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Yom Kippur Sermon  
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Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, which was yesterday, marks the celebratory close of the High Holy Days in Judaism. The High Holy Days begin with Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day in the Jewish calendar, this year on September 4<sup>th</sup>, and end 10 days later on Yom Kippur.

According to Jewish tradition, it is said that on Rosh Hashanah, God opens the Book of Life, and that all humankind passes before God to have their names written in this book. On Yom Kippur it is said the book is closed and one's fate for the year is sealed. To have one's name written into the book of life, one must atone well for their sins. These include transgression against others, self and God, or as I interpret this, against one's human family.

During the course of the holiday, a major component of the liturgy is the repeated *communal* confession of sins. Yom Kippur closes with a unique and emotionally powerful service during which the liturgy imagines the gates of heaven closing at the end of the High Holiday period. The ark of the covenant, housing the ten commandments, stands open during this time which ends with a long blast of the shofar or ram's horn, understood by many as signifying God's redemptive act in answer to true repentance. In the end, as long as we do our work of emptying ourselves of blame and denial, we are forgiven.

The entire month leading up to the High Holy Days, the month of Elul, is set aside for *tesuvah*. The word literally means “to turn,” and the practice of *tesuvah* means to look back over the past year and remember the places where we have gone wrong, where we have hurt someone else, where we have been unjust, or lost our way.

Then it means to turn, as in to make a change in the ways we have done wrong, to turn our lives around. There is also a spiritual component of *tesuvah* which speaks to turning ourselves toward what is holy, or what is good, to reconcile ourselves to God or I might say with love.

It is a time of turning, of turning toward and away from.

We are asked to turn toward self-recognition,

away from blame,

Toward those we have harmed in anyway, great or small

Away from self hatred

Toward each other in recognition of our shared humanity

Away from the consumption of what keeps us isolated, apart

We are asked to be accountable to each other and to mystery of love that surrounds us.

We are asked to forgive others and ourselves. We are asked to enter the bones of our humanity. We are asked to surrender to something larger than we are, to come to rest and from this place of rest, assess our lives. We are asked to do this in community, beside those whose lives we touch, all of us human and worthy of love and forgiveness.

Who likes to give such scrutiny to their lives. When asked to scrutinize our lives, we turn immediately to our failures, not our goodness. And then we cringe and walk away. It's too much! We are only human after all we cry into the night. Let me be.

The medicine of the High Holy Days is that when we want to shut down because we can't bear the assessment of the past year, we don't. We stay open. We turn toward. And what makes this possible is a community of like souls walking the same path, all of us feeling we fell short in too many areas, all of us feeling unworthy of forgiveness. We share these things as human beings. And when we share them out loud, it creates the strength to do the work of reparation: offering others apologies, offering ourselves forgiveness. Giving love equally to other and self.

Fasting is part of these high holy days and occurs from sundown to sundown this year from the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, this past Friday and Saturday. Fasting is a religious ritual in many traditions. It is said that emptying ourselves, pausing, allowing ourselves to be changed by the experiences of our bodies, connects us one to the other, connects us to our commonality, our unity in this fleshy embodiment.

We all hunger and grow weary and feel joy and sorrow. We are all enfleshed. When we fast, we arrive at the most basic truths of our embodiment: our fragility, our universality, our longing. Fasting also reminds us how privileged we are because we can choose when to eat and not eat when so many others cannot. It also shows us the way toward self-discipline, toward overcoming the impulse of body and mind when there is something higher than both of these that calls us. It frees us to digest our own lives.

It is not easy to look with such a searing light at our lives over the past year. Who can even remember the last year? And yet, it is one of the most basic of all spiritual teachings, to reflect, to take notice, to make oneself accountable for the consequences of one's actions.

Some of these consequences we know, others we cannot know, to all of them we owe ourselves and each other the courage to listen as others tell us how we have impacted their lives. We deserve the time and space to heal by making amends, by asking for forgiveness and by forgiving ourselves.

It is a lonely journey, this self assessment. I want to love myself with the rigor of one who knows I am good, but there is always that haunting voice that says I am not really that good, really barely good enough, and if I look without blinders, all of those words about self- love feel like a heady illusion built to keep us afloat.

How do we tread this terrain and should we bother? I believe that Yom Kippur has some medicine for us as UU's. The path to reconciliation with others, ourselves and the world around us is a path that we must walk.

And when we walk it together, a balm becomes available to us all. We recognize, together offering our apologies, together noting the ways we failed ourselves, did not keep our commitments to live intentionally, with kindness, with humility, with self respect, and the ways in which we failed to live up to our principles, to offer each other sustenance along the way ...together doing this work of our humanity, our terrible, beautiful brokenness becomes available to us, all of it.

The work is not to repair the brokenness. It cannot be repaired. It is part of this fleshy embodiment, The work is to notice, to recognize the brokenness and let our humanity, our own longing for goodness, guide us into a reflection with the power to reshape our lives.

There is a song by Leonard Cohen called anthem. This is the refrain:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

The light shining through illuminates the cracks. Without the cracks, the light cannot come through, cannot cast shadows, cannot show us the difference between here and there, light and dark, hope and sorrow.

The cracks scare us. So we stuff them up with all the stuffings of life. We busy ourselves from one end of the day to other. We fill ourselves so full we can barely see each other or our selves anymore.

My father died 14 years ago. His was a hard death. He had prostate cancer that had moved to his bones. For 5 years after he learned this news, he fought it. Some days were better than others.

Around 2 or 3 years in, I told my dad that I would come to the house where he lived with my mom and read to him. He was so happy about this. I could see it in his face. I was not used to being able to bring joy to my father's easily. He was always so busy consuming alcohol, scheming up ways to make money, covering up ways he lost money, trying to make up for it all. He could not rest inside himself. I did not have the tools then to see any of this. I only knew he was dying before I really knew him, before he really was able to arrive here fully and I was angry and scared and really sad.

So I told my dad I would read to him and the look of relief combined with joy on his face stunned me. Bringing my father joy was usually something close to miraculous given the world his children lived in: getting all As, travelling to India by myself, bringing up my daughter alone, renovating apartments and making them into little doll houses...then he would get that smile of joy, but from a simple offer to read to him, that was not something I had seen before.

My father did not have much of a shot at living well. His own father was a brutal man. My father wanted to be more. I could see this from time to time in him. And sometimes he was more. But mostly he was lost in alcohol and scheming and wrestling his own ghosts.

I never did read to my father before he died. I just couldn't seem to break through into that level of intimacy with him. It frightened me. And he never did tell me what he wanted to tell me before he died. He too could not break through the patterns our lives had made around us either.

I have learned to forgive my father, and myself. It was not an easy road. Somewhere along the way, I had to grant us our humanity and all its limits and longings and missed possibilities.

I had to let us both of the hook of being something we could not be then. And to let our love for each other exist nonetheless, even though we were not fully the people we strove to be. We did love each other. And that has to be enough. It is enough.

Yom Kippur is not a solitary holiday. It is a time when Jewish people come together and do the work of seeing beside each other. It is a time when people take each other's hands and say yes, we are not so different you and I. We have both erred, we have both been selfish and self serving and blamed others for what we should have taken responsibility for. Yes, I see you. Yes, I know you. Yes, I know you too are human and fragile and want so terribly, so very much to be good enough to be loved, to love yourself, to feel loved beyond yourself.

The Sufi poet Rumi writes,

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make any sense. Come.

And so I invite you to come here, come here to this body and this life and this place and do the work of looking and seeing and not turning away but turning in, toward, and let the pain and sorrow of it all come to you, not to crush you but to wake you up, to wake us all up to the beauty and fragility of our humanity.

This work cannot be done alone but it can be done here together. Say I am sorry. Make amends. Turn and turn again and each time another layer of your deep humanity will be made available to you.

We have only this one precious life. Live it! We will always err, we will always stumble and fall. Let it be so. For within each time we err is the seed for reparation, for turning, for learning, for becoming more whole.

I close with the words of the poet, Stanley Kunitz

How shall the heart be reconciled

to its feast of losses?

I turn, I turn,

exulting somewhat,

with my will intact to go

wherever I need to go,

and every stone on the road

precious to me.

In my darkest night,

when the moon was covered

and I roamed through wreckage,

a nimbus-clouded voice

directed me:

"Live in the layers,

not on the litter."

Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

May all of you, all of your changes and stillness know loved as so remain in the book of  
life until the end of our days.

Amen.