a one-size-fits-all religion with rigid rules of conduct, we try to encourage each participant to seek their true self, within a context of



loving accountability. Applying this ideal to New Year's resolutions, let me share a few of the top resolutions, why they usually fail, and take a look at what our faith says about each one.

**Resolution #1: I am going to lose weight this year**

This resolution fails because it is externally based. The vast majority of people who seek to lose weight are doing so because they want to be seen as attractive to others, not because they truly want to change. By saying it is about weight, the person is not taking into account the important factors of health, diet, stress, and so forth that create a healthy lifestyle; they are trying to fit the social mold that says anyone over 100 lbs is too fat. Unitarian Universalism would say that anyone is welcome, regardless of size, shape or fitness level. Thus, you need not be a supermodel to be welcome here. However, our faith also says that our bodies are important, and that taking care of them to the best of our ability is a matter of spiritual importance. A better way to frame this resolution might be in the context of our first principle, which says we "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of each person" (*Singing the Living Tradition* pg. x. This means that we support each person regardless of physical ability, beauty, or fitness level. On the other hand, our newest Source says we draw from "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature" (*Ibid.*) What would it look like for us to try as best we could to live according to the cycles of nature? Could it mean that we do less in the winter when it is cold, and more in the summer when the days are long? Could it mean that we admit that 60 year olds should not look like 20 year olds? What if we applied this to the food we ate, seeking to draw nourishment from simpler food, instead of complex chemical laden (and calorically heavier) prepared food?

In summary, a resolution to lose weight usually fails because it is vague, externally oriented toward social norms of beauty, and because we do not see the central importance of our physical being. Our faith teaches us that our physical forms are a critical part of our spiritual development, and that everything we do to our bodies is a spiritual practice. Thus, our resolution should be to honor our bodies, not just to look cute in that pair of jeans. In this case, the simple goal is not the better one, since it is a surface goal. Aiming for the deeper goal of being a person of wellness: mental, spiritual, physical and social, is what can lead us down the path of lasting change.

Speaking of lasting change, a lot of people feel that the New Year is the right time to seek something new in life, and resolution #2 is-

**Resolution #2: I am going to get a better job/ go back to school**

This resolution usually fails because it is fairly escapist. Yes, there are times when a new career or job does improve someone's happiness, but generally we are as happy as we want to be. Thus, by running away we soon find that we are as miserable in our new location as in our previous one. How can we avoid the misery trap and be fulfilled at work? First, changing this resolution to "I will find personal fulfillment and growth at work or school" is



probably a better reflection of the desire beneath the original wording. A lot of leadership books focus on this, but one in particular that struck me is called "The Leadership Challenge". In this book, the authors repeatedly make the comment that "personal values drive commitment" (*The Leadership Challenge*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. by Kouzes & Posner, pg.56).

What they are saying is that you can only be as effective a leader (or employee in general) as your values will let you be. When you are experiencing an internal conflict, you are not as effective at your job. So, if your workplace is truly immoral, unethical, or asking you to do something totally against your values, then by all means get out! I have had to make that awful choice in my life as well and while it was a terribly hard thing to walk away from my career at the time, I know that it was the right choice because it brought me to a place where I can walk my values every day.

Most of us though are not facing such a severe challenge, in fact, one of the biggest causes of work-related stress is boredom or being stifled. Feeling unchallenged or stagnant is a huge issue, and causes many people to leave their work. But often it is not the job, but the person, who needs a change. Unitarian Universalism encourages us to seek a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" and "to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love" (*Singing the Living Tradition*, pg. x). These are grand words, but how can a grocery clerk, IT manager, or student search for truth and meaning? How can they show the transforming power of love?

Let me share an example with you. It was shortly after my husband Robert was deployed to Afghanistan, and I was at the grocery store buying a few things to send to him as a care package. I was tired, and fragile, still breaking down into tears at the drop of a hat. The clerk asked if I was having a party, with all the cookie supplies I was buying, and I started crying and said no, my husband had just been deployed. The clerk kindly handed me a tissue, found a coupon for the cookies in the flyer, and then as I was about to leave he said to me "Thank you so much for giving up your family for my freedom". Needless to say I started crying again, but this time it was healing tears. With those few words this grocery store clerk, whose name I do not know nor whose face do I remember, gave me a lifeline to hold onto; my husband's being taken away from me served a purpose, and other people were thankful. It did not make this long year any shorter, but it gave me hope that day. This grocery clerk was helping me find meaning, and acting with transforming love to a total stranger. This kid probably goes to school all day, works and does homework at night, and will never know the impact his words had on me that day. **Each of us, every day, has the opportunity to go beyond the expected and cultivate the extraordinary.** He could have just checked out my cookies, mumbled something about being sorry, and let me go along my way. That was what I expected. But his tiny act made a profoundly painful time in my life immeasurably better. No matter what job you do, or how many people you see, we can all act out our values and demonstrate the transforming power of love to a sad and hurting



world. What if we all made a resolution to “look for a way to show the transforming power of love to one person today”?

The third most common resolution that I have seen is **“I am going to spend more time with my family this year”**. This one usually fails not because we do not want it, everyone I come across wants to spend more time with those they love, it fails instead because we easily allow the urgent to crowd out the important. One of the hardest things to do is to choose between several good choices, knowing that whatever you choose something else suffers. Even more, when people are clamoring for something to be done, it is exceptionally difficult to put aside our people-pleasing tendencies and stick to our guns. How can we tell the difference between the urgent and the important? How can we decide between the many good things we have available? What does our faith teach us about this?

This one is a much harder challenge, for while we all agree family is important, we also know we must earn a living, provide educational opportunities for our children, and that personal time is important for our spiritual growth. Here, I think that the covenantal aspect of our congregational polity is important, we promise as a congregation “our mutual trust and support” (*Singing the Living Tradition*, pg. *x*). This means that when we are in conflict about which good to choose, we are not alone. We have the company, advice, and support of the men and women who call Emerson home. Our small groups, the men's circle and Womyn's Web, coffee hour and social connections like Facebook offer us the ability to give and receive the support we all need to balance our lives. Our faith teaches us that the unfair truth is none of us will have the time, money, ability or stamina to do everything we wish to do, and the church offers us guidance for prioritizing our lives; but in the end it also says that the choices are ours to make for good or ill. Our faith does not believe that there is a god somewhere pulling the strings of our destiny and forcing us to work too much or play with our kids too little. Instead it places the heavy burden of infusing our daily life with meaning and purpose on us; but it gives us the company of all you see here and others you do not along the way. This is both a comfort and a challenge. A comfort because there are others to support us, a challenge because the change is ours alone to bear.

So often our resolutions fail because we are afraid of what change will do to us. Family Systems Therapy would say that every system seeks stability, even if that stability is not healthy in the long run, because change is the main source of fear. Human beings are genetically hard-wired to avoid fear, we seek to understand and control our surroundings to fend off the monsters that once hunted our ancestors, and now lurk in our psyches. Change causes fear and instability, so if what we say we want is change without disrupting the status quo, we do not really want change.

In fact, we go to incredible lengths to justify the status quo, to keep the balance we have in our life, rather than risk the fear of change. How many times have we seen and experienced people in a bad relationship, or



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battling an addiction they knew would kill them eventually, yet they refused to change? Many of us know we need to eat better, work out more, stress less, and that family is important, but we find it incredibly hard to do what is necessary.

But the hope our faith teaches us is this: first, that change for the better, scary though it is, is possible, and that we are capable of doing what is right when we take the time to see the world through the lenses of our shared values. Second, our faith gives us the fellowship of community, people to hold us up when we fall, celebrate when we win, to offer advice when we ask (and sometimes when we don't), and to keep us focused on the values that will help us overcome our fear of change.

In closing, our faith tells us that when we act according to our values we will find wholeness, and that with wholeness comes peace and joy. It does not say that the path is easy, but that it is possible. It does not say that change is quick, but that we have friends to help us along the way. It does not say that a better future is certain, but it does say that if we all do our part, our New Year's resolutions can be more than wishes, they can be life-changing realities. Amen and Blessed Be.