

Where We've Been, Where We're Going

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 13, 2026

As a young child, I loved the summer rainstorms—the earthy scent of the wet ground, the sound of falling water alongside the rumbling of thunder. Parallel to my family's kitchen was a small window-lined sunroom, allowing me a front row seat to the downpour, dark clouds and the occasional burst of a lightning bolt. All of my senses were engaged in this ordinary yet extraordinary communion with nature. Today, I carry these childhood memories with me: the wonder, awe, and curiosity of the natural world.

Later, out of these very same windows, the water was now tears running down my cheeks. My distraught sister and I watched our father drive away from our home to relocate hours away. Our parents had divorced. And from this memory, to this very day, I carry with me the emotions I felt that one sorrowful morning: an anticipation of profound loss. A fear for change that I cannot control.

These two contrasting memories left emotional imprints on my heart that will stay with me in perpetuity – that will shape my future. I found solace in a metaphor. Imagine, for a moment, a flowing river. This body of water did not begin the moment we first witnessed it; but began long ago. As the river rushes forward, it carries a great history, shaped by rainfall, glaciers, stones, swimming animals and all that remains unseen. Each experience leaves its mark, shaping the water's continuous flow. Just as it is with each of us.

Our past intimately shapes us today and all the days to come. And yet, life is full of moments we have not yet experienced. New beginnings. The birth of a child, a new courtship, a rediscovered faith. These fresh beginnings present us an opportunity to engage with what has shaped us, building upon it each day, because what has come before will not and cannot be erased. It colors our days.

Even within the inevitability of carrying our past, we are not without agency. We can welcome what shapes us—even, perhaps especially, the difficult and trying—and, in doing so, cultivate a meaningful life. We can carry what has shaped us into each new beginning, allowing it to teach us, challenge us, and lead us toward change. I invite us to welcome the heartbreak of loss because it amplifies the gratitude for love. To welcome our anger because it allows us to hold true to our convictions. To welcome our anxiety because it reminds us we cannot control everything. To welcome the inability to forgive because it reminds us that we need time to heal. We welcome these parts of ourselves not because they should remain as they are, but because acknowledging them gives us the agency to transform how they shape our lives.

Author B.J. Neblett offers a quote that remains the crux of this sermon - “We are the sum total of our experiences. Those experiences – be they positive or negative – make us the person we are, at any given point in our lives... None of us are the same as we were yesterday, nor will be tomorrow.”¹

I pull a further quote from William Faulkner’s book, *Requiem for a Nun*, a rather dark book that introduces the power of our history. Quote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”² Think about the practice of journaling. In the moment, what we write is fresh and poignant. Perhaps the laments of a lost love. Decades later, when we return to those words, we can see more clearly how those moments helped shape who we are, for better and for worse. So, if we ask with skepticism, “What’s the past?” “Why dwell?” I invite us to reflect upon those imprints and in doing so understand who we are and why we are. How many folks here have wondered, “Why should I be bothered by something that happened to me twenty years ago?” Perhaps we see a written recount of a parental argument that we realize resides within us as fear today. Maybe we read about a lack of friendships and understand why we are haunted by the prospect of loneliness. Have compassion for that younger you. We build positive relationships with ourselves as we work to understand our past selves.

¹ *Elysian Dreams: Where the Past Meets the Present*, by B.J. Neblett

² *Requiem for a Nun* by William Faulkner

As I reflected on this sermon and this quote with a trusted mentor, they shared a story that brought this theme to life. As an adult, my mentor had an aversion to messiness and clutter that truly weighed on her. In trying to understand why this felt so overwhelming and even unnecessary, she took time to reflect upon difficult memories from decades ago, and in doing so came to understand her current aversion. As a young person growing up in her parents' home, she lived in a very messy house that she was ashamed of, reluctant to bring friends home from school. She remained embarrassed and even confused. And as an adult woman reflecting upon her adolescent self, she met her younger self with compassion and fostered a true understanding of her current aversion to clutter. She created for herself a new beginning: a beginning where this discomfort with clutter made sense, and healing could begin. I use this story as an invitation to reflect upon your own laments: Why is anger so scary? Why am I a people pleaser? What is this need to be liked by everyone? Why am I so addicted to success? The past is held in perpetuity. It is part and parcel with the present, with the future, with all that will ever be. Sitting in these very pews, each of us is a living, breathing reminder of yesterday, of yesterday's yesterday.

Friday began the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashanah, a major holiday in the Jewish calendar. It is a sacred and hallowed time to look forward to the year ahead, to mark new beginnings. To make resolutions and atone for one's mistakes - marking reflection, acknowledgment, making amends, and changing one's behavior. And yet, in order to start anew, Jewish people take the time to prepare for this moment for an entire month beforehand by deeply and intentionally examining the year that just passed. It is a time of intense reflection, repentance, and preparation for the New Year. This preparation invites the Jewish people to begin again with greater freedom and optimism. The ram's horn - the shofar - is blown in the synagogue, waking observers up from apathy. What have I done wrong? How can I make amends? And, it is asking the creator to have compassion for our imperfect selves. Sacred, holy compassion. Some of us see this divine compassion in our own faith. Only through this intentional practice of reflection,

repentance, and making amends can we begin again. Only by honestly examining who we have been can we begin to shape who we want to become.

Each New Year celebration adopts similar principles of beginning anew, including the one marked on January 1st. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “And now let us believe in a long year that is given to us, new, untouched, full of things that have never been”³ It is a possibility. It invites curiosity. It welcomes enthusiasm. It crafts commitment. Think of the prevalence of New Year's Resolutions - not rejecting who we were, but as choosing who we want to become. May I check my anger. May I grow more compassionate. May I fill my days with joy. While the year is new, we do not enter it untouched. We are not called to erase the past and begin with nothing, but to know the impact of our past and craft a beginning that builds upon this but is not dictated by this. The year is not yet written, and we have the chance to craft a possible future.

So what awaits us? There will be heartache, there will be loss. There will be beauty, there will be strength. There will be new people and new experiences. We are always on the threshold of something new. There is a pause between what has been and what is yet to be. Fill that pause. Fill it with love. With intention. With purpose. With integrity. Woman to mother, child to adult, life to death.

In delving into our past, many of us cannot help but encounter trauma. We carry experiences that cannot be undone, grief that cannot be erased. And yet, even when we cannot change what happened, we can sometimes change what we do with what happened. We can begin to transform the pain we carry, allowing it to shape—not determine—the future before us. This work can be difficult and deeply soul-searching. It asks us to sit with what cannot be changed while discerning what we might transform.

I am reminded of images and depictions of European cathedrals. The sacred and holy spaces are filled with pews enclosed by ancient stone walls that rise to support a towering ceiling.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Clara Rilke, January 1, 1907, in *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1892–1910*.

Flooded with images of The Passion, the saints, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus. And yet often there is a sharp distinction in these sanctuaries - the ancient architecture held right alongside modern stained-glass windows. This unique, contrasting beauty is reflective of the trauma of World War II. Windows were shattered by bombs, but the structure remained. People of faith were determined to rebuild. And they did - hiring modern artists to recreate what was lost. There was a spirituality and faith that were never lost, even amid destruction at the hands of violence. They replaced the windows and included new art. They let go of what could not be restored while continuing the history of a blessed faith that will never die. They created beauty from loss, art from violence.

We cannot change the past, but we can change the future. Those without children can choose to build families in other ways. Those who faced divorce can find a new love. Those who faced a difficult childhood can make one better for their own children. That is creating a new beginning.

And so, at this ingathering service, may we mark the beginning of a new church year—a year of possibility. We arrive at the cusp of something new, gathered together at a threshold. But we do not arrive as blank slates. We each bring decades of insights, memories, and experiences. To this space we bring our joys and our laments. Our losses and our gains. Our fears and our hopes. We bring the people, places, questions, struggles, and moments of wonder that have shaped us. And together, all that we carry becomes something more. Together, we are something far greater than any of us could be alone. We stand, too, on the threshold of a new shared history for this church. This church carries the imprints of the many members and friends who have gathered here across the decades. It carries their stories, their questions, their hopes, their joys and their sorrows. It carries a Unitarian Universalist faith that has itself been shaped, questioned, challenged, and transformed. This is the paradox of a new beginning: we do not leave the past behind. We carry it with us. We honor the faith, theology, covenant, relationships, and growth in spirit and intellect that this church has gifted us —and we make space for what has not yet been imagined. Something has brought each of us here. Something has brought all of us here, together, today. And so, we mark this day—not simply as the

beginning of another church year – but as a threshold. A moment when what has been meets what might yet be.

I think of my yesterdays, and how they imbued my adult self with both childhood wonder alongside a deep fear of change. And I anticipate with joy what tomorrow may offer, knowing that sorrows will creep in. So, I have an invitation. Find a picture of you as a child and offer comfort to your younger self. Practice compassionate self-forgiveness. Reside in the happy memories that shaped you. As author B.J. Neblett reminds us, “None of us are the same as we were yesterday, nor will be tomorrow.” So cherish today. Remember yesterday. And use both to craft a more beautiful tomorrow.

May it be so, and Amen