

Unitarian Society of Hartford
Sunday December 30, 2007

Bigger, Better, Faster, More
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Bigger, Better, Faster, More

Approaching the end of December, people from every culture are recovering from the midwinter celebration of their choice. We have reminded ourselves that the light will return, that the days are getting longer, and the darkness is receding. And yet winter is still upon us. We are all a bit hung over, either literally or figuratively, from the frenzy of preparation that marks the season. Some of us are reeling from the inevitable overeating, overspending, and occasionally overwhelming family gatherings. Others are attempting to return to the light from the loneliness and isolation that mark a holiday away from those we count among our beloved. Nature, in her infinite wisdom, sends the second half of the winter to remind us that rest is a necessary part of life, and yet from this place of both feast and famine, we enter the new calendar year filled with intentions of self-improvement.

According to a University of Washington study, more than 100 million Americans will make a New Year's resolution tomorrow night. Lose weight, exercise more, quit smoking, be more financially responsible - so many of us start the New Year with a litany of goals designed to improve ourselves in every way - I can rebuild myself, I have the technology! So much of our energy is poured into being bigger, better, faster, more. But to what end? Of those 100 million people, only 19% will produce a lasting change in their lifestyle as a result of their resolution. That statistic alone has the capacity to produce a flurry of intellectualization.

Why do those 19% succeed? Let's study their make up, determine whether they have an internal or external locus of control, collect data, form a committee, and work the problem. Or, we can challenge the original hypothesis that radical self-improvement will offer any of us greater satisfaction with our lives.

Pema Chodron, in her book *The Places that Scare You*, maintains that: "trying to fix ourselves is not helpful. It implies struggle and self-denigration. Self-improvement can have temporary results, but lasting transformation occurs only when we honor ourselves as the source of wisdom and compassion." Only when we slow down, and learn to accept ourselves where we are, with our confusion and clarity, can we let go of harmful patterns in our lives. This level of

gentle self-acceptance is called maitri. If we continue to live in the harsh judgment of bigger, better, faster, more, we will never be enough, and caught in our self-recrimination, will miss the glorious light that exists in our imperfection.

Chodron cautions that, “as a species, we should never underestimate our low tolerance for discomfort.” It is often easier to live with the certainty of misery than to risk the misery of uncertainty. And yet that risk could be the difference between true joy and the neverending pursuit of improvement.

Can you imagine what it might be like to begin the New Year by releasing something old rather than promising to manifest something new? To lay down the burdens that bend our backs and keep us from truly seeing each other, and speak the words “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you”? What long marinated slight or sin could we release from our souls, forgiving ourselves and one another? The pre-Olympian Goddess Hecate is the guardian of the crossroads, demanding an offering before a traveler can continue on their path. She is willing to take from you what no longer serves you, rending a hole in your spirit that will allow what is new and necessary to enter, but how much more empowering to acknowledge what you no longer require, lay it at the feet of the Goddess, and continue on your way.

Perhaps it is fear that keeps us moving so rapidly forward. Fear that if we were to slow down, to reflect on our lives and allow ourselves to contemplate what could be released, we might find ourselves left with nothing. Or perhaps we would be forced to face our own divinity. Who would I be if I were not too afraid, or too young, too old, sick, or busy. What destiny would I need to embrace if I acknowledged that I am enough, just as I am? Marianne Williamson so beautifully illustrates this dilemma: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”

So how do we begin to release what no longer serves and embrace what we could be without falling victim to the pressure of bigger, better, faster, more? How can we have a simple, direct relationship with ourselves that does not include moralizing, harshness, or deception? As a community, we can support each other by examining the rituals and celebrations that are part of our spiritual and secular lives. During what rites of passage do we honor endings, releasing, and letting go? More often we celebrate beginnings, accomplishments, and accumulation. As communities we tend to honor loss and release only in death, and even then in a way that encourages all involved to complete their mourning as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. We resist even the lighting of memorial candles, associating the color black with something sinister rather than the universal experience of grief. We expect ourselves and each other to cope with loss, grief and endings with pithy encouragements to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, to let it go, to move on. Could we instead allow ourselves to express

our deeper feelings and needs, and celebrate them with the reverence we crave as people?

The need for meaningful rituals of release is clear, so how do we, as Unitarian Universalists meet that need in a theologically diverse environment? Many congregations include a fire communion in their liturgical year, a counterpoint and companion to the water communion that brings us together at ingathering. Each member of the congregation is invited to write something on a piece of paper that they no longer need in their lives, and then the intentions are burned to symbolize the release of energy into the universe.

I offer this on behalf of the congregation:

Let us release the pain of the past and embrace the hope of the future.

As individuals, our task is more daunting. How do we hold back the tide of societal expectation, family history and personal experience? Perhaps the best place to start is illustrated in the refrain of the song that has been repeating in my head this week: You can't jump the track, we're like cars on a cable and life's like an hourglass glued to the table. No one can find the rewind button girl, so cradle your head in your hands and breathe, just breathe. If we can start with one breath, one moment of silence, one gentle acknowledgement that we could be the source of wisdom and compassion, then we have moved miles from the crossroad in one single step. We have given ourselves permission to release what no longer serves, and the ability to move forward deliberately rather than in frenzied desperation.

This is such a simple concept, and yet so difficult to implement. As I was working on this service, I found myself at an uncharacteristic loss for words. I knew what I wanted to accomplish, but continued to struggle with how to take a concept and transform it into a sermon. I just kept thinking I would be fine if I just had one more text, some further research, 20 more years of experience, if only I could be bigger, better, faster, more...It was then I found myself caught between the spiritual equivalent of "physician, heal thyself" and the even more obvious "practice what you preach".

When I stopped to marvel at the irony of my own mind, I remembered a beautiful parable from the preface of Elie Wiesel's book *The Gates of the Forest*. Wiesel tells the story of a great Hasidic Rabbi who, seeing a misfortune threatening the Jews, went to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There, he lit a fire, said a special prayer, and the misfortune would be averted. Later, it fell to his successor to intercede with Heaven on behalf of the Jews, who went to the forest and said to God: "I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer!" and again, the misfortune would be averted. When his successor came to the forest, he was unable to light the fire or remember the prayer, but he called out to the God that at least he knew the appropriate place in

the forest, and that must be sufficient. It was sufficient, and the miracle was again accomplished. Finally, it fell to his successor to intervene on behalf of the Jews. Sitting in his armchair, he spoke with God. "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And Wiesel concludes that it was sufficient, because God created people because he loves stories.

So in that spirit, we must persist in our attempts to embrace the concept of maitri in our own lives, to free ourselves from the burden of bigger, better, faster, more. It is true that I am unable to light the fire, remember the prayer, or even find my way to the forest. All I have is my story, and the willingness to listen to yours. And this must be sufficient.

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