



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Become Your Habits

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Good morning. It's good to be back with you after the holidays and to start this new year together. After the traditions and revelry of the holidays, many of us find ourselves with new energy for making change in our lives. Whether you fully embrace the language of resolutions, as 44% of Americans do, many of us see the new year as opportunity to take a look at our lives with fresh eyes and recommit to positive change. We want to be happier, healthier and, many of us would say, generally better than we were before.

Gretchen Rubin is an author whose book *The Happiness Project* was a 2010 New York Times #1 best seller. Motivated by the understanding that while she was content and conventionally successful in many aspects of her life, she wasn't as happy as she could be. With the mantra that life wasn't going to change unless she made it change, she dedicated a year to seeking her own happiness, an elusive quality she decided she wanted to cultivate above all else in life. In January, she started setting monthly resolutions, exploring the wisdom of science, religion, philosophy and psychology. Each month she continued to follow these resolutions while adding in new resolutions. What she discovered on her yearlong search is the simple wisdom that many of the things we wish to change about ourselves are habits, deeply ingrained, persistent patterns of behavior.

Happy people, she noted, maintain the habits of happiness. Her conclusion produced another books which came out last spring called *Better Than Before: What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits--to Sleep More, Quit Sugar, Procrastinate Less, and Generally Build a Happier Life*. Perhaps in this extra-wordy title she has already named a few changes to which you aspire in the new year. If not, see if you can find yours in this list:

Rubin says:

Generally, I've observed that we seek changes that fall into the "Essential Seven." People—including me—most want to foster the habits that will allow them to:

1. Eat and drink more healthfully (give up sugar, eat more vegetables, drink less alcohol)
2. Exercise regularly
3. Save, spend, and earn wisely (save regularly, pay down debt, donate to worthy causes, stick to a budget)
4. Rest, relax and enjoy (stop watching TV in bed, turn off a cell phone, spend time in nature, get enough sleep, spend less time in the car)
5. Accomplish more, stop procrastinating (practice an instrument, work without interruption, learn a language, maintain a blog)
6. Simplify, clear, clean and organize (make the bed, file regularly, put keys away in the same place, recycle)
7. Engage more deeply in relationships—with other people, with God, with the world (call friends, volunteer, have more sex, spend more time with family, attend religious services)

So did you hear your new year's resolution in this list? I know I heard a few of mine. The new year is prime time for the work of shifting habits, primarily because the holidays are such a deeply traditional, habitual time. How wonderful it is to have the consistency of familiar rituals and experiences, but how painful it can be for some to feel stuck in patterns and habits that are unhealthy or hard to change. Many people- parents and children alike—note their unhappy return to early family patterns over the holidays. As we come back to our regularly scheduled patterns of work and family life we have more space to reflect on our own habits, and how we wish for them to change.

Over the past years, Gretchen Rubin's work is a part of a growing body of research coming from the business and social science communities on how our habits shape our individual and collective lives. Business journalist Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habit, Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* is perhaps the best known and most comprehensive account of scientific, business and social science research.

Duhigg's interest in habit was first sparked when he was a reporter in Iraq. He heard about an army major in Kufa, about a hundred miles south of Baghdad, who had been using the power of habit to limit violence in volatile political climates. He did this with a single action—banning food vendors from the public square. The major had analyzed countless video tapes of uprisings in public squares and he noticed one thing—a crowd that appeared peaceful by day would kick up into violence in the evening hours if given the opportunity to linger. As darkness approached, food vendors coming to service the restless crowd encouraged people to stay. Increasingly agitated, under the cover of darkness one aggressive person often incited the crowd to violence. When as an experiment, he asked the mayor to ban food vendors from the plaza at night, by dinnertime the crowd would get hungry and disperse into the night. Listen to his story:

You wouldn't necessarily think about a crowd's dynamic in terms of habits, he told me. The U.S. military, he explained to me, was one of the biggest habit-formation experiments in history. "Understanding habits is the most important thing I've learned in the army," he said. "It's changed everything about how I see the world. You want to fall asleep fast and wake up feeling good? Pay attention to your nighttime patterns and what you automatically do when you wake up. You want to make running easy? Create triggers to make it a routine. I drill my kids on this stuff. My wife and I write out plans for our marriage. This is all we talk about in command meetings. Not one person in Kufa would have told me that we could influence crowds by taking away the kebab stands, but once you see everything as a bunch of habits, it's like someone gave you a flashlight and a crowbar and you can get to work."

Duhigg's fascination with the military as an organization that has mastered manipulating the power of habit led him to be interested in habit's power to motivate behavior change, on individual and collective levels. One factor that cut across his studies was the power of the group to influence positive change. Evidence proves that we need other people to help us

make changes in our lives. A 1994 Harvard study showed this to be true for individuals who had undergone radical life changes in some of the “Essential 7” habits highlighted by Gretchen Rubin. While there were certainly the stories of tragedy or circumstances that influenced life changes, the support of a group was essential to make that life change. Duhigg writes:

“For habits to permanently change, people must believe that change is possible. Belief is easier when it occurs within a community. Change occurs among other people—it seems real when we can see it in other people’s eyes.” From Twelve Step programs to mega churches to social movements—communities have a valuable role to play in helping people make positive change. Not only this, but people are attracted to groups where it seems possible to lead healthier, happier, more generous and compassionate lives because they witness happier, healthier lives not only being aspired to, but being actively led.

Mahatma Gandhi, spiritual master of habit and architect of social change, once said:

Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.

What does this mean for us as a community? At Neighborhood, we are a community that is shaped by habits, with our own power to shape one another’s habits. Each Sunday is filled with dozens of unconscious tiny habits that create our congregational culture. Just consider your Sunday morning church routine. There are the little personal or family behavioral habits which shape your own church experience. As you come into the parking lot, do you search for a particular spot to park in, or a particular seat to sit in? Do you light a candle before worship, locate the hymns in the hymnal or ready your cash or check for the offering plate? Do you help to ready the coffee hour or set up the tables?

And there are the larger habits which shape our larger church culture: hospitality, friendship, service. Do you look for newcomers to welcome or orient to the space? Do you wear your nametag? Do you see children and families in your midst or only the adults you know? Do you use your gifts to volunteer your service in our music, religious education classrooms, hospitality ministries and social justice ministries? These habits all help to shape our congregation’s culture, making it a more welcoming and inclusive community to serve our members and guests. These habits of church benefit your own spiritual life but also enhance the spiritual lives of others.

Congregations are hardwired for habits deep in their DNA. Whether they are spoken or unspoken, oftentimes in church we don’t understand habits are habits until they are violated. Sometimes we call these habits traditions—habits that have been given particular religious and

cultural meaning over time, creating norms of what church is supposed to be. Over these past few months, I have noticed some habits that have become tradition at Neighborhood. One of the best and hardest parts about being a new minister at a congregation is that you have fresh eyes and ears as you encounter church life. How this has shown up for me is that I don't always know that I've uncovered a habit until I've violated it. I noticed this with the chancel area in our sanctuary, for example as I've experimented with it a bit, all with a larger purpose, sometimes to create space for our worship team or membership to be seen, or to have our chalice more visible. Each time I've made a change, I've heard how this change has impacted people's experience of church.

I feel grateful for this feedback, as it helps me to understand how habits shape member's spiritual experience. Now that I understand some of the habits of the congregation, we can openly discuss which ones are sacred traditions, and which ones are comfortable habits that, while challenged and perhaps ruffled by change, are still malleable.

Neighborhood is a flexible community which has been shaped and changed by many ministers and lay leaders over its years. This is one of your strengths as a congregation. You have many different understandings of what church should be and the appropriate habits that define us as a community. But our task now is not only to respect and honor our individual church habits but to define what our common habits need to be to achieve our larger vision to which you have called me to serve.

In our first months of ministry, what habits have we developed together that will help shape our future? What old habits may we need to let go of to make space for new ways of being, both individually and collectively? What new habits might we like to form that will help us achieve the results we desire for our life together as a congregation?

Remember Gandhi's words:

Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.

To truly live out our destiny together, we need to ensure that our habits are becoming the values we wish to embody as a congregation. You have called me as your leader to minister to an already amazing and vibrant congregation who seeks to be an even brighter beacon for liberal religion in the greater Pasadena community. This congregation aspires to be neighbors within and beyond our congregation's walls and to grow our congregation's capacity for service. In February, your Neighborhood Board of Trustees will be embarking upon a visioning process that will ask questions about our future as a congregation. The church is governed by a set of ends statements that will set a course for our new ministry, transforming the dreams of the church into a vision for the future. Whether this is your first Sunday or hundredth, everyone's participation is needed and valued in this exciting process, so when the invitation to participate comes, please do join in!

We have come, with our lives such as they are, to welcome the new year together. So what is your new year's resolution? What positive habits do you hope to adapt? Chances are, someone here shares your commitments and is already living up to them. Can you take a fresh look at this church to see the amazing people on this journey of faith with you? Can you take it to heart that this community is here to support you on your journey to be even better than before, and you are truly and deeply loved just as you are? As we aspire to positive change, in our lives and our church, may we be gentle with ourselves and with one another. May peace come to our homes and our shared life together. May the promise of the new year unfold, revealing what is possible for all of our lives as we join together in this beloved community of justice and joy.