

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
September 20, 2020
Rev. Andrew Frantz, contract minister**

Inner and Outer Renewal

Rosh Hoshanah / the year 5781

Shanah Tovah. This is the second day of the Jewish new year celebration, Rosh Hoshanah. Today's worship theme, and the theme for the month of September, is "renewal". Renewal fits very nicely with Rosh Hoshanah. When I sent my friend David good wishes for Rosh Hoshanah, he sent me back this blessing, and I now share this blessing with you:

Wishing an inscription of life, health, prosperity, and radical warmth to you and yours in this new year!

Jews say, "may your name be inscribed in the book of life," so this blessing is an extension of that idea. May it be so. Inscribing names on the book of life also connects to the practice in our Fellowship of writing names of members in the membership book. That book is here on the altar today, because four new names are being added today in the new members' ceremony. And finally, it is worth noting that in the Jewish calendar, this is the year 5781. For me, that helps to put into perspective the incredibly challenging year which I call 2020—a year of fire, flood, pandemic, and political unrest. The Jewish people, and by extension the human race, have been surviving times of trial for more than 5700 years, and that gives me some hope.

Renewal in the time of disaster

This week we have seen continued fires in Oregon, Washington, and California, destroying homes and choking the air with smoke. We also saw Hurricane Sally whallop Alabama and Florida, flooding homes and causing evacuations. In the face of such natural disasters, renewal might look like rebuilding one's home or business. And of course there is the ongoing natural disaster of COVID-19. For survivors of this disease, renewal might look like rebuilding one's health and strength.

Renewal in the time of death

Of course, in the worst case scenario, fire, flood or pandemic result in death...so what does renewal look like in a time of death? Many of us in the Fellowship are dealing with death in our personal lives; many of us are saddened or dismayed by the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg this week—ironically she is the first Jewish supreme court justice, and she died on the eve of the Jewish new year.

I say that we must honor and remember the dead. We must grieve the losses and be aware of our own mortality, the preciousness of our own lives. May we be able to find renewal through the grief, the tears, and the sadness.

Political renewal

This year is fraught with political tension, as Justice Ginsberg's death reminds us. In the political sense, renewal can be found in the form of democratic election. Ideally, an election gives voters a chance to renew the government with public servants who have better ideas, and gives us a chance to replace politicians who are not serving the public good. May it be so in this election.

John O'Donohue poem

So far I have talked about renewal in the context of politics, of the pandemic, renewal in the face of death, and renewal after natural disasters. Let me pause here to share the words of John O'Donohue about renewal.

May The Light Of Your Soul Guide You¹

John O'Donohue

May the light of your soul guide you.

May the light of your soul bless the work

You do with the secret love and warmth of your heart.

May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul.
May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light and renewal to those
Who work with you and to those who see and receive your work.
May your work never weary you.
May it release within you wellsprings of refreshment, inspiration and excitement.
May you be present in what you do.
May you never become lost in the bland absences.
May the day never burden you.
May dawn find you awake and alert, approaching your new day with dreams,
Possibilities and promises.
May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.
May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and protected.
May your soul calm, console and renew you.

Blessed be the words of John O'Donohue.

Religious renewal

That brings me to my final point, renewal as it relates to this Fellowship. I already shared, during the morning announcements today, that the front porch is being rebuilt. It is literally being renewed by tearing off the old boards that need replacing and—in front of me here in the sanctuary—putting on these new boards, in this case recycled plastic lumber that should last a long time. So the building is being renewed.

More importantly, the people of the Fellowship get renewed, if I can speak of it that way. This includes the minister. In the 19 years of this Fellowship, you have been served by 6 ministers. When one minister departs and a new one is hired, that's a significant act of renewal for the congregation.

And the congregation itself is not stagnant, of course. Existing members leave for various reasons, or even pass away....and new members join. Since I've been serving as your minister, about a year now, 4 new members have joined the congregation—and in a few minutes, we will have a ceremony welcoming 4 new members today. Their new ideas, their new energy, and their new perspective renew the Fellowship – just like you did, when you first joined.

Finally, this thing we do – getting together on Sunday mornings for a worship service and coffee hour – this is an act of renewal for all of us. Many people work during the week and the weekend is their time for renewal. Sunday is traditionally a day of rest in Christian traditions; Saturday is the Sabbath for Jews. In this Fellowship we choose to have our primary time together at 10:30 on Sunday morning, and I hope it renews you. I hope that you seek and find renewal in other things that this faith community offers as well: discussion groups, support groups, social groups, and social justice groups.

Conclusion

On this day, Jews celebrate the new year of 5781. Pagans celebrate the equinox holiday of Mabon, which falls tomorrow. On this day, secular Americans look for meaning and hope in the midst of the year 2020.

And every Sunday, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan gathers to find hope and community; to have a safe place to be fully ourselves; to voice both our beliefs and our doubts. We gather to be renewed by one another and by the spirit within and by the mystery beyond. Blessed be this place of renewal and the congregation that keeps it alive.

¹ John O'Donohue, "May the Light of Your Soul Guide You." <https://sacredmoves.com/general/the-blessings-of-john-odonohue/>