



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Reflections & Resolutions

Alix Geard © 31 December 2023

Good morning, community of Auckland Unitarians. Kia ora koutou! As we gather on this last Sunday of the year, New Year's Eve, we find ourselves between times, standing on the bridge that connects the past and the future. Today, our theme is "Reflections and Resolutions" – a time to look back at the footprints we've left on the path of the past year and to gaze forward with hope and intention into the uncharted territory of the coming year.

There are clichés at this time of year. We might at well make use of them. Janus, the 2-headed god of doorways, transitions and January looks both back and forward.

I encourage us all to take some time to think, to feel, to breathe, to examine... and to gather ourselves together as we move into the new year.

Reflections

In Māori worldviews, the concept of whakapapa speaks to the interconnectedness of all things, the understanding that each step we take is woven into the fabric of our story. As Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, we embrace a diverse tapestry of beliefs and experiences, and today, we come together to celebrate the rich whakapapa of our shared humanity.

Reflection is a powerful practice that transcends cultural boundaries, inviting us to journey into the recesses of our hearts and minds. Let us pause for a moment of collective reflection, contemplating the highs and lows, the joys and challenges that have marked our personal and shared experiences throughout the past year. In this sacred space, let us honour the diversity of our individual stories and perspectives, knowing that each story contributes to the mosaic of our community.

Looking back, we may encounter moments of triumph and moments of struggle, times of joy and times of sorrow. As we reflect, let us remember that our experiences are not isolated; they are threads in the larger tapestry of human existence. In the spirit of shared whakapapa, we recognize the profound interconnectedness that binds us together, fostering empathy and understanding.

In the spirit of reflection, let us also acknowledge the lessons we've learned, the growth we've experienced, and the resilience that resides within us. Our journey, like the ebb

and flow of the tide, is marked by constant change, and in each wave of change, there is an opportunity for transformation and renewal.

I begin my reflections on the past year with a personal note. The first service I led with Auckland Unitarians was on the first day of this year. Under Ted Zorn's guidance I learnt about worship templates and how to use them. I spent the Christmas break at my inlaws' place, trying to pull together the "Musings" for the service, with much the same stress and productivity as I'd previously written undergraduate essays, sliding them in on deadline. (That is still the case...)

My message then was that the search for truth and meaning from our 4th principle involves both finding things and making things. I talked about calendars and holiday celebrations, and how we have all these different ways of picking a point in our planet's circuit around the sun and saying "That's where one cycle ends and a new one begins". The astronomy is there for us to find. New Year timing and celebrations are things we invent. Sharing those celebrations is one of the ways we bond.

I asked you to add Matariki to your cycle of celebrations of the year. Did you do that? How was it for you?

Since that first service of the year we've had another year of changes and challenges. The headlines have included:

- armed conflicts, especially but not only affecting Ukraine and Gaza
- national elections and a change in Government here in Aotearoa New Zealand
- weather events – especially the storms and flooding intensified by climate change that Cyclone Gabrielle brought to the Auckland and Tairāwhiti regions
- strong and emotive movements to turn gender identity into a wedge issue to divide us against our neighbours.

Many of us have also dealt with illness: ourselves, and in our families, communities and workplaces.

The week after that New Year service, Ted led a service where the first half of the musing was written by ChatGPT. I thought it was cheating. I also thought it was fascinating. It was the final nudge for me to start exploring Large Language Models or LLMs. We've heard about LLMs often this year as Generative AI under names like ChatGPT, Bard and Copilot. It's troubling, and intriguing, and here. These days, when I have a blank page and I'm stuck for how to start something, I'll fairly often use Generative AI to give me a first draft that I can then correct and wrestle into shape. Yes, I've used it here.

Having our refurbished church organ reinstalled was a bright thread.

We've discussed the transformative work the Unitarian Universalists of America are doing to reformulate the UU principles as values. I'm increasingly working back and forward between the models, getting familiar with what the new framework brings as we approach our current challenges.

For us as a church community, a strong strand this year has been our minister Clay Nelson's illness, retirement and death. I know Clay came into this year not wanting to retire. Ministry was an important part of who he was, and he wanted to keep that active for as long as possible. I am thankful that the services around his retirement gave us the chance to acknowledge Clay's work and influence, and how he impacted us all. We miss him and grieve him.

And also this year we've kept connection with family and friends. We've made new connections within our communities. We've learnt new things. My achievements haven't made headlines, but I've stepped into a new work role, completed my Level 1 and Level 2 reo Māori courses and learnt the basics of how to weave with harakeke. And I've stepped well out of my comfort zone to lead a handful of these services. Many of us have similar stories of changes and connections.

The "Reflections" questions for discussion at the end of this service will be:

- Do you have business from this past year to address and resolve?
- How might you do that?

I've worded this a bit gently to encourage us to explore possibilities, but if it's clear to you, take note of how you *will* do that.

Resolutions

Now, as we stand on the threshold of the New Year, let us turn our gaze forward with a spirit of hopeful anticipation. The coming year is a blank canvas awaiting the brushstrokes of our intentions, a book yet to be written. This is the time for resolutions – not the rigid kind that set us up for disappointment, but the kind that inspire us to evolve, to stretch beyond our perceived limitations.

Let our resolutions affirm the values that anchor us. Let them be commitments to cultivate compassion, justice, and love. In our diversity, we find strength; in our shared aspirations, we find unity. As Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, we are called to engage in a lifelong process of discovery and transformation. Let our resolutions be guideposts on this sacred journey, pointing us toward a more compassionate, just, and interconnected world.

In the spirit of aroha, the Māori concept of love and compassion, let us resolve to extend kindness not only to ourselves but to every being we encounter on this shared Earth. Our resolutions, like seeds planted in fertile soil, have the power to blossom into a garden of positive change, nurturing the interconnected web of life that sustains us all.

As we embark on the journey into the unknown of the coming year, let us do so with open hearts and minds. The road ahead may be winding, with unexpected twists and turns, but let us walk it with courage, knowing that we are not alone. Our community, like a supportive wind at our backs, propels us forward, and the shared values that connect us serve as our compass.

The US Unitarian Universalist Association is gathering new worship resources. In the cover notes, they ask these 3 questions:

- What seeds are you planting for the new year?
- How are you weaving your magic into your relationships with others?
- How can we center beauty and goodness and love in all that's ahead?

The "Resolutions" questions for discussion at the end of this service will be:

- What would you like there to be more of in the world?
- How might you encourage that?

Whakamutunga

In closing, let us embrace the beauty of reflection and resolution as integral parts of our human experience. In looking back, we honour the lessons of the past, and in looking forward, we cast a vision for a future shaped by our shared aspirations. May the tapestry of our whakapapa, woven with threads of reflection and resolution, be a testament to the strength and resilience of our community here.

As we stand on this threshold together, let our collective spirit be a beacon of light, illuminating the path ahead with the promise of a new year filled with growth, connection, and love.

Arohanui, much love to you all.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

Reflections

Do you have business from this past year to address and resolve?
How might you do that?

Resolutions

What would you like there to be more of in the world?
How might you encourage that?