

Sermon: *Starting Over Again* by Joyce Ramay 1-1-23

In October, Christian Churches Together, an ecumenical group of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, gathered for its annual forum to address a topic that has plagued the church and society beyond it: **polarization**.

But they found that polarization within their own ranks made it hard to move forward. Two months later, on Dec. 9, they released a prayer. (Source: Religion News Service, 12-16-22)

“In the power of the Holy Spirit that blows where it will, remove the divisions and historical inequities, between Christians, and in society — between those who strive to follow you, and between us who raise this prayer. Show us new ways to be your churches in these troubled, polarized times. Give us fresh vision to respond in love to a world consumed by hate and fear.”

That is a mission that All Faiths adopted when we were founded in 2001.

We dreamed of creating a congregation that would learn how to love alike, even if we did not think alike.

Our goal was to be a home for radical inclusiveness, where we would not only tolerate, but also embrace diversity, and welcome challenges to our own ideas and beliefs.

Instead of fighting with each other over words, dogmas and ideologies, we wanted to love each other, with deep respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In order to do that, we chose to emphasize the UUA Sources, because we knew that we could grow, develop and change through enlightened exposure to a broad range of faith traditions.

Here at All Faiths, we expect to eagerly learn from each other, instead of rejecting each other.

So now we are at the start of a new year - a time when we often think of **starting over again**.

“The old year passes – hail the new, ye lads and lasses.”

Over the past three years, we faced some extreme challenges.

The Covid 19 epidemic kept us disconnected and isolated.

At the end of August, we lost our beloved minister, Rev. CJ McGregor, who left to start a new adventure with a UU congregation in London.

Now we have volunteers providing Sunday services and pastoral care while we search for a new minister.

We experienced the most contentious election year in my lifetime – leading to extreme partisanship and division in our society.

If those things were not enough, we were impacted by Hurricane Ian with 155 mph winds and a storm surge that brought ocean and river waters into our homes.

Joan Marshall, was scheduled to talk about the UU response to Climate Forced Displaced Persons on October 2, but we held no service that day, because of the Hurricane.

Ironically, Joan and her daughter, and many others, became real-life Displaced Persons from the effects of climate change.

Many of our members experienced serious health conditions – strokes, heart attacks, Covid 19, pneumonia, injuries and orthopedic surgeries.

I suspect some of those ailments were aggravated by the traumas of these past years.

On the bright side, in recent months, I have started to call us the Resilient Congregation.

I have deep admiration for the many brave and creative ways that you have weathered all the storms and challenges, and kept hope alive.

We found ways of staying connected and supporting each other.

Wow – we are surrounded by miracles.

So now it is a New Year and we are starting over again.

When things are going smoothly, we often wander through life, taking things for granted, doing things in the same old way, maintaining the same attitudes, beliefs and priorities.

Then suddenly – our hearts are broken by losses, our lives are shattered, we are shaken to the core of our being.

The beauty of experiencing all these troubles is that we are forced to go deep within our souls, to search for answers to the big questions of life.

Why am I here? Or even, why am I still here?

Can I trust the Universe?

Can I trust the people around me?

Who and what matters?

What is my purpose? What is the meaning of my life?

Or more mundanely, it may come down to: Why should I get out of bed in the morning?

All of us here have had major turning points in our lives – losing a parent through death or divorce when we are young, leaving home and going out into the world, changing where we live.

We take on new education, new jobs, and new relationships.

Along the way, we **choose** to make some strong commitments to vocations, families, and communities.

We are busy – we have things to do, we want to succeed, we want to achieve, we want to live up to the **expectations** of ourselves and others.

But then we lose our jobs or retire, we lose our spouses, we lose our homes and connections.

We are adrift in the wilderness.

We become so disoriented that it can often lead to despair.

That is when the strength of character must emerge from deep within our souls.

We find that we have to make a decision – and the preferred one is a choice in favor of HOPE.

Hope lives in our hearts and sustains us.

Today is a new day. This is a New Year.

We have an opportunity - We can start over again.

This past week, I sent out an article about rating your life. That's a great place to begin when you are planning to start over.

Think about what a gift this is – **WE CAN CHOOSE** how we will spend our time, talents and treasures today and for the rest of our lives.

WE CAN CHOOSE what we will commit to.

WE CAN CHOOSE who we will spend our time with.

WE CAN CHOOSE to trust that the Universe is supportive of life, and that love is another name for that force of energy that holds everything together throughout the cosmos.

I like that sign on McGregor Boulevard – GOD IS LOVE.

When we are children or at early stages of our spiritual development, we often envision a deity that is a Mother or Father – a kind of Big Daddy or Big Mama in the sky – one who will watch over us, love us, take care of us – and also, like Santa Claus, one who knows if we've been bad or good.

That might be called the initial acquaintance version of God.

But then we can move on in our spiritual growth – we may even go through a period of agnosticism or atheism – when we question or reject some earlier immature beliefs and incomplete images of the divine.

I sometimes say to atheists, “Tell me about the God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in him or her either.”

A time comes when we realize that there is a Spirit of Life – like the one that we summon in the wonderful hymn that we sing every Sunday.

You have probably noticed that I do not stand stiffly while we sing that.

That song has such depth, such meaning, it is all encompassing.

Don't just sing it through habit – pay attention to the message.

I particularly like the line – Wings set me Free!

In my dreams, I often fly – sometimes in a small plane but more often with just my body – soaring above the Earth, enjoying the beauty of all that surrounds me in three dimensions.

I am lifted up and supported by that great Spirit of Life, which enables me to defy gravity, and transcend the limits of old restrictions and habits.

In recent years there have been an increasing number of theologians who talk about the Cosmic Christ. For them, Christ is not the last name of Jesus.

Christ is the Universal Consciousness of which we are all a part, to which we aspire to be connected, which we can trust, and which we can embody in our daily lives, as co-generents, as co-creators and as co-participants.

A few years ago, I gave a sermon about how the computer spell-check wanted to change cogenerents to coregents!

It is still doing that with red underlining.

That exemplifies one of the biggest problems that our world faces today – we seek to be grounded as dominators, controllers and rulers.

We live in a world in which there is too much authoritarianism, too much dogmatism, too much domination, too much exploitation, and abuse of others.

We have extreme divisiveness caused by white supremacy, patriarchy, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia and obsessive nationalism.

But we are intended to be co-creators, protectors, care-givers, and most of all Lovers of each other and all living things.

Today is January 1. Seventeen years ago today, my beloved husband Haneef Ramay died after spending several weeks in the hospital with organ failures. We had almost 14 beautiful years together.

When I returned to our home in Lahore that morning, the phone rang as I entered the house.

It was former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto phoning from Dubai to express her condolences. That is how quickly the news had spread.

After speaking with her, I went up to my room.

I was filled with sorrow and tears flowed, but I also felt an amazing sense of gratitude filling my heart and soul.

I was so grateful that Haneef and I had lived and loved completely in the few years that we shared.

And that is when I wrote the words that you see on my emails:

To live is to love. To love is to live. Live and love completely.

January 1, 2006 was definitely a time in my life for starting over again. Shortly after I returned to Fort Myers, Carol Siferd invited me to lunch and asked me to be the nominee for President in the March elections. I had served as the Founding President in 2001-2002.

I expressed my reluctance at first and suggested some other people.

But she insisted that it would be good for me and for All Faiths.

My time as President from 2006 to 2010 proved to be some interesting years with many changes that often felt like starting over again.

We had to find a new location for services – so we went to Crestwell School. Then the 2008-2009 recession hit, and we faced the financial crunch together with our members.

But in 2010, we found and bought this lovely building on McGregor Boulevard.

We promised the former owners that we would keep St. Francis in the memorial garden.

So we started over again, with the guiding spirit of St. Francis nearby.

Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan Priest who founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. He wrote:

“The goal of the spiritual journey is to discover and move toward connectedness on ever new levels. (Think of our newsletter- Connections)

Of course, we won't become vulnerable enough to connect unless we learn to trust over and over again.

We must ask ourselves, “Is the universe a friendly place or not?”

The spiritual experience is about trusting that when we stop holding ourselves, Inherent Goodness will still uphold us.

Many of us call that God, but it isn't necessary.

It is the trusting that is important.

When we fall into such Primal Love, we realize that everything is foundationally okay.” End quote.

My Beloved Friends, on this New Year's Day, I encourage you to trust that the universe is a friendly place.

Choose Hope. Choose Trust. Choose Unity. Choose Love.

I invite you to join with your family and friends in starting over again. Choose to participate in a courageous movement of personal transformation of your hearts, minds and souls, as you welcome the Spirit of Life as the guiding force that enables you to play your role in creating a better world in the year to come.

Trust that in choosing to come together in love, we can defy gravity and our wings will set us free.

1-1-23