

Before this sermon was preached, the song *Another Train* performed by the a capella group the Poozies was played on CD. You can listen to this song at the following You-Tube site:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8qiY21xgKM>.

Sermon

The beginning is now...

Rev. Sara Huisjen

The first time I heard that song was in seminary, during the fall of my first year in Chicago in 2003. At the time, I'd agreed to sing with a newly formed a capella group and this song, *Another Train*, was # 4 on the practice CD I'd been sent home with after our first rehearsal. Thinking back, I'd guess I played it at least a 100 times the first few days I had it in my possession. I sang it in the shower, and on my way to classes. I sang it when I went for walks down to Lake Michigan from Hyde Park, and I sang it when I was washing dishes at the sink, and doing my laundry. I basically sang it all the time, and I nearly drove my housemates crazy, but there was something about the lyrics that really grabbed me.

The words echoed, or maybe amplified is the better word, a feeling I knew well—a kind of sadness *and* hopefulness that lived inside me. The words in the song expressed a longing I recognized as my own at that time; a kind of hope or faith that I wanted to hang onto; the confidence again to believe that somehow, regardless of whatever has come before; whatever heartbreak or loss or disappointment we have known in our lives, that we *can* move on, allowing our experience still to shape us, but not to hold us back or keep us from taking chances again. Whatever we've done, or not done that we want to, this song said to me, that forgiveness is possible; that beginning again is possible, that setting out and charting a new direction in our lives is possible; that however difficult or scary or overwhelming it may seem, that change is, in fact *always* possible. *The beginning is now, and will always be...*

In the responsive reading we heard earlier, Kathleen McTigue writes, *the first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always does, the earth moving in its rhythms. Yet also we stand at a threshold, the new year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands.*

The month of January is named for the Roman god Janus who is described as having two faces, one to look back and see the past, and the other to peer into the future.

As the old year dies, and the new one begins, we have the opportunity to be mindful of this threshold, and to take time to reflect on the past year, to remember what it held for us, good and bad.

As we say goodbye to the old year, we can't help but to look forward toward the future with our hopes for what it might bring, and for what we wish to experience in the days and months ahead.

In my work and ministry with hospice, I've learned to listen closely to what people I meet say about their lives and their experience, knowing, now, that it often has a lot to teach me about living my own life. People wrestling with a serious or terminal illness are often more aware of what matters, and what's most meaningful in their lives. For some, this awareness ushers in a sense of gratitude for all they've had—for their children and grandchildren; for the long life they've been fortunate to live, even in spite of difficulties they've known. For others, facing death and seeing more clearly what matters includes wrestling with regrets they still carry—hidden sadnesses about the choices they made; remorse they feel about broken or cut-off relationships.

For most of us, I'd, guess taking time to look back and to look ahead, as we're poised to do in this very

moment, to do this, particularly as we try to make sense of our lives, will likely involve acknowledging our thanks for the blessings we've known, and also admitting & facing somehow the sorrows and regrets we carry.

Bronnie Ware is a British woman whose worked for many years with people receiving palliative care—by that, she means medical care & support that seeks to keep them comfortable as they near the end of life. In an article she recently published on-line, Ware identified five regrets that dying people most often shared with her as she cared for them in those last few weeks of their lives. On this first day of this New Year, I offer them as “food for thought,” particularly as you consider the decisions, and goals, and intentions you hold for yourself and your loved ones in this year to come:

The first, most common of all regrets she heard sounded like this: **“I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”** How many dreams, I wonder, if any at all, have gone unfulfilled in your life to date? How *can* you, or *might* you, honor some of them still? I'm reminded of a poem by May Sarton, the one that begins, *“Now I become myself. It's taken time, many years and places, I have been dissolved and shaken, worn other people's faces...”* What does it mean in your life to be true to who you are in this moment?

The second regret Ware identified was expressed by *every* male patient she cared for, though several women also mentioned it to her: **“I wish I hadn't worked so hard.”** How good are you at balancing the demands of your work and the needs of your family? How much time in the day do you claim for your kids? Or for your partner? In what ways might you simplify things and make it easier to align your time with the people & engagements you love? *I wish I hadn't worked so hard...* it's good to remember this, and to imagine on this threshold of the new year, how you might choose to live and work differently, or even work, *less* of the time.

A third regret identified had to do again with being true to oneself: **“I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.”** Too often our inclination or conditioning is to suppress our feelings in order to keep the peace, a habit that can, and too often does, leave us feeling sick to our stomach, or bitter and resentful toward others, crippled somehow in our own lives. What would it be like to say how you feel, or to reveal what you really think? It's true, speaking honestly with people will invariably change your relationship with them—AND it's also true, that expressing yourself, offers the best chance you or I have of ever making and creating healthier relationships, and daring to let go those that aren't any good for us anyway.

The fourth regret people shared with Ware also had to do with relationships: **“I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.”** When faced with the likelihood or reality of one's imminent death, the relationships we've had and the love we've known and shared often becomes most important. When we get caught up in the business of life and work, we easily loose track of these things. Who do you want to reach out to and invite back into your life? What legacy of love are you mindful of wanting & trying to create?

The fifth and final regret identified in that article had to do with being content and satisfied with one's life: **“I wish that I had let myself be happier.”** Implicit in this statement is the suggestion that happiness is a choice we *can* make; that happiness is, or becomes possible, when we choose to appreciate what we have, and to act, even in spite of our fears, on what we know is right and good. Happiness, in any real sense, becomes possible when we're aware of our attitude, and when we're willing to step outside of our usual comfort zones, daring to be & feel more authentic, aware &

appreciative again of the stuff in our lives that truly matters.

“When is the best time to do things,” Nikolai, the little boy in the story asks. “[And,] who is the most important person? And, what is the right thing to do?” “The right thing do,” answers his friend, the wise turtle, “is to care for the one by your side, whoever that is...the most important thing is to do kindness, and remember, there is just one important time, and that [time] is right now.”

As Bill so eloquently said in his own words as part of our chalice lighting this morning, “During the next year, much will happen [over which] we [will] have no control - some good - some bad,” and so the question becomes how will we *choose* live with that reality of our lives? How will we learn to grow through all of it—bruised up at times, but also seasoned and made more wise through our experience; more aware, in each moment, of a capacity within us to choose well; to learn from our mistakes and facile starts; to step out, from under the burdens of grief, and loss, and indecision that we sometimes carry.

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, I've come across a story that resonates with me when I think about how any real change happens in our lives—changes that are more lasting and long lived than any single resolution made in haste this time of year; changes that come about as the result of a longer *process* of often beginning, and faltering, and trying again when we stumble. The story is told by Portia Nelson who writes it as an autobiography in five chapters. Imagine this, perhaps your autobiography at some point in time. 1) I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost...I am hopeless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out. 2) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't *believe* I'm in the same place. But it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out. 3) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it there. I still fall in...it's a habit. My eyes are open now. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately. 4) I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it. And 5) I walk down another street.

What street, new or old, are you walking down, aware or not of the potholes or pitfalls that challenge your way? What lessons are you learning, or have you learned, old or new insights now there, inside you, wanting to direct you on your way to making different and better choices, hoping to encourage you to go another way, even if it's hard; even if part of you still isn't sure it's right or you're ready.

Deciding to go to seminary was a bit like that for me, though I'd imagined it was something I wanted to do for the better part of a decade at that time—ever since I was 18. Looking back, I remember thinking, someday I'll know I'm ready, and the way before me will be clear, but it didn't really work out that way. Instead, as is so often the case in our lives, my journey into the work I feel most called to began on the heels of a significant life experience—losing two beloved people in my life—my father & grandmother.

Through that experience, I came to see that I may

never know for sure if I'm ready,
or if it will all work out, but that that moment,
was exactly my chance to try and do it;
to set out on a path fraught with questions unanswered,
but energized also with a longing I felt;
with a resonance of being right somehow,
something I could dare to trust,
knowing, and seeing a bit more clearly in that moment
that I would wish I had done it, if I didn't.

As for each of us, my way is still unfolding.
There was a time I thought I'd never be
a parish minister, but things change; people change,
questions and imaginings become calls to try
something new, something challenging,
some activity, or endeavor, or vocation that
speaks to us from within;
from a sense of both courage and humility.

In this new year, may you find the courage to live a life true to yourself.
May you find a balance between work and play,
between the demands we all know,
and the time people & relationship most important.
May you dare to express yourself and remember
to be in touch with those you love,
And may you choose to be happier with your lot—
sure, to seek to change or remedy whatever is not quite right,
but also committed to seeing & appreciating what you do have;
the time, this moment, that is yours;
the love and support that is there to encourage you on your way.

The beginning is now, and will always be...

Blessed be.
Amen.