

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Imagine What Could End, Resume ... and Begin!”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 3, 2021

Opening Words

Well, here we are! We survived 2020 and are now just beginning 2021. The transition is almost over as this weekend draws to a close. It is as if we've been suspended between 2020 and 2021 Friday to Sunday with the real, solid beginning about to happen Monday. That will be the day to get fully serious about this New Year.

In this Janus time of looking both backward and forward, may today's service energize that transition and grant our imagination a little creative time to dream ourselves into 2021. Let us consider what we learned and experienced in 2020 we'd like to bring forward and what we'd like to leave behind. And let us consider the many possibilities opening before us as we begin to vanquish this virus.

Reading

From: [‘I Learned to Appreciate My Husband,’ and Other Silver Linings From 2020](#)

The New York Times asked readers to name one good thing that happened in an otherwise dismal year. They got more than 1,500 responses. Here are three excerpts from those responses by Josh Mondry, Of Aspen, Colorado, Anne Thro-dahl, from San Jose, California, and Jeff Horton who lives in Keller, Texas

While obviously challenging, and even devastating for many, this year of Covid has forced us all to re-evaluate what is important, and even necessary, in our lives. Covid has brought family members back home to share quality time together and reconnect. It has enabled us to spend more time reading books, watching shows and playing games, providing opportunities to learn, contemplate or just slow down.

The year 2020 has been a seemingly never-ending stream of heartache, but *never* have I *ever* felt so connected with friends and family. We started a daily family Zoom call when the first quarantines started in March, and the call is still going strong nine months later. Sometimes people can't make it, or they drop in for just a quick hello, but it's a daily reminder, that even apart, we are connected by our mutual love and care for each other...

Despite everything, we did not give up. We found new levels of courage, humility, resilience and resolve. And renewed our understanding of compassion. But that is not all.

Newborns arrived, students graduated. Marriages, birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated. Agreements were signed, careers started. Discoveries were made, solutions were found. People found love (many of us for the umpteenth time since we met), shoulders were leaned on, aid was rendered, lives were saved.

Faith was found, memorials were held, kind words spoken. We began to heal. We did not give up.

The United States has weathered every crisis: independence, civil war, foreign wars, surprise attacks, economic setbacks, assassinations, civil and cultural change. We've endured, by realizing the capacity to do what *must* be done. I remain optimistic. And retain my belief in a better America tomorrow.

Sermon

One year ago, we had no idea what we were in for! So much *hasn't* happened as we anticipated it would. So many trips, performances and events were canceled. So many businesses had to shut their doors. Most regrettably, so many became seriously ill and died.

It all broke open, however, in November, with the announcement of an effective vaccine. Suddenly there was hope that we could stop this pandemic. The effect has been *to unleash our imaginations*.

Our theme for January is imagination. This is quite an appropriate theme for the beginning of a new year. And, because it coincides with our budgeting process for our congregation's coming fiscal year that begins July 1st. Those budget requests are due next Sunday!

This year, we're encouraging our committees and teams to use our vision to guide their imagination about what they'd like to do in the 2021-2022 budget year. Let me remind you, now, of our vision we're working on. Here it is:

Albany UU will be an inclusive, welcoming congregation.

Our sacred work is to: lift hearts, broaden minds and do justice in the world,
in service of building beloved community.

This morning I'd like to take you on an imaginative journey into upcoming events and ideas about how this year might unfold, not knowing, of course, what surprises may come. Please listen ... not just to my words, plans and ideas ... but more importantly, how you *inwardly* respond to them. Do you find what I'm imagining attractive? Do you find "the spirit" start moving in you in response to what I propose or suggest? Is your imagination engaged and moving you to want to get involved in moving a plan or idea into reality?

I recognize we have guests this morning from Schenectady joining us. Your congregation's vision may not look exactly like ours, but I expect we have some overlap. And some of what I'm imagining could become a regional collaboration if it strikes a chord with your congregation. Over the last 10 years, we've sought ways for our UU congregations in the Capital Region to be mutually supportive to build Unitarian Universalist awareness, presence, joint worship, education, and social action.

Here we go!

The murder of George Floyd and the response by our congregations and many people here and all over the world brought new energy to our inclusivity work last year. One theme that repeatedly comes up, is the need for white-identified people to recognize their participation in white supremacy culture, to disidentify with it and to work to dismantle it. Last year, we worked to energize that process with Robin Diangelo's book, *White Fragility* in two book discussion groups with Gemma.

[I saw Diangelo interviewed](#) by Alice Green for the New York Writer's Institute this summer. I heard Diangelo recommend a book titled [The Racial Healing Handbook by Anneliese Singh](#); I read it and decided it would be a great class. Jaye Holly, member of our congregation, and I will be using this book to work toward racial healing that, we hope, will energize participants to work for healing in our society by dismantling white supremacy. That eight week class will start Tuesday, January 19 at 7:30pm.

Working with our intern last year, the now Rev. Dan Miyake, stimulated my imagination. Since the 1950's, there have been revolutionary changes introduced by Lesbian, Gay and Transgender theologians seeking and finding themselves reflected in the Bible, especially in the radical love of Jesus. I'm wondering if some of their innovative thinking will stimulate a greater appreciation of Jesus among more secularly oriented heterosexual, gender conforming Unitarian Universalists. I'll be speaking about this in my sermon on January 25. Information about both were in the Thursday Windows.

One way we might be lifting hearts besides working for inclusion and welcome inside our congregation is just outside our doors. We've made a commitment to serve our neighbors on West and Bradford streets as well as in West Hill across Central Avenue. We also have a strong interest in working in the South End where we have members who live in the Mansion Neighborhood.

Our partnership with Sheridan Preparatory Academy, a public elementary school just a few blocks away, has validated the importance of taking direction rather than starting with our own ideas of what we think will help. We were told Sheridan Prep needed a better playground and helped them build one. As requested, Our members have volunteered to support teachers in the classroom. David Musser found out they were short of Chromebooks so he is working to take old laptops and convert them to function as Chromebooks. If that is in your skillset you might want to speak with him.

The neighbors just around us have been hard to contact as we don't have an active neighborhood association nor much participation by our neighbors in our congregation. What might we do to discover and serve their needs? We have many immigrants here due to the mosque and Halal stores on Central Avenue. How will a Biden administration change people's immigration status? What about access to vaccines? Will our neighbors be able to get them? Might we be a sight where our neighbors (and our members) could get vaccinated down the road?

After four years of a President who solidifies his base by causing conflict and division between people, I'm hoping this year will begin a healing process of our body politic. Yet, I doubt that broadening minds will happen all by itself. I've been attracted to the work of a group called [Braver Angels](#). They strive to create opportunities for Red and Blue folks to meet and talk using tools that facilitate communication, listening and learning rather than conflict that reinforces existing stereotypes and prejudices.

In the beginning of December, some of us met with two local leaders from Braver Angels. One fellow, Bruce France, is the director of [Capital Area Council of Churches](#). He spoke of churches in the Capital Region that were wounded by the divisive politics of the last four years and fights over marriage equality. He suggested our congregation and Braver Angels might be able to work together and help.

As he spoke, I realized how much our congregation has retreated from involvement with local religious organizations since the demise of the ARISE faith-based community organizing effort ten years ago. I started imagining ways we might be able to work with Braver Angels and CACC to build relationships that might also advance appreciation of Unitarian Universalism by other religious organizations. Our pluralistic approach is a strength we might be able to share with others. And Braver Angels methods might be helpful for our own internal divisions that simmer below the surface.

One of our strongest commitments in our vision is doing justice in the world. There is an abundance of ways to do that to stimulate the imagination.

I stopped by the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act web site climate.ny.gov. Wow! There is an intense amount of activity in its five Advisory Panels. Achieving the leading legislative goals of zero greenhouse gas electricity by 2040 and reducing emissions 85% of 1990 levels by 2050 will not be easy or simple. Hard choices and advocacy will be required – and that is where we can come in, using our imagination to sustain the work. Our Green Sanctuary Committees will have many opportunities for that advocacy to support the CLCPA work and keep it on track, if not accelerate it!

Another related effort that is gathering steam is reducing and eliminating many disposable plastics commonly being used. Former EPA director and local green activist Judith Enck will be here virtually on January 14th to discuss her efforts with [Beyond Plastics](#). Let us use our imaginations to see how we can address this overwhelming problem that is having a devastating effect on our lakes, rivers, and oceans.

The Defund the Police initiative by the Black Lives Matter movement motivated Governor Cuomo to require police departments to review their policies and procedures with outside input. Here in Albany that is being accomplished by the [Albany Policing Reform and Reinvention Collaborative](#). One of our members, Jill Peckenpaugh, is a member of this collaborative effort. Jaye Holly is working on a similar panel in Delmar. They will be submitting their required report in April. I imagine we will want to be part of any effort to make sure the reforms recommended are considered and enacted.

One of the strongest advocates for reform out on the streets has been a group led by Jamaica Miles called “[All of Us](#).” I saw her talk about her Black Lives Matter work on a Times Union broadcast that impressed me. She is interested in building partnerships, not just making demands, which she is also very good at doing. I’m wondering if she might be a partner we could work with, who could also be an accountability partner for our anti-racism work. Accountability partnerships based in trust and mutual support are crucial to effective anti-racism work.

Those kinds of partnerships will be critical for an initiative Peggy Sherman and I are working to get off the ground, New York Unitarian Universalists for Justice. We are imagining this as a UU New York State Advocacy Network for our UU congregations to work together on justice initiatives. Some of our work will be in partnership with interfaith New York State advocacy groups working for legislative change at the Capital. Some of our work will be in collaboration with other UU State Advocacy Networks like the UU the Vote effort this fall. And some of our work will be responding

to grassroots initiatives in local areas that have much wider implications, like our anti-fracking efforts did a few years ago.

The widest my imagination is roaming right now is wondering if we have the interest and energy to consider another partner church relationship. When we started our work in Transylvania in the early 1990's, that church was coming out of oppression by the Ceausescu regime. Communism had fallen and they were in desperate need. Today, our partner church in Szőkefalva has stabilized, and their attention isn't so much here as it is with the European Union these days. I'm wondering if there are other places in the world where a partnership with a UU congregation could protect and save lives. I'm thinking of oppression of LGBT UUs in Africa. I'm thinking of repression of Unitarians in the Philippines. What about Unitarian churches in Poland where women's rights are threatened. This is just blue sky right now, but I appreciate this moment to share my imagination with you to see if there is a response. Let me know.

Finally, I want to say something about Beloved Community that our vision serves. In the process of passing our Covenant in November, questions about Beloved Community repeatedly came up. I'm aware that there has been a great deal of conversation about it at UUA General Assembly each year that hasn't quite gotten back to our congregation. I'll take some of the blame for that, though I preached on it a year ago in January and you'll find [a copy of that sermon](#) in the sermon archive.

Fortunately, the theme for February is Beloved Community! We'll have a whole month to deepen our understanding and appreciation of what it is, how it works, and how it relates to Unitarian Universalism. I hope it will help us better understand and motivate us to live into our vision.

So, there you have a whirlwind tour of my thoughts about how to live into the vision of our congregation. Some of what I've mentioned will happen as soon as two weeks from now. Other imaginative ideas may never come to fruition. And you may be imagining ways to enact our vision and mission as a congregation that might inspire me and/or the leadership of our congregation.

We are not a top-down organization that takes direction from the UUA. They too have lots of ideas for us to consider, like [the Widening the Circle of Concern report](#) of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change delivered at our UUA General Assembly in June. As a covenanted Association of Congregations, we need to consider this report this year. And some of what you've heard from me today are imaginative ways of responding to it.

The next step is ***all of ours*** as we begin to end "pandemic mode" and put more energy toward bringing our vision we've imagined together ... to life!