

**Sermon: *The Gift of a Year***  
**by Gretchen Thomas, Melbourne Australia**  
**for Paris UU Fellowship, 14 October 2007**

**Newsletter Blurb:** *Inspired by our year in Neuilly, the Rev. Gretchen Thomas will encourage us to treat our "in-between" year as an opportunity, rather than falling into that very tempting we'll-wait-on-that-until-we're-settled-again mind frame. It could, instead, be a time for our congregation to dream and grow in unexpected ways, to do especially healthy and brave things for ourselves and for the world.*

Like the Paris UU Fellowship, I've recently moved. Every time you move, it suddenly feels as if you have a lot of empty time stretching far out in front of you. While you're making the many arrangements, and loading boxes (where *did* all this stuff come from? Who needs it, really?), you imagine all the things you will be able to do in that empty time waiting for you on the other side of settling in..

Now you will read the shockingly large number of never-read books you re-discovered when you packed. Now you will make order out of the boxes of jumbled photos and the travel articles you tore out to save for when you might someday got to Slovakia. Now you will finish grinding the make-it-yourself telescope lenses. Now you will change what you eat and commit to serious exercise. And truly do it this time.

But after the new home is set up, and you've found a doctor and a barber, and chosen (through gritted teeth) yet another internet server and mobile company, it is so tempting *not* to read, *not* to make order, *not* to create, *not* to go to the gym. It is so tempting to *wait* for the unknown to come to you, to let the reframing of your life happen *in its own good time*.

It's got to be something like this for the Paris Fellowship right now. You've been uprooted, moved to a new location, and are now beginning to make this interesting, surprisingly comfortable place, your new home. How tempting it must be to sit back and wait, to rest protectively in the limbo of this in-between year. Doesn't it make sense to wait on things until you are *ready*?

So there *I* was, definitely *stuck in waiting mode*, definitely living life from the corner of the couch – or at least from inside my new home -- in Melbourne, Australia, one of the world's most fascinating and growing cities (often called “the Paris of Australia” – as if such a thing were possible), when a great book fell into my life.

It's called, *The Gift of a Year: How to achieve the most meaningful, satisfying, and pleasurable year of your life*. The book asks, “Do you want the next year of your life to be a *convenient* year? Or will it be a year in which you *flourish*?” Reading *The Gift of a Year* pulled me out of my stuck-ness, into action. Its premise is that we all have times in our lives (not only you and me, but congregations, too), times when we especially need to take hold of the next year and make it a time to do some special thing we'd never do otherwise.

Taking on this idea has been so successful in pulling me out of my suspended waiting (between life in Europe and life in Austral-Asia) that I'm wondering if this basic concept would be helpful to the Fellowship as you move through *your* in-between year. At your last service Jim Robinson spoke about how *faith* can overcome the anxiety that inevitably comes with change. And I am speaking about how *taking action* can go hand-in-hand with faith, to pull any of us into a new, more meaningful, more satisfying life.

Why does it matter? Why not just wait until next year, after you've moved a second time, and finally re-settled for good? Because the hard truth is that when a congregation lives in limbo, it's too likely to fall right through the cracks. If it opts for that in-between place, a congregation certainly risks becoming unhealthy and out of balance. It *survives*, instead of *thrives*. I would not want this wonderful Fellowship to become stuck in *survival mode* for a month, much less for a year.

Could this next year become a time for the Fellowship to *dream and grow in unexpected ways, to do some especially healthy or brave thing for your selves, and for the world?* **What would such a year look like? What does it feel like to become transformed? What do you really want? Why do you deserve it? How will you get it?**

In *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, Loren Mead says there are eight key features of congregations that have transformed themselves into congregations that not only survive, but thrive, congregations that are able to take advantage of possibilities that come their way, congregations that are moving into future.

Mead's first two markers are: **Strangers meet on common ground**, and **Fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with**. Now, it seems to me that the Fellowship is doing good work of this kind. You understand well that unless newcomers make good friends here and find ways to contribute, they will not come back. Your small group ministry and UU Basics course are fine paths for along which visitors can move from being welcome newcomers to becoming members who know they belong.

The third characteristic of a vital, transforming congregation is: **Congregational life is given color, texture, drama, a festive air**. Your 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year showed you just how well you can celebrate, worship together, and reach out to the communities that surround you in *festive ways that bring your lives color and drama*.

Mead's fourth characteristic is: **People are drawn out of themselves.** This is important. And I would add, drawn not only *out of* your selves, but also drawn *deeper into* your selves.

Fifth: **Scarce resources are shared and abundance is generated.** And sixth: **Mutual responsibility becomes evident, and mutual aid possible.** Sharing and caring can be your watchwords. And you can ask yourselves about every proposed course of action, about any choice the Fellowship faces: "Does this help us share more widely, care more deeply?"

Characteristic number seven: **Vision is projected and projects are attempted.** We UUs see ourselves as people of action. Often we say, Unitarian Universalists do *not* focus our religion on our beliefs or theology. Instead, we pay close attention to how we are living our lives: Am I being true to my commitments? Am I acting out of my real passions? Am I guided by my principles? Do I know and share a clear vision of where I am heading and who I am becoming? Am I making choices that helps me sustain my faith over time?

This makes me think of how many of you are caring more deeply for the earth with your serious commitment to cut the greenhouse gases you produce. It is a joy to be a guest in your homes and see the significant changes you are making.

Loren Mead's final assertion is that in vital, transforming congregations, **People are both empowered, and protected against power.**

When I first thought about the Fellowship's having moved, and then moving *again* a year from now, I pictured you crawling collectively onto a cozy couch in this warm, protected place, to wait until it was all over. But if I stop to consider Lauren Mead's characteristics: *Strangers meet on common ground*, and *Fear of*

*the stranger is faced and dealt with*, I have to ask, how can people waiting on the couch be *drawn out of themselves* and ***their lives given color, texture, and drama?*** What would *empower a congregation* to rise up, instead of waiting, and *take some action?*

Here's one suggestion: This is proving to be a good place for the Fellowship to have landed. But let's face it, here, you are surrounded by strangers -- kind strangers, who are stewards of this lovely space, who have opened their home to you. How about *deliberately meeting these strangers on this common ground?* What if your RE leaders and theirs, your musicians and theirs made a time to share about their programs and their music with each other? What if your presidents, your young people, your board members, treasurers, long-timers and newcomers all reached out to truly come to know each other, to find common ground. I'm certain that in the process your fear of them and what they might fear or misunderstand about UUs, would all be dealt with. You'd be up off the couch, but still close to home—this new home.

If you choose to move, not only off the couch, but out into the wider world outside this new home, you might try something that Neighbourhood UU Congregation in Toronto did when they were a year old. (They're what we call a "newstart" congregation.) They decided they were too new and too small to take on any on-going social action projects. What they did, instead, was form a team of social action volunteers – eventually what they were doing turned out to be so much fun that almost everyone signed up to "be on the team." Whenever an event that reflected their values and principles was taking place in the area where they were going to be permanently located, some of their social action team volunteered to help. They showed up in colorful matching T-shirts that announced they were from the new Unitarian Universalist congregation, and pitched in to run an information table, or prepare food, or get out the vote, or paint buildings, or provide child care, or help with after school tutoring, or swell a protest or a parade, or ... well you can picture the many kinds of events it is possible for a roving social action team to become involved in. Some of their members had done some of these things before with these local organizations. But now they were volunteering *as a*

*group of Unitarian Universalists. That felt different. It felt like Marge Piercy's poem [from the responsive reading] where three of them together were a delegation, and a dozen could hold a demonstration. People were drawn out of themselves and empowered. Scarce resources were shared and mutual responsibilities became evident. Their vision for the congregation grew and changed.*

There are many possibilities, possibilities that could lead -- during the year that stretches now in front of you -- to greater depth, hope, or bravery, to growth, to new horizons, and strength. But you can dream the possibilities much better than I can -- since of course you are the ones who understand yourselves the best. What matters here are *your* dreams, and *your* understandings of the issues and challenges the Fellowship is facing.

I think it is rather arrogant for me to stand here and make suggestions for the Fellowship's future. I risk doing it because I know we all regret missed opportunities. We are all impatient with superficiality or self-absorption. We all yearn to find meaning on deeper levels. We long to be more strongly connected to others, to nature, to the sacred. This is what many of us come here to find. Why not make this coming year a time when you will find it?

Here's a story about one UU longing to become more strongly connected to others and to the sacred. It proves so well that we *cannot* control our opportunities. What we can do is take them up, or turn them down. We can act, or we can wait.

Eighteen months ago when I faced moving away from Europe, a bright star on the horizon of my new life in Australia was that, after a decade without one, in Melbourne I could once again belong to a local Unitarian congregation. It was so important to me that we purposely bought a house an easy walk to the Fellowship. Several people -- including a few of you -- cautioned me, "But, Gretchen, what if you don't *like* them?" And I

replied, “I’m so hungry for congregational life that they could all be standing on their heads every Sunday morning, and I’d happily stand on my head with them.” It turns out your caution should have been, “But, Gretchen, what if *they* don’t like *you*?” It turns out that an American minister’s wanting to join their congregation presents difficulties for this group of Australian Unitarians. Unfortunately for me (and them) they have had previous bad experiences with ministers who did not respect their (very capable) lay leaders and even more trouble with too many UUs who’d come from America and tried hard to change this congregation into the one they’d left behind.

The Melbourne Unitarians are holding “our American Friend” (as they insist on calling me), at a careful arm’s length....several arms’ lengths. Clearly this is not a congregation that has a goal of *meeting strangers on common ground*. Clearly it is not a place where *fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with*.

Of course I’ve been tempted to give up – to “attend church” by sitting on my couch at home, listening to the weekly radio broadcast of the Unitarian’s sermon. (The weekly radio program is only one of many things the Melbourne Unitarians do very well.) It is too soon to give you a happy ending to this story. I will persist in attending, and in my deliberately cautious participation -- because I am determined to belong, to once again have in my life that precious thing: a “home congregation.”

It’s intriguing to me how things like this can happen between a person and their congregation. But it’s sad, isn’t it? It’s a terrible waste, isn’t it? Jim Robinson would probably say it’s as close to sinning as a congregation can come—this letting fear of change and fear of the stranger, rule a congregation’s life in ways that are life-denying, and potentially self-destructive. Jim would join me in urging you not to wait out the next year, when you *could*, instead, be plunging into life, diving in with bravery

and passion, using your collective life together to create a transforming year that is a gift to your selves, and a gift to the world.

You stand together on the threshold of this coming winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Will you choose to live so the months ahead become a gift....a gift to your Fellowship....and a gift to the world?