

Everything Old is New Again (2213)

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Here is what I wrote back in May for today's sermon title and description: "Everything Old is New Again: With anticipation, we imagine gathering our religious community in-person again. What will be familiar? What will be new? How will we navigate familiar and new relationships, in ways that are compassionate, inclusive, and open to creative possibility?" I wrote this title and description to meet the deadline of the churches with May newsletters. I wrote in the flush of my second dose of the Pfizer vaccination, and an in-person staff meeting, and the loosening of restrictions on public gathering. I wrote still reluctant to eat inside a restaurant, still refusing to see a movie in a theatre, still unenthusiastically wearing a mask on an airplane still filled only to half capacity. And I wrote fully optimistic, fully convinced that 70% of the eligible citizens of the United States would be fully vaccinated by July 4 and herd immunity would begin to set in, setting us up for a triumphant Ingathering, a Homecoming, within our too long-neglected sanctuary. I was fully wishing and hoping for something new this fall after a long, disruptive monotony. Maybe you were, too.

Some of our UU churches have already been experimenting with limited re-opening—small group gatherings and so-called hybrid worship, with both in-person and online components. Others of us have been preparing our sanctuaries for this possibility, with the technology that will make it possible. Still others of us have arranged outdoor opportunities to meet and socialize and reconnect with the people who feel like community—people who have celebrated weddings and participated together in Pride Parades, people with whom we have mourned the passing of beloved from this life, people who have helped grow our churches and fellowships into the places of compassion and justice for which we and our world yearn. As we begin to contemplate a return to more restrictions this fall, I feel cheated of all I was wishing and hoping for—a return to familiar routines and familiar beloveds in familiar surroundings. I feel cheated of the opportunity to welcome newcomers and to try something different in religious education and worship. Maybe you feel this way, too.

The uncertainty about Covid variants, the reality that many of us may test positive for the disease without ever showing a symptom, the resistance to wearing masks, the refusals to see Covid as a serious threat, the hesitancy to trust experts in a time when expertise has been so undermined and derided—all of this makes for a too-familiar reality that is also too new. It's a reality that leads us back to an old one still new—physical isolation; gatherings for work, for play, for nearly everything, back to computer screens and TV sets; groceries delivered, contactless take out, and shopping all online. It leads us back to the challenge of communicating a smile with our mouths and noses covered. I have to wrestle with myself not to sink into despair over how disappointed I feel.

And there is much more, of course, much more that makes the world appear in *redux*. The endless war in Afghanistan, the United States's part only the latest foreign intervention in that region's history. The damage to citizens and the damage to soldiers. The similarities to the US withdrawal from Vietnam, with our ever-rising militarism thwarted but not quelled. The terroristic treatment of women, girls, and

LGBTQ people. And more yet again. The forces of nature, amplified by extractive, carbon-driven consumption patterns, brutalizing Haiti's fragile human beings. Our siblings, rich in cultures and poor in economic, political, and social systems. Wildfires raging, destroying both the universe-made and the human-built terrain. Here we are again—new disasters that look a lot like old ones. We don't appear to be making progress.

Everything old is new again, indeed. If we consider "old" to be 2020, we might wonder why we've even bothered to change our calendar year to 2021. Orange is the new black. Well, 2021 is the new 2020. It's day 600 of the year 2020. Something like that. Something like that old Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day," where the main character is destined to relive that one day over and over until something in him changes and he is released from the old ever new, the new ever old. I have to wrestle with myself not to sink into despair over how disappointed I feel, and so I fall back to dumb jokes and broad comedy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed for us: "Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands." When we are not feeling despair or frustration or rage or anxiety, or anguished resignation, we know that old and new are always woven together. Yesterday was the perfect summer day, today is looking good, too, the perfect lead in to the autumn that is already upon us, leaves of basswood and oak already whirling in the breezes toward the ground. Families are out at the lake or the cabin, out on the trail and the bike path and the playground, one more precious time before the new school year begins. We have lost beloveds to death and new babies have been born. The fawns and chicks and kits have grown into bucks and does, into house finches and downy woodpeckers, into rabbits and foxes both. As it always is, as it always happens, in the universe-made world and in our human-built world. The seasons turn, and so do we. It just is that way for us, old and new twisted into inexorable relationship.

Fall, and not summer, is nearly upon us here in Minnesota, not New England. It's ski equipment, ice houses, and snow tires we now tend, not "swan boats, the lobster pots, and last year's new gas grill." The train is about to depart once more, and it is "letting go" that is needed. But not the letting go of relaxation and slowing down. If we are tossing a glove into a subway car, it is the letting go of control and certainty. It is the letting go of a sense of autonomy over our lives and a necessary move into deeper relationship and connection at the same time that the easy path to relationship and connection has been foreclosed. We are preparing for autumn and yet remain in a winter of discontent. We are anxious and frustrated, and yet we are in this pandemic for the long haul. We worry about the mental health of ourselves and each other. What will we do—that we may not want to do—to improve those conditions? In the ripples farther out from the immediacy of our own lives, what will we do about the human suffering from war, from ideology, from the forces of nature amplified by our Western lifestyles?

How will we embrace the reality that everything old is appearing again, and that it is we who need to be, in some critical and crucial senses, made "new"? You are here, and so am I. And so I am, in some sense speaking to the choir, I know. How will we persuade others to re-emerge in fuller presence, those we love and cherish and miss as part of our communities, those who have not adapted to the online world we have been forced into? How will we reach out to each within our differences and divisions? The

horrors of war, of refugee migration, of so-called natural disasters, of a deadly rampaging disease—these all impact us in different ways. It is very easy to feel isolated and alone. It can feel, especially with the pandemic, like this world of trouble is descending upon our own individual heads. But we are not alone. This world of trouble is not happening to you or to me. It is happening to all of us. It is happening worse for some of us more than for others. How can we act, how can we all act, in ways that are life-giving and life-sustaining?

One way is to remember that we have all done hard things before. “There will be times when the world feels like a place that you are standing all the way outside of, and all that stands beside you is your own brave self, steady as steel and ready even though you don’t yet know what you’re ready for.” We kept ourselves and our loved ones safe last year, by doing hard things we did not necessarily want to do. We can do those old things with renewed energy, if we also do something else as well. If we hold hope close. If we rely on our values and our ethics to guide us in uncertain times. To turn to love like a North Star and “and to the truth that we are greater together than we are alone.”

We know we are here to build a greater world, and that work can continue as a solace in this isolation and trauma. We have a choice, and it is not the choice of simply returning to our in-person lives. It is the choice to continue in and to double down on our physically distanced lives, but to return this fall renewed for the work of justice-making, of liberation-demanding, of community-building effort that defines us as Unitarian Universalists. We can return renewed to offer compassion to our siblings displaced and traumatized by war and forced migration. We can return renewed to resist and to dismantle the excessive militarism that pollutes our world, literally and morally, and victimizes the powerless. We Unitarian Universalists, we are a people of community, defining our efforts to grow intellectually and spiritually in relationship with each other and not alone. Together in compassionate companionship, we share, we listen, we consider and reconsider, proclaim and reexamine, our understandings of the holy and our desire to ensure that we live our short and precious lives with purpose and meaning.

In the movie “Groundhog Day,” Bill Murray’s character is finally released from the day that will not end when he gains humility and compassion, when he is able to see the people around him as fully human as himself, when he is able to feel gratitude for life and the wonders of it—from the pleasures of a well-stocked breakfast buffet to the silliness of Sonny and Cher to the value of ritual and tradition that bind a community. He knows himself anew, and he newly sees himself as part of, rather than apart from. Oh, that in ninety minutes we might be so transformed, that our world would be renewed. But we know that is just a happy-ending entertainment. It’s the lesson that is critical, not the timing, though my patience continues to wear thin. The ceaseless flow of endless time runs on without regard to how we feel or what we want. It turns and returns, in cycles and seasons that are both familiar and ever new. As Covid clamps down on us again, our lives might feel like the repetitions of “Groundhog Day.” Yet, we are always beginning a new day, if we will attend to the moment and not slip into resistance and anxious rehashing. To “view the past with no regret, not the future with dismay,” “each day a thing complete.”

How do we do this? How do we greet each day as a new day, even while we seem to be returning to a painful old set of long days. I say it again, one way is to hold hope close. To rely on our values and our ethics to guide us in uncertain times. To turn to love like a North Star “and to the truth that we are greater together than we are alone.” We know we are here to build a greater world, and that work can continue as a solace in this isolation and trauma. To be a part of, rather than to be apart from. To feel one with the birds, the rivers, the wind as time changes the seasons, to feel one with all, with everything, the lovely and the painful, in a way that is not anxious, in a way that is at peace and accepting. To feel that old and new are twisted into that double-stranded thread, what we have confidence in and what can surprise us, what is familiar and what is strange, one doubled thing that is both recognizable and still able to set us wondering.

May you feel in the moment and the next and the next the capacity to endure the old that is new again despite our hopes and wishes. May you see new possibilities to transform yourself and the world in this time of relentless challenge. May you seek strength and fortitude in company and companionship, never alone, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”

Sources:

“Bird Song” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEGCvR9H39c>

[The Glove in the Subway | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#)

[Building Bridges UU Hymn 4 part Round - YouTube](#)

The Day You Begin https://youtu.be/tH_JhFVAkV8

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/we-hold-hope-close>

[Hidden costs of militarism: Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss - NationofChange](#)

[Hymn #350: "The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time" - YouTube](#)