

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“The Beginning of the End?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 1, 2012

Spoken Meditation

Spirit of life, spirit of love
 We breath you in, and we breath you out,
 We circulate you with every beat of our heart,
 You infuse every pore and follicle of our bodies.
 Whether in the form of breath, heartbeat, or sensation,
 You are already present in us.
 May our awareness meet that presence
 in this time and in this place, this morning.

Not all of us made it to this New Year.
 Not all of us will make it to the next one.
 Human life is very precious ... and very short.
 The gift of reflective consciousness is extremely rare.

What will we do with this precious gift.
 As the sun rises on this new year?

Let me respectfully remind you --
 Life and death are of supreme importance,
 Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.
 This moment is an opportunity to awaken.
 This moment is an opportunity to love.
 Take heed. Do not squander this moment.

Sermon

So here we are at the beginning of a new year. Usually this is a time for making resolutions and cultivating hopes for the days ahead, fresh with possibilities for a new start. This year, however, has a sense of ominous foreboding. A number of people have been hyping 2012 as a very significant year – and that isn't just because we've got Presidential elections.

Maybe you've heard something about the Mayan calendar ending on December 21, 2012. Here's the back story on that.

The Mayans have two calendars (three actually, but let's keep it simple), a cyclical one that runs for 52 years, and a long one, called a b'ak'tun, that moves in 394 year cycles. Their

calendar started about 5125 years ago. Right now we're in the thirteenth b'ak'tun or long cycle. That cycle comes to an end December 21. On that day we'll start the fourteenth b'ak'tun, though this is written as the number 13 since the calendar started at 0.

[Triskaidekaphobes](#) beware! You've got 394 years of bad luck if you use this calendar notation.

So why all the excitement about a date change? If you want more details, [go to Wikipedia](#) of course. The source wasn't the Mayans but those westerners who study them.

In 1957, Mayanist and astronomer Maud Worcester Makemson wrote that "the completion of a Great Period of 13 b'ak'tuns would have been of the utmost significance to the Maya". In 1966, Michael D. Coe, American archaeologist, anthropologist and author, wrote in *The Maya* that "there is a suggestion ... that Armageddon would overtake the degenerate peoples of the world and all creation on the final day of the 13th b'ak'tu. Thus ... our present universe would be annihilated in December 2012 when the Great Cycle of the Long Count reaches completion."

Thankfully, Coe's words have since been disputed by other Mayan scholars who find no convincing evidence of any such prophecy, calling it a "modern invention." Others say the Mayans don't have a linear sense of time that concludes with the end of creation – this is a western Apocalyptic overlay on their culture. For the Mayan, the end of a long cycle is something to be celebrated rather than feared.

This western obsession with end times, raptures and doomsday is a rather unfortunate byproduct of the inclusion of the Book of Revelations as the last chapter in the Bible. So much grief and misery could be avoided if they had just chosen to leave that creepy book out. Because it is so deep in the western mind that the world will end, we can't seem to help but see it around every corner.

Two examples come to mind. This is predicted to be THE BIG YEAR when supply and demand collide for oil. I sat in on William Reinhardt of NYSERDA's forum on the Geopolitics of Oil on the second Sunday of December downstairs. He showed us one power point slide that showed projected demand going up faster than current reserves for this coming year. When that happens, prices go up until the demand goes down. The problem is, everything we do, wear, and consume is tied to the price and availability of oil. Curbing demand means our material standard of living declines. Some say it is already happening right now. A declining GDP rather than a growing GDP is an economic cataclysm, since our economic system doesn't function without the prospect of future growth.

Europe may be the first economy to be paying this price of decline. They are not exporters of energy but net importers, especially as the North Sea oil wells begin drying up. Yes, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Ireland have been borrowing way too much money, but that is a reasonable thing to do in a growing economy. In a shrinking economy, there isn't enough to pay the loans back with. The belt tightening shrinks consumption as funds are used for debt payments. All this sets up a downward economic tailspin. My cousin Brian who writes

[a weekly market analysis blog](#) has been very pessimistic about Europe's prospects considering the size of the debt and the resistance to make real reforms. We'll see what happens.

People have been getting pretty stressed about 2012 fears. Bill Hudson is an information systems manager and amateur astronomer who [hosts a web site](#) to debunk 2012 hysteria. His reasons for creating the site are compelling. Visiting 5th and 8th grade classrooms, he started getting questions about 2012 three years ago. The students asked him if we were going to collide with a black hole or run into another planet in 2012. They were getting these predictions from Yahoo! Answers and Youtube. Hudson found this a little humorous until he got a worried email from a third grade teacher. One of his students had been talking about how it's ending, and why she shouldn't just end it now." A mother of a seven year old wrote to him, "[my] 7 year old happened to see a documentary on the History Channel [about 2012] that scared him so bad, that he became depressed and began to question the meaning of life." Grownups can take all this with a few grains of salt, but children don't know any better.

In reality, these children are facing a frightening future as human population and consumption growth slams up against hard energy, natural resource and environmental limits. Add to that nuclear proliferation, fear of terrorism eroding our freedom, and starvation and unemployment induced political instability. They are the first generation of Americans that expects to have a lower standard of living than their parents have enjoyed. They must face massive problems like climate change likely to reshape the globe in the decades ahead. We may well be living right now at the peak of human civilization for centuries into the future.

And 2012 could be the turning point.

Talking with my eighty year old father the other day, I pondered how we respond differently to anxiety about the future. He has been a generous contributor to the [Global Security Institute](#). Founded by Senator Alan Cranston, their mission is strengthening international cooperation, focusing on nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. My father met the President, [Johnathan Granoff](#), and was very impressed by him and the work the organization does. He has always been very focused on international affairs, embracing the vision of world community found in our Principles and Purposes. Though often frustrated by world problems, he holds on to the belief that world leaders can be influenced to move the world toward peace. He has the global view that good leaders can move the world in the right direction.

While I agree with him, I find my own focus and interests to be more local. Probably influenced by doing community organizing, but also feeling no small amount of despair seeing so much injustice in the world and the awful, unintended consequences of America's attempts to help, my focus is here. I'm interested in being part of making things better in the Capital Region. I don't know what the right thing to do is in Iraq or Iran right now. I don't

have all the classified information, or the language, that might show me what is really going on. And even if I did have the time to study policy web sites on Iraq and Iran, I wouldn't have time to understand what is going on in Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Argentina, East Timor or South Africa too. I can, however, develop some understanding of what is happening in my backyard, directly from the actual people involved. And maybe I can really make a difference here.

The problem with knowing as much as we do now about all the world's problems is the mismatch between what one person can do and the magnitude of the world's suffering. The third grader and the seven year old can't handle it emotionally ... and neither can we. Yet shutting it all out and ignoring it isn't the solution either.

We need to evolve our consciousness. We need to learn how to live creatively and productively while dealing with way too much information about the misery surrounding us all over the world. Just because we can't save everyone and solve the problems we hear about doesn't mean the future is hopeless.

An example of someone who is evolving her consciousness is Unitarian Universalist minister Karen (Cheh) Tse. She works internationally on one of the problems I wouldn't have believed you could do much, if anything, about. And she is making a big difference.

In December, she was featured on [a TED talk](#). If you haven't seen any TED talks, a lecture series sponsored by Google on innovative ideas, visit [TED.com](#). These videos are sparkling gems of the web.

Some of us probably [read about her](#) in the Winter 2007 issue of the UU World. Growing up in Los Angeles' Chinatown a Catholic, she didn't know anything about UU's. From an early age, her dreams were disturbed with witnessing torture scenes. Her compassion for the suffering of these dream visitors moved her to want to become a lawyer. After graduating from Scripps University, she got her J.D. From UCLA. For three years she practiced law in San Francisco as a public defender. Then she traveled to Cambodia to help them restore their legal system in the wake of the Khmer Rouge. They had killed all but ten lawyers. In 1995, while visiting a squalid prison, she met an incarcerated 12 year old boy who changed her life. Imprisoned for stealing a bicycle, beaten by police, tortured until he confessed, he had no trial date. No lawyer. No hope of release.

Karen wanted to make a difference in the lives of people like that boy but felt limited in what she could do. She realized "that the answers weren't just about the law. It was also about the spirit. If we're really going to create a worldwide human rights revolution, it's about the spirit." That insight stimulated her to enter Harvard Divinity School. She found us in a first year class on polity and felt like she had come home, even before attending a Sunday service!

While in seminary nurturing her spirit, she began to imagine a worldwide movement to

end torture. She didn't just imagine, she set to work building an institution to support that vision. Today she is getting a lot of honor, awards and recognition as her organization grows in size and effectiveness.

The door for her work opened with legal reforms in places like China, Cambodia, and Vietnam. They, like many nations have made tremendous strides in adopting laws that forbid torturing criminal defendants. What is missing is the implementation of those laws. Karen describes her organization, called [International Bridges to Justice](#), as a “practical nuts-and-bolts organization that seeks to build communities of conscience with lawyers, engineers, computer consultants, and others who can partner to build legal aid defender systems throughout the world.”

Torture continues to flourish, Tse says, because it is the cheapest form of criminal investigation. The key to ending it, she believes, is in creating public defender systems and training police officers and investigators in more effective and more humane techniques. “There’s a critical link between torture and the absence of defense counsel,” says Tse.

I bring her to your attention this morning because of the way she works, integrating strategy and spirit together. And in that integration, I find a lot of hope. Starting in 2001 in China, expanding to Cambodia and Vietnam, then to Burundi, she is a model of networking resources, connecting people and training trainers to teach everyone “You have a right to a defense lawyer, the right not to be tortured, and the right to a fair trial.” She takes the lofty dream of ending torture and works at the local level to realize the dream.

So rather than focusing on the “what ifs” that may be awaiting us in 2012, let us pay attention to and respond to the dreams and the visionaries that inspire us. We can do this by focusing beyond ourselves, seeking ways to be *part* of solutions. None of us can save the world by ourselves, but much meaning can be found by being part of using our energy and resources to heal and restore the world.

Like Tse, this congregation strives to be an agent of organizing people and resources strategically to deal with the problems we encounter, promoting our shared Unitarian Universalist values.

Whatever is ahead in this coming year,
 may we meet it together, in a spirit of mutual support.

That will make all the difference.