

## **BEGINNING ANEW**

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Lay Sunday Service

Charles Dickens' novel, *Great Expectations*, published in 1861, is a coming of age story about a seven-year-old boy named Pip living in the mid-nineteenth century England. Pip is orphaned, poor, and a social outcast. He feels that he doesn't belong anywhere. Yet, he falls in love with the beautiful, aloof ten-year-old Estella, who rejects him. Pip and Estella leave their childhoods behind and go their separate ways. As they grow up, each embark on a journey of many struggles throughout their lives. At the end of the novel, when adults Pip and Estella reunite at the Havisham estate where they first met as children, Estella reflects on their lives and says "I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape."

That simple but profound line has stayed with me ever since I read the novel as a young teenager. As they mature into adults, Pip and Estella endure challenges and hardships. Their lives, their spirits, have been bent and broken and yet, they look toward a new future, a new beginning. The story is about wealth and poverty, love and rejection, good and evil, life's setbacks and triumphs. But it's also about change, about transformation, and about new beginnings.

Most of us begin our lives with great expectations and endure challenges and changes. We experience our own joys and troubles; marriage and divorce, birth of children and loss of loved ones, new friendships and broken ones, love and rejection. While we have great expectations of our ourselves, our lives take twists and turns in ways we never could have expected. Yet, each year, we begin anew.

Likewise, almost every religion or faith has taken its own twists and turns, including Unitarian Universalism. In 1553, the Spanish theologian

and physician, Miguel Servetus, studied the Bible and concluded that the concept of the Trinity, meaning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, was not biblical. He rejected the Trinity and preached about Non trinitarianism, the belief in one God, which was later called the Unity, or Unitarianism. As far back as the 1500s, some might consider Servetus one of the early Unitarians. Well, you can guess what happened to him. Servetus was eventually arrested, convicted of heresy, and burned at the stake.

Nonetheless, the term Unitarianism entered the English language and Unitarian churches were formed in Transylvania and Poland in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1700s, the Unitarian movement had multiple founders, including but not limited to Lindsey, Priestley, Hedworth, Socinus, and Biddle.

Later, in 1793, the concept of Universalism was formed, the belief that all people will be reconciled with God and not just a select few. And by 1961, only 64 short years ago, the two institutions were joined, establishing the Unitarian Universalist Association for people of all ages, many backgrounds, and many beliefs, as an open-minded, open-hearted spiritual community helping people lead lives of justice, hope and love.

Clearly, over the years, Unitarian Universalism took many twists and turns. Now with about 800,000 UUs in the world, especially compared to other faiths, we are still only at the beginning.

Many of us know the story of our own All Souls beginnings. In 1819, the minister from Boston, William Ellery Channing stopped in New York City to visit his sister Lucy, in which he preached his now famous sermon to forty friends, and spoke about the tenets of Unitarianism. This powerful sermon led to the formation of the First Congregation Church in New York City, our predecessor, and in two years, the members erected a building on Chambers Street before they even found a minister.

Over the past 206 years, our church has moved four times. We have had 10 senior ministers, over a dozen assistant and associate ministers, dozens of boards, a plethora of committees, and many congregations. We have persevered through a Civil War, World Wars, the HIV/AIDs crisis, 9/11, the COVID pandemic, and many more events across our city, country, and world. While it may not seem apparent to us, All Souls, has been and continues to be in a constant state of change. It is a wonder to me that we are all here in this time and space together.

Is this part of some grand divine plan or did this happen randomly?  
 What would Servetus and our founders think about us now?  
 What are our great expectations for All Souls' future?

Well, for many of us, All Souls is full of great expectations. We want it to be a place of spirituality, pastoral care, friendship, community service, social justice, religious education, adult education, or sometimes a place to simply have coffee and meet friends. The list of great expectations we place on All Souls can be quite long.

Most of the time, All Souls meets, or even exceeds our expectations. The spectacular music and choir, our worship services, coffee hour, the 60 plus community groups, social justice programs, our connections to our family and friends, and so much more. That's probably why many of us are here today, and continue to come to All Souls, and participate as a member of this wonderful congregation. That's the magic of All Souls.

When I think of change, of new beginnings, I think of one of my favorite poets, Robert Frost and one of his greatest works, the poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay", published in 1923. The poem is only eight short lines. Analyzed and interpreted by many scholars, the general consensus is that this concise but spectacular piece of writing touts the concept that nothing gold, or in other words, nothing we hold dear, remains the same. Everything changes over time. Nothing gold can stay.

Change, transformation, new beginnings, as described by Robert Frost, or by Charles Dickens in the lives of Pip and Estella, or changes in our own lives, or changes at All Souls, can be challenging. Most of us don't like change. I know I don't. We resist change for many reasons; we are uncomfortable with the unknown; we perceive a loss of control; we mistrust the process. But change happens every day, every month, every year, whether we want it to or not. We can let change happen to us or we can guide it, lead it, like our founders, toward a future we want. And through change comes new beginnings.

Each year is a new beginning. 2025 marks a new beginning for All Souls and for ourselves. We have changes ahead with our ministry, our facilities, our bylaws, and much more. The question we must ask ourselves is: Can we embrace and lead our change and move forward together?

Can you imagine a future, not with 800,000 Unitarian Universalists, but with millions and millions of UUs around the world being a beacon for spirituality, hope, and justice for all of us? That may not happen in 50 years, or one hundred years. It may take a few thousand years like it has taken other faiths, but wouldn't that be a spectacular vision for our future?

You are a critical part of this future. We are creating a new beginning, our future, right now. It's up to all of us, but I am optimistic.

Why? Well, for almost 206 years, All Souls has been and continues to be a beacon of hope, spirituality, and justice. All Souls certainly has had its share of changes, challenges, and new beginnings. Over the years, All Souls has been bent, maybe even broken a few times, but I hope – and I believe – into a better shape.

Robert Frost said nothing gold can stay. There is gold right here at All Souls, and while it may change into something new, All Souls will remain shining, like a beacon, for years to come. May it be so.