

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
Words of Inspiration “Turn and Return”
September 25, 2011

Rev. Kathryn Ellis

We are entering into the holiest time of the year for Jewish people, the Days of Awe, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the evening of Wednesday, September 28 for 10 days until Yom Kippur on October 7th. The spiritual work of this time is that of forgiveness and renewal.ⁱ Rabbi Shefa Gold describes it this way:

Rosh HaShana celebrates the creation of the world and marks the beginning of a cycle of renewal in our lives. It is the season of looking deeply in to our lives and relationships. It is a time of facing that which is most difficult to face in ourselves in order to stand before God in wholeness and truth. It is a return to that which is essential. . . .

Standing at the thresh-hold, peering through to the awesome challenge that faces each of us: To fully awaken to our true selves, to come into peaceful relationship with our loved ones and with the world, to let go of the burdens that prevent us from moving with grace through our lives. And to take that necessary leap into the unknown. . .ⁱⁱ

It is a time of *Tshuvah* which means “to turn or repent, to turn one’s life back toward holiness or God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Teshuvah (literally "returning") is the process by which Jews atone on Rosh Hashanah and throughout the Ten Days of Awe. Jews are required to seek forgiveness from people that they may have wronged over the past year before seeking forgiveness from God. Teshuvah is a multi-step process for demonstrating true repentance. First one must recognize that they have made a mistake and genuinely desire to change for the better. They must then seek to make amends for their actions in a sincere and meaningful way, and finally demonstrate they have learned from their mistakes by not repeating them.^{iv}

The days of Awe are also the time to forgive others, to offer forgiveness. It can be a time for reconciliation. Rabbi Arthur Waskow says, “it is especially suitable for restoring old relationships.”^v “No human,” he writes “is to be expelled from the human community.”^{vi}

Rabbi Gold tells us:

Doing *Tshuvah* means returning to that which is essential. We look at our lives and see where we’ve missed the mark. . . . We see the ways that we have become alienated and then we connect ourselves back to the whole of life. We return to center where we can remember what’s really important and open our eyes to the miracle of life itself, and then we take aim again from a clearer center towards the work we were born for, towards our true calling.^{vii}

In the worship service here last week, Jim Walters talked about the importance of self-compassion and self-forgiveness. Has anyone tried keeping a self-compassion journal? Have you noted how often your internal critic is telling you nasty things? This work is essential, foundational for living a loving and giving life. Psychologist Carl Rogers said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." It allows us to return to the center, to return to our true selves. Today, I am talking more about forgiving others.

Sometimes Unitarian Universalists complain when worship focuses on spiritual growth too often or talk about themes like forgiveness. They say, "I came to Unitarian Universalism for social justice work. Have we forgotten social justice?"

My response is no, we certainly have not forgotten social justice. Indeed, how could we? It is built into our principles. We just sang, "Break not the circle of enabling love, where people grow forgiven and forgiving, break not that circle, make it wider still, till it embraces all the living." Enabling love and forgiveness allows us to love and forgive others, to do the social justice work that is rooted in our heritages from Christianity and from Judaism. An essential part of Judaism is *tzedakah*, justice, righteous action or charity. This is always important but is particularly part of the preparation for Rosh Hashanah.

Attending to our inward work allows us to use our true selves, our own gifts in our social justice work. It allows us to come from a centered and liberated place. For me, spiritual growth, spiritual practice and indeed forgiveness are necessary in order to be able to do effective meaningful social justice work. Forgiveness is about not being stuck in the past but giving power to the future. As Bernadette told us her story, she showed us how important forgiveness work has been for her in healing relationships, in allowing her to be more herself. What a gift, Bernadette is able to bring to us and to her work as a midwife, her own self, a centered, loving and growing woman.

There were some very sad stories in the news this week, as there always are. I was particularly saddened by the execution of Troy Davis, a man who may very well have been innocent of the crime for which he was convicted and sentenced to death. As an opponent of the death penalty, I had been signing petitions and sending letters for several years about Mr. Davis. The day before his execution, Mr. Davis issued a statement to Amnesty International:

The struggle for justice doesn't end with me. This struggle is for all the Troy Davises who came before me and all the ones who will come after me. I'm in good spirits and I'm prayerful and at peace. But I will not stop fighting until I've taken my last breath.

Just before his death, Davis looked at the son and brother of the murdered police officer and said, "I am sorry for your loss. I did not personally kill your son, father, and brother. I am innocent." For those executing him, Davis said, "May God have mercy on your souls, may God bless your souls."

MSNBC host, Lawrence O'Donnell gave an impassioned editorial urging us to abolish the death penalty. He said, "The death penalty is a human system and there is human error built into it. The time to protest the next execution is right now."^{viii} Lawrence O'Donnell talked about an execution in Huntsville, Texas that took place earlier on the same day as Mr. Davis' execution. There was no doubt about Lawrence Russell Brewer's conviction of a hate crime murder. He was one three men who brutally murdered a middle-aged African-American man, James Byrd, Jr.

Many people protested and tried to stop Troy Davis' execution. Very few protested Brewer's. Among those who did were longtime activist, Dick Gregory and Mr. Byrd's only son. Ross Byrd is a member of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, an organization that opposes capital punishment. He has campaigned to spare the lives of those who murdered his father. You can take action to oppose the death penalty now. On the Amnesty International website, you can sign the Not In My Name Pledge which says, in part:

The state of Georgia shamefully executed Troy Davis on September 21, 2011 despite serious doubts about his guilt.

But Not In My Name.

While a majority of the world – more than 65% of all countries – has abolished the death penalty in law or practice, the United States remains one of the top countries responsible for executing people.

THE DEATH PENALTY MUST BE ABOLISHED. I take this pledge because human rights and human lives are on the line.^{ix}

You can support Pennsylvanians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty Pennsylvania state senate bill, SB 423 would eliminate the death penalty in Pennsylvania. Did you know that:

African-American defendants in Philadelphia are four times more likely to be given a death sentence than white defendants.

Although Philadelphia's murder rate is only 3 times great than that of Harrisburg, the proportion of those condemned to death is 11 times greater in Philadelphia.^x

I actually didn't intend to speak so much about the death penalty, but to me, it is directly related to forgiveness. A colleague described seeing the movie, *The Interpreter*. Nicole Kidman's character had lived in Africa. She told of one group's practice when murder has occurred. The victim's family can set the guilty person afloat in a river, powerless and tied up. If the family allows him to drown, they are avenged, but will spend their rest of their lives in mourning. If they rescue him, they are freed. Kidman's character says, "Vengeance is a lazy form of grief."

Psychologist, Albert Ellis (no relation to me), said that blame is at the route of all our psychological problems whether we blame ourselves, blame others or blame God, the universe, the system or the situation. From a religious perspective, Sufi poet Hafiz wrote:

"The Sad Game."

Blame
Keeps the sad game going.
It keeps stealing all your wealth –
Giving it to an imbecile with
No financial skills.
Dear one,
Wise
Up.^{xi}

Yet our predominant culture is quick to blame, shame and punish. Blame is not the same as understanding what happened. Blame does not take action to right wrongs. When you blame someone, you don't have to take any action to solve a problem. Much of our culture today says there are bad people. Those bad people cannot be fixed, forgiven or loved. You simply have to find a way to get rid of them or at least to control them. Blame is vengeance, not accountability.

I think we have all felt shame at some point; shame is very painful. Shame is not guilt. Guilt says we have done something wrong, behaved badly. Guilt allows for the possibility of making amends, asking forgiveness and restoring relationships. Shame is feeling that your very being is wrong. There is nothing to fix, nothing to apologize for except perhaps for being alive, for being human.

Shame prevents forgiveness. Many people who look as if "they've got it all together" carry around a lot of shame. It is so painful that they need to hide from themselves. They cannot allow themselves to feel their feelings. They want to look perfect and can't forgive their own mistakes or vulnerabilities. Shame prevents forgiveness. Many people who look as if "they've got it all together" carry around a lot of shame. It is so painful that they need to hide from themselves. They cannot allow themselves to feel their feelings. They want to look perfect and can't forgive their own mistakes or vulnerabilities. Sometimes, a shame-filled person will fear deep inside that they are one of the **bad** people, one of the irredeemable.

I think that is shame and blame that allow the death penalty to continue. Sometimes people talk about “closure” as if all their painful feelings will go away once the person is punished, is executed. That is simply not true. We confuse vengeance with justice. The film character says, "Vengeance is a lazy form of grief." But it also just doesn't work that way. I think that is shame and blame that allow the death penalty to continue. Sometimes people talk about “closure” as if all their painful feelings will go away once the person is punished, is executed. That is simply not true. We confuse vengeance with justice. The film character says, "Vengeance is a lazy form of grief." But it also just doesn't work that way. We need to attend to our feelings, to feel them and to think about them. Then, we can let them go. Sometimes that is really hard work, but it is necessary work if we are to be really alive, if we are to be our true selves.

This is not Universalism. Our earliest Universalists taught that God's love was enough for everyone, everyone will be forgiven, will be made one with the divine. Human forgiveness requires work and practice. Next week we'll talk more about what forgiveness is and is not. In a few minutes, Bernadette will lead us in a forgiveness meditation. When she does please hold your glass bead. Then take the bead home with you, put it in your pocket and carry it around this week. During the week as you come into contact with the glass bead, think about someone that you would like to forgive or someone that you would like to forgive you. What do you need for that to happen? And bring the bead back with you next week.

Catholic spiritual teacher and writer, Henri Nouwen wrote, “Forgiveness means that I am continually willing to forgive the other person for not being God – for not fulfilling all my needs. I, too, must ask forgiveness for not being able to fulfill other people's needs . . . When you can forgive people for not being God, then you can celebrate that they are a reflection of God.”^{xii}

Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield, wrote, “Forgiveness is both necessary and possible. . . .Forgiveness acknowledges that no matter how much we may have suffered, we will not put another human being out of our heart . . .With virtue and forgiveness, we repair the world.”^{xiii}

So may it be. May you return again and again to your true self.

ⁱ Gold, Rabbi Shefa. “The Journey of Forgiveness” @ <http://www.rabbishefagold.com/RHSermon2008.html>

ⁱⁱ Gold, Rabi Shefa. “The Art of Celebration” @ <http://www.rabbishefagold.com/ArtOfCelebration.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982. p.233

^{iv} <http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/g/teshuvah.htm>

^v Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, p.33.

^{vi} Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, p. 30.

^{vii} Gold, Rabbi Shefa. “Tshuva- From the Golden Calf to the Mishkan
@ <http://www.rabbishefagold.com/GoldenCalf.html>

^{viii} http://thelastword.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/09/22/7908814-rewriting-the-american-death-penalty

^{ix} <http://www.amnestyusa.org/>

^x <http://www.pa-abolitionists.org/>

^{xi} Ladinsky, Daniel (tr). *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, The Great Sufi Master*. New York: Penguin Compass, 1999, p. 117.

^{xii} Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Only Necessary Thing* quoted at www.inwardoutward.org

^{xiii} Kornfield, Jack. *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universalist Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. New York: Bantam Books, 2008, pp. 341-349.