“Beginning After the End”
Message by Rev. Sarah Richards, 9/20/26, AUU

You know the wisdom story “The Tale of the Sands,” we heard this morning has many versions – I knew it as “The River that became the Sea.” At first this seems like a trivial distinction, but it points to one of the lessons of the story – perspective matters. The river or stream seems to be the main character of the story, the character that the reader or listener identifies with – the uncrossable river is the end of life for the stream. Its choice is irrevocable change. “But I want to stay the way I am”, wailed the stream. Whatever happens, you can’t stay exactly the same as you are now,” the voice responds. The river experiences the end of one way of being, and the beginning of a new one on the other side. From the perspective of the sands, though, endings and beginnings are a constant– they see this sort of thing every day.

What we see every day, if we’re telling the story from one perspective, is the end of “the world” as we know it. I recently saw a New Yorker cartoon by David Sipress, a city street scene with a bearded guy in sandals holding a sign saying, “The end is near.” A passerby asks him, “can you be more specific?” It’s funny because it’s true: which end is he talking about? Mounting evidence of catastrophic effects of climate change, and the concurrent systematic dismantling of policies and practices aimed to mitigate those effects can get me doing a pretty good Chicken Little imitation. As midterm elections loom ever closer, the real threats to voting rights and the myriad daily attacks on our democratic system made by our own government are, if not a portent of doom, a portent of depressing regression. The strengthening of us vs. them mentality has weakened community solidarity and communication among all the different us-es and thems in our towns, schools, neighborhoods. We Unitarian Universalists, fighting to protect the gains in civil rights, environmental regulations, economic policies made a generation or two ago, may feel a bit like the stream facing the vast expanse of the desert. We might ask the question, what comes *after* the end?

A famous American sociologist wrote, “If our economic and technological advance has placed power in the hands of those who are not answerable to any democratic process; weakened our families and neighborhoods as it turned individuals into mobile, competitive achievers; undermined our morality and stripped us of tradition…then we must consider where else to turn.[i]” Would it surprise you, as it did

me, to know that that description was written over 50 years ago? And does it provide some comfort, as it did me, to put the present moment into a longer perspective – we've experienced similar end of the world moments. What can we learn from them? Robert Bellah, the sociologist who summed up the national crises of the 1970's, argued then that a reappropriation of tradition was the turn needed.

His was not a reactionary return to golden olden days' fantasy, but a reappropriation of tradition that in his words "recogniz[es] the brokenness with the wholeness, the defeat with the victory. Above all any reappropriation of tradition must be made in the full consciousness of our present experience of loss. In these ways an authentic reappropriation is the direct opposite of the nostalgic, sentimental, and uncritical presentation of tradition in the mass media. They offer tradition as palliative. We need tradition as stimulus to rebirth.[ii]"

I'm not sure that Bellah would use this as an example of authentic reappropriation of tradition, but I thought of how the bronze statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville VA was torn down five years ago, and this summer, community members voted that its metal be recast into a 27 foot sculpture of a baobab tree, "life-giving fruit and the symbolism of resilience, interconnection and shared knowledge.[iii]"

The end of the confederate statue, the beginning of an interactive community sculpture. Very cool. What might we learn from a long term "sand's perspective" of our present situation? Rebecca Solnit's latest book, *The Beginning Comes After the End* speaks directly to the Chicken Little tendencies I and many others experience. Although she doesn't use Bellah's terminology, one of her basic arguments is that people have reclaimed traditions in ways that have made significant positive impacts on how we understand and behave in the world.

Just one example – the removal of dams from the Klamath River in the Pacific Northwest, the largest and most recent just two years ago, was the result of Indigenous groups' work to reclaim their rights and roles as protectors and stewards of the land. Decades of persistent advocacy caused minds to change which led to policy shifts. Solnit writes, "The land that emerged from the stagnant waters behind the dams is being restored and replanted with thousands of young trees and literal tons of native-plant seeds by tribal governments that live up and down this great salmon river that had been choked and stifled for more than a century.[iv]"

The end of the dams is the beginning of new life for the river, its lands and people – or is it a return to, a continuation of the natural cycle of that place? Solnit writes, "Much of what is new in mainstream society, in the dominant culture, is the return of the old ways, the ideas, stories, dreams, values that were not forgotten but pushed to the margins. Recognizing that means recognizing that colonial-industrial capitalism was an anomaly, an exceptionally destructive way of organizing consciousness and culture.[v]"

So one way of reframing "the end is near" view of our country is to see indicators of the end of destructive manifest destiny euro-centrism – course corrections of a sort.

Another way is to notice those incremental changes that accumulate "under the radar," that are invisible except when looked at over longer periods of time. Solnit uses the example of the great strides made in the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy over the past quarter century. She quotes environmentalist Bill McKibben: "Solar power is now growing faster than any power source in history, and it is closely followed by wind power. [In 2024], 96 percent of the global demand for new electricity was met by renewables."

Yes, there has been foot-dragging from powerful fossil fuel companies but that has slowed the progress only fractionally. Because journalism's news cycle is brief, the public - we – don't learn about the longer trajectories of fundamental change.

Solnit writes, "Only in the long view can you see the patterns emerging, the way the present builds on the past, the way past surprises guarantee more surprises are coming, the ingredients of change over years, decades, centuries. If you don't see time on the scale of change, you don't see change; if you don't remember how things used to be, you don't know they're different than they were and how that unfolded.[vi]"

Attention to the long view, making that which is invisible on a day-to-day basis visible. That reminds me of Virigina Slims' catchy slogan, "you've come a long way, baby!" At the time, it was meant to associate smoking cigarettes with women's increased status, independence, liberation – doing something that challenges the patriarchy. Today we might use the same slogan for the reduction in smoking by all genders and ages - both governmental policy and public awareness have come a long way since the ad was introduced in 1968.

Beneath the shifts in energy policy and practice, land and water use and conservation, there is a long-term shift in mainstream views of human-environment interaction from a kind of exploitative manifest destiny attitude to a recognition of interdependency. Solnit puts it this way:

"The most profound change is in worldview, when it comes to how settler-colonialists recognize and understand Indigenous presence and rights, and so many other foundational realities about our world, around gender, around race, around justice and equality, around nature itself and the science that explains it. The practical, tangible changes are consequences of these changed views… underlying most of them is a shift toward the idea that everything is connected, that the world is a network of interrelated systems, that the isolated individual is at best a fiction, and that the natural and social realms run more on collaboration and cooperation than competition.[vii]" Unitarian Universalism itself has been part of the progressive shift, and has often, but not always, been at the forefront of its component movements. We have also had and are having painful moments of recognition of our part in destructive colonial and postcolonial mindsets and policies. We are getting better at taking a critical look at our systems, apologizing, asking for forgiveness in order to deepen connection, and move toward Beloved Community. The recent adoption of our shared values – reconsidering and updating/adapting the principles that were cutting edge forty some years ago – is a prime example of this shift.

Throughout my reading of *The Beginning Comes After the End*, I thought about our Unitarian Universalist values of pluralism, interdependence, generosity, with love at the center – we clearly share this world view.

From my brief summary of some of her main arguments, you may think that Solnit ignores the significance of the backlash to these shifts in world view. To the contrary, she devotes a good deal of attention to what she terms "Disconnectors" – those who turn to authoritarianism and the ideology of isolationism to stop the new world being born. Reading through all the examples of practices of disconnection, from single cash crop farming to the sometimes violent rejection of public health measures during Covid-19 pandemic was both alarming and depressing for me. But I'm glad I kept with it, because Solnit makes a very compelling argument for how to combat the ideology of isolationism through personal evidence of its falseness. "There are so

many ways to undermine the ideology of isolation, the fantasy of autonomy. You who are reading this, like every other human being, did not give birth to yourself or raise yourself through those first few years of absolute dependency; someone gave birth to you, and someone else gave birth to her, and so it goes; human beings emerging from other human beings down the generations and the millennia, so that you're connected both to the long lineage and the long labors.[viii]"

She makes the same point using human biology –"We ourselves are not singular, each of us, but plural, a cooperative community. About half the cells in your body do not have human DNA, and your guts, skin, mouth, and many other parts of you are populated places.[ix]"

And of course we are wholly dependent on the air, water, earth, sun, plants, animals as well as humans for survival – we are part of the interdependent web of all existence, as Solnit puts it, "You yourself are not a single garment of destiny but a thread or a stitch in the tapestry.[x]"

At the risk of oversimplification of Solnit's book, I suggest two ways to combat an apocalyptic world view: get connected and get perspective.

Read books that dive deep into the past, as much as/more than scrolling the hourly news. Look for evidence of what Solnit characterizes as "the new world struggling to be born, the rememberer and heiress of older worlds that better met human and ecological needs…[xi]"

Such a long-term perspective of infinitely interdependent connection frees us to act based on the evidence of massive social change and the functions of our own bodies. Can that worldview, our UU world view, give us hope and faith to keep up the fight? There are so many groups in this congregation collaborating with each other, with community, state, national and international organizations to keep moving towards equity, justice, and transformation. And there are so many opportunities to be connected – socially and spiritually like Community Breakfast, Small Groups, and really every committee and team, every class and even coffee hour can make and strengthen the connections that by their existence refute the rhetoric of isolationism.

Yes, setbacks are dispiriting, even devastating; but are they truly harbingers of doom? In her concluding chapter, Solnit says "One thing I've learned through the back-and-forths over the years is that you can take rights away, but you can't so

easily take ideas away, including people's belief in their own rights and the rights of people they care about. You can cut down the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There is no going back, though how we go forward is the work—or conflict—at hand. … We have won enough that we are in what is to some the unfamiliar position of defending a(n imperfect and incomplete) revolution against backlash and counterrevolution.[xii]"

Sometimes we might feel like the stream that has reached a desert that seems impossible to cross – we've come to the end – but by taking the wider view we see possibility in collaboration, following the lead of those who have made the slow and often painful transformation to a beginning. As Solnit puts it, "We assume that the present is not in labor to bring forth a future unlike itself—and it is easier to see the old world dying than the new world being born. But beginnings are what come after endings."

Friends, the beginning isn't near, it's here. We are the river, recognizing our connection to the desert, the wind, the sun. We are the sand, looking back through time, and forward to the horizon. We're here now, in this beginning, together. Amen. Blessed Be.

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[i] Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial,* University of Chicago Press, 1975, 1992, pp. 143-4.
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] https://www.cvilletomorrow.org/charlottesville-votes-for-rooted-to-reimagine-melted-lee-statue-into-a-bronze-baobab-tree-in-market-street-park/
[iv] Rebecca Solnit, *The Beginning Comes After the End,* 2026, p. 8.
[v] Ibid, p. 16.
[vi] Ibid, p. 20.
[vii] Ibid,
[viii] Ibid, p. 46
[ix] Ibid, p. 47
[x] Ibid, p. 47
[xi] Ibid, p. 69
[xii] Ibid, p. 74