

## WITH OUR INTENTIONS ALIGNED

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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
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### OPENING WORDS *Intentions and Trust* ~ Amy Loyd

Today I want to greet joy  
without a trace of suspicion  
I want to open my eyes to the light  
without a blink of dread  
I want to look at my past  
without a whisper of shame  
I want to look at my future  
without a hint of fear  
Today I want to dance  
without pausing to think  
I want to belly laugh  
without caring who hears  
I want to open my arms  
and twirl in the sun  
Until I fall breathless  
free to be myself  
Full of the joy  
that I open to allow  
completely letting go  
Without even a smudge of suspicion  
Or a wink of hesitation  
That's my intention  
It's what i want

And with these words, let us enter sacred space together.

### STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Most Magnificent Thing* ~ Ashley Spires

*(A little girl and her best dog friend imagine creating the most Magnificent Thing, but almost everything they build doesn't turn out so well...until then step back and look at it another way.)*

### READING *Resolutions* ~ Natalie Patterson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuEShiLy4MA>

### MESSAGE

I promise. I promise. I promise.

These are words of intention. A promise states clearly what it is that one intends to do. But over the past few weeks I've learned that intention has two very different implications. Mostly commonly, I suppose, an intention is thought of like a soft promise. "I'll try to let you know." "I'm going to 'try' to show up." "I'm really 'intend' to be a better friend next time." "This time, I really am going to quit."

In this sense, intention is usually focused on a specific task or goal, and is oriented toward the future... something one intends to do or be...if possible.

So often, intention is interpreted as a maybe...you know what I mean? Somewhere inside we know we might not do what we intend to do... especially if it gets hard, or something better comes along, or we get distracted. And, truth be told, we commonly state an intention as a smoke screen...a way not to make a commitment. "Oh, I intend to help." "I intend to come to your party." "I intend to change my ways." Stating something as an intention 'makes nice' when we are uncomfortable being really honest.

Another slant on this is when intentions are used retroactively. "I didn't mean to hurt you." "It was not my intention to be racist." "We didn't intend for that decision to have THOSE consequences." When we don't take responsibility for the impact of what we do, intentions are meaningless. As we've all heard, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

This morning I want to talk about another kind of intention. I want to talk about the kind of intention that Rev. Stephen Atkinson spoke of last week<sup>1</sup>...which he described as "the ongoing, purposeful direction that guides our choices and our decisions." Or, what he called the "Terrain of Purpose" ...a kind of aerial view that shows us a clear and big picture of what draws us onward. This kind of intention is about living with our actions and words aligned with our deepest values.

As part of Buddhism's 8-fold path, 'right intention' is a commitment to: "Cause no harm, and treat yourself and others with loving-kindness and compassion while seeking true happiness, that which comes from being free from grasping and clinging."<sup>2</sup> So, for Buddhists, 'right intention' is not a specific task or goal, but rather a way of being...in the present. It is the ground on which one is instructed to walk...a ground that is ever-present...ever-guiding...a continual aspiration.

Consider the girl in this morning's story.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, we can see her desire to create the most magnificent thing like the first kind of intention...a specific goal or task that she might get done, or not. But what if her personal version of 'right intention', the thing deepest and truest within her, is something like this: "I see my life as a collection of things out of which I am called to create meaning. And meaning for me is found in the dogged insistence on creating that which brings beauty and joy to the world." To live in alignment with her values then, is to take what is, and from it, to create. That is her life's intention. And ultimately, it allows her and her assistant to 'climb aboard and enjoy the ride.'

Or, take the spoken word poem that Rosana shared with us. We could dissect that poem, and find Natalie Patterson's individual goals...to spend time with her mother, to call her sister, to drink more water...but taken as a whole, the poem sets an intention. The poet is calling herself toward a way of being...to bravely and foolishly love in the face of hurt...to lean into life and to let life make a masterpiece of her...to surrender...to listen to the way God moves. Patterson spreads a field of intention before her, and above her, and below her feet...a field seeded with her intentions.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon delivered at UFP on Jan 4, 2018: "Roads:Taken and Not"

<sup>2</sup> <http://dharma wisdom.org/teachings/articles/hearts-intention>

<sup>3</sup> The Most Magnificent Thing, by Ashley Spires

My generation was very taken by Max Ehrmann's "Desiderata".<sup>4</sup> Remember it? It begins..."Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence..." Those words hung in poster form on countless dorm room walls...including my own. At one point I had it memorized, I think.

But...it wasn't truly MY desiderata. It didn't express MY personal deepest need or intention. I simply 'borrowed' it because it was beautiful and moving. I mean, I 'intended' to apply it to my life. Sort of, anyway.

So how do we come to spread a true field of intention for ourselves and then walk upon it, daily, moment by moment? Of course, one might resonate with a particular well-known or group intention. Those who identify as Buddhist probably do adopt that 'Right Intention'...to cause no harm, to be filled with loving kindness, to seek happiness, to be free from clinging. Or, like Natalie Patterson, we might compose our own resolution, our own intention...and then memorize it, and speak it, and then try to live it true. Or, hopefully for most of us, we can adopt the Unitarian Universalist principles as our deepest intention...to see inherent worth in all, to search for truth and meaning, to work for justice, to live with an awareness of the web of all existence.

But it takes some intention, to set intention. What seeds do you want to sow in your field of intention? What is it that pulls you toward your truest self and guides you toward your deepest sense of purpose? Can you name those things? Once named, how will you keep them in your heart, and in the front of your mind? How will you use them to live true?

I want to share with you a short video<sup>5</sup>...(this is a moment when I wish we had monitors in the sanctuary; I chose not to fuss with setting up the screen, but you'll be able to hear the music, and I'll read the words. And the link is printed in the order of service, so you can watch it later if you want.)

Like prior examples, this is a way to think about how you might set your own intention. In this particular case, it's laid out as a set of principles, called the Monk's Manifesto.<sup>6</sup> It comes from some Benedictines. They say monk is someone 'immersed in the everyday with a single-hearted and undivided presence, always striving for greater wholeness and integrity' and they describe this manifesto as 'a public declaration of principles and intentions.' Here's the video, which illustrates how these principles might come to life. I invite you to just let the words and music wash over you. The Monk's Manifesto.

1st Principle: I commit to Silence - to make space for another voice to be heard, and to resist a culture of constant stimulation.

There were moments before the day's work and at the day's end when a hush would fill her up. A hush that said "This. Here. Now." It came now daily; welcomed and unbidden. A peace that flowed from practice.

2nd Principle: I commit to Hospitality by welcoming the stranger both without and within.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://mwkworks.com/desiderata.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://vimeo.com/76842041>

<sup>6</sup> <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-monk-manifesto-seven-principles-for-living-with-deep-intention/>

Grief. Lust. Fear. Rage. Peace. Joy. “Come,” she said truly. “Welcome.” It wasn’t always easy, depending on the guest. But even in the discomfort it worked on her. Softening something tight and protected. Growing a deeper ease.

3rd Principle: I commit to Community by finding kindred spirits along the path. His wish was a prayer: Friendship. Guidance. Connections of the soul. He watched for them hopefully, eyes and heart trusting they’d come.

4th Principle: I commit to Kinship with Creation, letting go of what does not help nature to flourish.

A shift was underway, separateness fading. Stewardship becoming less duty or corporate obligation and something more like love.

5th Principle: I commit to Meaningful Work by bringing myself fully present to the work I do.

In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: Each minute and each second of life is a miracle. And the dishes themselves and the fact that I’m washing them are miracles. Each bowl I wash, each poem I compose, each time [I sound a bell] is a miracle. And has exactly the same value.

6th Principle: I commit to Sabbath...and to resist a culture of busyness that measures my worth by what I do.

Time and space felt instantly less constrictive. Her restless drive to work a fog, that lifted from joy.

7th Principle: I commit to Conversion, recognizing that I am always on a journey with both gifts and limitations.

The secret of his security was the discovery that it happened over and over and over again.

We are Dancing Monks. Letting stuckness and stiffness loosen with our muscles’ warmth. Feeling joy begin to flow.

I’m not suggesting that this be YOUR intention...to be a dancing monk...or to express your commitments in this way. But there’s something powerful in committing intention to words, like Erdmann’s *Desiderata*, or even to a video, so that one might be reminded of them in an endless and always accessible loop. How do YOU intend to live? What commitments do YOU make?

We can’t talk about intention without talking about the practice of it, because without doing it, it’s empty. The girl in the story had to practice her intention...that act of creation. And she didn’t always get it right. Or perfect. And she got frustrated and discouraged. And yet she returned to the practice, because her heart called her back to it...back to her deepest intention. Again and again and again. Eventually, hopefully, creating a habit of that intention, so that it becomes natural and even automatic. And brings joy.

The non-fiction bookclub is this month reading Charles Duhigg’s “*The Power of Habit*.” Relying on a lot of scientific research, he talks about a habit happening between two things...a cue or stimuli, and a reward. What we do between the cue and the reward is the behaviour

that becomes a habit. We get the cue and we automatically respond because we expect or crave the reward. And those patterns get hardwired into our brains as habit.

Now, no one in this room today is at square one...as the quote on the front of the order of service states, we can't go back and change the beginning. We have already established all kinds of habits, and when we do this kind of soul-searching, meaning-seeking work, we discover that we are not always making choices that are in alignment with our life's intention. What that means, is that in order to change the ending, we're gonna have to change some of our habits. Well, Duhigg says that while becoming aware of the cues and rewards that have formed our habits is important, the real key to changing a habit, and responding to cues in different ways, is to believe that we can change.

Wow. We have to believe that it can be different. He uses the stories of several football teams to illustrate his point, and you know what? It's all about practice. You keep asking yourself if you are being true to your intentions, and if you're not, you start over.<sup>7</sup> And then you ask again, and start over again if necessary. Again and again and again. Practicing it until you believe it!

And here's what I found really fascinating. Duhigg says that most often, that belief can only emerge with the help of a group. Belief is essential, AND belief grows out of a communal experience.<sup>8</sup>

Well, what better endorsement for being part of a faith community! In the 'field' that is Unitarian Universalist intention, in the 'field' that is this particular congregation, we are committed to a search for truth and meaning while also to supporting one another in our individual spiritual growth; those are our 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> principles...our ways of being in community together that form the ground of our intention.

Coming together with such intention creates a very present field of possibility...a field in which each person can find and practice life intentionally in a way that connects them with their deepest self...while at the same time, co-creating a communal environment where we help one another change and grow and practice. And this practice, most importantly, brings us to believe that it is possible for there to be more authenticity, more life, more justice, more peace, more joy.

Of course, we won't get it perfect. It may always be off-kilter, and a bit more clumsy than we hoped. Our relational skills will always need a bit of thinkering. Belief comes, and change happens, gradually. But still, I believe living our deepest values with intention will bring just what we want...authenticity and peace.

So, how about we climb aboard and take this intention thing for a spin? We're sure not to be disappointed. It really is THE MOST MAGNIFICENT THING.

So be it.

**READING**

*The Intentional Act of Going to Church*

~ Rev. A. Powell Davies

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<sup>7</sup> <http://dharmawisdom.org/teachings/articles/hearts-intention>

<sup>8</sup> Duhigg, Charles, *The Power of Habit: why we do what we do and how to change* (Random House; 2013) p. 92-93

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church – and would whether I was a preacher or not – because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them.

I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church – my church of the free spirit – brings me back to what I want to be.

I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me. My church renews my courage and my hope.

It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level.

I must have my conscience sharpened – sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe to others. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I do.

I am brought toward my best, in every way toward my best.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

*~ Parker Palmer*

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.

May you be known by those values. May your intentions be clear. And may you go in peace and in love.

Amen.