

Beginning Anew

Happy New Year!

Our Gathering Music this morning really struck a deep chord in me - an acute awareness that what's happening here at home; all the loss, uncertainty and fear we're experiencing — the pandemic, political and social unrest, climate change - isn't just happening to us - it's happening to people all over the world. I know that but sometimes it's hard to wrap my mind and heart around it - the immensity and intensity of it all.

But we are all more human than otherwise. There's so much more that we share as part of the human family. And I know that as we celebrate the new year we share the same hopes for the year ahead with people all over the world;

A year of love and kindness, hope and healing. Amen!

But I wonder - what will the New Year bring? Like the pilgrim in our story this morning, we want so much; peace in our families, in our country, in our world? We want all people to be treated with dignity and respect. "We want this world to be a kingdom of love."

We want so much and yet so much of what we want seems so far out of reach. January 1st, 2021 - it's only a date on the calendar - a symbol of new beginnings. It's an opportunity to renew our resolve.

But we can't just walk into a shop and expect to pluck what we most desire, ready-made, from the shelves. Things aren't just going to change overnight. And they certainly aren't going to change by themselves.

Personally - I think we're still in for some pretty dark days and that we're really setting ourselves up with expectations of immediate and sweeping change with the advent of a new year or the inauguration of a new president. We're going to have to begin again and again with a renewed sense of resolve to create the world we seek.

Where do we begin? We begin with seeds— all kinds of seeds. The seeds of everything humanity has ever been and ever hopes to be.

My colleague Jason Cook created this list of 20 lessons learned in 2020:

1. Our social systems are only as just, as good, as capable, as strong, as compassionate, as reasonable as our leadership is.
2. The process of identifying, naming, and responding to injustice is messy and necessary.
3. We are more broken, wounded, traumatized, and inclined toward our most selfish inclinations than we knew.
4. We are more generous, thoughtful, caring, and compassionate than we knew.
5. We are more disorganized, fragile, vulnerable, and open to corruption than our complicated, formalized governmental systems would suggest.
6. We are more resilient than we knew.

7. Grief is real, an on-going process we never extinguish but only learn to manage.
8. Joy is real, an on-going process we never tap into non-stop but must learn to intentionally create space for.
9. Our social lives are more profound, nourishing, and central to our overall community and individual health than we knew.
10. Our sense of community is held together by more than physical proximity but is tested by distance.
11. Every person plays an essential role in the social structure.
12. We are dependent on one another in multiple ways.
13. Anti-scientific sentiments are alive and well, even thriving, and are a contemporary evil.
14. Science is a key component to human salvation.
15. Misinformation is more dangerous, seductive, and abundant than we realized.
16. Critical thinking and the quest for truth is not lost.
17. Religion and religious community continue to be tools that can be used to divide, conquer, and wreak havoc.

18. Religion and religious community continue to be sources of profound comfort, connection, and nourishment on multiple levels.
19. Hate in its many forms can be easy to access, often provides immediate gratification, and destroys the soul over time.
20. Love in its many forms can be hard to access, often provides delayed gratification, and, in time, anchors the soul through rough waters.

There are so many seeds imbedded in this list - seeds that are part of the human condition. Seeds we see growing in the world today. All possibilities — we can choose to water — or not.

Thich Nhat Hanh would say all of these seeds are part of store consciousness; all those things that live in the dark recesses and that we choose which seeds to water. The first step is awareness - understanding what is - what's growing in us and in the world and how we're watering the seeds that are growing.

Reason *and* irrational fear. Compassion and judgement. Love and hate. Humility and hubris.

These are all seeds that live in the dark recesses of the mind and heart. In some ways it feels like the pandemic has been like a great light shining into the the dark recesses of our collective consciousness, allowing us to see what's down there. Giving us the opportunity to become more aware of all that is — what we've been watering — and what we want to water.

We can nurture positive seeds with intention; creating conditions that can help those seeds grow. Some will sprout, some will grow - others will wither and die.

There's often a lot of habit energy associated with the seeds we sow. Sometimes we find ourselves creating the same conditions over and over again - falling in the same hole until we begin to really see what that seed really needs to be grow. It's only when we become aware of what is that we create new possibilities for beginning again.

An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters
By Portia Nelson

I.

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in
I am lost ... I am helpless
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

II.

I walk down the same street,
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III.

I walk down the same street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

VI.

I walk down another street.

We tend to overwhelm ourselves by thinking about big changes. We make New Years resolutions that wind up doing nothing more than watering the seeds of inadequacy in us. Sometimes we lack the awareness to see what's right in front of us - we fall into the same hole, both individually and collectively, every time. We can't see the seeds or how we may be watering seeds we don't really want to grow.

But as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Every morning when we wake up, we have 24 brand new hours to live" – 24 hours in which we can choose to be the people we want to be in the world.

We may keep falling in the same hole but we can begin again – becoming more aware of the seeds we want to water

in ourselves and in the world - paying attention to what those seeds really need in order to grow.

We never have to give up on ourselves or each other. We can make changes by beginning again, and again, and again – in each new moment, each new day, each New Year.

Communities that practice in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh gather to Begin Anew each week - beginning by sharing affirmations. Watering all the good seeds they see growing in each other. They then take turns sharing ways they feel they may have fallen short in the past week. Refreshing their sense of resolve to water the seeds of kindness and compassion in the community - watering seeds of patience, and being present for one another.

We can all practice beginning anew every week, every day, in every moment - watering the seeds we want to grow in ourselves, in our families, in our communities, in our world.

Can you imagine what it might be like to engage in this kind of practice in our families, in our neighborhoods, our cities, our governments??? What if we all engaged in beginning anew - watering the seeds of our highest resolve with intension on a regular basis?

So don't be afraid of those resolutions. Go ahead and make them. But be prepared to take a good look at what they really need to grow. When you fall short, pay attention to what is — to all that is and begin again.

My hope for all of you and for all of us is that one day we'll learn how to walk down another street - a street where we realize that we have to live every day, every moment with fresh resolve to build the world we seek.

May it be so. Blessed Be and Amen.

Rev. Carol Strecker
January 3, 2021