

Deeper Connections in 2024
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

Do your goals for 2024 feel joyless? You know, go to the gym four times a week, cut out caffeine, cut out sugar, reduce screen time, update your will, try that Swedish death cleaning. All valid ideas, but maybe not anything that fills your heart with happy anticipation. A lot of us start the year with resolutions that feel like the syllabus to a difficult class—important but not necessarily fun. I respect these serious attempts at better health, stronger relationships, more meaningful service to others. But let's take a few minutes to focus on how to have fun in 2024.

I've learned that I need to have something on my calendar to look forward to, and it's not getting my tires rotated or having the furnace serviced. I'm an enthusiast about a number of oddball topics, and I enjoy people who go deep into their own offbeat areas of interest. I tried several new experiences in 2023 that brightened my life.

How you seek out fun depends on your unique interests, of course, as well as considerations of time and money. Maybe you can hike the Pacific Crest trail, or maybe an online book group or a wilderness podcast is more realistic this year.

You can be realistic and still have fun. I learned from people who took kind of generic goals and turned them into something epic.

Like a friend who wanted to spend more time with her dad. She found a list of the 100 best movies ever made, and she and her sister and their dad resolved to watch them all, together. That was ambitious and certainly not for everyone, but I liked that as a goal. They had organized fun together, it was inexpensive, and it wasn't physically challenging, which made it more accessible for their family.

That friend and her sister also did an annual dance week—again, not for everyone, but they had so much fun. Seven consecutive nights every year when they dressed up and went to clubs. They stayed out late, they laughed a lot, and they were maybe relieved when it was over and they could return to staying home and going to bed at a decent hour.

Book groups are another venue that can be creative, silly, or thought-provoking. Choose to do a deep dive into an unexpected topic. I had a coworker whose book group one year had the fairly specific theme of queer, Guatemalan poets.

You may know someone who had the resources and ability to make pilgrimages to see a baseball game in every ballpark or visit every national park. Maybe you can scale that down and take your kids to every playground in Vancouver, and make a notebook to commemorate it. You could resolve to go out once a month to try restaurants from other cultures. I knew a couple who were interested in libraries. They resolved to visit all 11 of the Carnegie libraries still operating in Oregon. It was a solid choice, and they had a great time.

A friend who shared my love of the old tv show Buffy the Vampire Slayer joined an online Buffy fan group—and signed me up for it too. That seemed pretty silly even by my standards, but it was a hoot. We did secret Santas, and occasionally met in person, and now, many years later, I'm still in touch with Buffy friends from all over.

In 2023, after several years when I didn't feel like celebrating Christmas, I invited a bunch of friends over for a wreath-making party, and it was so fun. What else did I schedule in 2023 for fun? I spent a night in a Star Trek themed room at a funky old motel at the coast. I set aside some house projects so I could fly to Nashville for a memorial concert honoring the songwriter Justin Townes Earle and visit the National Museum of African American Music. I attended the Jane Austen Society's annual conference. I didn't know a single person among the hundreds of Janeites there, but I had a feeling I'd enjoy being with the academics, podcasters, fanfic writers, students, and people who really enjoyed wearing Regency clothing, and I was right. It was perfect for me. I'm fine with people saying, "you do you, Deborah." Or "it's nice that you're living your truth."

Maybe in 2024, you too will pursue interests that could seem boring or silly to others but totally float your boat. Maybe this is the year you learn the latest dance moves, or get to know a musical genre that your grandchildren (or grandparents) are drawn to. I hope that "living your truth" includes lots of time for fun.

Reflection on the Theme by Ben Kessler

When I think about self-care, I think about what does it mean to care? What do I care about and how do I act towards the people I care about? It means that I wish them the best, and I want to see them reach their highest potential. It means that I want them to be happy, healthy, and whole.

Something that has taken me a long time to really learn is that I don't really take care of myself the way I think people should be taken care of. Which means that I tend to neglect myself. It's easier for me to spend time helping others and put aside all the minor things that I really should do for myself, but I can't be bothered.

But why do I do that? I guess there must be some part of me deep inside, a part that was hurt a long time ago, that decided I wasn't worth being taken care of. I don't know how or why this developed, but the resulting behavior is clear. It's not that I consciously don't believe I am worth taking care of. If I ask myself honestly, the answer is of course I do – I know that I have just as much inherent value as all other living beings do. And yet my actions don't live up to that.

It seems to me that the common idea of self-care is to work like crazy until you are near a crisis, at which point you then take a break to do as many pleasurable things as possible to recharge your batteries. Unfortunately for me, that mostly means eating chocolate and lying down a lot – not a very good recipe for feeling better.

That kind of encapsulates the less than healthy attitude of not really embodying self care, or self compassion. What would it mean to take it more seriously? What if I could find the root of why I busy myself to the point of ignoring my own needs? Instead of running myself into crisis mode so often, what if I could make long term changes so that I could function in a healthy way, with my capacity increasing

as I take better care of myself and heal old wounds? It seems to me that that would be the advanced version of self care.

So I think that self care has to start with the decision that I really do deserve the best, and that whatever I'm willing to do for whoever I care about the most I should at the least be willing to do that for myself. I think it's worth asking, how much can I really love someone else if I don't love myself? And how much can I care for another if I don't care for myself? If there was a good reason that I shouldn't care for myself, doesn't that mean that others could just as easily have a reason too? And yet we know that no matter what has happened in the lives of our loved ones, they will always deserve care and compassion. In other words, love is unconditional.

In order to care for myself better, I think I first need to listen to my body and the way I feel. I have come a long way in this already, because for decades I stored most of my feelings in my body by hardening myself off, creating an armor for myself to face the world with. A lot of work has gone into slowly opening that armor up, and healing the wounds it was covering. I have to allow myself to feel the ups and downs without judging. I can't always have a good day, and since caring can't be a conditional thing, that means I have to accept that I won't always feel great and it doesn't help to beat myself up over it. If I am really listening to myself, it would mean that sometimes my body will dictate that I spend a day doing a lot less than normal, and if I really care I would acknowledge that and not let the inner taskmaster overrule it, because we know that that just causes more problems down the line. Making yourself go go go when the body needs to slow down is how we get into trouble in the first place.

It is scary admitting that what I really want is to be happy, and I can't just cover over that by trying to make other people happy instead. But talking about happiness brings us full circle. Because I do believe that true happiness is found in living one's life for the sake of all living things. After all, we are all here together on this ride. But that includes me, I am here too, and I deserve to be happy. If I establish my own healthy habits and take care of my body, that will free me to have more time and energy to spend doing what I love, which is helping people. So self-care is really a win-win thing. I would strongly recommend myself to try it.

Reflection on the Theme by Dean Yamamoto

Good Morning! I chose Gay's reflection on retirement as I am approaching my own, pulling back hrs in 2024, scheduled to retire in 2025. Here, let me share from her introduction in her book of poetry, a magical moment:

"Perhaps it is because [dragonflies] are one of the most ancient species that still exists on earth, or maybe it is their whimsical iridescent elegance that captures my imagination...

"My friend's dad had died a week before and it was the day of his service. As I headed to the parking lot to drive to the chapel, my thoughts were of my OWN father who had passed away more than two years before. Suddenly, ..out of nowhere, ..the dragonfly appeared. I got into the car and sat entranced as it hovered near the front window then moved to the right and left of the car. For an instant it seemed as if it was all around me. ..I was awestruck by its fragile presence. ..The dragonfly seemed to beckon me. ...[and] I [have] felt.. the magic.. of its unexpected visit.. long afterward..."

WOW !

Umm.. I think we should leave it just there. Y'all can go home now, Amen & off to coffee hour.

2024? Deborah said something about Swedish death cleaning? Is that really a thing? Anything like the Samurai's hara kiri

Ima just gonna take it easy and spend my days looking for dragonflies in this new year. You know, it's a cruel, harsh world out there with so much conflict. Some days it just feels too heavy. War continues to rage in The Middle East & in Ukraine; climate's heating up; as are politics.

So ya, Ima try and balance my peacemaking with more dragonfly watching, for I've forgotten how animated the world truly is. Or to put it another way, to slow down, take more deep breaths, question my Facebook prompts [head shake], and give witness to how much more is happening in front of me and right here in my spiritual community.

This is about my 20th yr at UUCV. I've cherished the friendships made. It CAN take a little "elbow grease": like Ben with coffee hr; making room for a chalice circle here; volunteering for a committee there; or just chatting up the visitor in church at coffee. ..Mmm.. no, not "just" chat. How about seeking a meaningful exchange of what's going on. Perhaps there is something YOU, can help carry, for another, this week.

Be looking,... for those Dragonflies!

In 2024, I'll join the Beloved Community Work Group here at church. I'm inspired by their activities which anticipate the coming UU national vote on new "principles language" to center us in love, working for justice.

I confess I'm still fixated on Teresa Cooley's book *Transforming Conflict*, a recent BCWG event focus. What an impact I/we could have on our world were we to embody some of this teaching. Things like "holding a spirit of exploration," or "having the humility to embrace ignorance, ie, what we do not yet know." ..reminds me of the Zen concept, "Sho shin," or "beginner's mind."* A good start for healthier conflict, I'm thinking. I bet dragonflies sit Zazen.

I'll close with a dragonfly moment that caught me by surprise, and as poet Gay has said, beckoned me forward:

In the harsh Chicago winter of 1979, I was a rather lost 24 yr old, searching for a path. I'd spent 2yrs after college, unsure of what to do with my life, biding time at dad's art studio. Volunteering one night would change everything.

Please excuse some of the unvarnished language: we were a motley crew of volunteers working to keep, in the vernacular of the day, "wino's on skid row" from freezing to death. Led by inspiring Franciscan Brothers, dedicated to a life of poverty, we held the shelter together by a thread.

The scene that night was chaotic: men clad in freezing, wet rags, looking to escape the blizzard outside, shuffling in for a cup of watered down Folgers. Musta been 50 of 'em, elbowing each other for a strip of blanket & floor space. The cacophony of grunts, flatulence, incoherent mumbling was disorienting, not to mention the odors of street life that kept me wincing.

Oh oh, TROUBLE !!

Right across from me, a grizzled old fella who went by the moniker, "Injun Joe" got elbowed so hard, he nearly crumpled. He shot a glaring stare at the offender. I braced for the coming fight, my body tensing. I was sure Joe was reaching in his pocket for a weapon. And it was gonna be me who'd have to wrestle it away.

As Joe slowly withdrew his hand, his expression softened. With the meticulous intention of a priest with the host, I watched him tear the half-eaten McDonald's burger, and slip one half into the mouth of the man who had struck him.

I'm shaking now as I recall the moment.

Injun Joe, in this most unlikely "upper room" embodied a Christ like figure at the last supper. I fell to my knees. And knew this was holy ground. He was my dragonfly. That experience drew me to seminary to explore a calling I had not yet understood.

Join me in seeking out the dragonfly's wisdom this year. I ask you to take one step, with curiosity, in her direction. I can't wait for what she has to teach us.