



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“There’s Another Way”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 6, 2013

If you were going to pick a word, one word, to be your companion and guide in this new year, what would it be? One word that would help you to remember how you want to live, and who you hope to be.

About a week ago, one of my colleagues¹ shared this idea--to pick a word that would be your word for the year, that would help call you back to yourself, a reminder of your intentions and aspirations, of how you hope to live. Not a resolution, which is so easy to break. Just a word to be your companion for the year.

A word came to me, that I’m going to hold close this year. And I offer this idea to you, as something you might want to try too. I’ll probably share my word with you, eventually. And I’d love to hear yours, if you pick one!

In the church calendar, today is the feast of the Epiphany, which at the end of the 12 days of Christmas and celebrates the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem to see Jesus. We heard about this on Christmas Eve: in that passage from the gospel of Matthew that tells of those wise men who followed a star, seeking a messiah. On the way they went to King Herod, and their news caused Herod to be troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And the king said, “When you find the child, let me know, so I may worship him also.” When the wise men find Jesus, they offer their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The passage ends this way: “Being warned by God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12).

James Taylor wrote a song about this line, called “Home by Another Way.” And it seems to me that this day, this first Sunday of the new year, is the perfect time to step back and look at ourselves, to consider what we are doing and how we are living. To look at the assumptions we make, about ourselves and others, and simply ask: “Is there another way I want to live? Are there things I want to do differently?”

You see, we humans can get into habits and forget that we have choices and free will and the ability to do things differently. I love that line from Matthew, “they went home by another way,” because it’s a reminder to us that we have that ability too--to search the stars and listen to our dreams and find a different way home.

¹ Rev. Elea Kemler, minister of the First Parish in Groton, MA, shared this idea which she learned from Mrs. Sundberg, columnist for the radio show “A Prairie Home Companion.”

And when I say home, I'm not thinking about where you grew up or where you have been--I'm remembering what Starhawk said, "We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time."

You may be completely happy with your life. There may be nothing you want to change. But if that were true, then why are you here? Maybe I'm wrong, maybe you're different from me, but the reason I've been drawn to church all these years is because there is something missing, something I need. There is in me this need for hope and encouragement, for the sense that I am not alone, for the assurance that there is something more, something larger and deeper than my own ego. I need a place where I can be, as the Methodist minister Ted Loder says, "in touch with who I am, and who God is, and who my sisters and brothers are."²

I assume that there is, within each of us, a holy longing--a desire to be in touch with that source of life and love. That no matter what we call it, we each long to be in the presence of that which inspires our awe and wonder, that which is always More.

If you looked at this church or any church, at how we spend our time and our money, you might assume that we exist to maintain a building, or hold fundraisers and potluck suppers, or employ church staff and sustain a vast array of committees.

But none of these are why we are here. Any of these good things could fall away and we would still be a church. Because the church exists simply to help you be in touch with who you are, and who God is, and who your sisters and brothers are.

Just over five years ago, you all were searching for a new minister, and I was looking for a congregation to serve. The first step for ministers in search is to fill out a multi-page form called the ministerial record. Under "Describe the new ministry you hope for," here's what I wrote:

"I love the church for its potential to change individual lives and, in the fullness of time, to transform the world. I hope to find a congregation where I can help people do this vital work. I'm particularly interested in worship and preaching, pastoral care, and exploring ways to put our faith into action."

Even with all its faults, I believe in the church, enough to spend the second half of my life in it, because of its potential to change individual lives, and in the fullness of time, to transform the world. That is why we are here. To help you grow and change, to become who you were born to be, so you might live into that fullness. We are here to transform lives and leave the world better than we found it. Everything else is secondary, and in support of that mission.

Pivoting now into more traditional theological language, listen to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It asks, "What is the chief end of humankind?" And the answer: "Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever."

² This comes from Ted Loder's prayer "Pry Me Off Dead Center," found in his book *Guerrillas of Grace*.

How do we glorify God? By being who we were born to be. And by loving and serving others. If we do this, if we live into the fullness of that invitation, we will enjoy life and our place in it, even as we live in the midst of struggle and sorrow and brokenness.

We live in this constant tension between what is and what might be. Here in this church we say you are welcome and accepted here just as you are. We affirm that our differences are a gift and a blessing, that we learn from each other and need one another. We trust that each of us does have a hidden wholeness that we can and ought to be in touch with.

But this doesn't mean that any of us are completely whole, or that we don't each need to grow and change. I know in myself the constant struggle between who I am and who I hope to be; the desire to live a good and holy life in touch with what really matters and all the temptations and distractions that keep me from doing so. I need this religious life to call me back, to help me. And I suppose you do to.

If you want to see change--in your relationships, in your family, in your community, in the world--the only thing you can really do is to change yourself. You can't change anyone else. The good news is that changing your own behavior will cause a ripple effect that can be a powerful force for change. The bad news is that changing yourself is hard.

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, (Mary Oliver says) and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.³

That's what it can feel like, when already late enough, you decide to make a change. As the poet says, it can be a wild night, the road full of fallen branches and stones. But, she says, that's not the whole story. There's also this sense of rightness, of clarity, of being grounded, when you're on the way that is yours. You have this deep sense of "here I am, where I ought to be."⁴

So if you are beginning this new year with a nagging sense that something is missing or not quite right, if you are tired of the way things are but don't know how to change, if you have been meaning to make a change but haven't been able to get your courage up, take heart. You are not alone. We each have in us holy longings, calling us, as our choir sings sometimes, "calling us to be more whole, to hear God's music in our very souls."⁵ Now is a good time to listen to those longings and get on with those changes.

³ From Mary Oliver's poem, "The Journey."

⁴ Issak Dinesen, in *Out of Africa*: "Up in this high air, you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands, you woke up in the morning and thought, 'Here I am, where I ought to be.'"

⁵ Joyce Poley, "All of Life is Calling Me."

Some Sunday soon I'll extend this conversation to ask how we as a community might change, how we might better focus on what matters and live out our faith. But let's start by each doing our own work. What is yours?

It may begin with finding a single word that becomes your companion for this year. What is that word, that you need to hear? That will help you in this new year?

If the way you are traveling is no longer helpful or fulfilling, there is another way. Even if you can't see it or imagine it yet. Even if most of your life is okay, and I hope that it is, there are parts, aren't there, that you'd like to change? There's another way.

I've been carrying a song in my heart lately, a beautiful song called "Another Train." It's about finding hope when all seems lost, and I want you to hear the start of it:

The beginning is now and will always be,
You say you lost your chance and fate brought you defeat,
but that means nothing you look so sad,
You've been listening to those who say you missed your chance.

There's another train, there always is,
Maybe the next one is yours,
get up and climb aboard another train.

You may feel you're done, but there's no such thing,
although you're standing on your own, your own breath is king,
The beginning is now, don't turn around,
For regrets of bad mistakes will only drain you.

There's another train, there always is,
Maybe the next one is yours,
get up and climb aboard another train.⁶

There's another way--there always is. It begins with a dream, or a longing. It takes shape when you know what you have to do, and you begin. When take that first step in a new direction. And you begin to sense, "I'm on my way."

This is at times a solitary journey. But on it, you will hear a new voice, that you'll recognize as your own. And you will find companions on the way. This journey, of transformation and liberation, it's why we're here. Are you ready? Are you ready to be on your way? Then let's sing, "I'm On My Way."

Amen.

⁶ "Another Train," by Pete Morton. I played part of a recording of this song that was recorded by The Poozies. You can listen to it online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l-7nrallrY>