

## **First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco**

Sunday, January 8, 2023

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“A people without vision shall perish!” These profound words from the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Sacred Text brought to a close this morning’s reading. I chose them as the central theme of this morning’s sermon because they are prophetically critical in these uncertain times and in this complex place.

Just a week ago today, as both individuals and as a community of people, we rang in a New Year, with all of its rituals. I would submit that this annual rite of bidding farewell to the year past and greeting the New Year with all of its hopes and possibilities is never experienced the same by any two people. On the one end of the spectrum, there are those who cannot imagine celebrating New Year’s unless they are surrounded by the masses, popping champagne corks at midnight, and partying until dawn. These are those who diligently plan for the event in advance and engage others to join in their revelry. On the other end of the spectrum are those who, for their own valid reasons, are alone, often in bed by nine, and elect not to subscribe to the pressures of societal norms. For many in this camp, the passage of yet another year is but a grim reminder that our finite existence on this earth is marching closer to its close. In between these polar opposites is every nuance imaginable. The only thing I suspect they all have in common, if only subconsciously, is a haunting obligation to make some sort of personal resolution, no matter how quickly it might be abandoned, to enrich their personal and spiritual

lives, their relationships, and the community in which they live. For in the back of their minds, at some level, either they hold those convictions, or fear that, as the proverb warns, “A people without vision shall perish.”

What is daunting about making New Year’s Resolutions for the year 2023 is that, for almost three years, the context and foundation of our very thinking and being has been upended. We are not sure, but believe that we’ve weathered the worst of a once-in-a-century global pandemic; a shocking crisis that has frightened us, catalyzed us to grieve the loss of both loved ones and the masses in ways unimaginable, forced us into isolation which for many has led to depression, ripped the scab off broad and deep wounds, exposing longstanding economic, racial, gender and generational divisions that have plagued society far longer than this pandemic...the have’s seemingly able to endure, the have nots forced to, if not falling off, the precipice of their very existence. At the beginning of COVID-19, we witnessed firsthand the great divide of just who had access to personal protective equipment, testing, services, then vaccines and needed care. In the frenetic daily progression of this disease, we saw existing political division expand and the interpretation of critical news mirror that very divide. In our own City of San Francisco, the restaurants we once loved shuttered, our bustling and vibrant tourism, tech sector, transit, real estate, cultural and social life become a shadow of their prior self. Their demise had a domino effect. Their revenue loss, a relied upon tax base, profoundly devastated the philanthropic efforts of our City’s cadre of nonprofits, those on the frontlines providing essential services for San Francisco’s most vulnerable residents. Three years later, as we suffer COVID fatigue, wishing it would all go away, people we know are still testing positive.

What's worse, as much as we long, at some level, we realize that we cannot return to the life we once knew, the comfort and security we once held as normal.

Yes, it is on this cheery note and with this stark reminder of the personal and collective trauma that we have endured, that in January 2023, we are being called to make New Year's resolutions for ourselves, how we will engage with those around us and the greater society. It is on this cheery note and with this stark reminder of the personal and collective trauma that we have endured that we are haunted by that proverb, "A people without vision shall perish!" How, we might ask ourselves, can we make such resolutions? Where do we even start? Some are muttering under their breath, "At this point I can barely take care of myself, how am I expected to care for others, no less the greater society."

To that, I would remind you that you are good Unitarian Universalists. You possess a rich interfaith spirituality that you need to harness at this critical time. In this very sanctuary we have sung together, at the top of our lungs, that treasured interfaith anthem, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me!" Having myself been reared in the Orthodox Christian faith, I am reminded of a similar calling by the Russian Saint, Seraphim of Sarov, who wisely asserted, "Acquire the spirit of peace and a multitude around you shall be saved."

In a recent Chronicle OP Ed, commentator Keith Humphreys summed up the unique libertarian individualistic spirit of San Franciscans this way, "Since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans have come to San Francisco to be free of traditional constraints back East, to reinvent themselves, to escape the small mindedness of small towns, and to find themselves. This culture underlies the City's entrepreneurialism, artistic energy and tolerance for diversity in all forms." Foundationally, I think what Humphreys suggests is true, and if so, affirms that we

San Franciscans could and should be heroes in the context of the proverb, as historically, our success as a City can be attributed to the fact that we are a people of vision.

Why then do we seem to be stymied? More importantly, if allowed to persist, why will this uncharacteristic paralysis, not only mar our reputation as a people and city of vision, but impede our ability to effectively innovate, set the agenda, meet the demands and effectively contribute to a nation that secretly relies upon our ingenuity.

As for the former, I would submit that we are stymied because this pandemic has understandably traumatized us on so many levels. We are a people in need of healing. We need to heal ourselves and care for one another. As people of faith, we are well positioned to do both. As fragile children of a higher and loving being, we are being called to come to terms with the trauma we have endured. To do so, we will need to risk trusting, trusting in that loving higher being, trusting in ourselves, that higher being's creation, and trusting in one another. In essence, as people of faith, fragile children of that higher and loving being, we must come to the realization that to be fully healed, we cannot shoulder such an immense burden alone. To this point, I am reminded of the Catholic Theologian Henry Nouwen's treasured little text "The Wounded Healer." In it, he asserts that the only thing in this life we human beings all have in common is our woundedness. Only when we are able to risk coming to terms with our woundedness, can we enter into the mystery of true healing. Nouwen goes on to suggest that, once acquired, the depths of the realization of our woundedness may be empathetically conveyed to others wrestling with their woundedness, and that this conveyance has the effect of catalyzing that same mystery of healing in those who suffer with and around us. Thus, we hearken back to the lyrics of that profound interfaith anthem, "Let There be Peace on Earth and

let it begin with me” and Seraphim of Sarov’s words, “Acquire the spirit of peace and a multitude around you shall be saved.” In healing ourselves and those around us we then will possess the discernment and clarity to see beyond the legion of seemingly insurmountable personal and societal challenges that plague us and reclaim our greater vision... for remember, “A people without vision shall perish!”

In the meditation offered earlier in the service, Mayor Lee painstakingly enumerated every wave of people who ever came to San Francisco and powerfully challenged us to be our better selves in welcoming the newcomer. In the course of that history, our City has experienced a series of booms and busts, adjusted and thrived by fearlessly recreating itself. In the course of these many iterations, we as San Franciscans have learned much about ourselves, grown in wisdom and as a result reached new plateaus with each new beginning, earning our reputation as leaders in innovation, creativity and the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusivity. That visionary leadership is needed now more than ever. We know we can heal... We know we have it in us...What are we waiting for? Remember the proverb, “A people without vision shall perish.”

Sadly, while we are waiting, short-sided, self-serving, mean-spirited law makers and judges are distorting the spirit of freedom and justice; creating, passing and interpreting laws, such that those they have been entrusted to serve and protect are no longer able to be safe nor their authentic selves. Running roughshod, in the name of a distorted sense of morality, these legislators and judges could care less about the spiritual, emotional, physical and economic damage they are inflicting upon fragile souls. This we’ve witnessed firsthand in the sad cases of undocumented political asylees, used as pawns, being sent to cities like our own, to score

political points. The countless other souls of whom I speak, our fellow citizens, those whose liberties are in serious jeopardy simply because of their race, sexual orientation, gender and desire to make decisions regarding the health and wellbeing of their bodies, will soon become spiritual migrants in search of a place of refuge. Mayor Lee's reflection so powerfully reminded us, San Francisco has long been the destination for waves of such refugees. The question before us today is this, in *that* great tradition of our City, do we San Franciscans of this age possess the spiritual health, fortitude, conviction and vision to welcome them...and if not, why? For remember, "A people without vision shall perish!"

Having already addressed the why and how to bring spiritual healing to ourselves and those around us, we must now address the elephant in the room, the collective societal paralysis that is standing in the way of reclaiming our vision as a great City! As alluded to earlier, a not so small part of that paralysis can be attributed to the pandemic's revelation of our City's deep-seeded systemic inequities, compounded by a myriad of other unaddressed and now emerging societal failures; The perfect storm, whose impact hit so quickly with such intense rage, that it knocked the wind out of us and left us overwhelmed. While leading the country in its public health response to the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, San Francisco found itself under the national media's microscope on every other issue, from the tech exodus to homelessness, from filthy and unsafe streets in the Tenderloin and other vulnerable neighborhoods to an emerging fentanyl epidemic, from skyrocketing real estate vacancies to the vandalism and looting of premium Union Square storefronts, and everything in between. Once thought to be the *crème de la crème* of Cities, now, with a bruised ego, we find ourselves scrambling to respond, scrambling to make things right. We don't like being

perceived as anything less than the best. So obsessed are we with our image and the prospect of overcoming the seemingly insurmountable multitude of our crises that we can no longer see the forest from the trees. But they are just that, crises. Some, by the very mention of the word crisis, shut down and regress to a catatonic state. Closer examination of the word, however, suggests quite a different possibility. The word crisis is derived from the Greek root krino, which means having to render a judgment, a decision. Best understood, it's like arriving at a fork in the road and having to decide which path to take. Paralysis is staying at the fork in the road and not deciding. The real call of a crisis is to decide which path to take. In reality a crisis presents possibilities and opportunities. In reality crises offer us the occasion to reclaim our vision.

I am a sailor. A real estate developer, repurposing a religiously owned parcel for affordable housing, in a recent presentation, kept referring to the project's obstacles and economic challenges as "headwinds." As a sailor, I know that a "tailwind" increases a vessel's speed and reduces the time required to reach its destination, while a "headwind" has the opposite effect. Only after hearing his presentation and doing some research did I realize that the terms are also used metaphorically in business and elsewhere about circumstances where progress is made harder by a "headwind" or easier by a "tailwind." Like that fork in the road, any seasoned sailor knows that trying to take on headwind is akin to an exercise in futility. The next time I heard the presenter make this reference, my response was to advise him to adjust his sails and change course. Moving from paralysis to progress is really just as simple as that. Mustering the fortitude and courage to make that decision in the midst of a crisis, however, requires vision! For as the proverb teaches us, "A people without vision shall perish!"

As an organization founded 34 years ago in response to a homeless crisis and the Loma Prieta Earthquake, the San Francisco Interfaith Council knows that crises are opportunities for miracles to occur; They have a strange way of bringing people together to offer the best that's in their DNA. Our Council knows firsthand the power of our prophetic voice and ability to mobilize at critical times. We are guided by the collective Vision of our diverse religious and spiritual traditions to speak truth to power at those appointed moments and to act decisively when called upon to do so. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic we rose to the occasion and became the City's primary liaison, providing San Francisco's 800 communities of faith and religious institutions with the timely and credible information needed to make informed decisions on behalf those entrusted to their care. From this perch I could see and was convinced that we would be called upon to play a critical role not just in our City's response to the pandemic, but more importantly in its recovery, as it forges the uncharted frontier of a new normal. Just as our communities of faith had the vision to so quickly and creatively adjust to new ways of worship and ministry, so too are they now called to harness all of the resources in their spiritual toolboxes to help navigate their faithful from isolation to connectivity, from fear and anxiety to a new place of trust, love, service and relationship. This is our great calling at this profound moment in history. This is my New Year's prayer and resolution as we sail into the year 2023!

As people of faith, we are de facto people of vision. Let us, with the help of that higher being, discern the gift of that vision in ourselves. Let us abundantly inspire that vision in one another. Let us courageously and with conviction share that vision with our greater community; That in doing so, we as individuals may realize our full spiritual potential, know true healing,



connectivity and love in our relationships with one another, and be effective instruments of creative and radical change in our quest for a more just and equitable society.

Thank you!