

My Jubilee Year: An Interfaith Reflection on Renewal
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
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My family never had much money. Yet somehow, I always assumed by inheritance or gift, my mother had several ‘treasures’... a few precious china figurines and trinkets, solemn and painted daintily, that sat about our house on shelves and end tables. Unfortunately for those trinkets, my mother also had six children and a husband who liked to ‘rough house’. I remember many evenings rolling on the floor with my dad and brothers, hooting and giggling, times that invariably ended with a mighty crash, and some precious bobble would be broken or re-broken. We would beg our mother’s forgiveness, which she gave willingly but not always cheerfully. I think she had resigned herself to the fact that such symbols of perfection could not exist unbroken in the real world of an active family. During the ensuing evenings, my father would sit at the kitchen table with the broken pieces spread on newspaper, clumsily and ultimately ineptly, gluing the pieces together. In these memories lie some of my earliest learnings about repair...about forgiveness and renewal.

This year, during the month of October, there has been a convergence of two important religious holidays that focus on renewal, a convergence that will happen again in 2006 and 2007, but then not again for thirty years. These are the sacred Muslim lunar month of Ramadan and the sacred Jewish lunar month of Tishrei. If we want to cast a wider net, October also marks the birthday of Ghandi, World Communion Sunday, and Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, along with the Celtic New Year and the anniversary of the introduction of Buddhism into Canada. Interfaith organizations have called upon all people of faith to make the most of these sacred connections and temporal overlaps by praying with or alongside each other, by sharing food and stories, and by working together for peace, for justice, and for the healing of our wounded earth. This convergence presents an opportunity for us to try to heal some of the brokenness of our separation.

My first real exposure to the import of the month of Tishrei was about five years ago at a weekly chapel service at Pacific School of Religion. A rabbi came to do a Yom Kippur service, a female rabbi, and I was so touched by both the memory and the meaning of the holiday, that I left that service and immediately went to my computer and emailed many people back in Minnesota, asking forgiveness for any unkind things that I had done, intentionally or unintentionally. It was a healing act, made more beautiful by the quick and unconditional forgiveness offered by my friends.

Yom Kippur follows about a week after Rosh Hashanah, and it is understood that during this time, you will apologize to everybody that you've offended, hurt or trespassed against during the past year. I could imagine this to be a very long list! Yet, the focus of Yom Kippur is not actually on being forgiven but on repentance, or *teshuva*. And this repentance is not taken lightly...it involves no less than five steps. The first is to recognize one's sin, then to feel true remorse, to stop the offending behavior, make restitution if at all possible, and finally to confess or to ask forgiveness.¹ Yom Kippur is a full day spent in prayer and fasting. Repentance is serious and important work.

As is forgiveness. To be able to forgive, you have to accept the pain that was unjustly received and then offer goodwill toward the one who hurt you. But, say experts on forgiveness, if you can do this, then you will experience emotional relief and an increased ability to feel compassion for others. This is the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and love, we ourselves are healed. The way in which we love our neighbors is equal to the way in which we love ourselves.

Whenever confronted with examples of such disciplined and intentional spiritual work I find myself wondering if I am up to the task. We Unitarian Universalists are not required to have any uniform beliefs, and our individual spiritual disciplines might seem less than impressive up against a month of fasting, as required of Muslims during Ramadan, or ten days of asking forgiveness and praying for atonement, as required of Jews during the High Holy Days and Yom Kippur. How can my religion, this young, oft-called uncentered, tradition stand alongside these ancient time-tested and institutionalized practices? By comparison, how can I call myself a person of faith? I don't mean to

¹ Blumenthal, David R., "Repentance and Forgiveness", *Cross Currents*, Spring 1998, 76

digress into some kind of self-centered navel-gazing, nor do I believe that a faith tradition needs such strict requirements to be legitimized. But there is something powerful about these rituals, these Holy Days, that carries those who celebrate them into a space of reflection and renewal. This got me thinking about the concept of Jubilee, and I came smack up against the realization that I am 50. Well, that didn't come as a complete surprise...I am well aware that I'm 50. If common lore is correct, this is the point at which I am over the hill, or beginning to go down hill. I prefer a more enlightened way to look at this...that I am now standing at the top of the hill, that I have a clear overlook to see the landscape of my life. But I hadn't given any thought to the fact that I am in my personal Jubilee year. What might this require of me? What do I see as I view my life?

The Jubilee Year is described in Leviticus and also in a pseudepigraphical book called the *Book of Jubilees*. Leviticus can be a difficult book. It is a book of the law, of rules, a manual for the priests of Israel to follow in order to maintain purity and secure their position with God. The proof texts used by right-wing Christians against homosexuality, and other things, are found in this book, so just saying the word 'Leviticus' can stick in my throat. It's not a pretty book that is easily read nor can it be comprehended outside of its intended context. Yet here in the 25th chapter is a very early understanding of sustainable farming and restorative justice, grounded in the belief that regular periods of rest are necessary for taking stock and making amends. Regular periods of rest, of Sabbath...on the seventh day God rested, and so should we. In the 7th year, the sabbatical year, the people of Israel were required to observe a Sabbath for the land...the fields were not to be sowed and the vines were not to be pruned. This is a tough requirement for an agrarian people!

The Jubilee Year, which occurs after seven times seven years, goes even further. In the Jubilee Year, the season of Yom Kippur, at the beginning of the Jewish year, is to be heralded by a joyful shout of trumpets proclaiming liberty. As with the sabbatical year, all land is once again to be fallow. But in addition, all property is reverted to its original owners, Jewish slaves are set free and all debts are forgiven.

A sidebar here...I know of no connections between Jubilee and Islam. Although the Torah and the *Book of Jubilees* were written well before the birth of Mohammed,

there doesn't appear to be any crossover...nor would one expect there to be. The concept of Jubilee applied to an agrarian culture and was written for the Israelites settling in a new land. As such, it would not be relevant for nomadic Arabic peoples. However, the fasting required during Ramadan, which is one of the five pillars of Islam, is meant to strengthen one's self-discipline and to soften the heart, reminding all of the necessity of charity and compassion. Although I've called this sermon an "interfaith reflection", I am focusing on Judaism today. Even so, let's be mindful that imperatives to peace, justice, and forgiveness are trans-religious ...

Now, the mandate for a Jubilee Year operates something like a socialist Manifesto. The Israelites were a clan-based society, and each clan had been given an equal amount of land, so the Jubilee year served to preserve that clan structure by restoring the landholdings. Everyone was to return to their original property. This would prevent the accumulation of land by a few to the detriment of the community at large. It would make inequalities of riches and poverty impossible. It would give a fresh opportunity to begin again for anyone who had encountered adverse circumstances. Forget what has happened in the last forty-nine years. Return to the beginning. Begin again in love.

I can be something of a Socialist, and this sounds great in concept. But, as it turns out, there are many, many things in the book of Leviticus that are not strictly observed today or in the Israelites' time. There is no record in the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, of the actual observance of this festival, although there are some allusions to the fact that it was at least paid lip service to. Let's just say that the idea of Jubilee has moved out of the realm of property and into the spiritual arena. It is no longer thought of, at least in Catholicism and Protestantism, as a time to release debts or slaves, but rather as a time of renewal, to release our grudges, and a time to encourage greater commitment.

Perhaps what Jubilee has come to represent is a time of reflection during which we work to set things right. Renewal happens when we can return to a place where we feel right with ourselves and right in our relationships with others. We begin with reflection, with a willingness to change and a desire to be changed. As people of faith, I would hope that we are always looking for ways to repair the damage and to start anew,

but Jubilee calls our attention to it. In Islam, this is symbolized by watching for the crescent moon that marks the beginning of Ramadan. Seeing the moon is a reminder that it is time to renew vows, time to return to the source. It is an inward spring, to use Channing's phrase, calling us to the reconciliation and forgiveness that remain key components of the spiritual and ethical life. Inequities build up, old hurts fester, disappointment in ourselves and in our lack of ability to get it right hardens us, and yet we continue to keep trying. There remains the hope that one day, somehow, we will be able to pick up all the pieces and restore justice, in our own hearts, in our families and communities, and in the broader world. We can't leave the pieces broken. We must mend them with love and forgiveness.

Struggling with this is virtually timeless. The kabalistic creation story, the one Ed read earlier about the scattered shards of divinity, reminds me of, and perhaps is even based in, the myth of Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of agriculture and civilization, whose annual death and resurrection personified the self-renewing vitality of nature. He was treacherously slain by his evil brother, who cut his body into pieces and spread the fragments throughout Egypt. Isis, his sister and wife (okay, it's mythology) sought and found his scattered body. In one version of the story, she collected the pieces of her dead husband and miraculously brought him back to life. In this way, Osiris became the great symbol of the creative forces of nature and the imperishability of hope. Similarly, Rabbi Michael Lerner says that the central claim of Judaism is that we are not stuck...that fundamental healing and transformation are possible.² It is possible to pick up the pieces and begin anew.

All people, religious or not, theist or not, are still human beings... each person lives and loves with a mixture of divine and human motives.³ Our challenge is to tip the balance toward the divine. Unitarian Universalism is proud to draw on the wisdom of the world's religious traditions, including, I suppose, ancient mythology. So what can Osiris teach us?...we Unitarian Universalists who may not believe in any God, and certainly see no scientific evidence for the possibility of resurrection. What can we learn from the story of Jonah, a guy with a bunch of enemies who he'd rather see die than be granted

² Lerner, Michael, "Judaism: Cruelty is Not a Destiny", Peace x Peace Newsletter, December 2003

³ Knock, Andrew, "What Motivates Us to Forgive?", ForgivenessNet, 1999.

forgiveness? What can the example of Yom Kippur teach us, we who may not fear being abandoned by God? Because of what we UU's believe, or don't believe, we don't have the option of leaving forgiveness and redemption in the hands of a God, and that places a greater onus on us. If we aren't willing or able to be the ones who forgive and repair, the world will continue to be full of bitter and damaged people, who are never able to release their hurt. I love these Hopi words: "All we do now must be done in a sacred manner. We are the ones we have been waiting for."

I don't believe there is some external force or being that can be called God. For me, god-energy is a matter of immanence, present in all existence. I believe that there is something of the divine in all of us, even in our brokenness. I believe that we contribute to the life and pervasiveness of the divine by how we interact with and connect with others. We are each other's gods. If we want to ensure that the future is life well lived, we must be responsible for crafting a new mythology, for finding possibilities that inspire us, for creating stories that will become the shared memory of humanity. Repentance and forgiveness can help us to release our fear and anger, and to contribute hope and possibility to the stories we write with our lives.

John Patton, in his book *"Is Human Forgiveness Possible?"* says that forgiveness is not so much an act as it is a discovery, a discovery that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them.⁴ Perhaps forgiveness is the discovery that the edge of my broken piece fits into the edge of yours, and that together we can begin to make repairs. Forgiving and being forgiven might provide a glue that restores us, making us more whole, better reflections of the divine light that is in each of us.

If we hold the image of our inter-connection in front of us, which is one of Unitarian Universalism's great principles, asking for forgiveness takes on a different dimension. We celebrate and respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. So, when I choose to repent for a wrong-doing, I am not only seeking the forgiveness of the person I have wronged, but my act ripples through all of creation. When I offer forgiveness, bidden or unbidden, I also forgive myself in a motion that touches the whole of existence. This movement of the heart is a critical part of re-

⁴ Hill, E. Wayne and Mullen, Paul M., "Contexts for Understanding Forgiveness and Repentance as Discovery: A Pastoral Care Perspective", 289-291.

building the kingdom, reconnecting the pieces...just like a favorite UU hymn says, building a land where peace is born. If I want things to change, I can't think of forgiveness as an act of reciprocity⁵...I have to take responsibility for it and make the first move. If I want the future to be better, my oh-so-human being must be willing to repent and to do my best to make restitution, and in the same movement, to forgive.

I think a lot about our world these days, and I imagine that you do too. Our world seems to be so fractured. Looking at that big broken picture can be daunting. I don't know how to pick up all of the pieces and lay them out on a sheet of newspaper so that I might fit them all back together. I sometimes feel like just a helpless observer...as people and governments far away and out of my control do things that go against my basic notions of peace and goodwill. But if I am truthful with myself, especially during this my Jubilee year, I see the shadows of malevolence in my own daily interactions...in my own heart. I do well to remember the Jewish imperative of Tikkun Olam, to repair the world so that it reflects the divine values of justice, compassion and peace. Somehow it seems like forgiveness, even in small personal acts, is the place to begin that repair.

Andrew Knock, who has written extensively about forgiveness, has looked for what might be called 'secular' motivations to forgive.⁶ He lists three, which I will only touch on briefly. First, since the concept of freedom is our instinctive standard for evaluating all activities, we should recognize that being forgiven is central to freedom. Second, forgiveness creates solidarity. Forgiveness requires us to truly empathize with another person, and in so doing we recognize our own shortcomings. Lastly, forgiveness allows us to be truly 'with' another person, fully present, and in this way we experience an authentic encounter, an intimacy we all crave.

Are these motivators enough? I'd add one more. Marc Ellis, a Jewish ethicist, talks about what he calls revolutionary forgiveness. This is not about forgetting the

⁵ The German thinker Helmut Thielicke, courageous in the face of Nazism, wrote: This business of forgiving is by no means a simple thing. We say, "If the other fellow is sorry and begs my pardon, then I'll give in, and forgive him." We make of forgiveness a law of reciprocity. And this never works, for then both of us say to ourselves, "The other fellow has to make the first move." And then I watch like a hawk to see whether the other person will flash a signal with his eyes ... which shows me he is sorry. I am always on the point of forgiving ... but I never forgive. I am far too just. (*The Waiting Father*, p 112)

⁶ Knock, Andrew, "What Motivates Us to Forgive?", ForgivenessNet, 1999.

injustice, for that will always remain a part of both the victim and the victimizer. Revolutionary forgiveness carries a desire to create something different, a society beyond injustice. I often think of an adage that my Real Estate boss liked to quote... “The definition of insanity is doing things the same old way and expecting to get different results.” We know what it looks like to stay in fear and anger. We know what it looks like to live in a society with extremes of riches and poverty. We know what it looks like to let things fester until they are irreparable. Perhaps we could create something different if we were more willing to forgive.

In a curious twist on the Jubilee numerology, Jesus told Peter that when our sisters and brothers sin against us, we are required to forgive them not only once, not only seven times, but seventy times seven times⁷, dwarfing the numbers in the Jubilee renewal model. I think what he’s saying is that forgiveness is never over and done with...it’s an ongoing process, one that we must renew every day, every moment...certainly not just on the Sabbath or the sabbatical year or at Jubilee. The possibility of renewal is always with us. The need for renewal is always present.

As I grew older, I was sometimes ashamed of the mended china around our house, but when my mother died, it turns out that several of us wanted to have pieces of it...the green pottery dish that held a candle, the little china angel whose red skirt was a bell, the Swedish dalarna hes. I see now, now that I take this time of Jubilee to reflect on my life, that these broken treasures are symbols of a willingness to embrace our faults and of a hope that there is always the possibility of repair.

May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Matthew 18: 21-22