

I Resolve...

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

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CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Matt Hoyt and I am a member of the congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, politics or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said. If you have something to share, please come forward, tell us your name and what's on your mind.



Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

Please rise now and greet your neighbors at the door. Welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN 350, The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time

GREETINGS

MADDIE. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. There is an emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode" and childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

The guest at your table has good manners—she knows when it's time to go. So, if you did not return your box this week, please do so next week. And thank you for your generosity.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

Today, Kate brings us the music of Tom Barabas.

PRELUDE: Suite Memories

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Our chalice lighting today comes from Stephen Shick. This is a responsive reading and your words are in italics.

From the loneliness of troubled times, we come
To discover that we are not alone.

Into the dwelling place of togetherness, we come
To collect remnants of hope.

From fear that all is lost, we come
To discover what will save us.

Into the comfort of each other's arms, we come
To feel the strength that has not yet vanished.

From darkness, we come
To wait until our eyes begin to see.

Into the refuge of fading dreams, we come
To remove illusions and focus new visions.

From despair that walks alone, we come
To travel together.

Into the dwelling place of generations, we come
To pledge allegiance to being peace and doing justice.

STORY: Boris Is Grateful

NARRATOR. Boris is a mutt. Not a Collie. Not a Poodle. Not a Beagle. A mutt; a mix. When I was young we used to call mutts Heinz 57 dogs. You never could tell anything about their ancestry. Mutts are pretty good dogs, most of the time. Of course, a lot depends on how they are treated.

Boris cannot remember his parents or where he was born. All he remembers is walking down the street one day when he was a young pup and finding a good home.

Prudence is his friend. Lives around the corner. Always had a good home. She's a Lhasa Apso. Hair down to here and then some.

Attitude out to there and then some.

Have you ever heard of a gratitude journal? Boris decided to keep a gratitude journal to write down everything he was thankful for each day. For his first entry, he wrote this poem:

BORIS. I stood in awe
Of all that I saw
Unfurl for me today.
The earth goes round the sun
I had lots of fun
My day was full of play.

There's so much to know
I have every chance to grow
And the stars twinkle in space.
I have a brain to think
My cheeks are very pink
And I have a sweet, brown face.

I still hope that life holds more
I can't guess what's still in store
But I'm amazed by life's mystery.
I can taste, touch, and feel.
I have a really good deal.
I feel lucky to make my history.

PRUDENCE. What's up, Boris? You look mellow.

BORIS. Hi, Prudence. I just made the first entry in my gratitude book, and I'm feeling very thankful.

PRUDENCE. [*Self-absorbed; lots of attitude.*] Thankful? What fer? Life is terrible. I stepped in a mud puddle and got my shiny, white coat all dirty. Sally said a mean thing about my curly tail. And my family changed my dog food to this awful blend of healthy nuggets

and chewy bits and it's enough to make me barf.

BORIS. Prudence, are you angry just because life is not going your way today?

PRUDENCE. Duh. You figgered it out, Sherlock! I took so much time today making myself pretty, and no one has even noticed or given me a compliment—and, what's worse, my hours of grooming were ruined by the mud all over my coat!

BORIS. Oh, I get it now! You're disappointed because all you worked for came to nothing and you've had a bad day. You know Pru, I hate to say it, but you're really having a pity party here. How can you act like a victim when you have so many privileges?

PRUDENCE. Victim? *Vick-tim*? How dare you call me a victim—you're just a mutt with no pedigree!

BORIS. Prudence, we're not talking about my breeding—which is just fine, by all accounts—we're talking about you. And your behavior. You came here looking for sympathy—I didn't come looking for you. And all you've done since you crawled through that hole in the fence is whine, complain, and pout. You need to get a grip, girl. Focus on something positive in your life instead of wallowing in all the negatives you can imagine.

PRUDENCE. Something positive? Like what?

BORIS. You're the one with the *breeeeeeding*. Aren't you happy to have such good parents and family? Aren't you happy to live in that McMansion? And all your grooming aids and cosmetics? Aren't you happy to primp each day? And even though you don't like the food you are given, *it's given to you, Prudence!* You don't have to scrounge through the dumpsters behind Chick-Fil-A!

PRUDENCE. [*Beat.*] Thank you, Boris. I'm going home now.

Perhaps I'll write my own gratitude book. Maybe I'll write a poem.

BORIS. I don't know about Prudence. She seems like she has a good heart, but you just can't hear it beat sometimes for all the folderol she goes through.

PRUDENCE. I'm baaaaaack! Betcha didn't think I could be grateful, didja? Hunh, poopy-dog? Well, here's the first entry in my gratitude book. And I want you to know it only took me nine days to write it.

Sometimes you think a friend
Is someone who will pretend
That all you do and say is right.
It's a dog who will let you whine
Who says everything is fine
And will never put up a fight.

I learned that a friend does more
Than just allow you to bore
The world with all your complaints.
A friend is like the cat
Who won't let you be a brat
And insists on some restraints.

I needed to get a shock
And to stop and take stock
Of all my many gifts.
Now I think about my bath
And my ability with math
To get me out of my fits.

NARRATOR. Boris was glad that he Prudence wasn't angry at him. He really didn't know how she would react when he confronted her about her bratty behavior. He had always liked Prudence and appreciated her many talents, even though her prissy prancing sometimes got under his skin. He got out his gratitude book and

made another entry.

So I urge you to look for reasons to be grateful, not reasons to be angry or discouraged. Thanks for listening to this story of Boris. I'll have another one sometime. You are free to go to your classes now.

CHILDREN'S RECESSIONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go.
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
we hold you in our love
as you go.

OFFERTORY: Prayer

Do you know Hetty Green? She was a businesswoman, remarkable for her frugality—some would say stinginess—as well as for being the first American woman to make a substantial impact on Wall Street. She was the “Witch of Wall Street.”

When her father died in 1864 she inherited seven and a half million dollars and invested in Civil War bonds. Three years later, she married Edward Henry Green, but made him renounce all rights to her money before the wedding. You can see where she began to get her reputation as a miser.

There are many tales—some true, some not—about her stinginess. She never turned on the heat nor used hot water. She wore one old black dress and undergarments that she changed only after they had been worn out. She did not wash her hands and rode an old carriage.

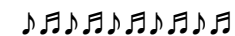
She ate mostly pies that cost fifteen cents. She once spent half the night searching for a lost stamp worth two cents.

Green conducted her business at the Seaboard National Bank in New York, surrounded by trunks and suitcases full of her papers; she did not want to pay rent for an office. She ate oatmeal she heated on the radiator. She would travel thousands of miles to collect a debt of a few hundred dollars.

Her frugality extended to her family life. When her son Ned broke his leg as a child, Green tried to have him admitted to a hospital charity ward. When she was recognized, she stormed away vowing to treat the wounds herself. The boy contracted gangrene and his leg was amputated. When her children left home, Green frequently moved among small apartments in Brooklyn Heights and Hoboken, New Jersey, mainly to avoid establishing a residence permanent enough to attract the attention of tax officials in any state. She refused to have an operation to relieve a hernia because it cost \$150.

Her only true friend, she said, was her dog. The dog had the unfortunate habit of biting people who came to see her. She maintained that the dog loved her even though he didn't know how rich she was.

We're gonna put the bite on you now, even though we don't know how rich you are. And please understand that I told you all about Hetty Green as a *negative* example. Do not imitate her as the collection plate comes your way. If you have an pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them.

Christina, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

This morning I am moved to remember all the service men and women serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and other dangerous locations around the world. Theirs is a perilous assignment for which they and their families are not rewarded.

I don't have the words to express my feelings when on Saturday morning I read that no Americans died in Iraq in the month of December. When the editor and publisher of our newspaper believe that such a fact is newsworthy and belongs on the front page, then something is seriously gone awry.

Spirit of life
that ebbs and flows
within, between, and beyond us
calling our sacred name,
Help us connect to you and to each other,
so that we can hear music all around us
and dance to its rhythms.

Give us this day
to shape with love and gratitude.
Feed our souls with compassion
for all things seen and unseen.
Let forgiveness and hope be life's instruction
As we surrender to the power within us.

For the miracle, the majesty and the awe
are present in each moment
Until with grace
we melt into the universal mind
and are Unleashed.

In this time of silence, let us hold close to our hearts those who are lonely or alone at this time of year, those who are cold or without a place to go, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

SERMON: I Resolve...

This morning, I want to kick around the topic of making and breaking New Year's Resolutions. Will you make one? Or rather, have you made a resolution to do something in the new year?

I recall from the time when I was very young the custom of making a New Year's Resolution. People talked about them, asked you what yours would be and the paper had stories with tips on making and not

breaking them. Many jokes were made about how easily New Year's Resolutions were broken under the weight of temptation and habit.

As I was searching for an image to put on the cover of today's order of service, I ran across a cartoon which pictured three 55-gallon drums. One was labeled paper, the second, plastic and the third, New Year's Resolutions. And I thought it was a shame that the custom of New Year's Resolutions is held in such low regard as to be the fodder for satirical cartoons.

But of course it's our own fault, me included. To paraphrase a popular expression about the law prohibiting texting while driving, New Year's Resolutions seem to be honored more in their breach than in their keeping. Is there anyone in this room who has made a New Year's Resolution and kept it? For more than a week? More than a month? More than a year?

I thought so. What is it with us? Why can't we keep our promises to ourselves?

About 43% of American adults make a resolution each year. You probably can guess what the most popular resolutions are: weight loss, exercise, and quitting cigarettes. Also popular these days are resolutions dealing with better money management and debt reduction.

But we don't keep our resolutions with the same commitment that we make them. As time goes on, resolutions kept:

- past the first week: 75%
- past 2 weeks: 71%
- after one month: 64%
- after 6 months: 46%

The downward trend is not auspicious.

While a lot of people who make new years resolutions do break them, research shows that making resolutions is useful. People who explicitly make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than those who do not make resolutions.

Celebrating the new year is the oldest of our holidays. It began in a pre-historic haze, but was recorded first among the ancient Babylonians. Making a resolution for the new year also began with the Babylonians. The Babylonian's most popular resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment.

We ought to characterize a New Year's Resolution. Typically it's one that involves some aspect of self-improvement. Like losing weight, reading good books, working less and enjoying family more, getting more exercise, and so forth. A resolution to stop jaywalking across Market Street or stop speeding on 75 is good, but it doesn't quite have the same *gravitas* as a resolution to speak more kindly to your spouse or partner or one to cut up your credit card.

Why can't we keep our promises to ourselves?

My answer is that we must be pretty comfortable as we are. If we were uncomfortable, if we were in peril or distraught, we'd be making promises to ourselves left and right. And keeping them. Scarlet O'Hara made this resolution and kept it: "As God is my witness, as God is my witness they're not going to lick me. I'm going to live through this and when it's all over, I'll never be hungry again. No, nor any of my folk. If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill. As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again." Now that's a resolution.

So as we're all that comfortable, it's easy to dismiss any resolution we make to better ourselves or to improve our interactions with others. We made it through last year, and so many other years before that without any resolutions, or without keeping them, so why break such a perfect record?

We all know why. Because we know better. We know we ought to lose some weight, treat everyone better, read more, watch less, and stop using foul language. We know what we ought to be doing.

One of the things that I struggle with is categorical thinking. That's the cognitive process we employ to stick everything in a box of its own. "A place for everyone and everyone in their place" is a particularly mean-spirited example of categorical thinking. Another example is religious leaders who issue fatwas, denounce sinners and otherwise separate the washed from the unwashed. I am disappointed in many religious leaders who separate us in the name of spiritual purity. That they get away with it is the bigger disappointment.

Whenever I get on to a topic, I always try to relate it somehow to our lives as Unitarian Universalists. This usually means figuring out which Unitarian Universalist principle is involved. And for this, it's one and seven, loosely put, "Everyone's important and we're all connected." Categorical thinking is not helpful in promoting the first and seventh principle, because it separates people and promotes one over the other.

But the brain responds readily to categorical thinking. It's easy to think categorically. With little boxes for everyone and everything, you can make sense of a very chaotic world. Making the world either black or white reduces complexity, makes decisions easier and simplifies your existence. June Griffin, our noxious neighbor in Dayton Tennessee, who occasionally writes the editor and often calls Talk Radio, is a categorical thinker of the first order.

Categorical thinking is useful in some scientific circles, like in the classification of animals into vertebrates and invertebrates, birds and mammals, fish and earthworms. Or rocks into igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic. Classifying animals and some things can be a harmless endeavor, and in some cases, quite useful.

But in the case of people, their thoughts and ideas and their speech,

categorical thinking is not helpful. So my new year's resolution is to be more aware of *either/or* thinking. I resolve to think more *both/and*.

Do you remember Lisa Earle McLeod? She is a motivational speaker, and after I've described her as such, I can just hear you say, "Oh, my God. Not another one!" But she's not like that. She is a Unitarian Universalist, and a good one. She is a former president of her congregation in Lawrenceville, Georgia who spreads the good news without beating people over the head with it. She has something to say *either/or* thinking.

Either/or thinking really is the bane of human existence. Whether it's business, politics or relationships, *either/or* thinking gets everyone in hot water. Whether it's an inter-departmental turf war or an argument with your spouse about the best way to load the dishwasher, the moment we adopt an *either/or* mindset, the moment we begin to think *I'm-right-so-you-must-be-wrong*, well, that's when we lose the opportunity to create anything better than what we have.

Many of us fall into the *either/or* trap without even realizing it. Like when we assume that the boss can *either* side with us *or* our hopelessly misguided co-worker. Or that we must choose between being a good parent or a good provider, or that life is a quest for either love or money.

Instead of *either/or* thinking, try *both/and*. As in, perhaps the boss can implement your ideas *and* those of your coworkers. Maybe there's a creative way to be a great parent *and* a great provider, and have a life that includes lots of love *and* money.

I won't sugar-coat this. Thinking *both/and* is not easy. It runs counter to every rugged individualist thought you ever had. It is diametrically opposed to the American myth of individualism. It is communally oriented, something that is not stressed in our culture,

but ought to be. *Both/and* thinking is not promoted nor rewarded—at least not obviously, like hitting the lottery or finding a better job. Any reward you get you’ll get yourself. That is, it won’t be handed to you.

But I am here to say it’s worth it. And I have six suggestions for you to consider when you want to think *both/and*:

1. Make peace with ambiguity. *Both/and* takes longer than *either/or* because the solution isn’t always readily apparent. But wading through a little uncertainty is how we make things better.

2. Withhold judgment. Passing judgment too quickly shuts down the creative process. When we immediately decide that something, or someone, is wrong, it prevents us from seeing the positive kernels buried inside. The other guy’s idea might only be half-baked, but some elements of it might be great.

3. Question with curiosity. Jumping to all the reasons why something won’t work—my spouse won’t go for it or I can’t afford it—takes potential solutions off the table before you’ve even explored them.

Thinking of all the reasons why something will not work is easy. Just look for the flaws. I am sorry to say that some Unitarian Universalists I know have this down to a science. Of course it’s important to know what might go wrong. But if we’re gonna succeed, we need to know what will work, which direction to sail, instead of where all the minefields are. We need to have faith in ourselves. Try asking, “What element of this might work?”

4. Lose the labels. Labels are helpful when it comes to file folders, but they are useless when it comes to people and ideas. People are both good and bad, and their ideas could be brilliant or need a peer review before implementation. Saying—or thinking—that something is *bad* or *wrong*, limits you to about half of what the world has to

offer.

5. Don’t should all over the place. Just because someone once told us that good parents, or nice people, or hard workers *should* act a certain way, doesn’t mean that model is still viable. Living out the one-dimensional version what our lives *should be* diminishes our potential. However, if we can open our minds to the possibility that we can be this *and* that, we’ll tap into more of our own internal power.

6. Take a breath. *Either/or* thinking is reactionary; it’s fear-based. But if we just take a minute, just take a breath, just remind ourselves that everything doesn’t have to be settled right away, and that life doesn’t always have to go exactly the way we scripted it, we’ll open ourselves up to many new options.

Both/And. Simple words, with great power.

And now, if you take your order of service and tear it up. Right. I mean it. Look at the bottom, and you’ll see the horizontal dotted line running left to right. Tear the bottom off along that line. Right now. Do it. Use the hymnal for a flat surface if you need it, and fold it a couple times and separate the bottom portion along the dotted line.

After you have done that, tear the bottom portion in two pieces along the vertical dotted line. This will give you two pieces of grade A copy paper. One labeled Resolutions, the other, Irresolutions. Put the Resolutions portion aside for the moment.

On the Irresolutions portion, write down what you want to be rid of next year. This has to be something you can control, so writing “Junk Mail” as something you want to be rid of won’t work. Write down what you want to be done with, to be rid of, what you want to end, what needs to go away or what will not be a part of you and your life in the future. It might be a memory, a habit or a pattern. It might be an a latitude, an attitude or a platitude. Or several things—you

can write more than one thing, you know. There's seven lines.

Anyone here besides Kate watch M.A.S.H.? There's an episode in which everyone in the camp gets involved in building a giant bonfire. They throw chairs, lockers, bunk beds, footlockers, desks and bed pans onto the fire. Anything that will burn or melt. In this way, they take out their frustrations with the war and literally burn them away.

That's what we'll do directly after this service. Here is an attractive fire-proof container in which you can place your irresolutions. After the service we'll set them on fire—outside, of course—and we'll burn them away. As this beautifully-engraved, handsome cauldron comes your way, place your irresolution in it and say, either aloud or silently, "I am done with this."

Now, for the resolutions. With the remaining slip of paper, you can either now, or at a more convenient time, write down your resolution and keep it. Post it on your bathroom mirror. Or the fridge. Or your computer screen. Somewhere you'll see it.

I will conclude this service and 2009 with a meditation about rebuilding.

MEDITATION: To Build and Build Again

When I was a child I waited for the big storm.
I would take my shovel and build a large pile of packed snow.
Then I would hollow it out.
Inside would be a cozy room: quiet, sheltered,
gleaming blue white all around me.
After several hours I would be wet and cold
and would abandon my shelter for the house and a hot tub.

Sometimes when I was not looking
other children would crash my shelter to pieces
and the gleaming blue white

would be broken pieces and overshoe tracks.

My mother assured me the world had two kinds of people:
the builders and the destroyers,
the trusting and the jealous,
and I was a builder.

The snow of the big storm brings us together.
In the gleaming blue white walls of winter
we can build our lives inside.
We can come together sheltered from the cold.
We can be builders, not destroyers.
We can be trusting and not jealous.

We can be who we are,
when every storm comes upon us,
walking into the outdoors, shovel in hand, trusting,
to build and build again.

HYMN 16, 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: Simple Gifts

