

**Wrestling Blessings from 2020**  
**Sunday, December 27, 2020 ~ UU Society of Sacramento**

Guest Preacher – Dr. Tovis Page

with Rev Roger, Rev Lucy, Frances Myers (W.A.), Cynthia Davis (cellist), Dirk and Ivan (Tech)

**Prelude** – Hymn #209, "[O Come, You Longing Thirsty Souls,](#)" First Unitarian Church of Oakland

**Opening Hymn** - #446 "Come Sing a Song with Me"

**Chalice Lighting** – Frances Myers *Now the Work of Christmas Begins* -- By Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

**Prayer and Silence—Rev. Roger**

Please join me now in a spirit of reflection and hope  
for a time of prayer in word and silence.

First, let's take in a deep inhale breath and hold it for a moment, and then after pausing, exhale. Let's do that again. Let us notice our feet or body where it is resting at this moment. Let us give thanks for the gift of this body, the gift of life, and the gift of this new day.

Let us give thanks for having made it this far through this hard year. Let us give deep thanks for this congregational home and for all those in it who have kept us together.

May we continue to summon the gifts of patience and flexibility, kindness and generosity, care and creativity. We hold in our hearts those we have lost this year, and those in our lives for whom we continue to care.

We hold in our hearts the people we know and the people across this nation of whom so much has been demanded. We extend our deep thanks for the frontline health workers who are overworked, the families who feel overwhelmed, and the teachers and school staff members who have learned new ways to serve. Thanks for all essential workers and the business owners who keep our communities going in so many ways. Thanks for the firefighters and rescue workers, the poll workers and election officials, the journalists and committed civil servants. Thanks for the peaceful protestors this year, who persist in demanding equity and insisting on social justice. May they all be safe, in the coming days. May they all be well, in the coming year.

With vaccinations now taking place, may our grief and worry be reduced by a sense of hope, day by day. With a presidential transition a few weeks away, may we look beyond the climate of strife and mistrust in this country with a cautious hope. May we feel a renewed commitment to our deepest values: compassion, human dignity, respect for others, and care for the common good.

And finally, let us not forget the signs of hope and sources of joy we have experienced in this past year: Examples of courage and kindness, creative alternatives to enjoy the arts and new opportunities find human fellowship. The new friendships we have made online or in the local neighborhood, the old connections we have renewed. And of course, the blessings of new children adopted or born into our families and other families we love.

Let us give thanks for having made it this far through this full year. Let us be open to living this day, and every day, with gratitude, with courage, with care.

So may it be. Blessed be, and amen.

### **Story for All Ages: Wrestling on the Riverbank—Tovis Page**

In the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a story about a man named Jacob, who had some complicated family relationships. When he was young, Jacob tricked his father into giving him the birthright blessing meant for his brother. This made his brother so angry that Jacob had to leave home to escape his wrath. So Jacob traveled far away to live with his uncle for many years, where he started a family of his own. But it was still complicated. Jacob and his uncle tricked each other. And eventually, Jacob left his uncle's home as well, taking his large family and flocks of sheep and goats with him.

Now, Jacob was a man of deep faith. His actions may not always have been honest, but he tried to follow God's will as he understood it, and God had told him to return to his childhood home with his family and livestock. They had to walk a long way to get there. As they got close to Jacob's childhood home, they came to a river. Jacob sent his family wading across to the other side, but he himself stayed back in the darkening night. Separated from his family by the river, Jacob was alone with his thoughts and feelings. As he sat on the riverbank, I imagine he thought about all the decisions he had made in his life—the good ones and maybe especially the not so good ones. He had left his uncle angry, and now he was going to have to face his brother, who he had wronged so many years ago. Jacob must have felt afraid, confused, uncertain about what would happen when he met his brother again. He was, in a way, between two worlds. Sitting there on the riverbank, between one home and the next, between the complicated past and the unknown future.

Then, out of the darkness, a stranger appeared—some say it was an angel, some say it was a man. The stranger demanded that Jacob wrestle with him, and so they wrestled together throughout the night. Shoulder to shoulder, struggling with all their might, they wrestled. At one point, Jacob twisted his hip, but he continued wrestling. Finally, as the sun began to peek over the horizon, the stranger asked Jacob to let him go. Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." And so the stranger gave Jacob a blessing in the form of a new name. "From this moment on, you will be called Israel,"

the stranger said. “All who hear your new name will know that you have struggled with God and with men, and you have prevailed.” With that, Jacob released the stranger, who disappeared into the dawn. Then Jacob crossed the river and went on to meet his brother face to face, and they hugged and were reconciled. But Jacob, now called Israel, which means “God wrestler,” walked with a limp forever more. Although things turned out well for Jacob, he was changed by his night of wrestling on the riverbank.

I love this story, because life is really hard and confusing sometimes, and we have to wrestle with things. We humans long for some way to make sense of new and difficult situations especially. I think that’s what Jacob was doing by the river that night. He was trying to make sense of the difficulties in his life, trying to find some meaning that would help him move forward into a future that was uncertain—trying to wrangle a blessing out of difficult circumstances.

As we come to the end of the year 2020, I imagine that we’re a bit like Jacob. It’s been a really hard year, hasn’t it? Full of change and uncertainty, loss and conflict, worry, and separation from people and places we love. But it’s almost the new year. In just a few days we will be crossing over to 2021. Like Jacob, maybe we can take some time before we cross over to wrestle some meaning out of 2020, some lessons that might be a blessing for us in the future. Like Jacob, we will be changed by this difficult year, by the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the changes will be beyond our control, but we can influence others. We can make choices about how we want to move into the future together. And the meaning we make of things now—the spiritual wrestling—will shape how we do that. And that’s what we’re going to be reflecting on together this morning, and what I invite you to do at home as well: wrestle some blessings from a very difficult year. Thank you for listening!

**Shared Offering** (half of donations will be shared with River City Food Bank)

**Reading** – “It Is a Challenge,” by Susan Frederick-Gray.

*An excerpt from a recent holiday message from Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, to all Unitarian Universalists:*

“It is a challenge to shift my perspective away from what is missing [this season], but when I do, when I’m able to stay in the present, and let go of longing for what has been in the past, I find that there is a powerful ‘yes’ waiting in this moment. A ‘yes’ in a year full of negation and despair, an affirmation that the world is calling forth from us in this great season of turning, in this season of generosity and goodwill and peace--there is a ‘yes.’ May we in this season, unlike any before, invite gratitude for the gifts that have emerged and continue to be present this year.... Instead of focusing on what cannot be, may we create new practices of gratitude and meaning that reflect the generosity, the humanity, and the compassion that are needed in our world today, and that are needed to foster more love and justice for the future.”

**Hymn** #128 “For all that is Our Life”

## **Homily** – “Wrestling Blessings form 2020” by Tovis Page

“2020 is a unique leap year. It has 29 days in February, 300 in March and 5 years in April.” That’s how one social media meme described how the year felt *last Spring*. So how long do you suppose that makes *December*? A century? It’s been a long, difficult year. And it’s going to take a long, long time to make meaning of all the things that have happened—the coronavirus pandemic and over 300,000 American lives lost; the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and the global uprising that followed; the undermining of our democratic institutions; an unprecedented presidential election; unfolding economic devastation; and the sudden indispensability of something called “Zoom.” Not to mention all the things that have happened in our own personal lives.

It’s hard to make meaning of things that are still unfolding, but it matters that we try. Making meaning out of new and difficult experiences can help us feel more connected and whole, and it can provide orientation in the midst of uncertainty. Unitarian Universalism doesn’t offer easy answers or predetermined meanings. It’s a tradition that welcomes *wrestling* so that together, we can arrive at the “YES” that Rev Susan Frederick-Gray described in her holiday message. So today I’d like to share three blessings that I’ve wrestled out of 2020, lessons that I’m carrying with me into the new year.

### **The Blessing of Truths Laid Bare**

The first is the blessing of truths laid bare. People say Americans experienced a “reckoning” this year, a long overdue reckoning with the intertwined legacies of white supremacy and rugged individualism. We don’t yet know if this reckoning will lead to lasting change. But truths were laid bare this year, and record numbers of people took notice—and that matters. James Baldwin famously said: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Facing the truths that were laid bare this year can be a blessing, if we choose to make it so.

The events of 2020 have highlighted both the subtle and the stark disparities among us. It’s often said of the coronavirus pandemic that “we’re all in the same storm, but we’re not all on the same boat.” This year we’ve learned that some boats are noisy and crowded; others are painfully quiet and still. Some boats have spacious cabins, with wireless internet and copious provisions, while others are leaky and open to the elements. Some have lost far more than others this year. But we’re all in the storm, and as we struggle to survive it, we need to pay attention to the signals from other boats. We need to listen to each other’s experiences of what this year has been like, face the truths the storm has laid bare about structural inequality and systemic oppression, and together plot a course that enables all of us, every single one, not only to survive, but to thrive.

The pandemic has also laid bare, with terrifying clarity, our interdependence. In a very real way, we hold each other’s fates in our hands. And it is teaching us that we are all only as safe as the most vulnerable among us. If we as a society don’t protect those who can’t afford rent from becoming homeless, we put everyone at greater risk. If we imprison asylum seekers or condone policies of mass incarceration, we ensure that

the virus will continue tearing through our overcrowded prisons and into surrounding communities. The pandemic has revealed that America's dominant ideology of individualism is, quite literally, killing us. Recognizing this fact, and embracing the truth of interdependence, could become one of the greatest blessings of this year, but it's up to us to make it so.

### **The Blessing of Letting Go**

The second blessing I have wrestled from this year is the practice of letting go. Letting go is difficult for most of us, but in a world of constant change, it's essential for our survival.

When my spouse and I learned in March that our 9- and 10-year old kids would be "distance learning" for a couple of weeks in order to "flatten the curve," we were supportive of the decision, but worried about how we'd manage at home. *Two whole weeks?*, we asked each other fearfully; *how are we going to get any work done?*

As the parent with the most flexible schedule, I suddenly found myself in charge of two virtual school schedules, myriad new online learning apps, and frustrated and bored kids who didn't want to learn at home. Trying to keep up with my own seminary coursework and part-time job, I rushed from one computer screen to the next, troubleshooting Zoom calls and helping with math problems I could barely remember how to do myself. I made daily color-coded schedules to keep us all on track. And I tried to respond to one emotional meltdown after another without melting down totally myself. In that first month of at-home learning, I tried *so hard* to keep everything together. I was burning the candle at both ends because I believed I just had to hold on really tight until everything returned to normal.

Then one morning in April, in the middle of angrily modeling for my kids the "Sid Shuffle Dance" they were supposed to do for P.E., the absurdity of it all hit me. For those of you who don't know, Sid is a giant ground sloth from the animated movie, *Ice Age*. His dance involves shuffling, sliding, wiggling your rump and, as the accompanying song says, "stepping it out like granny." (It's on YouTube if you want to give it a try.) My boys wanted nothing to do with this P.E. assignment, and neither did I. But I gritted my teeth, turned on the video and followed Sid's moves as best I could, trying to pretend it was fun. The kids didn't buy it, and as I felt the frustration rise in me, I suddenly realized I could just let go. It was all suddenly way too much. The terrible burden of trying to do it all, to keep up with some impossible standard sucks the joy out of life anytime, but in a pandemic, it's especially destructive.

After my Sid Shuffle Dance revelation, I excused the kids from all assignments that weren't core academic subjects and decided to devote more time to nourishing family activities like gardening, cooking, and giving the kids free rein in the garage to build stuff on their own. I let go of the idea that I could single-handedly keep things "on track" for my kids, or for myself. At some point it dawned on me that it was no longer clear what track any of us were even on anymore, much less what our definition of success might be.

"The models no longer apply," Teresa Thayer Snyder, a former school superintendent from New York, wrote recently about children's education. "The

benchmarks are no longer valid, the trend analyses have been interrupted.” Please, she begs fellow educators and parents, “resist the urge from whatever ‘powers that be’ who are in a hurry to ‘fix’ kids and make up for [time lost in the pandemic.] The time was not lost, it was invested in surviving an historic period of time in [kids’] lives—in our lives. The children do not need to be fixed. They are not broken. They need to be heard. They need to be given as many tools as we can provide to nurture resilience and help them adjust in a post-pandemic world.”<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic has taken so much from us—much of it beyond our control. In the face of so much loss, there is an understandable desire to cling even harder to what we knew before. But clinging to the past isn’t going to bring it back. And it prevents us from engaging with reality as it is now. Now I’m not talking about rushing grief here; grief takes time and often needs to run its own course. But let’s not let grief from all the losses we experienced this year prevent us from *choosing to let go when we actually have the choice*, and when letting go will enable us to live more fully and wisely in the present.

Our national leadership—the Unitarian Universalist Association—modeled this kind of letting go early in the pandemic. It took courage and foresight to officially recommend, way back in May, that UU congregations suspend in-person worship for a full year. It was shocking at the time. It felt almost impossible to let go of something that seemed so foundational to who we are and what we do together. But what a gift that bold advice turned out to be! Because it freed us from the constant, anxiety-ridden question: *when can we return? When can we go back to the way it used to be?* By encouraging us to *let go*, our national leaders freed us to think creatively about how we might best fulfill our congregational missions now, in *this* unfolding reality. Only through the courageous initial choice to let go were we able to focus our energy on innovating and adapting. This blessing of choosing to let go when we need to adapt is key to our survival—now and in the future.

### **Always Held – The Blessing of Our Universalist Faith**

The third blessing I’ve wrestled from 2020 is the blessing of our Universalist faith, the one that boldly claims that every single one of us is held in the embrace of something larger than ourselves—something good, and sacred. Even when we feel alone, when our safety nets tear, when we make mistakes, or feel we are drowning in grief and despair—our Universalist faith tells us that even then, we are held. Even then, we’re connected to each other and to a vast, intricate whole. The web of life, the Spirit of Love, God, the Universe. Call it what you will, it’s always there. This year, I have touched that deep Universalist faith, and it has held me.

In October, I had foot surgery to remove a bunion that has pained me for decades. The surgery itself went fine, but the chaos of our pandemic household made for a rocky recovery. One midnight in bed a few days after surgery, when I finally paid attention to the growing pain in my stomach, I discovered that I had been taking too

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa Thayer Snyder’s original piece was a post on her Facebook page, later shared here: <https://dianeravitch.net/2020/12/12/teresa-thayer-snyder-what-shall-we-do-about-the-children-after-the-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR3KPQc0GpRUOtYxMBktMpoj7Ma60ZAPJRshhObCCEffPcTj1uZQflgYupE>

much Tylenol. If you get only one thing out of this sermon, please, I hope it's this: *accidental Tylenol overdose is a real thing*. That night, I ended up in the Emergency Room, receiving an antidote through intravenous drip. I spent 8 hours all alone in a grim E.R. room, my foot throbbing, my stomach hurting, and my mind spinning. *How could I have messed up so badly? What went wrong? Did I damage my liver permanently?*

I couldn't sleep, and I was too upset to disappear into the virtual world of my smart phone. So I just lay there with my thoughts and my feelings. And I started to think about all the other people lying in hospital beds all over the world, alone and afraid. This enabled the tears to flow—tears I had been too busy to shed before. Grief for all that we have lost, all the separation, and the difficult moments spent alone by so many people this year. My vulnerability and dependence on others for care enabled me to touch into the beautiful and terrifying truth of interdependence. We cannot manage everything on our own. We need each other to survive.

At about 3 o'clock in the morning, when I had cycled through the first wave of grief, it occurred to me that it was already 6 a.m. on the east coast. Some of my friends there would soon be awake. So I texted my friend Lisa. I didn't say where I was, I just reached out, saying "hi" or something. She immediately texted back: "why are you awake?" And then, before I could reply: "Stacy is dying." Stacy was a dear friend of Lisa's—a dynamic woman, a devoted social worker, wife and mother. Stacy had been fighting cancer for over a decade, but now she was actively dying. That's why Lisa was awake. So I called Lisa, and we talked and cried together for over an hour.

That phone call was a gift of grace for both of us. It reminded me once again that we are never really alone. Sometimes in life, we discover we are exactly where we need to be to learn what we need to learn and give what we can give. Stacy died about the time I was discharged from the hospital, but my friend Lisa had not been alone in her fear and grief, and neither had I.

"Even when our hearts are broken," writes UU minister and theologian Rebecca Parker, "Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives, even when we have done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will."<sup>2</sup> This is the radical promise of our Universalist faith. It's the theological complement to our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle, which recognizes our interdependence in the web of life.

This terrifying, difficult year has taken so much from us. But it has also given us back some precious gifts, blessings that can help us survive and thrive in a world of constant change. The blessings of truths laid bare, of knowing when to let go, and of leaning into our connectedness and the larger Love that holds us always. I hope the blessings I have wrestled from this year might also be blessings for you, or inspire you to wrangle your own blessings before wading across the river into the new year.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Reading #184 in *Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition*. Also available on Worship Web: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/affirmation/even-when-our-hearts-are-broken>

**Hymn #131 Love will Guide Us**

**Benediction – Tavis Page**

With Love to guide us and hope inside us,  
may our wrestling with 2020 bring forth blessings in the world.  
So go in peace, my friends, go in love,  
And remember—no matter how physically distant we might be,  
we're still always connected, always held.  
Blessed be! And amen.