

## **Intention vs. Resolution**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, January 7, 2018

### ***Meditation***

“Because we spill not only milk...”

- a poem by Nancy Shaffer...for a new year...

Because we spill not only milk

Knocking it over with an elbow

When we reach to wipe a small face

But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn’t,

And also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light

How much is gone and we hadn’t intended it

Because we tear not only cloth

Thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole

But also tear friendships when we grow

And whole mountainsides because we are so many

And we want to live...right where black oaks lived,

Once very quietly and still

Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen

And have to go back to the room we were in before,

Remember why it was we left

But also forget entire lexicons of joy

And how we lost ourselves for hours

Yet all that time were clearly found and held

And also forget the hungry not at our table

Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze

And precious papers left in rain

But also at legs that no longer walk

Or never did, although from the outside they look like most others

And also weep at words said once as though

They might be rearranged but which

Once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless

Because we are imperfect and love so

Deeply we will never have enough days,

We need the gift of starting over, beginning

Again: just this constant good, this

Saving hope.

## **Reading One**

Excerpt from *Cat's Cradle*

- by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

"In the beginning, God created the earth, and [God] looked upon it in [God's] cosmic loneliness. And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was [human beings]. Mud as human alone could speak. God leaned close to mud as [human] sat up, looked around, and spoke. [Human] blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" [the human] asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said [the human].

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God." And God went away."

## **Reading Two**

"Shoot the Moon"

– by Anne Lamott

Oh my God, what if you wake up some day and you never got your memoir or novel written; or you didn't go swimming in warm pools and oceans all those years because your thighs were jiggly and you had a nice big comfortable tummy; or you were just so strung out on perfectionism and people-pleasing that you forgot to have a big juicy creative life, of imagination and radical silliness and staring off into space like when you were a kid? It's going to break your heart. Don't let this happen. Repent just means to change direction — and NOT to be said by someone who is wagging their forefinger at you. Repentance is a blessing. Pick a new direction and aim for that. Shoot the moon.

## **Sermon Reflection**

*What does it mean to be a people of intention?* This is the guiding question for our worship gatherings for the month of January...and what a perfect month to have this as our focus. January – the month of new beginnings, of both looking back and looking forward with resolve to “do better” in some way. So it is I want to begin on this first Sunday of January - before the actuality of new or considered resolutions has faded completely from our consciousness – to consider the difference...the contrast between resolution and intention, and to offer some leading questions for our consideration as we stand at the cusp of a new year.

The dictionary defines a resolution as a “**course of action determined or decided on.**” “A resolving...with determination...to do something.” It’s hard not to be pulled into or to argue with the pervasive call at this time of year for daring resolutions “to become better,” to set goals of self-improvement. It all seems so well-intended.

But let’s pause for a moment to consider what intention is, in contrast to resolution. The First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, in their order of service for a similar worship gathering themed on intention, defines it this way:

"Coming from the Latin word, *intentionem (in-TEN-tee-uh-nem)*, intention literally means a stretching out, a stretching out of mind, of heart, of body, of spirit. When we set an intention, we are turning our attention toward something, or someone, or some idea, and stretching out to meet it."

~ First Universalist Church of Minneapolis order of service

In 17th Century English law, intention was defined as a "state of mind with respect to intelligent volition."

Several definitions cited on Wordnik.com include:

- A determination to act in a certain way or to do a certain thing; purpose; design.
- **The goal or purpose behind a specific action or set of actions**
- A stretching or bending of the mind toward an object; fixedness of attention; earnestness.

The folks at Soul Matters – the worship and religious education resource service we subscribe to - offered this explanation by Katie Covey of the contrast between intention and resolution:

"Intention is different from setting goals or resolutions in that it "pulls us into" who we truly are. Goals and resolutions "push us out" into future possibilities. To set intentions, we listen to our inner voice which tells us who we truly are."

I particularly like the next questions posed by the wise people at Soul Matters: When you [hear] [those words] about being "pulled in" rather than "pushed out," what happens in your heart? Do you find yourself still excited about the New Year's work of striving to become a brand-new self? Or do you suddenly notice an internal whisper that says "I long to be pulled in more deeply to the self I already am"? In other words, maybe our real New Year's work is not about leaping into self-improvement, but about pausing, stepping back and asking "What hunger really has my heart?"

There is, after all, a big difference between becoming better and becoming ourselves. **Self-improvement is not the same as self-alignment.** Wanting to get from point A to point B is something quite different from longing to find your inner anchor. Goals (or resolutions, if you will) and intentions may indeed be more distinct than we have thought.

- from Soul Matters Small Group resources packet

We can learn much from Buddhist's teachings on intention, or more specifically, *right intention*. We can also see how intention and goal-setting are interconnected. Buddhist teacher Phillip Moffitt writes that:

Goal making is a valuable skill; it involves envisioning a future outcome in the world or in your behavior, then planning, applying discipline, and working hard to achieve it. You organize your time and energy based on your goals; they help provide direction for your life. Committing to and visualizing those goals may assist you in your efforts, but neither of these activities is what I call setting intention. They both involve living in an imagined future and are not concerned with what is happening to you in the present moment. With goals, **the future is always the focus:** Are you going to reach the goal? Will you be happy when you do? What's next?

Setting intention, at least according to Buddhist teachings, is quite different than goal making. It is not oriented toward a future outcome. Instead, it is a path or practice that is focused on how you are "being" in the present moment. Your attention is on the ever-present "now" in the constantly changing flow of life. You set your intentions based on understanding **what matters most to you** and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with your inner values.

As you gain insight through meditation, wise reflection, and moral living, your ability to act from your intentions blossoms. **It is called a practice** because it is an ever-renewing process. You don't just set your intentions and then forget about them; you live them every day.

[...]

Goals help you make your place in the world and be an effective person. But **being grounded in intention is what provides integrity and unity in your life**. Through the skillful cultivation of intention, you learn to make wise goals and then to work hard toward achieving them without getting caught in attachment to outcome. [...] Only by remembering your intentions can you reconnect with yourself during those emotional storms that cause you to lose touch with yourself. **This remembering is a blessing**, because it provides a sense of meaning in your life that is independent of whether you achieve certain goals or not.

[But] ironically, by being in touch with and acting from your true intentions, you become more effective in reaching your goals than when you act from wants and insecurities.

"Right intention is simply about coming home to yourself. It is a practice of aligning with the deepest part of yourself while surrendering to the reality that you often get lost in your wanting mind."

Source: <http://dharma-wisdom.org/teachings/articles/hearts-intention>

When we focus primarily on resolutions and goal-setting and neglect the work of setting right intentions, we will inevitably suffer more deeply when we fail, tending to interpret our failures as the result of our inadequacies as "**human merely beings**" which is true, of course, we are imperfect beings. But with resolutions, we tend to get stuck there. Again, there are gifts for us in Buddhist teachings here – particularly in the practice of meditation. And for those present who seize up internally at the notion of doing any sort of sitting meditation, I am referring to any sort of meditative practice that brings your focus to the here and now, to the present moment – it can be done while doing the dishes or walking in the woods – whatever practice that allows you to have what Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg calls "fractal moments" – moments that allow us to begin again.

The moment our attention wanders away from our chosen object in meditation — a sound, a visualization, a mantra, the feeling of the breath, whatever it is — we are guided to gently let go of whatever has distracted us and **begin again** by returning awareness to that object.

"That's the fractal moment: practicing letting go and beginning again in that micro setting is the replica of having flubbed something at work and needing to begin again, **or having strayed from our deepest aspiration or chosen course and having to begin again**, or finding that we have fallen down and needing to stand up and begin again."

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-fractal-moment-an-invitation-to-begin-again/7589/>

So, all around us this month, there's going to be plenty of busy talk about being "a people of goals and resolutions." We are going to get more than enough advice about how to stay focused on a new future for ourselves. But in the midst of it all, may we, as a people of intention, also carve out a quieter place that keeps our attention closer to the present and who we *already are at our center*. **May we make space for listening** before we leap into the striving.

May we ask ourselves what dictates our days? Our "To-Do" list or our intentionality? Do we begin by asking, "What do I have to get done?" or with "What do I want this day to be about?"

### **Closing Words**

"Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

~ Parker J. Palmer