

A Sermon delivered by Magdalen Lindeberg to the congregation of the First Unitarian-Universalist Society of Ithaca, NY December 28, 2025 on four resolutions for the coming year

Last August, Keith and I drove out to Boston to spend a few days with our son - doing some fun activities in the city and helping out with his move to a new apartment. On the day of our return drive to Ithaca we got up early, had a nice breakfast at a café on Union Square, and headed out just before the traffic and slow moving student U-Hauls started to take over the labyrinthian streets of Somerville and Cambridge. Driving in the Boston area is not one of my favorite activities, but everything was going according to plan.

And then... one hour down the Massachusetts Turnpike, I discovered that I had left my work laptop and backpack in Julian's apartment. There was no real alternative but to get off at the next exit, turn around, and drive back to Boston, adding 2 hours to a 6 hour trip... on a 90 degree day... in a car with a failing air conditioner.

In the grand scheme of things an extra two hours in the car is not a big deal. But my emotional response in the moment felt titanic. This wasn't supposed to HAPPEN! Driving through the increasingly slow and traffic-filled streets all I could think was, I just want these two hours to DISAPPEAR. We are supposed to be going FORWARD not BACKWARD.

I'm a planner and a list maker which, in addition to my overall privilege, mean that much of the time I live with the illusion that I am in control of things. I live a predictable life, generally characterized by momentum and progress and not one where progress gets undone, momentum is lost, and my sense of order and predictability get yanked out from under me.

The abrupt sense of lost progress may have felt especially acute in the moment we had to turn around and retrace the miles back to Boston, but in truth, this feeling has been with me the whole year. Because 2025 has felt like a year of going backward. This wasn't supposed to HAPPEN!!! I want this to be OVER!!! I just want these weeks and months of backtracking to DISAPPEAR. Maybe you've shared those feelings as well.

I have an administrative position up on the hill and throughout 2025 I've had faculty, staff, and students standing in my door saying those very words. When USAID was dismantled and years of time and energy and relationship building by some incredible faculty and staff was halted overnight. When visas have been revoked without explanation. When we faced the possibility that ICE might appear in our buildings. When contracted funding from the federal government was abruptly and illegally withdrawn because of a focus on climate change or international food security. Research areas that are at the core of our School's mission.

The last church service of the calendar year often focuses on resolutions and new beginnings, but it's hard to face up to beginning again without reckoning with the loss

we're experiencing at the end of 2025. The upended state of our country. The frayed condition of our social fabric. The destruction brought about by our leadership. Not just loss of momentum, but the dismantling and undoing of laws, agencies, and policies that support women's rights, the rights of immigrants, rights of LGBTQ persons, environmental concerns, the slow progress toward greater racial justice, and fundamentally, the rule of law. It feels like our collective journey toward our vision of a better world has taken a big U-turn and we are hurtling backwards. How many times have I comforted myself with the Martin Luther King Jr quote that the arc of the universe is long but bends toward justice? This year has challenged that assumption.

So, bracing for the coming year, here are four resolutions that have been on my mind.

The importance of community and relationships. While driving back to Boston, I was not at my best during those added hours. Loss of momentum and a frazzled, frustrated state of mind can make everything worse – the heat, the traffic, the likelihood of unforced errors. But Keith's calm balanced my general upset. Sometimes you're the tree branches in the storm and sometimes you're the deep roots. Be the deep roots when you can, supporting those who are in the thick of the storm. And trusting that you are part of a network of relationships that will ground and support you when you are in need.

This past year I attended two of the Ithaca No Kings protests in Washington Park. I went with the primary goal of being counted among the nationwide protests. But I was surprised by how much it fed the soul to stand shoulder to shoulder with a network of people sharing energy, creativity, and solidarity. People from work whom I didn't expect, parents of our kids' friends not seen for many years, the guy from the wine club, and so many of you wearing your 'Side with Love' t-shirts, distributing information, signing people up, and parading with signs and puppets that were a testament to fierce creativity. All of us communicating to one another by our presence – no one person is alone in this.

Touch grass, be real. A second, related resolution is, essentially, touch grass and be real. Driving back from Boston, I just wanted the trip to be DONE. OVER. Push through the miles, all hot and cranky and then put it behind me. That kind of a psychological sprint is possible on an eight-hour drive. But the work of resisting the current and ongoing threats to our values is a marathon. And much as we may feel that this moment demands an all-out sprint to undo the past year's damage as fast as we can, the enduring work of repair is going to be a long haul. People often talk about self-care but I prefer to think of it in the context of stewardship. How can I steward my inner resources for the long haul so that I have the mental and physical health to effectively meet whatever comes next?

Community and relationships are a big part of this. For me, this also involves taking more time to connect with what is real. Make something, dig in the ground, touch grass, shovel snow for your neighbor, read a book. Different people draw strength from different activities.

Or just practice paying attention. A couple weeks ago I was leaving work and emerged onto Tower Road to discover one of those spectacular winter sunsets. Half the sky was bright magenta, reflected in every west and south facing window up and down the road. Strangers around me stopped to comment, “isn’t that amazing!” Photos being shared from all over Ithaca on social media and group texts – “did you see the sunset?” What is it about the 1000th, 5000th, 10,000th sunset of our lives that still inspires awe? Just as the light and color of our beautiful September and October are carrying me through the gray days of December. May we resolve not to let despair or discouragement blot out our capacity for awe and wonder.

Focus on what is within my control. This third resolution is a lifelong challenge for me – discerning what is within my control, especially when I’m awake stewing about things in the middle of the night.

A diagram originally popularized by Stephen Covey displays three concentric circles – The largest circle being the circle of our concerns. The circle can feel so large as to be overwhelming. But within that larger circle is the circle of influence representing those concerns over which we have influence even if we do not control the final outcome. And within the circle of influence, the circle of control. This last circle encompasses that which we can directly control through our words and actions. It is easy to expend all our precious energy despairing over things outside our control – doom scrolling for example. Or one can feel paralyzed by not knowing what to do - like the Tolstoy story, waiting for wise men to direct us. Instead, may we resolve to reorient our focus to those things we can control and where our energy can effect real change. I look out and see so many of you who are doing this right now in so many different ways.

One of the things I like most about my job is the opportunity it provides to practice small gestures of connection. “Can I help you find where you’re going?” “Let me send you the name of the person who can answer your question” “Thank you for your work in the conservatory – the plants look so good” I read an article recently by the psychologist Rabiya Karamali that referred to this as “micro-mattering”. Notice and acknowledge. And then, she continues, redefine success through contribution. Instead of measuring our individual achievements, ask, “Who benefited from my actions today?”

Re-think my assumptions. This last thought isn’t really a resolution but a recognition of my own blindness. The contemporary American world view and certainly my own perspective tends toward assumptions of growth and progress. Evolution, technology, knowledge – all of it a steady upward climb. I’ve assumed that the important achievements we’ve seen in recent years toward expanded rights and greater legal protection for women, LGBTQ persons, and racial minorities WOULD continue. I remember the Jay-Z quote from the time of Obama’s election, “Rosa Parks sat, So Martin Luther King could walk. King walked, So Barack Obama could run. Obama ran, So we all can fly.” I’ve come to see that I’ve allowed myself to be lulled by the inevitability implied by those words and its momentum unstoppable – and why not, this

was a very comfortable assumption! I've assumed, complacently, that the arc of the universe will inevitably bend toward justice.

This past year has brought home to me that nothing is inevitable and that the work to advance our vision for the world demands that we engage and reengage over and over again. Keith and I watched Ken Burns' series on the American Revolution earlier this month – which I highly recommend - and I've been listening to history podcasts throughout the year. And one of the most valuable lessons from these has been the reminder that bringing about political, social, or cultural change is almost always be long and hard and those who came before us stuck with it anyway. In our simplified version of history it always seems like the famous winter at Valley Forge just melted into the American victory at Yorktown. But Valley Forge was only one of seven difficult winters with the Hard Winter two years later being far more severe.

As an alternative to the arc of the universe, I find it helpful to think of our existence as a cyclic wheel. This is an image found in many cultures, and it feels especially resonant this year when everything feels upended. The wheel of our shared history will continue to turn in cycles of loss and justice, conflict and peace, division and connection. And we will need to retrace some steps no matter how hard we work. That is inevitable. But through the constant efforts and vigilance of many people working side by side, I believe its direction can be shifted over time – not just by inspired leadership, but by the collective efforts of individuals working to strengthen community, support one another, and remind one another of our reason for being through shared connection and awe. Our shared story is not cast in stone so long as we are actively working to write a new one. May you find your path to engage in the coming year.

