January, 2020

The month of January is, as many know, named after the Roman god of Janus – a two-faced deity that can simultaneously peers forward into the future and while the other looks behind. For several millennia, this deity has been used as an apt metaphor as humans assess their successes and losses while imagining what may lie just ahead.

I know of some who are planning to celebrate the milestone of the new year with a “Roaring Twenties,” a tribute to the Jazz Age from a century ago.

There are many contemporary ways to reckon time, e.g., according to lunar cycles, solar cycles, civil or religious calendars. For the typical layperson, this new year will be popularly known as 2020 CE (of the Common Era) although many will think of it as A.D. (Anno Domini, the Year of Our Lord). Some of us may speak of “two thousand and twenty” whereas I favor “twenty-twenty.” Either is fine, really.

What might 2020 hold? Political pundits, social historians, economists, followers of fashion, and yes, even theologians and faith leaders will no doubt conjure likely scenarios and timetables. All, in their own way, will notate calendars, set plans and appointments, hoping against hope that God will not laugh (as the saying goes).

At the risk of provoking divine laughter, allow me to offer a few reflections and hazard a prophecy. Perhaps the very name of this publication, FOCUS, is inspiring me in this regard.

During the past year, we have seen an enormous surge of energy and visioning. We can well visualize that fairly soon, ground will be broken for the sanctuary extension project. Hopefully, we will welcome a half-time Assistant Minister who will further our social justice aspirations.

In general terms, social justice is one of the most important characteristics of our mission. This will continue to be true in 2010. Of special note, ALUUC will soon be embarking on a special anti-racism/anti oppression curriculum developed by my alma mater, Meadville/Lombard Theological School. This will be far-reaching in terms of our self-awareness and engagement with social justice.

And yes, we will continue to be engaged in other social justice concerns that demand attention. During the past three years, “resistance” has been a popular keyword but there’s been little respite. Let us be mindful that when one is devoted to social justice while the environment remains toxic, spiritual wounds may develop. Let us cultivate a spiritual practice and be in partnership with others to help us keep perspective.

I trust that Covenant Groups, Circle Suppers, etc., will flourish as we will continue to welcome new friends into our circle of members. We will continue to appreciate the gifts that Tracy Zieber shared in her role as Membership Coordinator and we will look forward to the gifts that her successor, Heather Vining, will bring. We will celebrate the talents of our intern, Dee Evans, and we will continue to learn from one another.
Finally, we can look forward to welcoming new members and friends into our circles of care and support.

In a few months, ALUUC will celebrate its 66th year on the Prairie. I will have completed my 17th year of service. In one year, I will begin a six-month sabbatical, so it seems assured that we will invest some effort in preparing for that chapter.

Allow me this opportunity to once again state what a privilege it has been for me and my family, and that we are very grateful for your support and blessings since 2003. I look forward to the promises of this new year, and to the mutual opportunities for further growth and re-dedication that lie just ahead.

February, 2020

*This month’s article is originally from a dozen years ago, but I find its message still pertinent. Perhaps even more so than when I first composed it. The fact is that we as a religious community have taken many leaps of faith (and occasional hops) together, and this new year will not only witness the culmination of many such actions but will in turn provide the impetus for even more.* One decisive leap from xx years ago was the decision to engage in a thorough long-range planning process. You will recall that we held a series of cottage meetings in which the vast majority participated. The result was a visioning process, complete with a host of action items. During this new year, 2020, we will cross some crucial new thresholds: breaking ground for our new sanctuary; contracting with a part-time assistant minister (fingers crossed); embarking on the Beloved Conversations journey of Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression social justice work; taking steps to ensure a smooth transition into my sabbatical next year. All four steps will be done in partnership with others within the larger community and/or the UU movement, a reminder that all that we aspire to do, all that we envision, and all that we ultimately accomplish are part of an interconnected web of relationships.

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Leap Day

It’s a given that 25% of all sermons presented nationwide this month will be entitled “Leap(s) of Faith” (the percentage being somewhat skewed by newly minted clergy). This concurrence stems from the fact that this particular February contains an extra day, in keeping with the dictates of the Gregorian calendar. One may well wonder why the crafters of the Gregorian system preferred to add an extra day to February rather than, say, May or June. I suspect that the answer may reveal that they were in the employ of the church and that they lived in a milder Italian clime.

In any event, we all have an extra day on our hands. The obvious question to ask
therefore is: will it be an extra day to endure, or an opportunity to create a transformation? In short, a burden or a gift? Minute by minute, hour by hour – our habits shape our days, which in turn shape our seasons, and ultimately, our destiny. Will there be a balance of chores and dreams, fear and confessing, doubt and blessing?

If time permits, I recommend watching the film Groundhog Day. As you may know, the main character is caught in a seemingly endless loop. That recurring day, repeated ad nauseum, is in effect a gateway to self-discovery. But oh, ever so gradually. One wonders whether the loop lasts months or even years. The main character pursues every whim yet finds ultimately that they do not satisfy his deepest needs. Hence, Groundhog Day is an old-fashioned morality tale, about a human being coming to terms with the nature and value of the transient v. the permanent.

Come then, leap month, come then leap day. As we stand in the proverbial stream of life, panning as it were through our thoughts and our habits, may we recognize the small golden flecks of our existence from the refuse – and then share the former with our companions.

March, 2020
(no article)

April, 2020

As you all know by now, a strange stillness has settled over ALUUC – meetings, concerts, classes, rentals, and worship are all currently canceled. How long will this last? Weeks, certainly – perhaps even longer. Time, plus the CDC, will tell.

I know that students and teachers have been transitioning to on-line platforms. Perhaps the learning curve is easier for them than others. We knew that we were living in an age of unrivalled access to information … but many had not fully appreciated the range of technologies available to us to get the message out. Some of you know that I used to be a telemarketer, and the phone continues to be a favorite tool. I had been delighted with the prospects of social media, and in rapid succession moved from Friendster, MySpace to FaceBook. But of course, I was also obliged to learn about Instant Messaging, texting, and Messenger. Barely had I acquired a working knowledge of these when I first started joining, then scheduling, zoom chats. After I had an Iphone, I learned how to use Facetime. Just a few months ago, I acquired WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat accounts … but I must confess I rarely use these.

At times, I realize just how much my mindset is a remnant of the 20th century – not only do I still hand out business cards, but my livelihood depends upon my ability to write and of course, speak in public.
I assumed as a child that my career path would require public speaking. Over the decades, I’ve pushed myself to become comfortable with that – no easy path for an introvert and someone who often spoke in choppy sentences. What did I do? I volunteered to read aloud from the Old Testament during mass, in front of hundreds, often stumbling over unfamiliar, multisyllabic names. Along with my classmates in grade school and in high school, I memorized poems and speeches. I auditioned for a high school play, but the less said about that, the better. On the other hand, I found my niche in debate – my partner, Brian Jesse Posey and I did pretty well as a team. After college, I learned how to deliver a sales pitch, which can be quite grueling. During my late twenties, I began entering poetry slams in Chicago, standing on stage at venues like the Green Mill, learning to instantly gauge the crowd’s reaction and adapting my style. With practice, comes confidence, they say. For me, that was true, although the process took decades in my case. Still, preaching from a pulpit is such a very different matter. I learned very early on at seminary that crafting a sermon, and then delivering it, would not only draw on my basic speaking skills but much more. In other venues, most people would listen out of courtesy or curiosity, but a sermon has the power to truly make an impact on a person. I came to appreciate that this was not something to be taken lightly.

For the past nineteen years, I’ve preached an average of 32 Sundays each year. In Park Forest, I often preached twice each Sunday morning – which is often exhausting, by the way. I learned to write out my thought carefully and to underline key words, to double space, and to slide rather than turn pages. On occasion, a guest presenter at UUCC-PF delivered a riveting discourse about J.R.R. Tolkien, speaking effortlessly for perhaps 40 minutes. At the conclusion, he pointed out that he had used only one simple note card with a few sentences written upon it as a prompt. Still, it was not uncommon for me to deliver a blessing or charge, using notes. But at one point, encouraged by Angela, I began to liberate myself from reading a manuscript.

I have known many splendid preachers and public speakers of both schools – one of the more remarkable was the Rev. John Shelby Spong, who secluded himself before his presentations, writing out in longhand, the gist of what he wanted to express.

As for myself, I’ve estimated that I’ve delivered approximately 625 sermons and homilies. You’d think that would prepare me for anything – and that I would never be nervous. But of course, as I have related to many over the years, there is still a flutter of nervousness until the moment I can stand at the pulpit, facing the members and guests gathered together. One sip of water usually helps me gather enough courage to begin.

I have frequently envisioned ministry as a hands-on affair, an opportunity to connect in person with others individually or in groups. My paradigm has shifted in the past two weeks, as no doubt it has for all of us. I am amazed at how many tasks can be accomplished from afar, and how we can continue to stay connected, albeit as we all maintain a safe distance.
It’s quite a change to preach from the pulpit in a nearly empty sanctuary – a novel experience. It has helped immensely that Bonnie, Kurt and Marissa have been present (practicing appropriate social distancing, naturally). But of course, I long for the time when we will be able to re-connect in person and resume the rituals that have connected us thus far. Until we can do that, we must rely being deliberate in reaching out to one another. No doubt we will be integrating newer methods of communications – this too may seem peculiar at first, not unlike preaching to an empty room. I have no doubt that our comfort level will increase with practice. And so, during this time of enforced apart-ment, may all of us find much to keep us creative and kind, happy and healthy, connected and content.

¡Salud!

May, 2020

The Vietnam War is on my mind for several reasons. Growing up, news and images from that war frequently intruded upon my childhood consciousness, but those memories had receded until the number of deaths caused by the pandemic began to mount. A quick online check shows that 58,220 Americans died during the course of twenty years. In contrast, the number of 57,863 American lives have been lost during only the past few months from the COVID-19 virus. No doubt by the time you receive this newsletter, the number will be much higher.

A nearly equal death toll, but one spans twenty years and the other only months. Already, there is widespread speculation that the current death toll has been grossly under-reported. Some suspect that elected officials deliberately downplay the deaths to limit collateral damage to their political fortunes, while others fear that it virtually impossible to prove that the pandemic was the root cause of death.

I am also reminded of various key anniversaries that are nearly upon us. This May Fourth will mark the fiftieth anniversary of when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on student protesters at Kent State, killing four young adults. I had read the account of that awful day when I was a high school senior but the memory was stirred by my conversations with the Rev, Barbara Child, a UU minister and colleague who was a faculty member there on that day. The event was seared into her memory and changed her life, leading to a life devoted to creating social justice. Some of you may recall that she visited ALUUC a few years ago, leading a workshop on avoiding triangulation within congregations.

Given the social-distancing conditions imposed by governors due to the pandemic, I do not know what observances will be held. Perhaps they will be deferred. But for some, the names of the dead and wounded will never be forgotten.

Elsewhere, the names of those killed during the Vietnam War are inscribed upon an impressive Memorial designed by Maya Lin. Many have visited that place for decades,
searching for names of comrades or family, to weep or perhaps to make peace. The number of artifacts left behind has been legendary. The veterans of that war have aged, and are generally considered to be at risk from the COVID-19 virus.

I do not think that there will be a similar monument to remember, let alone honor the dead from this pandemic. But I fear that the rolls of the dead will be much higher, and I am at a loss to predict how our society and its institutions will weather this particular crisis. But I remain hopeful of the outcome, placing my trust not only in the values of our democracy but especially in the decency and determination of the common people.