

New Year Renewal

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ January 6, 2008

It's midnight. Happy New Year! Okay, that means I'm on a diet. I'm going to lose 20 pounds by spring. I've got to start now. Oh, I'm so glad I'm home, finally. That was a good party but I had a little too much to drink. Maybe I should eat something before I go to bed so that I don't get sick. Good idea. Oh, but my diet, my new years resolution. Okay, I'll start in the morning.

DING. Beautiful New Years Day. Great day. No work. I'll read that book I've been wanting to read and then, oh, right, we're going out for dinner tonight to celebrate the new year. Cool. Oh, yes, my diet. I'll try to eat sensibly. It's an Italian restaurant, maybe I'll just order a salad.....OH, wow. That was a great dinner! I'm so glad that you talked me into the Spaghetti Alfredo – I hadn't had that in years and they even had real old style cannoli! Oh, I ate too much.

Next morning: Oh, I'm still stuffed. I'll skip breakfast. That will help my new year resolution. Good, oh, but I have that luncheon date, maybe I'll start my diet tomorrow.

Happy New Year! This is the new year, a new beginning, a clean slate, the opening salvo in a brand new world. We have ritualized the start of the new year to give ourselves “a second chance” to put closure on selected events and to pursue chosen new ones. We look forward to it with a gusto that belies the fact that we have simply moved from one day to another on a calendar that is only imperfectly tied to the changes in the natural world. Yet, the factual reality is of little consequence. It cannot dwarf the fact that we know that January marks a time of review and renewal, a looking back at the year just passed and a glimpsing forward to what lies ahead.

The excitement and anxiety that pulsates during this time, is accompanied by a ritual ceremony, a prescribed rite of passage into the new year for this is the time when we make new year's resolutions. How many of you have already made your new year's resolutions?

I have some concerns. Just think about it. We begin the year in judgmental scrutiny of our behaviors over the past year, ferreting out whether we were “naughty or nice,” good or bad, right or wrong. I eat too much. I need to lose weight. I must exercise more. Then, in humor, sadness, sorrow or shame, we resolve to do better, to become a better person, to live a better life. I'll cut out carbohydrates, fats, big portions, seconds, anything I like and all calories over 1000. I'll go to the gym five days a week for an hour each time. I'll read two books a week.

It's such a downer! Do we dislike ourselves so much that we start the year with an almost sure fire set up for failure? This is not self love.

And this month of January is an important marker for love. Aristotle uses three concepts to describe the nature of love. He speaks of agape, philia and eros. The Christmas holiday was filled with themes of agape, a brotherly love for all humanity. February is the month when we celebrate eros, erotic love. It is this in between time that is free for focusing on reflective feelings of philia. Philia represents fondness, appreciation, loyalty, or more generally friendship love, particularly, for our discussion, self love. For Aristotle, self love is simply friendship with oneself.

For some the term self love is somewhat tainted. It makes us squirm with pornographic images. Yet, self love is the wellspring of the Golden Rule: Love thy neighbor as thyself. This is a concept so important that it was mentioned directly seven times in the Judeo Christian Bible.¹

In the Bible self love is assumed. Although in some passages it is explained how to love thy neighbor, explanation for how to love thy self is a given. But I ask you, in these times, is it possible that those authors assume too much? Is it possible we do not fully love ourselves? How many times when we have read that message, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” have we accented the first part and ignored the latter. Love your neighbor, yes! That is what we must do. As you love yourself, yeah, yeah yeah. Sure, sure, I love myself. Yet without self love one cannot fully love another.

So this is a time for a renewal of self love, a time to cleanse ourselves, of the stagnation and baggage that occurs throughout the year and to open ourselves to a brand new world, a new beginning on our journey toward wholeness.

Sometimes when we look at that sack of baggage we try to minimize it. Really, I’m doing quite well. I wish that truth for all of us. Let me share an exercise that I have done with several groups. It begins with a task. I invite you to try it for seven days and see how it feels for you. When you get up in the morning, as you are staring at the mirror, -perhaps after you have washed your face, shaved, or brushed your teeth, look into the mirror and say to your reflection, “I am a good person.” Then, just be with that for a moment. This is a powerful act of self affirmation, one that asserts one’s basic belief in self and in one’s actions. If it is hard for you; that’s okay too. It’s food for thought.

I once worked with a group of about thirty women (and one man) who were returning to or entering the work world after many years of absence. We had a talk session on Friday mornings. During the early weeks I gave them an assignment to get up each morning, look into the mirror and say, “I’m a good person.” Only one person in the group could do it. The others said that it was too hard. So we made the task easier and switched to “I’m okay.” Or, even less threatening, “It’s okay.” Most of the women found that, although it was difficult to do, with effort and laughter they could make it a habit. For two of the women, we had to go to the next level. They said, “It’s going to be okay.”

Every week I would informally check on how this exercise was going. As the weeks went by, several women reported that it was becoming more comfortable for them. Some began to try the next harder rung on the ladder. Would it surprise you to know that as the task became easier, their adjustment to their new status as workers also became more successful. Probably not. What we witnessed was an increase in self love, a more positive affirmation of self.

Why is it so important to love oneself, to take care of oneself? Psychologists tell us over and over, in study after study, that it is difficult to love other persons if we do not love ourselves. A healthy self love will steer us away from self-destructive life styles and into more positive ones.

We are reminded of the need for self care every time we fly in an airplane. One of the first duties of the flight attendant is to remind us that in the event of an emergency, the oxygen masks

¹ Romans, 13:9; Leviticus, 19:18; Matthew 19:19, 22:39; Mark, 12:33; Luke, 10:27; Galatians, 5:14 and; James 2:8.

will drop down. If we have a child or person near us needing assistance, we do not immediately help them. First we put on our own oxygen mask; then, once our needs are met, we can attend more fully to the needs of others. We must try to put ourselves in the healthiest place possible in order to give love.

Aristotle reflects on the concept of self love. He claimed that there are five ways in which a good person loves oneself and analogously loves another as in true friendship.

The good person will want to survive, to flourish and do well. The good person, guided by reason, wants to be in control of making their own decisions and is not simply swept away by emotions. The good person will have a consistent response style based on their good, virtuous, character and, and hear this one, the good person will spend time alone, not just with others.

For me this makes sense. I want to be the best person possible and by loving myself I hope to not only survive, but also to make good decisions. I want to do well and to discern what doing well is through spending time by myself.

What would our daily lives be like if we asked ourselves at decision making times, Is this decision guided by my best reason, my most authentic self?

You know when I am most aware that I am not making good decisions? When I sit in front of the TV watching programs that I have no interest in, just so I don't have to do anything else. I wonder how many of you, like me, have yearned to take Spider Solitaire off the computer. To just wipe it away. Go Satan, get thee away from me! I really know that I am not loving myself when I play too many computer games or when I zone out in front of the TV.

Tongue in cheek I ask, isn't watching TV spending time with myself? But I know, in my heart of hearts, that the true meaning of the pronouncement to spend time alone, means something more. It means to focus on understanding myself, learning more about what my core values are and how I want to live them out. It means facing that little feeling of uneasiness head on rather than trying to drown it out with mindless games.

Well, my friends, I have learned that paying attention to your self is the lynch pin of self love; and I know that it is self love that enables us to love others well.

Dr. Christina M. Puchalski², M.D. in an article entitled *Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications* writes that Forgiveness is the first stage of self-love and acceptance. It is also the basic building block of loving relationships with others.... [it]can result in greater peace of mind, healing of old emotional wounds, peace with others and the possibility of better relationships.

Dr. Puchalski, then, notes that we must forgive ourselves. We must learn to hold ourselves and be present to our pain. Through self forgiveness, we can heal old wounds and bring ourselves greater peace of mind.

² Puchalski, Christina M. MD *Forgiveness, Spiritual and Medical Implications*
<http://www.med.yale.edu/intmed/hummed/yjhm/archives/spirit2003/forgiveness/cpuchalski.htm>

When we look our sack of baggage, we must sift through it with love, realizing that by withholding our love, we are depriving ourselves of the freedom to openly interact in each moment. We cannot fully engage the now if we are weighed down by unresolved burdens toward ourselves or others.

As Forgiveness experts Sidney and Suzanne Simon³ note: Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we always had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves.

Forgiveness is a letting go. It is also a reshaping of our thought to focus on what we want and need rather than what we dislike about ourselves and others. It is a focusing on the positive.

And so here we are. I propose a change in this annual New Year drama. In my opinion it is always a good thing to take the time to stop and smell the roses, to review one's beliefs, values and behaviors. Yet instead of focusing on the changes that we need to make in order to become better persons, I suggest that we build upon those things that we are already doing right, expanding their scope and frequency. Instead of flagellating ourselves for our shortcomings, let us use an Appreciative Inquiry approach to enhance our strengths.

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University. It is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that accents the positive, building upon the basic goodness in the person, situation, or organization, in order to foster positive change. The basic idea is to build upon what works, rather than trying to fix what does not.

Appreciative Inquiry was developed for and is a terrific process for organizations, - including non profits such as religious groups. It would work well in our decision making at UUFSCC. However, Appreciative Inquiry spans a wider audience. It can be used on a very personal level and, as "Howard" the blogger reminds us, it mimics the evolutionary process itself!⁴ Let's examine how it works.

Appreciative Inquiry is a four stage process, the 4 Ds. Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Discover what has worked. Dream of how it can be brought forward. Design a new plan and then vow to Do it!

Reviewing the past year then, would be a time to identify those actions and activities that worked well during this past year, envisioning how they or similar behaviors might work well in the future, designing a strategy to implement, modify expand, or enhance them and then resolving to follow through.

Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Discover what has worked. Dream of how it can be brought forward. Design a new plan and then vow to Do it!

³ Simon, Sidney B. and Suzanne *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get On With Your Life*

⁴ <http://www.systemsthinker.com/interests/appreciativeinquiry/>

Appreciative Inquiry builds upon our positive feelings of self worth. We review our strengths, reflect on what works for ourselves and dream this into the future. Reflecting on our strengths is not always an easy task. Yet, couldn't it be worth the slight discomfort in the face of such positive rewards.

You know, instead of going on a diet this year, I'm going to increase my going out to eat budget just a little. I love Burger King. It's a place to sit and reflect, one where I rarely run into health conscious UUs with whom I want to talk. It is a me time. They have veggie burgers there, but I never get them because they are a few cents more expensive than the less healthy meat products. I can do that for myself. I'm going to put positive power in my corner.

Let us all face the new year squarely, head on, from a place of positive power. We are a community of faith. Let us trust that process in ourselves. And now,

Let us close with a quote that you have heard before, but let us listen through the lens of our current talk on self love. It is by Marianne Williamson and used by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 inaugural speech.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and famous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”