How do we begin a new year? How do we begin each and every day?

J. R. R. Tolkien offers the text of a song in his books about Hobbits. In his fantasy/fairy tale epics of good triumphing over evil and of self-discovery, his hero Bilbo Baggins sings a song whose words go like this:

The road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began  
Now far ahead the road has gone,  
And I must follow if I can,  
Pursuing it with weary feet,  
Until it joins some larger way,  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then?  
I cannot say.

How do we begin each day? Perhaps by saying, "Good Morning." Tolkien offers this exchange between Bilbo and Gandalf:

"Good Morning!" said Bilbo, and he meant it. The sun was shining, and the grass was very green. But Gandalf looked at him from under long bushy eyebrows ….

"What do you mean?" he said. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?"

"All of them at once," said Bilbo.

And "the road goes ever on and on…"

Bilbo Baggins early on says about his clan, "We are plain quiet folk, and I have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, and uncomfortable things."
Yet, he enters the Hero’s Quest of self-discover and service to others.

Tolkien, like so many, offers the image of the reluctant pilgrim, the seeker, the adventurer, of being on the road, to unknown destinations deep and fierce, to places peaceful and blissful, to exactly we know not where. And it is a fundamental religious image, a mythic image, an epic image of the human soul, the growing soul.

Among New Year’s resolutions, at least reminders, is this one:

*Each of us is on a journey, a journey of the Spirit, of the mind and of the heart, a sacred journey into greater gratitude and awareness with the hope that we shall make the world a bit better and make ourselves more human along the way.*

“*What We Choose Is What We Are*”

During this past couple of weeks at this New Year, the closing verse from an old hymn kept coming to mind. About 100 years ago, William DeWitt Hyde, President of Bowdoin College wrote:

> Since what we choose is what we are  
> And what we love we yet shall be,  
> The goal may ever shine afar –  
> The will to win it makes us free.

In those brief lines remains a most excellent teaching – a succinct summary of our way of being religious in the world.

And for the New Year, this affirmation is fitting as it lifts up so much of what is sacred in our human nature:

- the ability to choose,  
- the ability to love and how that helps us to grow and change, and  
- the power we have of human will to choose AND to love and thereby to define our lives.

We can choose how to live and to love rather than being pushed around by Life, or by circumstances, or by others, or by our own internal weather, emotions and feelings, even regrets.

We have a useful theme for the New Year—“what we choose is what we are” – and “what we love we yet shall be.”

To choose: our choices define us.

To love: what we love shapes us anew.
Acceptance and Challenge

Let’s hold that while I turn to a paradox in our religious path – in this freely choosing, big-hearted, spirit-filled faith tradition that we love so much and that gives so much to curious people like us.

One half of the paradox is in the reading – the story from India about the water bearer with his yoke and two pots, with the conversation he had with the pot that was cracked, and that still nourished life, nourished the flowers along only one side of the road.

“… the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, [but] The bearer said to the pot, " Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house."

Moral: Each of us has our own unique flaws. We’re all cracked pots, but it’s the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You’ve just got to take each person for what they are, and look for the good in them.

That’s how we, in this kind of religious community, celebrate humanity. We offer radical acceptance. We say to all who come – “Welcome! Come, come as you are. You have so much good within you – each one of us does! Welcome!”

Bruised, or broken, jubilant and strong, we are all children of a glorious creation, made of the stars.

This wonderful, radical acceptance is a gift we share.

Yet there is the paradox, and if not paradox, the challenge – the challenge to change, not just to change, but to grow, to become, to use your talents and gifts and Creativity, ever more fully.

Accepted for who we are, and challenged to grow our souls.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw put it more pointedly than we might when he made a fierce suggestion as he pondered human behavior and obligation. Once a year, Shaw suggested, each person ought to be examined on the character and conduct of his or her life. The weight of one’s efforts, according to his analysis, should be on the side of helping others, and if one cannot justify one’s existence on such a basis, on an annual basis, then, … then what?

He suggested that one should be put to death!
Recognizing and accepting the fact, the reality, that we are creatures with blended character – that we are capable of so much goodness and too much cruelty – recognizing this, our heritage would reject Shaw’s advice. The death penalty is not our answer for self-absorption, carelessness, malice, and indifference.

Yet Shaw reminds me of the admonition by Horace Mann, the 19th century Unitarian advocate of public education, who declared, “Be afraid to die until you have won some victory for humanity.”

Cracked pots that we are, accepted as we are, we are also challenged to make the world more sacred by what we choose and by what we love.

**Resolutions**

Resolutions for us? How about to honor your unique beauty and honor... and to honor Life’s way, God’s way, as change and growth? How about embracing the sacred journey?

*“Patience, Pragmatism and Principle”*

And what else?

The road goes ever on and on
  .... Pursuing it with weary feet,
  Until it joins some larger way,
  Where many paths and errands meet.
  And whither then?
  I cannot say.

A movie of great note at this season is *Lincoln*, the story of the last months of Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency and the passage of the 13th Amendment. Lincoln’s earlier road to the Presidency was a grand adventure from being born in a single-room log cabin in Kentucky, upbringing in Indiana and Illinois, working on flatboats on the Mississippi, as a postmaster, and as a surveyor, becoming a lawyer, a State Representative, a US Representative, and on to the Presidency in 1861.

A newspaper reporter in 1860 reported on Lincoln’s Cooper Union address:

When Lincoln rose to speak, I was greatly disappointed. He was tall, tall—oh, how tall! and so angular and awkward that I had, for an instant, a feeling of pity for so ungainly a man.... But pretty soon he began to get into his subject; he straightened up, made regular and graceful gestures; his face lighted as with an inward fire; the whole man was transfigured. I forgot his clothes, his personal appearance, and his individual peculiarities. Presently, forgetting myself, I was on my feet with
the rest, yelling … [wildly], cheering this wonderful man.

As many have noted, Lincoln among many qualities displayed the complexity of patience, pragmatism and principle. He refused to demonize others; he sought to be a bridge-builder. He reached out to adversaries, as President Obama quoted in Lincoln’s first inaugural address: "We are not enemies, but friends.... Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." (See Philip B. Kunhardt III, *Smithsonian* magazine, February 2009)

Would that politicians would embrace this as a New Year’s resolution and practice it beyond the current, ugly, divisive partisanship.

For Lincoln, the road went on and joined a larger way… of emancipation.

“*Broken. And New.*”

Recently, I have learned about someone with a different road. Paul Guest is a poet and essayist. Since age 12 in 1986, following a bicycle accident, he has been a quadriplegic, breaking his third and fourth cervical vertebrae. His wheelchair is equipped with a breathing tube, and he has a mouthpiece by which he types.

Paul Guest, now 38, reflects on his life this way: “Luck beyond luck gilded me. If I couldn’t lift my arms, I could breathe. I could see. I could move more of my body than any diagnosis could have ever sanely promised. Great grief filled me up, I seemed to breathe it but what freed me was this: if my arms never worked again, never dressed myself, if I depended on others to do these things for the rest of my life, I no longer had to be, or even could be, who I once was. What I once was, I was broken. And new.” (Amazon review, Bonnie Brody, May 7, 2010)

He tells us how at age 14, “I had reached the end of the body’s capacity to heal itself. There was no more. Though this was something too painful for loved ones to hear, who kept a vigil in their hearts for me, I had made my peace with it. This was my body and this was my life.” Paul Guest now teaches at the University of Virginia. [Ron Slate’s web site, June 2, 2010]

Of course, he could define himself by his regrets, anger, self-recrimination, but he does not.

*Regrets?*

In addition, about regrets, a few words, a dilemma. Regrets may empower us, just possibly, if we do not live there. Regrets wound us and leave us stuck, just possibly.
Unitarian fellow traveler Henry David Thoreau counseled: “Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow, but tend and cherish it till it comes to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh.”

Jane Addams – pioneering settlement house leader – offered: “Regret, which is guilt without the neurosis, enables us ... to move forward instead of back.”

Eleanor Roosevelt resolutely declared: “There is nothing to regret – either for those who go or for those who are left behind.”

Which is simply to say what we all know: Accept that some wounds may linger and we need to let go of regrets.

Our various personal approaches to what we have done, how we accept ourselves, and to this temptation of regret are reflected in various social science surveys.

Participants in one study ranged in age from 19 to 103 and came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings showed that gender, age and education level all influence the types of regrets people feel.

Women were far more likely to have romantic regrets, with 44 percent fretting about a lost love, while just 19 percent of men still had relationship regrets. People who were not in a relationship were the most likely to cite a romantic regret.

No pattern emerged on the reasons for regret. Just as many respondents expressed regret for something they had done as those who felt regret for something they had not done. However, people whose regrets involved something they didn’t do or a missed opportunity were more likely to hold on to the regret over time.

“The longer-ago regrets tend to focus on lost opportunities, things you could have done or should have done different,” said [psychologist Neal] ...Roese. “More recent regrets tend to focus on things you did do that you wish you could take back.” (“What’s Your Biggest Regret?”, Tara Parker-Pope, *NY Times*, March 23, 2011)

We handle regrets differently.

Another article cites the “Top 5 Regrets of the Dying”, reported by a hospice nurse. (Bronnie Ware from AARP, February 1, 2012)

When questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, common themes surfaced. Here are the most common five:
1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. This was the most common regret of all….
2. I wish I didn't work so hard….
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings….
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends….
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier….

The road goes on and ever on, and what we choose is what we are….

Illusions

Most of our unhappiness, according to Taoism, is that we are too often guided by illusions – illusions for example that we are Separate from the Natural World. Or the illusion that some of us are better or More Important than others. Sometimes we have unpleasant feelings or fear because of the illusion of What Might Be, an illusion because it has not yet happened. Or there is sadness from

- What Might Have Been, or
- What if, or
- If Only I Had….

How Goes It With Your Spirit?

How at this New Year does it go with your spirit?

Perhaps, there is one small thing you wish to change, or a few things or a lot, and perhaps this is the day – the year – the week simply, just to go for it. Only you can know when and what, and even if not fully accomplished, you honor yourself by the effort.

The New Year… any new day… we can make some resolutions, or not.

We can fail. We can try again, begin again, struggle, reach out to touch someone in our loneliness, and embrace the mysterious journey.

Give thanks. Be still. Honor your own integrity and your staggeringly beautiful life and your own genius. Help others along the way.

One of Tolkien’s nastiest characters “believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check”, but, Gandalf, the wizard, answers, “that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep… [evil] at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.”
Freedom to Choose and To Love

The road goes ever on and on
.... Pursuing it with weary feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then?

We have freedom… Freedom:

To choose: our choices define us.

And freedom to Love: “what we love we yet shall be.” Love shapes us anew.

If you do these things, or a few of these things, you will grow your soul and live more richly on your sacred journey to unknown destinations.

“A Brave and Startling Truth”

Maya Angelou adds these good blessings, what she calls “A Brave and Startling Truth”, a poem written and delivered in honor of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
...
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.
Readings

(1) A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years, this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you. I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house."

Moral: Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots, but it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You've just got to take each person for what they are, and look for the good in them. Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape.

Remember to appreciate all the different people in your life!

(2) The second reading is a brief excerpt from writings by my colleague the Reverend Kenneth Sawyer who serves the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Wayland, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb. Ken Sawyer is reflecting upon the mistakes we make, and offers an illustration and a response that on many occasions might be the best. He cites the following retraction regarding a newspaper article:

"Just to keep the record straight, it was the famous Whistler's Mother, not Hitler's, that was exhibited. There is nothing to be gained in trying to explain how this error occurred."

Sawyer ruminates on the author's consternation, and possible excuses, but moves on to say: "I picture the writer... realizing that the only thing to say, after
acknowledging the error, is that ‘There is nothing to be gained in trying to explain how this error occurred.’ What can the writer do but throw herself or himself on the mercy and good sense of the readers, who at their most wise understand that they are fellow members of the human community of the fallible?

“We live in a world where ridiculous errors abound. We try to contribute as few as we can to the total, but we make some, too, and others just happen in ways past explaining. What can we say but we’re sorry? What can we do but move on? …

“Let’s hope we have the sense and luck to leave [behind] the many things that offer nothing to be gained, and discern the few things that are worth our doing, best we can, and hold on to them.” (in CLF QUEST, January 2004)