

“What is it You Plan to do with your One Wild and Precious Life?”
The Rev. Sue Spencer
UU Congregation of Danbury
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The readings were from W. H. Auden’s For the Time Being: a Christmas Oratorio (closing section), and Mary’ Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day.”

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January 1st: It’s only a day on the calendar. It’s only one way of reckoning the New Year.

The Chinese New Year, marked by the new moon, falls somewhere between mid-January and mid-February. In Jewish tradition, the New Year begins in early fall, with Rosh Hashanah. Like the Chinese New Year, it too was originally determined by the new moon.

In Celtic Britain, New Year’s Day was November 1, after the planting season had ended. In today’s Christian churches, the first day of the year is arguably the first Sunday of Advent, falling usually in late November. But among early Christians, it was March 25, nine months before Christmas - the day Mary heard that she would bear a special child.

March 25, it turns out, is not far away from the date of the oldest New Year’s celebration. This is believed to have originated in ancient Babylonia (modern day Iraq) about 4000 years ago. It was a spring observance, falling on the first new moon after the vernal equinox. Interestingly enough, New Year’s resolutions were apparently a part of this Babylonian celebration - so they go back a long way!

With all that history, how is it that *we* celebrate the New Year on January 1? If you Google “New Year’s Day” and “origins,” you will get somewhat conflicting answers. However, they all converge on the idea that the January 1 date started in ancient Rome. One story has it that Julius Caesar chose that date in 46 B.C.E., thinking that the month named after Janus, the god who looks backward and forward, was an appropriate “door” to the year.

But even with the authority of Caesar, January 1st took a very long time to catch on, even in Western Europe! Early Christians clung to March 25 well into the Middle Ages. Popes forbade “pagan” celebrations of the new year. It wasn’t until the Gregorian calendar was published, in 1582, that January 1 became widely accepted.

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Whenever the new year begins, there’s something strangely potent about the knowledge that our planet has made one more revolution around Sun. Even though Earth has made

that journey some four and a half billion times – long before humans appeared on it - still we dare to call this year “new.”

Not that it’s unanimous. You are perhaps familiar with Qoheleth the Preacher, author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. He saw the endless cycle of time - the sun rising and setting, the generations rising and falling – and declared everything old. “All is vanity,” he said. “There’s nothing new under the sun.”

But Qoheleth’s view has become the minority opinion, both in the Bible, and more generally in the West,. What characterizes much of Western thought is the idea that there is *always* something new under the sun. History progresses. Things change. And a new year offers new opportunities to *bring about* change. As UU ethicist James Luther Adams was fond of pointing out, Western religion “takes time seriously.”

In both Judaism and Christianity, and I believe in Islam as well, the world is seen as the arena for the divine plan. God is always working through history, and through human beings, to bring about *Malkuth Yahweh*, the kingdom of God, the reign of love and justice. Such a faith is embedded in the deep structure of western consciousness. It shapes even those who are atheists, Karl Marx being the classic example.

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In this particular New Year, of course, the upcoming inauguration of a new president highlights our hope for forward movement. “Change” was Barack Obama’s theme song – and are we ever ready for it!

This year especially, we pray for *real* change. We hope against hope that the new administration isn’t swept up in the backwash of history, that it doesn’t become bound by what is old and discredited. This year, we pray for something new under the sun - something *very* new.

At the same time, the headlines warn us about the undertow of history. What’s happening in Gaza, even as we speak, warns us just how powerful old patterns can be. The events unfolding now hit close to home for me, because this time 19 years ago, I was over there – part of a UU-sponsored fact-finding delegation.

During our two-week stay, we visited Israel, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza. I remember that it was around the New Year, because on New Year’s Eve we shared a bottle of champagne in East Jerusalem, at the old American Colony hotel.

At the time I was there, hope for change was beginning to emerge. We met people of good will on all sides of the conflict – there are certainly more sides than two! – and it actually seemed as though a path was opening to some kind of resolution.

Nineteen years later, looking back at a trail of dashed hopes, missed opportunities, bilateral blame and recrimination, oppression and endless suffering – I find myself

despairing, wondering if any new thing is possible. And yet, a prayer emerges in me: For peace and justice for *all* the people of the Holy Land, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian – but also that, in this new year, I may find some way to be an instrument of peace.

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The two poems I read this morning give us a sense of the urgency of time. W.H. Auden tells us that even in “the moderate Aristotelian city” – darned, the 8:15, irregular verbs – we have “the Time Being to redeem from insignificance.” Mary Oliver reminds us that, as far as we know, we have only one life, both “wild and precious” - and asks us just what we plan to do with it.

But what are these poets telling us? Just what would it mean for us, to “redeem the Time Being from insignificance”?

A traditional, Western, Protestant answer is *doing*. As soon as I hear Auden’s phrase, my mind automatically goes to thoughts such as these: We must be productive! We must keep busy! We must make every minute *count*! In this connection, there’s a UU church in Boston, King’s Chapel, that used to read “The Parable of the Talents” on the first Sunday of every year. If I remember correctly, the by-laws required it! We must use our talents, and make something of ourselves! And maybe even perfect ourselves through resolutions!

All this runs the danger of leading to a dead end. Sam Portaro, a university chaplain and spiritual writer, captures it well. He speaks of how easy it is to be “hung up on performance anxiety, afraid that I am not good enough, a poor example, an insufficient instrument to the task.”

Sam goes on, saying, “I know that such insecurities as these have driven and continue to drive me, sometimes beyond reason and health, to work harder, but not always better. I fear that in the end such overcompensation only obscures whatever God might reveal in me were I more relaxed, more centered, less anxious. What gospel do we convey when we are always overtired, when we are so consumed in the doing that the very quality of our being suffers?” (*Daysprings*, p. 52)

The poets offer a different vision. To the temptation to be a human *doing* rather than a human *being*, they say, “hold on – not so fast!” When we unpack these poems of Auden and Oliver, we may find a different perspective on redeeming the time. Both poems, it turns out, are more about *seeing* than about *doing*.

Auden steers us away from the instrumental view of the world – the view that defines value only according to usefulness. He speaks of “seeing the Child” – of looking into the mystery. He remembers the Stable, “where *everything* was a You” – having deep, intrinsic worth – “and nothing was an It.”

Meanwhile, Oliver tells us that she's spent the whole day strolling through the fields, "being idle and blessed," and asks, somewhat defiantly it seems, "what else should I have done?" She knows "how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass." What captures her reverence and wonder is the grasshopper, living in the joy of the moment – and not the busy, industrious ant. She seems to suggest that part of our "wild and precious life" *might* just involve what some would consider "wasting time."

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"Tell me, what is it *you* plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

There are no "shoulds" here – no cut-and-dried answers. We're each invited to ponder the question for ourselves – and perhaps not to *answer* the question so much as *live* it.

Some of us may feel we've been idle for too long – and definitely *not* blessed in such idleness. We may discover that what we need most is to find something to do, of deep significance – something to give shape and purpose to our lives.

Others of us, who've been running too hard, and doing too much, for far too long, may want to spend some time with that grasshopper – or this time of year, with that chickadee or that snowflake.

And who knows? We may find that such paying attention – such a "waste of time" - invests our lives with fresh purpose and meaning.