



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

How to Make 2015 a “Year of Well-being”

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A colleague reminded me recently of a quote from Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God that is resonant with this time of year: **“There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”** What has 2014 been to you? “A Year of Questions,” “A Year of Answers,” or somewhere in between?

From a different perspective, the online magazine *Slate* spent the past year **tracking what various people were outraged about**. If you follow the news regularly, it’s probably not surprising to hear that there is a lot of umbrage-taking in our culture. But it is nonetheless stunning to see every day of 2014 connected to a story about which one or more groups were incensed. And a fair percentage of the stories are what some pundits call “fake outrage”: exaggerated anger, exploiting someone’s misstatement to score partisan political points.

What does 2015 hold in store for you? Will it be a “Year of Questions,” “A Year of Answers,” “A Year of Outrage”? You can likely think of other overarching themes that may connect more with your particular situation in life. But for this morning, I would like to invite you to consider one other way of being in the world that you can intentionally choose for 2015 and beyond. **What would it look like for 2015 to be a “Year of Well-being”?** As the Buddhist monk Bhante Sujatha invited us to experiment with in November, what would it mean for you to regularly set an intention for yourself in 2015 based on the Buddhist loving-kindness meditation: “May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be well.” And then to extend that intention to anyone nearby: “May you be filled with loving-kindness. May you be peaceful and at ease. May you be well.” And finally to all beings: “May we be filled with loving-kindness. May we be peaceful and at ease. May we be well.”

Now, there is truth in the bumper sticker adage that, “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” But **how might your relationship to other people and yourself change this next year if you invested equally as much time and energy in cultivating well-being as many do in stoking outrage?**

Along these lines, I heard a interesting interview with Arianna Huffington, the founder of the online media website *The Huffington Post*, about the motivation behind writing her new book Thrive. Her wake-up call came in 2007 when she collapsed from exhaustion, hitting her head on the corner of her desk, cutting her eye and breaking her cheekbone in the process. After extensive medical tests, it turned out **the only thing wrong with her was profound sleep deprivation** (1).

She had founded *The Huffington Post* two years earlier in 2005, and to keep up with its explosive growth, she had been “working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week.” Outwardly, she seemed like the ideal of success and had been chosen by *Time* magazine “as one of the world’s 100 Most Influential People.” In terms of “money and power,” she was successful. But she writes that she was **“not living a successful life by any sane definition”** (2). And collapsing was a loud wake-up call.

The term “wake up call” is deeply resonant with Buddhism. The word “Buddha” is a title that means “Awakened One” that was given to the prince-turned-spiritual teacher Siddhartha Gautama. For the historical Buddha, his wake up calls came when he wandered out of the walled gardens of his palace and for the first time encountered poverty, sickness, and death. And he began to seek a different sort of life. Like Huffington, the historical Buddha in his childhood seemed to have it all from the perspective of money and power. But he came to see that **there is much more to living a good life than money and power alone.**

Money and power are important if we’re going to change the world, but if we are to truly thrive and flourish as human beings, we must take into account not only the “bottom line” of profit, but also additional factors such as what some commentators call the **“triple bottom line of “people, planet, and profit.”** For Huffington, in addition to money and power as measures of success, she has in the years since her wake-up call identified a handful of “third metrics” that have served as touchstones for her as she has studied people who are not burned-out and exhausted, but instead thriving. For Huffington, these **“third metrics” are well-being, wisdom, wonder, and giving.**

Again, for this morning, I am primarily limiting myself to the first of that list: well-being. And in consulting with experts, Huffington has identified three steps that anyone can begin experimenting with

immediately to increase well-being. The first as you can probably guess from her wake up call story is to **get more sleep**. That could include going to bed earlier or taking a short nap in the early afternoon if your schedule and job allows for a siesta. For on-the-job napping, I have friends, who keep a yoga mat in their office, which they use to catch a twenty-minute power nap with the office door locked (111). Because many of us have less control over our first meeting of the day, for going to bed earlier, Huffington recommends starting with setting an alarm to remind yourself to go to bed just thirty minutes earlier, then work back from there until ideally you find yourself waking up in the morning *before* your alarm clock feeling refreshed (82). And here's a "pro-tip": if you put that reminder alarm to go to bed early in your bedroom, then when you get up to turn off the alarm, that "at least gets you in the right room at the right time" (84).

Personally, I stay busy most of the time, but one of my priorities has always been getting 7-8 hours of sleep a night, and I take a twenty-minute power naps in the afternoon when I can:

As Dr. Michael Rosen, chief wellness officer of the Cleveland Clinic, put it, "**Sleep is the most underrated health habit.**" ...There's practically no element of our lives that's not improved by getting adequate sleep. And there is no element of life that's not diminished by lack of sleep.... Our creativity, ingenuity, confidence, leadership, and decision making can all be enhanced simply by getting enough sleep. [Doctors at Harvard Medical School's Division of Sleep Medicine add that] "Sleep deprivation negatively impacts our mood, our ability to focus, and our ability to access higher-level cognitive functions. (75)

Huffington's personal experience and research have led her to become a self-described "sleep-evangelist."

And after getting more sleep, **her second step is getting more exercise**. Again, start simple if you need to: take the steps instead of the elevator, add a walk in the morning, afternoon, or evening, and build up from there. Exercise, as study after study shows is not only good for our longterm health, but also a huge stress reliever and sleep aid.

Her third and final step is to meditate, starting with five minutes and building up to twenty (or more) minutes a day. You can start even more simply by introducing some contemplative silence into another part of your day: turn off the radio for some or all of your commute, take a walk or exercise without listening to an iPod and allow that silence to be your gateway to meditating more. You may also be interested in visiting our UU Buddhist group, which meets in the chapel on 2nd and 4th Sundays. And

there are some links to **free beginner's guides to meditation** on the UU Buddhist page of our website, which you can find through the link marked "Connect" on our homepage.

I also appreciate that meditation is the *third* of Huffington's three steps. Over the years when people have come to my office asking for advice about meditation, by far the most common problem people have named is that when they sit down to try and meditate, they find themselves falling asleep. My response is that your body is telling you that **before learning to meditate, you need to get more sleep**. Adequate rest is step one. And exercise is often an important intermediate step because it gets us out of our "monkey mind" and into our body. So if you reprioritize sleep and exercising (even thirty minutes/day more for each), you will have a much more solid foundation for meditation and will have taken significant strides toward creating a year of more well-being.

For the technologically inclined, there are a few Meditation and Mindfulness apps for smartphones that can help you get started. Some good ones include "**Buddhify**," "**Headspace**," and "**Insight Timer**." If you are at a computer for much of the day, Huffington also recommends the website **donothingfor2minutes.com**, which:

is simply a full-screen video of waves crashing at sunset with a timer counting down for two minutes, along with the instructions, "Just relax and look at the waves. Don't touch your mouse or keypad for two minutes." If you do, a bright red flashing "FAIL" comes up on the screen — perhaps not the most Zen reminder to go back to your break, but effective nonetheless. (269)

Personally, looking back over the past few years, I am already doing fairly well with setting aside time for sleep, exercise, and meditation. But one major hindrance to well-being that particularly stands out to me is that my summers for the past three years straight have been hijacked by moving to Frederick in 2012, the UUA's requirement of me to take Clinical Pastoral Education in 2013, and studying for the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in 2014. So in 2015, one change I hope to make is take more of my vacation time for actual vacation. I'll get back to you this summer with how that turns out. But with 2015 stretched out before us, I invite you to consider if you can **go ahead and block off any vacation time you are allotted** to make sure that you have time away. Or which of Huffington's three steps most calls to you here at the beginning of a new year: sleep, exercise, meditation — or something else? What one next step might you take to cultivate more well-being in 2015?

For now, I will move toward my conclusion with this poem by Anne Hillman titled "**We look**

with uncertainty”:

We look with uncertainty
beyond the old choices for
clear-cut answers
to a softer, more permeable aliveness
which is every moment
at the brink of death;
for something new is being born in us
if we but let it.
We stand at a new doorway,
awaiting that which comes...
daring to be human creatures,
vulnerable to the beauty of existence.
Learning to love.

In reflecting on this poem, the spiritual teacher Parker Palmer has written about **five questions Hillman’s poem evokes in him**. Which of these questions most resonates with you in the new year:

- How can I let go of my need for fixed answers in favor of aliveness?
- What is my next challenge in daring to be *[not perfect, but]* human?
- How can I open myself to the beauty of nature and human nature?
- Who or what do I need to learn to love next? And next? And next?
- What is the new creation that wants to be born in and through me?

In that spirit of open reflection, as we continue to consider what it might mean to experiment with making 2015 a “Year of Well-being,” I invite you to consider two different ritual responses that are part of a tradition in Unitarian Universalism called Fire Communion. At the front of the sanctuary, there are tables with paper, pens, and votive candles.

Looking back on 2014, is there something — a person, place, or thing — that has been a hindrance to your well-being? **Is there is something that you feel called to say “no” to or *let go of* for the new year? In a few moments, I invite you to come forward and write a word or phrase on a slip of paper that is symbolic of what you feel called to let go.** Then I invite you light the slip of paper on fire and drop it in the bowl in the center of the table. To be clear, this ritual of burning a slip of paper

does not necessary mean that the process of “letting go” is complete. But I invite you to see this ritual as an important gesture — perhaps one step among many — of your intention to continue the process of letting go of a part of your life that in the past has been life-negating for you. Looking forward to the year ahead, **you are also invited to light a votive candle to symbolize something that you want to *do*, *affirm*, or say “yes” to in 2015.**