

On My Mind  
1/5/07

A New Year. If one stops to think about it, it's not actually a new slate, a fresh beginning. After all, the same officials are still in office, the same projects on-going, the same problems still there. The "newness" is not physical, in other words - except in that the pages of the calendar are still mostly blank. The newness is in the mindset, in attitude.

And the question is, "How many people will stop and take a fresh look at where they are, what they are doing, what's happening in the world, at what they can, want to, should, are willing to do about it?"

One such fresh look was offered in an article titled, "Whatever happened to We?" The writer, Douglas K. Smith, observes that in the past, people relied on their neighbors both for friendship and companionship, and for help in times of trouble. They also depended on the people in their immediate surroundings for governance. "Even people who were not necessarily friends or family learned to participate together democratically and effectively because they shared fates - because they had to." People were not as mobile, and the well-being of their villages, of the community, depended on their shaping and pursuing the common good together.

Nowadays, Smith says, because of increased mobility, neighborhoods don't provide the same kind of support, and as a general rule, neighbors don't join together to develop common goals and values. Rather, the "neighborhood" is replaced by the "community" at work, by those who share the same workplace. Yet, "whether formal or informal, work or volunteer, large or small, for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental, organizations can become the communities in which we connect our shared values to the greater good of humankind, but only if we...take responsibility to help shape those shared values."

The article appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of "UU World," the magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association; it also discusses what church groups can do to identify and promote shared values. It urges congregations to identify a vision, define the strategies for achieving it, and set measurable goals for doing so. Values mentioned include respect for other people, regardless of race or sexual affiliation, the right of all employees to earn a living wage and to have access to health insurance, incorporating truth-in-accuracy into the purchase of school text books.

The approach has wide application. Just think of what the outcome might be if the Senate and the House, jointly or separately, were to work together to establish a commonly-held vision, defined strategies for achieving it, and set measurable goals for doing so! Or if the governor's cabinet did the same. A single government agency. Or the CNMI's school principals. Or a single PTA.

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The CNMI would certainly be better off than it is at this moment, with not only a federally-imposed minimum wage, but also federal take-over of immigration hanging over its head, if even a single component - the public, the Chamber of Commerce, the legislature, the administration - had gotten its act together, defined a vision, developed strategies for achieving it, and set measurable goals for doing so. Instead, all have blathered on and on about the need to set up a task force, to commission a study, to conduct research, to put off and delay taking a position, to postpone any action, in every way they could think of, rather than face reality.

Just this past week, the Washington Rep was still urging government officials to put their positions on paper, to go to Washington in person, to let their voices be heard directly by the members of the U.S. Congress. All to no avail.

Now the CNMI must face the consequences of its inaction.

Though most now say it is too late to change Congress' determination, when one considers how long 100 hours is in terms of Congressional sessions - the Democrats have vowed to pass the minimum wage bill within the first 100 hours of its new term - I have to disagree. At a rate of 40 hours per week, that comes to, at the very least, two and a half weeks after Congress' opening. And we all know that Congress does not spend 40 hours a week in session. So there could be at least a month, more likely two, before action is finally taken.

The real question is whether CNMI policy-makers can reach a mutually acceptable decision, put it in writing, and personally take it to Congress within the next two weeks. One caveat: the decision better be to accept an increase in the minimum wage now, or they might just as well forget about the whole thing. It's far too late to expect a request for yet another delay to be received with any degree of support or sympathy.

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The hand of the governor's special legal counsel Howard Willens is clearly evident in the speech that the governor made at the memorial services for former president Gerald Ford this past week. The details of Ford's role in the enactment of the Covenant come straight out of Willens's book, "An Honorable Accord," for one, and for two, none of the other media stories dealing with Ford and his importance to the Covenant provided any elaboration on just what that role was.

It is more than a little ironic that the meaning, significance, importance of the Covenant has been given greater recognition this past week in connection with the passing of former president Ford than it receives on the day specifically set aside to commemorate its enactment.

As well, it is more than a little disappointing that at the same time the Covenant is being honored, the unique benefits given to the CNMI by the Covenant are being attacked by the U.S. Congress, primarily because the CNMI does not seem to have been able to handle those benefits responsibly.

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Short Takes:

Guess it's a reflection of how difficult it is to devise a good solution to the situation in Iraq and the Middle East that the Iraq Study Group was not able to come up with a more do-able, a more compelling one. What's frightening, rather than disappointing, however, is how rigid the U.S. president's perspective is, how inflexible, how hostile to alternative ways of looking at things.

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Why is it that no one has managed to silence George Miller's criticism, and now, Nancy Pelosi's, of the CNMI's treatment of foreign workers by exposing the conditions of foreign workers - read migrant workers - in the groves and fields of California?

Seems to me it would not take all that much talent, what with all the examples of the

recent political campaigns on the U.S. mainland, to do some effective spin-doctoring about the plight of migrant workers in California - and elsewhere in the U.S. - and how the plight of those in the CNMI pale in comparison. Not that I believe the CNMI's foreign workers are all treated fairly and decently, but it does rankle that those with similar, or worse, conditions in their own back yard are not held accountable for the poor conditions, but rather, are supported in freely criticizing conditions in the CNMI.

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Stirring as the "call to arms" is that PTI Chief Executive Officer Ricky Delgado issued in his letter to the editor (in both papers) this past week, the problem is that just what the legislature ought to do first is not all that evident. Delgado wrote that it's time the people, the electorate, spoke up, and let legislators know that they (the people) are not happy with things as they are and that they want change. But in sitting down to make a list of the first ten things the legislature ought to do to bring about that change, it becomes clear that that's not such an easy task after all.

Should it be privatizing CUC? That appears to be in the hands of CUC, not the legislature. Should it be lifting the austerity holiday? Paving Obyan road? Paying at least a portion of the government's debt to the Retirement Fund? Raising the minimum wage? Further reducing the size of government? Requiring all candidates for political office have at least an AA degree? It would be helpful if Delgado would take it one step further, and - perhaps working with others - come up with a list of candidates for the top ten actions the legislature should take. That would at least provide a focus.....

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At least the *Saipan Tribune's* story earlier this week on the number of bills proposed by members of the Senate put the accent on the right syllable: it's how many bills pass, rather than how many are proposed, that counts. Total numbers of bills proposed should be counted against legislators, not as a mark of accomplishment. All those other bills do is clog up the system, and put extra burdens on the budget (for providing copies of all those bills to everyone else), on staff (who have to keep track of them), and on the other legislators (at least some of whom are supposed to review the bills in committee to decide what action to take).

Hopefully, a similar story on the number of bills proposed, acted upon, by House members will follow.

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As the Commonwealth Ports Authority renegotiates vendor leases for the airport, it sure would be nice if those negotiations included making books, newspapers, magazines available at the airport as well. Lots of time is spent in airports, especially with the two-hour lead time for checking in, creating a great market for reading materials to while away the time.

And wouldn't it be nice if the CPA loosened up a little, and allowed local vendors to sell fresh mwar-mwars at the airport, which people could buy for their incoming visitors and guests? In Hawaii, the lei stands do a big business at the airport. What would probably work best here, given the nature of mwar-mwar making and the schedule of arrivals, would be a co-op booth/set up on the sidewalk outside the exit area, so that whoever had mwar-mwars for sale could come offer them at arrival times.

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Movies this week? Incredibly, for the second week in a row, no new ones. Just when more people have more time to go to the movies - especially those who work in the schools - there are fewer options. Is that any way to run a business?