



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The shape of the year: meanings we find and meanings we make

Alix Geard © 1st January 2023

Opening Words

Our 4th principle is “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning”.

“Search” is an interesting word there. One of its familiar meanings is to look for a thing that exists. Many truths about things in the world may indeed be there to be found by this kind of searching. We observe, we measure, we interpret patterns, we test.

But searching for something can also mean reaching for it. Wanting to have or share something. And getting that ‘something’ can involve creating the thing, idea or custom that you seek.

Most meanings are things we make.

Sometimes we share them, and that shared meaning is a way we bond.

Random Musings

The shape of the year: meanings we find and meanings we make

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tatou katoa

Greetings, greetings, greetings to us all.

Welcome again to this - small, niche - gathering of our community. Thank you for the opportunity to stretch outside my own comfort zone to address our group here. Happy New Year.

Or should I say “Happy Gregorian New Year”? Let’s come back to that.

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On this first day of the year, I want to talk about meaning. Specifically, I want to talk

about how we take our small blue planet's gravitationally-bound sweep around its star and turn one point on that circuit into a time for parties and new year's resolutions and setting up a calendar for the year to come. About how different people - and peoples - do that differently, and how we navigate getting along together.

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My thesis is that calendars start with things we observe - that we "find" the simplest calendars in the world around us. As our societies get more complex and need different types of things from their calendars, we tweak them away from straightforward observation to meet the new needs of granaries and taxes, feasts and fasts. We use our calendars to commemorate important things: the ascension of rulers, the actions of gods, the anniversaries of births, and other changes to our families. We note when to plant our crops, when our shared social and civic celebrations will happen, and we add our own favoured high days and holidays.

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Here in Aotearoa New Zealand there are civic and secular rituals for this time of year. There's a 2-week pause, wrapped around the 4 public holidays. There are work shut-downs and change freezes in this suspended time. People travel to gather with family and friends or to take a holiday. News articles list things that happened in the year that's ending. There's cricket, and a New Year's Honours List. For a week or more it's possible to lose track of what day it is - and there are memes about that, too. We seem to hang, suspended in time; neither in one year nor the other.

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For those of us who have the week between our summer public holidays as "the week outside of time", I hope you're feeling rested. For those supporting health services and infrastructure which can't shut down, I wish you well and hope that you've had a break recently or will get one soon. For those supporting family and friends over this time, I hope you find what you need to recharge, whether that's energy or stillness.

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We've spoken, including at our Christmas Eve service, about this time of year as an apex, a turning point in the passage of the years. There's a lot of talk of endings and beginnings. As January comes in, named for the 2-headed god who looks to the past and the future, there's a sense that this period of suspended time is also a kind of chrysalis phase, dissolving the old year and preparing for a new year that's still unknown.

There's a strong cultural sense of pivoting. Of putting one unit of time aside as completed, and embarking on a new one. Of setting up a new journal, even hanging a new calendar. Of reassessing our priorities for the year ahead.

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I use the phrase “looking ahead” as I speak today. I want to note that the idea of travelling forward into the future is a culturally-mediated way of describing the passage of time. Te ao Māori famously holds that we move backward into the future - ka mua, ka muri. We know the past and what’s already been. We’re unaware of what is yet to come.

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We live in a world of layered truths and meanings. This period of time that floats between the years is anchored between an astronomical event at solstice, a religious festival and a civil celebration. How does that work for us? How did it come to be? Who does it speak to? How well does it fit this land and this latitude?

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My civil calendar is Gregorian, with the year beginning today. But in my civil life I also work with the New Zealand tax year which starts in April and the government financial year, starting in July.

And there’s a stunning array of times when people here celebrate a new year according to solar, lunar and lunisolar calendars. Many of them are occasions to share food and memories, to make noise, and - especially for the winter events - to light the darkness or wear bright colours:

- Our winter solstice is in late June and our summer solstice in late December.
- Lunar New Year, also called Chinese New Year or Vietnamese New Year, is in mid January. We’ll move from the year of the Tiger to the year of the Rabbit.
- Historically, people who came to New Zealand from India tended to come from Punjab or Gujarat. Punjabi new year is in mid-April, and Gujarati new year is on the second day of Diwali in mid-November.
- Islamic new year is in mid-July.
- Rosh Hashanah, one of four Jewish New Years, is in mid-September.
- The Christian liturgical new year starts on the first Sunday of Advent, this year in early December.

And of course we have Matariki, still fresh as a public holiday marking a Māori new year in the darkest times. This year the public holiday will be on the 14th of July, with celebrations for Puanga Matariki in the month around. This is a time found by watching the stars, and given meaning - several meanings, with more being developed - by the people sharing in it. When you plan what to invest your creation-of-meaning into this year, I ask that you make Matariki one of the events you explore.

We, and others in our communities, will celebrate each and several of these as new years. And although the year is a thing we can “find” by looking, the choice of when to mark its end and beginning is in good part a thing that we’ve created rather than a thing that existed for us to find. That’s fine - we create meaning all the time, and I’m for it. It’s good sometimes, though, to reflect on the meanings we’ve created and sift through them. What have we brought from old times and ancestors that we want to continue?

What fits our current environment, social groupings, intentions? What would we like to add, remove, continue or change?

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Some meanings we find: there is a cycle of the year based on the way our planet's tilt makes us experience the circling of the sun. Some meanings we invent: each society seems to pick a point in that circling to declare to be the completion of one cycle and the beginning of another. Then we take our calendars with us, transplanting the things we find, tweaking to make them fit with other things that are also important to us. Sometimes this makes them lose their direct connection to the observed world: seasons that make sense *outside* the tropics might have less relevance in the tropics. The Gregorian calendar, and the Julian calendar before it - held that new year came in winter, at the first day - the Calends - of January. And through a long history of politics, the layering of celebrations and the movement of people, that's arrived here in Aotearoa where the calends of January is a time of long days and relative warmth. Winter Christmas songs and symbols in Aotearoa are a call-back to a transplanted tradition AND colonialism AND commercialism AND a connection with others around the world who share the symbols even when they're not part of lived experience.

How do we relate to calendars and celebrations that were developed for places and societies that are in significant ways not like ours? We develop our own version of the meal with family involving barbecues and white wine in the sun. We live in that alongside a cultural experience of snowflakes and sleigh rides. And as we move through the year there's a good chance we'll experience at least a few of those many other ways of setting the new year that are celebrated here.

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A city planner I follow is fond of reminding us that to tell what a city really values you don't go to its vision statement, but instead to its budget. For people, even more telling than that is to look at how we allocate our time.

And part of that is what we choose to celebrate.

When you set up a calendar for the year, what do you mark in it? Public holidays? Birthdays for friends and family? Weddings? Anniversaries? Poetry day? Transgender awareness week? Te wiki o te reo Māori? Parihaka? That catch-up you do each year with old friends? Your grandkid's birthday? Your anniversary?

Ask yourself: to the extent that I can outline it, what is the shape of my year? What meanings do I find, gather, choose and - yes - make, as I'm swept into this next circuit of the sun?

Closing Words

Go now: as one day passes to the next; as one year passes to the next.

Gather and craft the meanings of your year: great and small, shared and private.

Help one another. Bring justice. Live joyfully.

Question for meditation / discussion

What events and commemorations do you want to add to your calendar this year?

Are there any you might remove or change?