

“Making Space”
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How many of you have made New Year’s resolutions? What’s your resolution?

A resolution is the intention to make a change. For some reason, we like to make changes at a beginning. For anyone who’s ever gone on a weight-loss diet, when do you start? Monday. A new week, or a new year, it gives us an opportunity to make a fresh start.

I made a resolution this year. It’s to make more space in my life. In my home, for example. It’s an on-going project, but I’m going to be more intentional about it this year. Do you remember the first place you lived when you left your parents’ home? Think about the amount of stuff you owned. Was it less than what you have now?

My first home away from home was a tipi. I wrote about that experience in the sermon I gave to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee when I was applying for fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister back in the spring of 2001.

I said:

Sometimes I look back on my young adulthood and remember how simple life seemed then... My [first] husband and I lived in a tipi in the woods up in New Hampshire. Inside the tipi were the basics, and not much more. In a home that’s 18 feet across, there’s not a lot of room for clutter! There was no phone, no electricity, so fewer bills, no yard maintenance, no major repairs. Meals were simple --we cooked outside on a Coleman stove.

...We had very little money, but...we felt wealth...all around us. Pink ladyslippers in spring, juicy wild blueberries in pancakes on summer mornings, hooting owls at night, wood thrushes like Pan’s flutes at dawn. We were [in tune] with the weather, the moon, the sun’s rising and setting. I felt privileged to be alive in the midst of nature’s glory.

Now in 2018, in our consumerist society, it's very difficult to live as a minimalist. I suspect that as young adults, most of us started off as minimalists, by virtue of necessity. In 1980, I moved to Pennsylvania pulling a little trailer. Twenty years later, when I was ready to move to Connecticut, I needed a full-size moving van.

I gave away most of my furniture and a lot of other stuff before I moved back to Pennsylvania 5 years ago. Gene and I now share the big 3-story Victorian home that Gene has lived in for about 25 years. Can I just say that Gene likes to save things? So, decluttering has become a joint project, because we both like the results.

Clutter is stressful. Every little item we add to our lives is another item weighing on us. Clearing out our physical space gives us a greater peace of mind. It gives us more room to think and more room to create.

I sometimes look back on my time living in the tipi as a time when I had more space in my life in general. I had more room in my day, even though I was either working or going to school full time. My to-do list was short. There was time to walk in the woods or sit on a log and just hang out. So my tipi dwelling days serve as a kind of model for me of having space in my life.

In that Ministerial Fellowship sermon, which I preached in 2001, I lamented,

...my life has become so much more complex, with more and more demands on my time, my finances and my energy. Most people I know experience the same thing...My second husband and I bought a house 15 years ago, and since then we've added two children and so many possessions I couldn't begin to count them. We spend more *time* having things repaired and replaced. And, ironically, we spend more *money* on ways to store all our stuff.

For many of us, our lives often feel too busy. And with our portable laptops and smart phones, we can be doing something all the time. Even when we don't need to be doing anything. Have you been in a waiting room lately? What did you see people doing? So many people in our culture today actually feel awkward or uncomfortable if they're required to just sit with nothing to do. Whether they're in a public space or in their own home. And I'm not immune. There's ALWAYS

something to keep us from having to be alone with our thoughts. We're trying to escape the mental clutter of our minds with visual and mental stimulation.

Our culture not only tells us to buy more, it also needles us to do more. It's almost a badge of courage in some circles to complain about how busy our schedule is. One of the main reasons I choose part-time ministry is that I know myself, and I know that I can't be a mentally, emotionally and spiritually healthy person if I'm working 50 or 60 hours a week. Especially not in this kind of work.

Still, part of this year's resolution is to create more space in my schedule. I want to be more intentional about how I spend my time. To be able to respond more to the call of my spirit and less to the call of everything else. In my ideal world, I'd spend more time on yoga, meditation and prayer. On anti-racism and other social justice work. More exercise and less sitting. More quality time with family and friends.

I also want to be relaxed and present enough to experience serendipity. Going for a walk downtown and striking up a conversation with someone. Catching a glimpse of a colorful bird in a hemlock tree. Noticing the beautiful architectural details of a building I've passed many times before.

I'm taking a serious look at the ways I'm currently spending my time, and eliminating or reducing the time I spend on some activities to open up space for the things I would actually prefer to be doing. Because I know it will lead to greater serenity in my heart and mind.

The story I told earlier, Everybody needs a Rock, reminds me of the huge wide-open expanses in southern Utah. My first time hiking there, I was astonished at how far I could see in all directions. I had never experienced that sense of large space before. One of the many reasons I like hiking and backpacking, whether it's in Utah or Pennsylvania, is that it surrounds me with so much physical space.

But it also opens up mental, emotional and spiritual space. I carry everything I need on my back. My needs are simple. I'm away from the usual distractions and responsibilities. I find the simplicity very calming. There's time to just be. Being surrounded by nature, I feel spiritually alive and rejuvenated, connected with the sacred, the Spirit of Life. My body feels tired, but in a good way. My heart feels

full. It's a wonderful reminder that most of the stuff in our big house isn't necessary to my enjoyment of life.

I'm always just a little bit wistful when I have to come back to civilization.

In our normal day to day lives, we are sometimes called in so many different directions. Without intentionality, we can easily become lost. We can drift. We can become caught up in addictions. We can lose sight of our purpose.

Natalie M. Fenimore, a Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Shelter Rock, NY, wrote a piece in a collection of meditations by UU ministers of color, called, Voices from the Margins. She says,

We are all called.

Called by the wind, the rushing water, the fireflies, the summer sun.

Called by the sidewalk, the playground, the laughing children, the streetlights. Called by our appetites and gifts – our needs and challenges.

Called by the bottle, the needle, the powder, the pill, the game, the bet, the need, the want, the pain, the cure, the love, the hope, the dream.

Called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, and visions of God's purpose for our lives. We are all called.

What will we choose? How will we answer?

Intentional living means making conscious decisions about how to live our best lives. Which means making choices. And to change our lives, we have to make space for those changes. We need to clear not just physical space and space in our schedules, we need to clear our minds of mental clutter and our hearts of stress. Prayer and meditation are powerful tools for creating quiet space in our minds and hearts. As little as one minute a day can make a positive difference.

Sometimes we don't KNOW exactly how to live our best life. We may not KNOW what we're making room FOR. But opening up space in our lives, in all the ways we've talked about, opens the door to creativity. It allows us to be co-creators, in harmony with God, the spirit, the universe. To have faith in the Spirit of Love and Hope, that the purpose for our lives will become clear. Maybe not immediately, but when the time is right. And it will lead us to beautiful places.

We all need a touchstone, a way to stay spiritually grounded, connected with the spirit. “Everybody needs a rock,” says the girl in the story. What’s your rock? What is it that connects your heart and mind with the spirit, with the universe? Is it meditation? Prayer? Being in nature? Something else? What is it that puts our heart in a holy place?

Whatever our “rock” is, it can help us open our senses to the possibilities for our lives. To “intently listen for the voice within.” To listen for the morning star, singing the song of the universe. To smell the fresh air of open spaces.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

The hour is striking so close above me, so clear and sharp, that all my senses ring with it. I feel it now: there’s a power in me to grasp and give shape to my world. I know that nothing has ever been real without my beholding it. All becoming has needed me. My looking ripens things and they come toward me, to meet and be met.

May this year bring forth more spaciousness in your lives, and more of what your heart truly desires. May it be so.