

Here we are. Joining together once more in community for the first time in the new year. A little later than usual, but we finally made it. And acknowledging that not everyone is here with us.

Perhaps this is the first time that you have ever been here, and if so, welcome. Here we offer you, not only that warm welcome, but also a place to belong. We may sometimes welcome one another into community awkwardly and clumsily because, even with the best of intentions, we are only human.

But we will keep offering. We will keep opening up the doors, and our hearts, to one another, because love is at the center of who we are as Unitarian Universalists.

James Baldwin wrote:

“The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance— is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other’s light. Gentle work. Steadfast work. Life-saving work in those moments when life and shame and sorrow occlude our own light from our view but there is still a clear-eyed loving person to beam it back. In our best moments, we are that person for another.”

That is my hope for all of us this year, for each of you sitting here in the pews, those of you in the Parlor, or joining us from home, for those who can’t be here, for those who don’t even know that we exist, for me too. That we magnify one another’s light. That we embody love. And that in our own times of need there are people there to gently and lovingly shine our light back to us.

The sorrows and tragedies of this life can make it feel challenging to prioritize our own joy.

Who are we to seek happiness when a beloved member of this community is suddenly no longer with us?

Our own troubles can feel irrelevant when compared to the reality that people are still dying in Palestine, tens of thousands of people, including children. Not to mention those in Ukraine, in Myanmar, in Sudan, in Ecuador, in Niger, in more unnamed places.

Focusing on starting the year with a liberating love of self can feel selfish when a seven year old member of this community had to be kept under sedation for more than an entire week after complications during her fourth surgery for a congenital heart defect.

And we are so grateful that she is now moving towards recovery.

These challenging times are exactly when we need to center our own self-love. You've probably heard the phrase you need to put on your own oxygen mask first.

If we don't cherish that love at the core of each of us we will be unable to share it with those around us who need it most. Those who are suffering. Those who are overwhelmed with sorrow at a recent unexpected loss. Those who are holding on because they have to. Because there is no other choice.

Maybe right now that person is you.

Even in this we have to believe that we are enough. We can't do everything, we can't fix every problem, but that should never stop us from doing what we can.

And in order to magnify one another's light we need to make sure our own light has enough fuel to keep burning.

Even in the best of times the beginning of each year can feel challenging. We are bombarded by messaging telling us that now is the time to make positive changes in our lives. Changes like eating a healthier diet, exercising more, drinking less, saving more money, spending more time with family and friends.

And none of these are a bad thing but often the underlying message here is that what we are right now isn't good enough. Not thin or fit enough, not rich enough, not engaged or active enough. Simply not enough.

This year we should really try to **be** better.

And I wonder, better than what? Is there something wrong with the parts of us that are soft? That are fragile? The parts of us that are weak, that have cracks from being broken? That are under repair.

The parts of us that weep for the loss of those known and loved and those unknown but no less precious?

Are these parts not also worthy of love?

I've shared these words by Stephen Chbosky before but I think they bear repeating: "We accept the love we think we deserve."

What do you think you deserve?

I know I'm not alone in struggling sometimes to feel deserving of love.

The world tells us in so many different ways that we are not enough all year long, not just at the beginning of a new year. So much so that we internalize that message and can create harmful patterns of self-criticism.

We tell ourselves that these messages of not being enough are true. We magnify every flaw, examining in minute detail the ways in which we are failing to live up to impossible standards.

And some of this we do to ourselves. I have to remind myself often that the only one who is actually expecting me to be perfect is me.

If I stumble over my words today, if I sing a wrong note, many of you might not even notice, or if you do it will be immediately forgotten. I will be the only one holding onto that mistake.

What mistakes, real or perceived, are you holding onto? And how do we give ourselves the love and grace, and permission, to let them go?

Then there is the reality that being our own worst critic can sometimes cause that criticism to bleed over into the way we interact with others. These are the times that we don't offer others that love and grace when they are the ones who mess up. Who don't live up to some perceived standard.

Because if we believe that we ourselves are unworthy if we're not perfect then sometimes we unintentionally project that insecurity onto others.

That insecurity, that internal criticism, can sometimes manifest as us offering "helpful advice".

But we need to remember that all unasked for advice is criticism.

I know that I've said it before but I'm going to say it one more time:

All unasked for advice is criticism.

That's true regardless of intentions. And it's true regardless of whether you are just passing on something that someone else said.

And it's also true for ourselves.

How often do we put ourselves down, criticising our work, our art, our bodies, our parenting, our relationships? Giving ourselves advice that our hearts didn't ask for. That we don't need and that isn't serving us or offering us anything of value.

We accept the love we think we deserve.

But we deserve so much more.

Kate Landis tells us:

"I want you to know that you are loved beyond your wildest imaginings by the spirit of creation. Every bit of you is holy—even the embarrassing parts, even the thoughts you wouldn't tell your best friend. (God) *or Life and love if you would rather*, is in your every cell, calling you to live a loving, joyful, boisterous life. To go easier on yourself. To accept that you are a blessing. To spread the word that there is no original sin, that we are all glorious gifts to a world that desperately needs us."

You are a blessing. And the answer, the only answer, has always been love. Our UU values tell us that "Love is the power that holds us together"

And that doesn't just mean the power that holds us together as a community, it also means that love is the power that holds each of us, as individuals, together. It is the center of this faith, but it is also the center of who we are.

If we can't give ourselves that love, if we can't accept that we are worthy of it, then we won't be able to accept the love that others offer to us.

Bell hooks wrote:

"One of the best guides to how to be self-loving is to give ourselves the love we are often dreaming about receiving from others. There was a time when I felt lousy about my over-forty body, saw myself as too fat, too this, or too that. Yet I fantasized about finding a lover who would give me the gift of being loved as I am. It is silly, isn't it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself. This was a moment when the maxim "You can never love

anybody if you are unable to love yourself" made clear sense. And I add, "Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself."

You deserve the love that you are dreaming about. And you can have it, it's right there inside of you.

Rupi Kaur said that:

"How you love yourself is how you teach others to love you."

Let's start off the year teaching others to love us with reckless abandon. With souls bared and hearts open from the love that is spilling outward from deep within ourselves. Shining that inner light so that we can reflect and magnify the light in others.

Let the only words that fall from our lips be love. Especially in times of sorrow let us offer only love to ourselves and one another.

Let this be the year that we free ourselves to love and be loved. Without judgement or criticism.

And let the beautiful and broken parts of us spill forth to water the ground, creating beauty, wherever we go.

Because love, love is the answer.