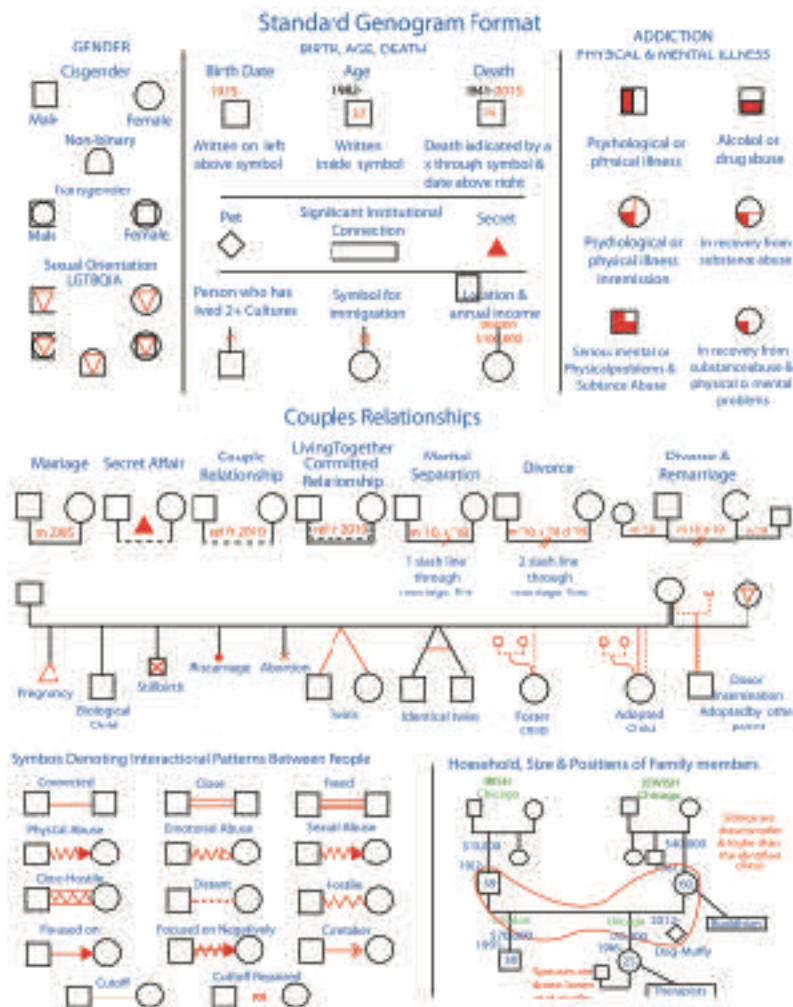


Dear Congregational Church of La Jolla:

Happy New Year!

Today's worship experience will be a little different. Let me explain why and make a few announcements about what to expect in the coming weeks.

As you might remember from this past summer, I was selected to participate in the Next Generation Leadership Initiative of the United Church of Christ—an intense seven-year program of learning and professional development alongside a cohort of the church's most talented clergy under 40. My orientation week happened this past August, and this week I will virtually join together with my cohort for our first week of class in 2021. Because of this I have spent this past week reading two books that were assigned to us as well as making my own genogram. A genogram is like a map of a family that visually depicts one's relationship to their family and the various factors that impact lives and relationships. Here is Psychology Today's standard genogram format:



In ministry this relates to something called “family systems theory”— which helps us understand our own functioning within our congregations and our communities. Congregations can often resemble families and we can often find ourselves taking on roles in our congregations that mimic certain familial relationships. This is human nature. However, it is the awareness of this that is key to a pastor’s successful ability to navigate the complex family that is a congregation. That is—in brief—what I will be spending this coming week learning.

Because of my upcoming study week, there is no PDF or recorded sermon this week. This email will offer you a prayer as well as some of my reflections on this turn of the calendar that has just happened. Nina and Bronwyn have offered us some more Christmas music this week—so that we all can remember that Christmas is not just one day but is rather an entire *season*. We are still in the season of Christmas! If anyone asks you why the Christmas music is still on or the ornaments are still up, you can let them know that YOU are still seasonally appropriate!

Next week our worship will focus on the concept of “unfinished art.” Why? Because the start of the new year offers us a lot of reflect on in terms of starting new things: goals, projects, endeavors etc. However, there is the common understanding that for many of us, no matter how pure and good our intentions, sometime around mid-February our motivation can lapse or our discipline grow weary. If any of you are crafters, artists, gardeners, or creatives you will know all too well the plight of the unfinished project—always beckoning us to return. It begs the question, does something need to be “finished” to be holy? Does something need to be complete to be good? Can something be “finished” in its “unfinishedness.” Next week we will take up these questions!

This week however, I thought I would just offer us what I think we are all yearning for: a prayer for a better 2021. The new year is actually a complicated time for me. I remember back to the times when saying “2021” felt like some far off non-existent future. Now, it is our reality. I remember once as a child I asked my father what year he thought the sci-fi movie he was watching took place in. He replied: 2020. Well, 2020 is now history. And yes, it was stranger than science fiction.

The nature of time is something that interests me. It haunts me. And I imagine that this will only become more poignant the older I get. I have found that the further and further I get from certain experiences in my past the more anxious I become about the passing of time. I’ll often find that my memories of certain events and experiences that were very important to me become more and more fuzzy over time. My ordination was the most treasured day of my life. And even though its

only been a little over 3 years since then, I sometimes feel my mental snapshots from that day fading a little more as time passes.

This coming year will already mark my 4th year with this congregation. I am no longer the “new” pastor. I am just the pastor. I am still the youngest pastor in La Jolla but it is only a matter of time before even that is no longer a truth I can hold on to. Of course, the majority of you reading this have seen more time pass than I have and have seen more new years come and go than I have. I welcome your wisdom on this topic. The passage of time seems to hit at the very heart of being human. It binds together our fears and insecurities but also our hopes, dreams, and deepest yearnings. When we see our parents age or children/nieces and nephews grow up so fast we are witnessing the joy of life running its course in the way it should. But also in that is the deep vulnerability of realizing that we have control over time and that all of this we love is so fragile.

I have often referred to the work of my favorite artist, Felix Gonzalez Torres. He died of AIDS in 1996 when he was in his late 30s. Most of his work concerns time: he documented his partner’s death from AIDS in 1991 by displaying a stack of candy in his partner’s ideal body weight. Then he invited the viewers to take a piece of candy as they visited the work. Kids would take a few, enjoying the sweet candies so liberally spread across the gallery floor. Slowly, day by day that once large pile of candy would diminish to just a few pieces left. The decay of time had taken its toll.





Felix wanted all of us to remember the delicate nature of time. He undertook a billboard project where he purchased ad space in different counties so that he could display the words: "It's only a matter of time," in the local language.

And so it is that it is only a matter of time... It is only a matter of time until we experience the deepest joys and it is only a matter of time before we experience great sorrow. It is only a matter of time until we are together again and it is only a matter of time until the sting of change hits us yet again. William McKinley, the 25th president of the United States, summed it up quite well when he said, "we are all going." Yes, yes we are. Where are we going? Well that is the question. And it is, I think, in these unanswered questions, this uncertainty, and this vulnerability that God resides.

In divinity school I took a course on resiliency. In that course I learned something quite hopeful: Human beings are incredibly resilient not only physically but also spiritually and emotionally. The things that we can live through, come out on the other side of, and adapt to is amazing and profound. We are created in the image of a God who built us so. I believe that we reflect just a small portion of God's resiliency.

We are all getting older. We are all contending with time. We are all going....going forward, going to new places, going to new heights, going to a future filled with hope.

May your new year be one filled with the resilient strength of our still-speaking God,

With grace

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Seery". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "With grace".

Rev. Tim