

## “Beginnings”

Megan Mathieson, Intern Minister

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Frederickuu.org

Happy New Year! Our first Sunday in 2019. 2019! Boy that sounds futuristic, doesn't it?

New Year's is an interesting time, it's a strange, sort of off-balance time. I never feel like I'm quite doing it right. Like, it creeps up on me and I'm never quite ready to get used to the idea that it is a New Year. I feel all this pressure to notice every moment, to imbue every minute with meaning - our first worship service of the new year! The first thing I watched on Netflix this year! my first sandwich of the New Year! To do it right this time, to make it a better year and to make resolutions and improve myself.

And the great thing about resolutions is that I am really primed and ready to make some. The dizzying and voracious Christmas season is over, and I'm left with a post-December hangover that full-bodied. I spent the week between Christmas and New Years in a blur of overeating, oversleeping, staying in pajamas, watching the most mindless movies ... and I've emerged on the other side of it in a stupor of guilt - what did I do last week? What did I eat? Do I dare take a look at my post-Christmas bank account? I ordered what on amazon?

So I'm all full of guilt and shame and just primed to make resolutions. I will be a better Megan this year. I'll improve all of the ways that I do all of the things. I'll be a better mom, a better wife, a better student, a better employee, Carl! I'll stop eating

sugar and find a way to live my life ethically and be environmentally conscious and without giving any more money to Jeff Bezos!

What is this? What is this drive? I look out at all of you and I don't wish this on you. You are fine. You are doing your best. You are a gorgeous, miraculous reflection of the divine. You do not need a New Year's resolution.

When my daughter was born, I was in a pediatrician's waiting room for a well-baby checkup, and there was a mother in there with three rambunctious kids, and she was just frazzled and yelling at them and complaining loudly on her cell phone about her kids being brats, and I was so alarmed - was this my future? I looked at my baby daughter, and she was so perfectly, well, perfect. Her tiny fingernails in their tiny precious nail beds, and her tiny nose, and... when would she stop being perfect? When does the transition happen where our kids are no longer amazing little miracles? When did it happen for me?

My mother once cooed down at infant-me that I was God-given perfection. Now, I'm clearly not. And there is something in our society that tells us - this is your chance - New Years! Make resolutions! Go back to being perfect!

And to that, I'm going to say "no." No, thank you. I'm going to invite you to come with me, on a journey of self-acceptance that begins with recognizing the lie behind our cultural rejection of imperfection.

I'm going to go out on a limb and tell you something. This might make you feel uncomfortable, and I feel nervous, but I know we can handle it. Just sit with it. Ready?  
I love you.

I love you.

That's only half of it. Here's the other half:

You deserve love.

I love you. You deserve love.

Let's breathe for a moment.

You deserve love, and you are loved. You don't have to do anything to earn it.

I look at my children and I am amazed - they never stopped being perfect. My baby's tiny pink nail beds are now larger than my own and certainly longer perfect. Or are they? Who gets to decide?

When did you stop being perfect? At what age did the world first point out your flaws? When were you first convinced to stop unconditionally loving yourself? Were you ever given a chance to start?

I see you. I'm looking at you right now. Nobody else is looking at you. And what I see is perfect. What I see needs no justification, needs no excuse. What I see is a completely inexplicable miracle of the convergence of chance and happenstance with earnest hard work and best intentions.

The lie of perfectionism is out there, and it is insidious. Our culture, saturated as it is in extreme dualistic, black-and-white thinking, tells us that we are worth nothing if we are not perfect. This is a lie. It's the same lie that tells us that human beings in wheelchairs are worth less than those who are more able-bodied. It is the very same lie that tells us that the lighter our skin, the more worth we have as humans. Yes, perfectionism is an integral part of white supremacist culture.

It is the same lie that coerces us to find our self-worth in our reproductive organs - what our gender is, how it correlates with the gender that society expects from us, whether we choose to or are able to reproduce, and who we choose to either reproduce or not reproduce with. This is the lie. It is the lie of white supremacy and the lie of dangerous misogynistic patriarchy. This lie hurts everyone, even white men who appear to be at the top of the heap.

Dr. Brene Brown encourages us to look at our imperfections. She has discovered through years of research that this lie - the lie of perfectionism - can be undermined simply by pointing it out. When we look at our shame, when we look at our imperfections, when we point them out, they crawl away. They lose their power.

Leonard Cohen brilliantly stated that our cracks are where the light gets in. Apply this to the idea of a beauty mark - a little mole on a beautiful woman's face makes her a little more interesting to look at. Perfection is a lie. Perfection is boring.

Perfectionism is dangerous: Author Rebecca Solnit says, "Perfection is a stick with which to beat the possible."

Rev Carl has delivered the good news that "You are saved from perfection."

And I think that this Marianne Williamson quote encapsulates the whole idea perfectly. This is a long quote but worth reading in its entirety:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

We are Liberated. Officially. Marianne Williamson says so, and I say so.

In fact, by the power vested in me as a human being, as a flawed and imperfect human being who just happens to be standing at a pulpit, I hereby officially absolve you from perfection. In fact, I'll take it one step further: I want to urge you to fight against the racist and white supremacist construct of perfectionism that pervades our society and wreaks havoc, not only on us, but on many who are less fortunate than us. Part of living into that “Dismantle Racism” sign that we have hanging in the atrium is to learn to forgive yourself. Love yourself. Recognize that perfectionism is a lie. Recognize that you deserve love. Recognize that you have inherent worth.

The beginnings in our lives can be fresh and wonderful. A new year can be a chance to see doors opening. Let's not allow these open doors to pressure us to believe the lie.

Life is nothing if not impermanent. A New Year brings change, and a thing, once perfect cannot change. In your imperfection, in your rejection of perfection, allow yourself to change, to roll over and move and to not be bound in your old self. None of us gets out of this alive. We might as well enjoy life as much as we possibly can.

At this point, I'm not entirely sure whether I am arguing against making New Year's resolutions or just arguing that you should make a resolution to battle cultural perfectionism. Whatever the case, don't try to do it perfectly!

What I do know is that I've been culturally trained that when I look at myself, I see so many flaws, so much to feel ashamed of. And when I turn and look at you, and I picture you as a child. A sweet, earnest child who just wants to be reassured, and it breaks my heart to think that sweet child could feel flawed and unworthy and ashamed. You are loveable. I am loveable. We are loveable.

Let's say it together: We are loveable!

Did that feel corny? Just be glad I didn't start singing Kumbaya. I might one of these days!

In this time of beginnings, I think the pagans have the right idea in harkening back to stories from our ancestors. Each culture has a story about its own beginnings, and we have been handed down a doozy in the story of Adam and Eve. Even if you were never taught to take this story seriously, it still remains, embedded in our culture, in the very air we breathe, spreading xenophobia, misogyny, and fear.

Make a mistake and you are expelled from paradise! This idea that we are descendants of sinners. We have inherited an original sin, from the very beginning of humankind, this is the story that our people have told for millennia and continue to tell, whether it is taken literally or not.

Now, I don't want to disrespect an ancient Jewish story. What I want to do is to point out the ways that this story has been distorted and used in current white western

culture to further oppression and to hurt us all. The ways that this story has become so insidious, so pervasive that... well, I didn't tell the story at all, did I? I feel confident that when I say "Adam and Eve," I don't need to explain any further - we're all on the same, humans-are-terrible-and-a-disappointment-to-god page.

But what if we told a different story?

What about the popular pagan creation story, where all of humanity, and in fact everything that exists was birthed by the Great Goddess? Just imagine what a society would be like if it told and re-told its children this story instead of a story of shame and guilt and an angry God?

Or the Iroquois creation story where humans were created by wise animals such as coyote and crow.

How much more stable and secure would this society be. How much more connected to nature, as opposed to our story where the wise animal, the snake, brought only punishment and shame.

How about this story:

The Berbers of North Africa

Before creation began, one man and one woman lived under the earth. They were unaware that they were different until the day they had a disagreement at the drinking well. When the woman insisted that she be the first to drink water, the man pushed her aside and she fell to the ground. The bottom of her garment rose up and she was exposed. When the man asked about her body, she said that it represented good. He stayed with her for eight nights and they eventually gave birth to 50 sons and

50 daughters. Overwhelmed by the number of children they had produced, they sent their children above ground, where they created mankind and expanded on earth.

Sure, that sounds crazy, but they're not asking you to believe in a talking snake, so which story really is more believable?

Of course, I'm going to have to vote for Douglas Adams' short creation story as my personal favorite: In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move."

To be honest, I think that is even a more positive story than Adam and Eve, because the blame for the problems in the universe is put on the creator and not on the created.

So what if you were willing to dare to rewrite your own creation story? What would that look like?

For me, a story that is very, very dear to me is Forrest Church's "Cathedral of the World." I was fortunate to encounter this story right as I was discovering Unitarian Universalism, many years ago. It is so important to me that I adapted it for children; you heard me read my adapted version during the Time For All Ages. This story encapsulates so many of my beliefs and so much of my faith: the basis of which is both love and pluralism.

We won't all agree. What is right for you might not be what is right for me. But we can support each other and love each other, and that is where I am coming from when I stand here and say today that I love you. I mean that you are deserving of love even though you are not perfect. You are deserving of love precisely because you are

not perfect. You are deserving of love and I want to shake down the heteronormative hegemonic system and question everything including what is perfect and who gets to decide? You are deserving of love. Period. No discussion of perfection required.

Perfection can be an especially cruel concept for those of us who are outside of the “typical.” My son has autism, is he not perfect? Was he imperfect as an infant?

There are autistic people who view their autism as a disability, my son is among them, and there are people on the autism spectrum who consider their autism to be anything but a disability, just a difference, like being left-handed or blue-eyed. Those of us who are “neurotypical” don’t have the place to judge.

I once had the distinct pleasure of sharing an office with a conservative libertarian man who would freely challenge my homosexuality, asking questions around the theme of - if scientists could discover a gay gene, wouldn’t I want to be “fixed?” Wouldn’t I want to be “normal?”

It is clear to us why this line of questioning is offensive, but there are folks in other communities who feel this same offense when we assume that their differences ought to be “fixed.”

I’m going to tell you one last story. This is a story that many of you already know. Once upon a time, in 2004, there was a UU minister named Rev. Jason Shelton. With a deeply compassionate and loving heart, this very talented man wrote a lovely song called “Standing on the Side of Love.” Many years later, another UU minister, Rev Theresa Soto, (a queer woman of color - woo!) spoke out about how the use of the word

“standing” in the song was ableist. Rev. Shelton changed the lyrics to “Answering the Call of Love.”

In my eyes, both people in this story are heroes. Rev. Soto made a brave and important statement and she made it well. Rev. Shelton, to his credit, listened and adjusted. He did not fall apart under the realization that he and his song were imperfect. He did not resolve to write better or more inclusive songs in the future.

Maya Angelou said that when we know better, we do better. Simply doing better when we know better is in itself a powerful blow against white supremacist perfectionist culture.

Let’s all rise in body or spirit and turn to hymn number 1014 in the teal hymnal. We will do our little bit to “do better” by Answering the Call of Love.