



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “First Footing for the New Year”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on January 3, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16*

*Every circumstance is a chance for you to practice being the person you truly want to be.*  
Marianne Williamson

*The earth is a circle; and even time seems to have a circular nature...The year is a circle... This rhythm is even mirrored in the day...First, the new dawn comes out of the darkness, strengthening toward noon, falling away toward evening until night returns again.*  
John O'Donohue

### Sermon

Two days ago we officially greeted the New Year – 2016. I hope you have caught up on your sleep and have recovered from any other winter holiday excesses—perhaps too many rich foods, unruly house guests, late night parties, or maybe too much spending? Many of us indulge in these ways as part of our year-end observances.

In a way, it's odd that we do all these things because, just as there is no difference between December 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, there really is no difference between December 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup>. One day follows the other seamlessly. The earth doesn't shake, the sun doesn't dance, and the moon doesn't glimmer when the clock strikes midnight on January 1<sup>st</sup>. It's only because we humans categorize the days differently that they appear different.

Generally, I think we experience time along linear lines. We think of a timeline where the past extends infinitely in one direction and the future lies infinitely in the opposite direction. The past never meets the future except in the present moment – which is gone in an instant. The convention of a calendar reinforces the idea that time is linear. We even tear off days, months, and years as we constantly march forward through our days, never revisiting the past.

And yet, Earth's endless circling around the sun creates a year. A circle, not a straight line – which means we retrace a year's path over and over and over again. Linear time and circular time together form the rhythm and seasons of our lives. But whether we think of our lives as spent

in circles, with no beginning and no end, or in infinite straight lines, the difference between one day and another is merely a cultural convention that archaeology has proven we humans have been keeping since before written history. Stonehenge is a primary example of humans tracking time and repeating solar and lunar events.

I am *so glad* we have this convention.

Not because I think humans need an excuse to drink champagne and get together with friends. Though I like both, I appreciate that a new year allows you and me to start over.

When we mark the passing of time with an annual event whose very name includes the word *New*, it means whatever has already occurred is now Old, part of the past, over and done with. We say, “Out with the old, in with the new,” and what comes in new is a clean slate, a fresh start.

Since every culture and religion includes this New Year convention, it clearly serves a deeply meaningful human need. I believe new beginnings are necessary because we are incredibly imperfect creatures aware of our own foibles, mistakes, and limitations. And, we aspire to be something greater – we wish to be more perfect.

Our desire to be better than we are motivates many of us to participate in a religious community. Having an at least a once-a-week, Sunday morning reminder of our values and high ideals serves to bring us back to closer adherence to those ideals. This weekly reminder keeps us from straying too far or being seduced away by the bright shiny objects of greed, selfishness, and excessive individualism.

Our desire to be better than we are also motivates many of us to make New Year’s resolutions. In addition to eating better, losing weight, and getting more exercise, we commonly promise to be kinder, more generous, and more forgiving. We commonly promise to become better informed about a topic, get more involved in an issue, or stretch ourselves in some new way. These are all worthy resolutions to begin our year and our lives anew.

If we couldn’t let go of the mistakes we make or the ways we might not live up to our high expectations for ourselves, we’d be carrying around tremendous weight on our shoulders. We’d never be able to let go of our imperfections if we felt we could never start over or try again to be better individuals. It’s no wonder the convention of a New Year can be found across cultures and religions. The New Year lets us move beyond who we have been to who we might yet be.

Each and every one of us needs this opportunity because we’re going to make mistakes. We’re going to hurt others and be hurt by others. But we, our human spirits, are resilient. We get back up after falling down. And our New Year’s traditions help us do just that.

But the New Year isn’t only for looking back on our mistakes. It’s a chance to look back on what we did right. It’s a chance to recommit ourselves to doing more of those right things. It means we can look back and accept both the good and the not so good aspects of who we are.

A New Year reflection also offers us a time to consider what seeds were sown, what patterns begun, what connections were made, and what lessons were learned. We don’t need to wipe our slates totally clean. We want to bring some things forward.

The story I told earlier has nothing to do with the New Year, but in its own way it embodies the value of a New Year’s new start.

When we make a mistake or when things don't go right, we often don't know exactly why. I frequently blame gremlins as the culprits behind my losing a computer file or for some other technological snafu I encounter. Or if I'm thoughtless in a remark I might make to someone, I say some inner demon got the best of me. Or if I trip walking down the sidewalk, clearly some mischievous elfin sprite stuck his foot out. I couldn't be that clumsy.

We really have no idea why some things happen. In the story, the daughter was overtired and she forgot to toss out the dirty water from her foot washing. The spirit of the water made visible the consequences of her forgetfulness.

She battled her spirit foe and when she realized she couldn't solve it on her own, she went to the wise woman for help. Through the guidance of this elder, she successfully vanquished her foe. In the process the girl learned she was capable of fighting chaotic forces and she learned it was okay to ask for help.

These are valuable lessons for us, too. Our problems don't always manifest themselves so clearly. The demons we fight are rarely so visible. And our culture often teaches us that we must solve our problems ourselves. Children and adults both need to be reminded that we are competent and can handle a world that seems more chaotic than ordered. And, we need to be reminded that here is a community of wise elders ready to help each other, no matter what our age.

In 1691, the Scottish Reverend Robert Kirk affirmed that the world is full of spirits. He wrote "[they were] As thick as atoms in the air." Whether you believe the world is full of nature spirits or not, whether you perceive the fairies and sprites or not, and whether a tall, dark-haired person was first to step foot across your threshold this new year or not, may you only be visited by good fortune in 2016.

May you remember to toss out your dirty feet-water before bed each night, and  
May all your new beginnings be blessed as we step into this New Year together.  
May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. How do you wish to begin this New Year and what will help you keep that promise?
2. What lessons have you learned in the past year and what new lessons call you forward?
3. To whom do you owe a personal apology or thank you for some occurrence this past year?
4. How can you alleviate any concerns that might prevent you from realizing your dreams?