



At the Turning of the Years – reflections on 2020 and hopes for the year ahead

Dear friends,

As this year comes to an end, we struggle to find words to describe it. Many have settled on the now oft repeated **“2020 - Worst Year Ever,”** a tagline that in many ways is well earned.

Our world is suffering through a global pandemic that has taken more than 1.8 million lives to date, over 335,000 in the U.S. alone. But terrible as these numbers are, they do not reflect the full impact of this virus on our world. So many millions more have contracted Covid-19 and all of us have been impacted by the changes in our lives resulting from the public health response. We have experienced something beyond our imagining: *a world shut down* – the economy suspended, jobs lost, many isolated in their homes, most limited to socially distant, mainly digital forms of interaction. This global event has of course touched us, the community of First Unitarian. Members, friends, and family have been stricken with the virus. Far too many in the community of which we are a part have faced severe challenges due to the economic impact of COVID restrictions. And we have all had to endure the isolation of social distancing, including the need to vacate our church building.

We also saw many horrific images this year of violence against black people at the hand of police sworn to protect them. These generated long overdue recognition that institutional racism is an epidemic that persists in our country. Unprecedented numbers took to the streets protesting this injustice, including here in Rochester following the murder of Daniel Prude. Our ministers, members and friends took part in Black Live Matters protests and bore witness to and were the victims of police violence against protesters. Meanwhile, the U.S. president attempted to confuse, distract, and inflame the situation with destructive challenges to fact, playing to base instincts of fear and greed. Unbelievably, his followers were convinced that the real civil rights injustice of 2020 was the call to wear masks to stop the virus from spreading.

And all this in an election year where our very democracy seemed at risk, a nation divided standing at a crossroads, its future course more uncertain than in any moment in our memories.

Yes, 2020 is certainly a candidate for “Worst Year Ever.”

And yet... 2020 also deserves to be remembered as “A Year of Miracles.”

Somehow, facing tremendous shortages of staff, medicines, equipment, and protective gear heroic front line medical personnel provided care to an ever-rising number of COVID patients.

Somehow, *in less than one year* the world’s scientists and governments came together to produce several highly effective vaccines when typical development time is *five to ten years*.

Somehow, during a pandemic, a higher percentage of eligible voters voted in this year’s election *than in any since 1900*, in part due to unbelievably successful registration drives like UU the Vote.



Message from the President – December 2020



Somehow, *the power of people* protesting across the country resulted in many finally recognizing the existence of institutional racism and in calls to *change the role of police*.

Somehow, First Unitarian Church of Rochester was *able to adapt to pandemic protocols practically overnight*, providing worship services and religious education online, and finding innovative ways to stay connected like digital Coffee Hour on Sunday, weekday lunchtime drop-in sessions, Elder Tree on Saturdays, virtual Vespers on Wednesday nights. We checked in on each other as Caring Stewards; held drive through collection of COVID supplies for refugees and a drive through welcome for Rev. Margalie; walked a socially distant Labyrinth, shared a virtual Thanksgiving feast; and on Christmas Eve we were serenaded by our Virtual Choir, then we held candles up to our screens as we sang Silent Night. *Led by Rev. Shari our amazing staff* made this all possible. But they could not have done it without all of you, *our amazing congregation*.

And finally, if there ever was a year when we experienced the deep need for and true power of our Unitarian Universalist faith, 2020 was it. The interconnected web of which we all are a part was never more apparent as people around the world were touched by the shared event of a pandemic and depended on each other to get through it. It was a year when our shared search for truth and meaning was the tie that kept us connected. Together we learned that our church is not a building, it is us.

What lies ahead for us in 2021? We do not know. But at this turning of the years hope for a better time seems justified. Vaccines are being distributed and administered, heralding a time when life will return to something like normal. A COVID relief bill has finally been passed, offering some much-needed assistance to people and families at risk. A new administration is readying to take office signaling a move back to a path towards more economic, social, and environmental justice and away from bigotry, misogyny, calumny, and corruption. And our church has made it through a year of pandemic, prepared to capitalize on that experience and experiment with new ways to engage with and support each other and the Rochester community we serve until the need for social distancing passes. Meanwhile, our building waits patiently for us, ready to take us back in to worship, sing, learn and pray together – *maybe by this time next year*. May it be so.

All of this makes me hopeful and excited for the coming year.

I hope you are too.

Praying for you all to have a happy, safe, and healthy new year!

Gregory