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Trust that you have what it takes.

Climb Every Mountain

Whether stepping out onto the trail or taking in the view from the peak we've just summited, we find ourselves in transition all the time. We live there. Sometimes the journey feels flat, with a sameness day after day, and other times it comes at us faster than we'd like. Either way, if we choose to pay attention, the journey always offers us more. More to notice. More to learn. More chances to grow, too, if we choose to go into the next stretch *on purpose*. If we choose to equip ourselves with what we need.

On the mountaintop, we savor the view and our accomplishment. Another one under our belt. A list in our pocket of more mountains to climb. So it can be with life's mountains. We choose how to use the time we're given: we *plan* many of our hikes. We plan to apply to schools or for jobs. We choose one, and as our goals evolve, we adjust our plans, perhaps moving in new directions. We plan our next chapters – we might choose to pledge our troth to another person. Raise a family of humans or pets. For some of us, these mountains are in the rearview mirror. For others of us, they are our now.

We don't plan all of our hikes. Life surprises us and gives us unintended detours. Sometimes the mountain in front of us looks daunting. Have we made the best choice? Are we on the right trail or have we lost our way? We may feel anxious about the next stretch. The hill ahead can look steep when we've had a change in our health or a loss. It can look daunting when a loved one is struggling or when challenges arise in our relationships or our work. When we approach the end of life – and even when freshman year is about to begin – we can find ourselves in uncharted territory. We wonder, do I have what it takes to do this?

Who's not in a state of transition right now? If only that we're transitioning into a new day, a new week. "A Year Begins Today," wrote UU minister Robert Weston. "...today I start another year, whatever the month or season;/It is what lies before me that concerns me now."¹

UUFES's fiscal year starts this month, and last Thursday, our new Governing Board met in an all-day retreat to discern its goals. Our president, Kathy Burnell, kept things going with an approach she and Warren Lindsey learned in a leadership workshop put on by the Unitarian Universalist Association. A way to climb the hill, you might say.

This climbing technique involved looking back with curiosity and then forward with purpose. And so the Board looked back over the recent past to what has stood out for them at UUFES: the high points, the conflicts, how we communicate, the stories that have brought UUFES to today. From their observations, they crafted goal-oriented questions.

¹ Robert T. Weston, "A Year Begins Today," *Seasons of the Soul*, 1963.

For example, one question was: “How can we cultivate kindness and mutual respect at UUFES?” A critical question not only in a faith community but in our own homes, around our kitchen tables, not to mention in our public discourse. “How can we cultivate kindness and mutual respect?” This and other questions became a jumping off point for brainstorming the way forward and naming the gifts we will take with us along the way.

The nine of us hiked together on this foothill, thoughtfully considering the options. How, they asked, shall we go forward? Who are we now, given where we’ve been? What are our assets? What do we have in our toolbox, and what do we need to take with us for the next leg of the journey?

At one point in the quiet sunlight of the afternoon, Kathy tasked the group with sifting through and ranking several proposals for next steps. The room grew quiet as each person reflected, responding out of their own giftedness, from their own shining inner authority. Taking in this extraordinary moment of concentration, I found myself moved, filled with the caring and love in this room. Charting our way forward is sacred work.

Today is a new year. How shall *you* do it? Who are you now, given where you’ve been? What do you have in your toolbox, and what do you need to take with you for the next leg of the journey?

We can look at this moment, or any moment, as a re-set button. We can choose anytime, anew, who we want to be. Re-consider our assumptions. Let go of that nickname we never liked. When people ask what Unitarian Universalism is, I often say that it’s about living life on purpose. That we have principles, rather than creeds, which help us be intentional about our journey. Help us notice more. Reflect more...and choose again and again our way forward.

We may not always feel up to the climb, but we have more going for us than we realize. Look back at the mountains *you* have summited, especially the jagged ones. Chances are you have climbed many mountains, if not ranges of them. You are able mountaineers.

When you look back at those hills, you may see places where you stumbled or fell or where you made mistakes. But you found your way again. Without a doubt, you have honed valuable climbing techniques. It’s easier to see each others’ than your own. Isn’t it true that, when we see someone struggling in a steep, rocky place, not only are we there with them in solidarity and hope and love, wanting the very best outcome in this struggle, but we also can’t help but notice and admire how they take on the hike?

We see wisdom in their resilience. Humor in their courage. Strength in their perseverance. Words we just heard in reference to our graduates! You may not see your own resilience or bravery or strength, but you have more in your backpack than you realize.

Given what’s brought you to this here and now, how will you proceed in this next transition, this next phase of life? What do you have and what will you need to take away with you on the next leg of the journey? May the wisdom of hindsight and the promise of intention bring clarity and growth. So may it be.