

Long Haul

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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We're almost a month into the new year – just one more Sunday till the end of January – and already it might feel like January was a year unto itself...

And still, a lot of things feel the same, or maybe worse – covid infection rates seem higher than they were last month – approaching 100 million worldwide this week; the long-awaited vaccine has yet to reach the majority of the population; and our social and commercial options are narrower than they were before Christmas... very much the way things were last March. On top of that, talk of a U.S. impeachment trial in February gives a sense of déjà vu for 2020, a bit like the movie *Groundhog Day*.

It certainly looks like many things about life in 2021 will continue to look a lot like the hallmarks of 2020 – the looming possibility of lockdowns, with uncertain beginning or closing dates, the threat of the disease itself. Many things have changed, but things might feel like they're going to stay the same for... a while.

Last month, just before Christmas, I made the observation that many things pointed toward things getting better, but that it also seemed like some things might get worse before they got better. And in many ways, this past month has been a fairly faithful illustration of that playing out. Only now do things seem to be getting into more steady direction toward sustained improvement – but we can't rule out bumps along the way. At this point we are still roughly in what might be called a midway point.

As we look at Canada's expected timeline toward recovery from a pandemic situation, the last leg of population-wide vaccination is currently scheduled for September. This is, of course, tentative... unexpected delays may yet come up, and with full efficacy taking several days to set in, September does not automatically mean a full return to large in-person gatherings and restriction-free socializing. Of course, it's also possible that the schedule may be moved up and progress accelerated... but at this point, a healthy dose of anticipoointment might be helpful.

We're still in for the long haul.

This is also a time when many of the hard realities of the pandemic have become more visible in our church community. If, by any chance, the pandemic still seemed abstract, we have now all been touched by people in our immediate church community who have been infected, and in one case died.

This is hard news, which challenges our sense of coping with several more months in this prolonged situation. It is concrete and it is palpable.

And yet, this latter part of January is much different than the end of December in 2020. Infection rates are indeed going the opposite direction – down. In fact, in most of the jurisdictions where we live – in Windsor-Essex, in Ontario, in Canada – the infection numbers over the past week are actually lower than they were a month ago. And many of you have already had your first dose of one of the new vaccines... the change is slow, and it is also concrete and palpable.

And, despite the civil unrest in the U.S. earlier this month, a tumultuous leadership has been replaced with one that uses a different and more conciliatory tone, just this past week. This does not mean that Canadian

leaders and representatives won't have challenges in dealing with our neighbour, but it does mean that expectations on how our leaders will relate to each other are likelier to follow more regular norms of diplomacy and a more respectful demeanour.

Let's also remember that many lingering conversations around social inequalities are now more largely in the open, with people having a wider awareness of them, as well as a deeper understanding of what they mean for the whole of society.

We have discussed before that, in many ways, a full return to what was normal ten months ago might be untenable – and, in many ways, even undesirable. Many things that were normal in early 2020 no longer feel acceptable to us in early 2021 – particularly the conditions that led to the pandemic having such a devastating impact over the past several months, as already-vulnerable sectors of the population became even more vulnerable under pandemic circumstances.

We've become familiar with the risky conditions in congregate living settings, where folks with compromised health were put at higher risk due to structures of employment that unnecessarily allowed for repeated exposure to the disease.

We've heard the evidence and stories of people in precarious work conditions, who could not afford to follow the ideal precautions, or who were simply left behind with inadequate support.

We've become aware that decades and centuries of marginalization based on race and ethnicity have left systems that perpetuated the marginalization of many communities.

This enhanced awareness, along with the actions that our larger community has taken and will be taking – in which many among us play a part – is a welcome change. This year, we can look to many things being different, for the better.

My friends, in our church community, the time that still remains for this current crisis to wane also offers us space we can use toward envisioning our church's life toward September.

My friends, we have become used to different ways of doing church and being church. To some extent, these alternatives have simply been ways to cope with the barriers that have come up, but they also represent options for making our church more accessible. Come September – or whenever in-person gatherings make sense – we can expect some changes to stick around and complement our church life, not to return to normal, but to go beyond normal. When sitting at the pews becomes an option again, our church – its people, its culture, and its relationships with the wider community – will inevitably look and feel different.

Some aspects of our Sunday services might be more flexible, as we've adapted with openness to see how else worship can look. We'll have more options on how we get together, who gets to participate, and where else we might fit into the larger community and its shared mission.

Yes, my friends, already, this year is different, even as parts of it may feel like we're lingering in the past few months. We have changed, we have grown, we have developed unexpectedly, and we can expect our story to develop as we keep steadfast into this long haul.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen

Suggested hymns:

Opening Hymn #348 Guide My Feet

Words: Traditional

Music: Spiritual from the collection of Willis Laurence James, 1900-1966
harmony by Wendell Whalum, 1932-

GUIDE MY FEET

Hymn #146 Soon the Day Will Arrive

Words: Ehud Manor, 20th cent.

Music: Nurit Hirsh, 20th cent.

BASHANAH

Closing Hymn #131 Love Will Guide Us

Words: Sally Rogers, © 1985 Sally Rogers, used by perm. of Thrushwood Press

~)| Music: Traditional, arr. by Betty A Wylder, 1923-1994

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