

**Wise Choices**  
**Rev. Dr. Elaine Strawn**

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As the proverb goes, we are surely blessed by living in interesting times! But a blessing? Joanna Macy writes of the Great Turning; Rutger Bregman's research reminds us that humans are evolutionarily decent and friendly. What kind of world will you create, will we create? Together, as we calm our fears, we recognize the deep Wisdom within. Together we develop our awareness and flexibility. And together we become a force for transformation. Presented by Rev. Dr. Elaine Strawn, UUA Congregational Life Staff, Central East Region.

**Opening Words** *The Great Turning*, adapted — Christine Fry

You've asked me to tell you of the Great Turning  
Of how we saved the world from disaster.  
The answer is both simple and complex.  
We turned.

For hundreds of years we had turned away as life on earth grew more precarious  
We turned away from the homeless men on the streets, the stench from the river,  
The children orphaned in Iraq, the mothers dying of AIDS in Africa

We turned away because that was what we had been taught.  
To turn away, from our pain, from the hurt in another's eyes,  
From the drunken father, from the friend betrayed.

Always we were told, in actions louder than words, to turn away, turn away.  
And so we became a lonely people caught up in a world  
Moving too quickly, too mindlessly toward its own demise.

Until it seemed as if there was no safe space to turn.  
No place, inside or out, that did not remind us of fear or terror, despair and loss,  
anger and grief.

Yet, on one of those days, someone did turn.  
Turned to face the pain.  
Turned to face the stranger.  
Turned to look at the smouldering world and the hatred seething in too many  
eyes.  
Turned to face himself, herself.

And then another turned.  
And another. And another.  
And as they wept, they took each other's hands.

Until whole groups of people were turning.  
Young and old, gay and straight.  
People of all colours, all nations, all religions.  
Turning not only to the pain and hurt but to beauty, gratitude and love.  
Turning to one another with forgiveness and a longing for peace in their hearts.

At first, the turning made people dizzy, even silly.  
There were people standing to the side, gawking, criticizing, trying to knock the  
turners down.  
But the people turning kept getting up, kept helping one another to their feet.  
Their laughter and kindness brought others into the turning circle  
Until even the nay-sayers began to smile and sway.

As the people turned, they began to spin  
Reweaving the web of life, mending the shocking tears,  
Knitting it back together with the colours of the earth,

Sewing on tiny mirrors so the beauty of each person, each creature, each plant, each life

Might be seen and respected.

And as the people turned, as they spun like the earth through the universe,  
The web wrapped around them like a soft baby blanket  
Making it clear all were loved, nothing separate.

As this by love reached into every crack and crevice, the people began to wake and wonder,  
To breath and give thanks,  
To celebrate together.

And so the world was saved, but only as long as you, too, sweet one, remember to turn.

**Chalice Lighting:** - V. Elaine Strawn

Drawing from the fire within us, we remember that we all are one. And it is this fire -collectively-which fuels our chalice. Together, we send light into the world.

**Hymn suggestion:** # 119 *Once to Every One and Nation*

**Time for All Ages:** Walking Together - Elder Albert D. Marshall & Louise Zimanyi

**Caring Time** (candles/ joys and sorrows)

**Meditation:** *Spirit of All Blessing* . Maureen Killoran

Spirit of all blessing,

be with us

in the ordinariness of our days.

May hope's light guard us and keep cynicism from our hearts.

May the energy of laughter build endurance for the dark times of our lives.

May creativity's vision grant the possibility of seeing old relationships with new eyes.

May the oil of healing keep us  
from anger's hardness or despair.

May the mantle of humility give courage to admit when we are wrong.

May compassion's loom weave in us  
the discipline to forgive.

May patience help us bear in mind  
that ours is not the only scale of time.

May the flame of justice be a beacon for the choices we must make.

May peace be ever in us  
and sustain our stressful days.

Spirit of all blessing,  
be with us  
in the ordinariness of our days.

**Reading:** from Learning to Fall: the Blessings of an Imperfect Life. Philip Simmons. NY: Bantam Books, 2000.

We must understand what we can, and learn to dwell richly in the mystery of what we cannot...I turn to religion in particular because it is with religious language that "human beings have most consistently, rigorously, and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak....Life is both more and less than we hoped for, both more comic and tragic than we knew. Comedy ends in happiness, while tragedy yields wisdom. We want, I suppose, to be happily wise and wisely happy. Only then can we know the full blessings of our imperfect lives.

## **Sermon Wise Choices -Rev. Dr. Elaine Strawn**

**Hymn suggestion:** # 1051 *We Are*

**Closing Words:** “And the People Looked Up” - V. Elaine Strawn

And the people looked up. In the sky east of the Mississippi the was a brilliant light and in that brilliant light were blue flames and red flames and yellow flames and white hot flames, lighting up the sky with a tremendous light. And holding up that flame were hands: old hands and young hands, black hands and white hands and red hands and yellow hands. And they took turns holding so none were burned by the flame. And that light rested over our community here. And the people saw it. And on the next day, the people went to work and mowed their lawns and marched for justice and cared for the babies. And their schedules weren’t any different. But somehow that light gave them hope. And their days were a little lighter.

People of this Beloved Community, we have a task this week. We will hold up the flame together. And we will challenge and feed and care for each other so deeply that when this week is done, that flame will not disperse and go out. That flame will burn on and on in all the towns we bless with our courage and compassion.

Blessed Be and Amen

## **Sermon Transcript**

Good morning. This is Reverend Dr Elaine Strawn, and I'm happy to be with you this morning. I want to start our time together by reading from Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life, written by Philip Simmons. We must understand what we can and learn to dwell richly in the mystery of what we cannot. I turn to religion in particular because it is with religious language that human beings have most consistently, rigorously and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak. Life is both more and less than we hoped for, both more comic and tragic than we know. Comedy ends in

happiness, while tragedy ends in wisdom. We want, I suppose, to be happily wise and wisely happy, only then can we know the full blessing of our imperfect lives.

Wise choices. It seems there are a lot of choices to be made right now in the world in which we find ourselves. What do I stand for? What do I really believe? How closely do I hold our principles and our shared values as Unitarian Universalists? How deeply do I believe in them?

These are certainly interesting times. My late father-in-law used to remind the family very often that he would bless us with these interesting times, borrowing that from the Chinese proverb. And these certainly are interesting times in which to be alive that take all the resources and the brain power and the emotional intelligence and the physical stability that we possibly can have. It's a divisive time in some ways. There are also many, many people coming together with new ideas, new hopes, new resources. Both of those things are operating at the same time.

There's an old Girl Scouts of America song whose title is Looking Wider and Look Wider Still. Elder Marshall reminds us, in the story for time for all ages this morning, that if we walk together well, we will learn to see with both eyes. That's a skill that we need to have.

I've learned a little bit about that as the news has basically driven me almost beyond the bend. And one of those sources is fix the news, which has brought to us a podcast called Hope is a Verb. I love that phrase. And one of those episodes featured two women, Peta and Marwa. Peta is an Israeli who founded Women Wage Peace, and Marwa is a Palestinian who founded Women of the Sun. And for 10 years, they've been working on peace. They've been working together. They have brought those groups together, to try to speak to each of their governments for what they want, for peace. These two peoples that have been siblings for ages and generations, coming together in peace. Marching in the streets, encouraging people to speak out, trying to get the powers that be to listen to the possibilities. How often have we all found ourselves in that place, and we need to continue.

I've also started listening almost news backwards in that listening to statisticians who can put together history, recent history, in a way that looks at what is really happening, as opposed to what is the immediate reality? And one of those people,

historian and statistician from the Netherlands, Rutger Bregman, wrote a book Humankind, and he came out from his analysis, he came out with five things.

The first thing is that people are basically decent. We want to help one another. When a house is on fire, who's the first person there? It's usually a neighbor, a bystander. It could be a stranger, and the fire department and the emergency folks get there, but it's usually the first person is a neighbor. We are basically decent.

And want to help one another survive. We are also friendly. We have evolved, he has learned, to be friendly. Because without cooperation, without listening, we can't build things. We can't build cathedrals. We can't build universities. We can't build grand ideas. We get along.

The third one follows closely, and that's that we're basically non violent, that even though Hollywood likes to point us in the direction of the monsters that we all are, that studies from battlefields show ammunition left in guns. Soldiers having a very difficult time shooting, and when they do the trauma that comes from that is so severe. Basically, we are non violent.

The fourth one is, you know this, we usually get what we assume. If we walk into a meeting expected to be bored, or to a sermon expected to be bored, we probably will be. But if we're listening with all of our attention, if we're present in all of our being with a sense of hope and openness, we will probably be very richly rewarded.

And finally, he says, let yourself be scammed once in a while, he asks the audience, when he speaks, how many people have never been scammed, and usually it's only two or three, and he says to them, you need to go see a psychotherapist. You're not trusting enough because in life, and think about your life. How many times have you offered help, and how many times have you been scammed? He says, predominant evidence indicates that we really can afford to trust one another. We can afford to do that, we are basically decent.

So I finished the book, and I sit back once again and say, what is it that I really believe about people and about our strength? What do I really believe about the possibilities of justice and transformation, and do I really believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all. And sometimes I don't. Most of the time I can bring myself back.

Joanna Macy is famous for so many things, but one of the things is her great turning ideals. And she talks about the bardo that we're in, that concept borrowed from Tibetan Buddhism, about being in the in between times, being in the not yet arrived, being in the what's going to happen next section and that that's very, very hard, and it takes a lot of courage, and it takes a lot of wisdom, and that's where we find ourselves. So she looks at reality in three ways, business as usual, status quo. Just go about your business, and whatever happens, happens. The second one is the great unraveling. Oh, It is all falling apart. What can I do? This is the end. And the third one the great turning that we deeply take an inventory of what's going on in the world around us, and how life sustaining is it and where it, isn't how can we contribute our resources of time and gifts and energy to creating new ways that are indeed life sustaining for all of nature, not just human beings, but for Mother Earth herself. That that's where we are to be, and this is what she writes, when we dare to face the cruel, social and ecological realities we've been accustomed to, courage is born, and powers within us are liberated to reimagine and even perhaps one day, to rebuild the world.

That's what we've always been about. That's been our history. May that continue to be our history as we go farther. We have so many sources from which to learn, so many people, so many folks who have weathered the storm that's been awful, and they keep on going, the dismissed voices among us that have so much to teach us.

The disingfringed, disenfranchised peoples and the truths that they hold. Wisdom abounds. Again. As Elder Marshall says, If we walk together well, we will learn to see with two eyes. Deborah Eden Tall writes in her book Relational Mindfulness, imagine if, as young people, our parents had sat us down and said to us, quote, we welcome you to this incredible and sobering journey called life. In this lifetime, you're going to experience more love and beauty than you could possibly imagine, and you will also experience more pain and suffering than you think you can bear.

Given this reality, let us prepare you with much awareness, wisdom, courage, resilience and self compassion, as you're going to need it for this journey. You will experience all of it. So let us prepare you with the ability to see clearly and listen deeply as you navigate this journey called life. You will have what it takes to meet whatever life brings you. Your unique contribution matters here, and you're not alone.

Imagine a world that that generation of young people could create, and I think are creating. What kind of a world would you like to create? Start with your own family, your own neighborhood, your own friendship network, and move on and get bigger. Where do you see the links? Where do you see the common interests, common commitments, the common joy? And keep building as we go. Get as specific as possible. You are paving a highway of hope, and in the same time, you're paving a highway of reality, of possibility in the neural pathways in your brain. Wouldn't it be great if we had eight lane neural pathways of realistic hope and wisdom to enter into the great turning.

Finally, nature is a great teacher for me. Dandelions teach me a lot. They're not my best friends, I think, but Robin Wall Kimmerer, reminds us so that dandelions both will feed us with great nutrition, and their roots will break, break up clay and make the ground more open to seeds and planting. Dandelions, those little flowers, with a hollow stem put forth a plant that can crawl up through almost any kind of concrete we put down. That is strength, and that's one of the things that nature has to teach me. Practice.

Practice what you could create this being human is not an easy assignment. I'm not sure it was meant to be. Find a practice that helps you into wholeness. Mine is Tai Chi, with balance and agility, deep breathing and centering. Find something that can center you, that can welcome in your mind, your emotions, your soul, your body, all of you, to give you strength, compassion and wisdom. Take a deep breath and feel your power, feel your existence, acknowledge in gratitude who you are and the gifts that you have to share, and then walk into the next moment together. Blessed be and Amen.