

A TIME FOR TURNING

OPENING WORDS—by Carl G Seaburg

Let there be joy in our coming together this morning.
Let there be truth heard in the words we speak
and the songs we sing.
Let there be help and healing for our disharmony and
despair.
Let there be silence for the voice within us and beyond us.
Let there be joy in our coming together.

TIME FOR ALL AGES—*What If Nobody Forgave?*

by Barbara Marshman (adapted)

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Universal Spirit of love, O God within each one of us, whose power reaches to the stars, whose love connects us one to another and to all creation -- we are one.

We cry out with the pain of this broken world. With all our capacity for love, we ask: why can't we wrap this world in love and bring healing? We confess that we are not always able to express the love we know is inside us. We feel constricted and hesitant, afraid that our love will be rejected or misused.

We pray for forgiveness, that we may learn to forgive others and accept their forgiveness of us. Help us let go of fear so we can move on, opening our hearts to one another. We pray for empowerment that we may learn to love more fully. Let our love shine forth from this sacred place that others may know that here they will find freedom, acceptance, community and love.

We give thanks for the blessings of love in our lives and for the chance we have to love again and always. May we feel the love inside us connecting with the love in each other and the stars. Amen. Blessed Be. Om Shanti.

SERMON

On the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every fall, every year, the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged or slighted or injured or in any way neglected in the past twelve months. The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. ...the task is not comfort, it is about truth, about wholeness and holiness. Restoration.¹

These words by the Rev. Victoria Safford describe the practice of acknowledgment and forgiveness Jews all around the world are asked to engage in during this ten-day period they call the High Holy Days.

I was first introduced to this practice by an old friend Gena. She called me up one day and asked to meet for coffee. I hadn't seen her in several years. You see, we were once very close but something had happened that had damaged our friendship. I had been hurt, but I moved on and tried to forget about it.

When we met, she explained about the Jewish practice of the Teshuvah. It's very simple, really. You are supposed to approach others whom you may have hurt during the past year and seek their forgiveness. Jewish tradition teaches that for sins between the individual and God, forgiveness is guaranteed, but for sins between one individual and another, we must actively seek their forgiveness.

And that's exactly what Gena did. She approached me and asked to meet. She acknowledged what she had done to hurt me, and then she asked for my forgiveness. I left that meeting feeling lighter, freer, as if a burden had been lifted from my heart, a burden I didn't even know I had been carrying.

¹ Victoria Safford, "At One," *Walking Toward Morning* (Skinner House Books: 2003).

Teshuvah, as with many words from other languages, doesn't translate easily into English. Often it is said to mean "repentance." But some Jews explain that a more accurate translation is "return." Rabbi Schneerson writes:

The concept of teshuvah as "return" emphasizes the fundamental spiritual potential of every person. Chassidic thought teaches that within each of us resides a Divine soul, a spark of G-d. This infinite G-dly potential represents the core of our souls, our genuine "I".

From this perspective, sin and evil are superficial elements that can never affect our fundamental nature. Teshuvah means rediscovering our true selves, establishing contact with this G-dly inner potential and making it the dominant influence in our lives. Seen in this light, our motivation to do teshuvah is not an awareness of our inadequacies, but rather a sensitivity to this infinite potential within our souls.²

I find these words and the concept of teshuvah right on target for the work we are doing together at this stage in our interim ministry journey.

Last fall, we began the first task of interim ministry, the task of claiming and honoring the past and healing its griefs and conflicts. It was especially appropriate to honor the past, as last fall marked the 350th anniversary of this historic congregation. But we also discovered the less than glorious more recent history, and began to make some inroads into discovering and coming to terms with those influences.

As the year proceeded, we explored the second task of interim ministry, illuminating the congregation's unique identity, its strengths, its needs, and its challenges.

² Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson Shlita, *Chassidic Insights Into The Cycle Of The Jewish Year*
<http://www.sichosinenglish.org/books/timeless-patterns/06.htm>

You articulated the value of being a small, friendly congregation, welcoming to people with different interpretations of religion and different life-styles. You recognized the need to grow, and acknowledged the challenge you face in integrating new members and new ideas. Several new members have now taken leadership in helping to address the need you also articulated for raising much needed funds to support the work of the church.

And now we are in the midst of another interim task, that of clarifying the multiple dimensions of leadership and allowing new leadership to emerge. Here is where I think the practice of teshuvah is particularly relevant.

I had several conversations over the past couple of weeks that helped me understand one of your persistent struggles. This is not simply a struggle here in this congregation, but also in many other aspects of our lives—and in the lives of many people around the world. It's a struggle that lies at the heart of many conflicts and even many wars.

I'm so glad the children are going to be back in the sanctuary for worship more often this year. The plan is that they will be here every Sunday except the first one each month. Then they will have their own special service in their Religious Education program. I like this arrangement for two reasons. First, it seems most appropriate for the children to be a part of the whole community's worship. Second, it gives me a chance to convey the message of the Sunday service in more than one way.

This morning's story was about a town where no one ever forgave, where generation after generation people carried around the grudges of the past and added their own until the burdens were so big and heavy they couldn't even see each other's faces. In the story, the grudges had physical form and people carried them in big sacks on their backs, afraid to put them down.

In our lives, the grudges we carry are less visible and perhaps more challenging to identify. Grudges reveal themselves to us, though, when we find ourselves complaining about something or resenting something someone does or does not do.

For instance, you might find yourself thinking that a particular person never follows through, like you do, of course. Or you might find yourself saying to someone else that you can't trust a particular person, because he or she always causes conflicts, or always has to be the boss, or only volunteers to do something because they want to be the center of attention.

If you're one of the long-time members, you may find yourself questioning how new people can possibly be as committed to the church as you are. Or, if you are a new person, perhaps you find yourself questioning why someone who has been here awhile acts like they know the only way to do things.

Now these are the sorts of things people say or think every day in all kinds of situations. These ways of thinking become so ingrained that you don't imagine you could ever feel differently about the person or situation. But if you look behind your comment or thought, you are likely to find a grudge you are carrying around without even realizing it. It probably comes from some past experience either with that particular person or with someone in a similar situation.

You have two choices. You can continue to carry your grudge around, or you can acknowledge where that grudge comes from and seek to make amends.

"Now is the time for turning," we read responsively earlier in the service. Turning is another way to express the idea of teshuvah. We read: "It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy.... It means saying: I am sorry" and meaning it.

Jesus was, of course, a Jew. He was undoubtedly familiar with the practice of teshuvah. One time his disciple Peter came to him and asked: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18)

Then Jesus told a story about a man who about to be put into prison because he owed a large amount of money. He begged the ruler to give him more time, and because the ruler was compassionate, he forgave the debt entirely.

On the way home, the man ran into someone who owed him a small amount of money. He demanded payment, but the other man didn't have it and asked for patience until he could pay. Instead of forgiving the debt, the first man had the second thrown into prison.

Some friends of the man who got sent to prison reported to the ruler what had happened. The ruler summoned the first man and changed his ruling, forcing the first man to pay back every cent of the money he owed.

Just like a lot of Jesus's stories, this one is a parable. The ruler represents God, who forgives the man for what he did wrong—running up a big debt. But instead of being grateful for God's forgiveness, the man treats another man exactly the opposite of how God/the ruler treated him. And he learns that there are consequences for such bad behavior.

According to Jewish tradition, there are two parts to teshuvah. First is the acknowledgement and admission of mistakes we have made in terms of our faith, what they call "sins against God." Some of us may have difficulty with the word "sin," but just think of it as falling short of the mark, acting in ways you know perfectly well are less than your best.

Expressing sincere regret and making a commitment to act differently in the future is all that is needed for God's forgiveness. The problem for most of us (and as it turns out, for most Jews) is that sins against God—cases where we do not act according to our faith—are also sins against other people.

Look at the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. Not following these principles invariably lead to instances in which we fall short of our best and hurt other people. And so, one of the best ways for us to return to wholeness is to ask others for forgiveness.

What happens if we don't do this? In Jesus' story the failure of the man who was forgiven to show the same compassion to others had personal consequences. In the town of Grudgeville, the failure to forgive damaged the whole town and made it a horrible place to live.

In a congregation, the failure to acknowledge the grudges we carry and the ways we have fallen short of our best behavior, can keep the church from moving forward. As we read earlier: "Unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."

This is important all the time, but especially during interim ministry. You have a special opportunity right now to let go of the past, discover a new identity, allow new leadership to emerge, and commit yourselves to new a new vision of what this church can be.

I invite you to suspend your disbelief. Have faith in yourselves and each other that a new way to be a church is possible. And then live for this church year, as if it were true.

Like most spiritual insights, it all comes down to what each of us is willing to do in our own lives, in our own heart of hearts. In a liturgy for this season developed by UUs, I found the following words:

The starting place is within. ... Teshuvah implies a returning within: to examine the reality of who you are, spiritually as well as intellectually. Returning to your inner reality can give you the power to create the changes you must make for the survival of your true self.³

The survival of our true selves, "the infinite potential within our souls," both for us as individuals and as a congregation.

³ "A UU Liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur," prepared by Marcel P. Duhamel, Carolanne Mercier Duhamel, Charles (C. J.) Landsman, and Karen Landsman.
http://www.uuja.org/holidays/lit/high_holy_days_duhamel.htm

Every new year invites us to begin again. I'd like to close with the words of Rabbi Howard Berman, who served for several years as Rabbi in Residence at Arlington Street Church:

Traditionally referred to as the "Birthday of the World," Rosh Hashanah reminds us that each of us is a co-worker and partner in the unfolding process of Creation... that our world—and our lives—will ultimately be what we make of them! What a wonderful hope... and what a powerful challenge.⁴

Happy New Year!

CLOSING WORDS—from *Gates of Repentance*, #636

⁴ Howard A. Berman, "A New Year... and a New Chapter," Rosh Hashanah, 5764. Arlington Street Church, Boston Massachusetts.
http://www.uuja.org/holidays/sermons/sermon_roshhashanah-rabbiberman1.html