

“The Days of Awe, Forgiveness and Siamese Fighting Fish”
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Meditation adapted from Doug Kraft

It was an hour and fifteen minutes drive from my home in Groton to Sharon, Massachusetts where I was ministering a few years ago. As I got up to speed on the interstate one morning, I clicked on the cruise control and settled back.

I put my brain in cruise mode as well and began musing about a Rosh Hashanah service I was planning. My mind rambled along from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to atonement to evil. I don't believe in evil. I think people are inherently good at the core. But if pressed for a definition, I would say evil is acting with the intent to hurt. Out of revenge, righteousness, confusion or whatever, a person might want to inflict pain. That doesn't make the person essentially evil, only functionally evil for the moment.

I wondered what is required amidst these wrong doings to lead a good life. These ruminations carried me to the next freeway exchange. Several cars were coming up the on ramp. Entering traffic is supposed to yield. One thing I hate about Massachusetts drivers is that they never learned this — they just plow in. A blue Chevy was headed toward me with no indication it would give way. There were cars in the left lane and cars behind me. If he didn't slow down and I didn't slow down, we would crash. I didn't want to slow: I had the right of way. Besides, the cruise control was on. So I leaned on the horn several times.

The blue Chevy suddenly slowed and pulled in behind me. I looked in the rear view mirror. The young guy looked furious. A moment later, he pulled up along side me, gave me an obscene gesture and sped down the road at 80 miles an hour.

I slowly recovered from the adrenaline rush. I was glad the guy was out of sight and the little adventure was over.

I returned to my musings. I had been thinking about evil ...

With a start, I suddenly realized what I had done. By my own definition, I had committed an evil act. I would like to tell you that I blew my horn out of a benign concern to raise the fellow's consciousness so that he might lead a safer and more prosperous life. But the truth is I wanted him to feel bad for his rude and dangerous driving. This fit my description of evil.

I did not conclude that I was a terrible person. Considering the fighting around Jerusalem, or in Iraq, or the posturing in congress, my evil act was small potatoes. But the middle East and Washington are far away while my own life travels with me. If I want to be an influence for peace and well-being, then I need to attend to my own outlook. And I had just sent a ripple out into the world. My horn blowing triggered this man's wrath. Maybe he swerved past some other drivers making them fearful or annoyed. That fear and

annoyance might have caused them to be rude or impatient when they got to their home or office. Who knows how far the waves might go?

It seems that leading a good life may not have anything to do with avoiding evil. It may have more to do with learning understanding. And forgiveness. And it may just need to begin with me.

Sermon:

L'Shana Tovah Teekatayvu – “May your name be inscribed in the book of life.” This, some of you will know, is a blessing exchanged among people of the Jewish faith. It is shared around the time of Rosh Hashanah in the Jewish Calendar. Which we happened to have celebrated a couple weeks ago.

Today I would like to extend that blessing to you, especially to all of our new members. I wish you all a wonderful new year – your first year as members. That your time here leads to a deepening of connections – with your faith and with your fellow members. That being part of this place helps you feel as though signing the book this morning was something like having your name inscribed in the book of life. I also wish to share with you a little bit about this book of life, what it is and what it means to have your name inscribed there.

But first, I wanted to check in with you. You've been members now for, oh, 20 minutes or so. And though, it may seem a little early, I thought it was about time to ask you. How's it going so far? Problems? Conflicts? Tensions? Have your feelings been hurt since you became a member? Hurt anyone else's feelings? Anyone thinking of having their name blotted out yet?

It's early yet. But if in case you have already been offended, or found a way to offend someone else, or in some way broke the rules, rest assured. You haven't set the record.

That record, according to Jewish lore, was first set by a couple named Adam and Eve who were charter members back in the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Eden. What made their accomplishment most impressive is that they were the only members. It is recorded in the book of Genesis, that Adam and Eve were placed in the garden in the last verse of Chapter 2. By the sixth verse of chapter three the snake had gotten them to eat the apple which led to God kicking them out of the garden. Six verses was all it took! And apparently their offense was so egregious, an angel with a flaming sword was placed by the entrance to block their return. They were forced to go out and build their own paradise.

But that didn't go so well either. Their own children, in the very next chapter, broke their record. From the time where Abel is born, it only took Cain five verses to kill him. So, you see, it's not too early to check in with you. I know what happens when you get mixed up in religious company.

And so do the Jews. I believe they understood this kind of impetuosity when they came up with the days of awe – the high holy days of the Jewish calendar. The days of awe start with Rosh Hashanah - a celebration of the new year. The new year symbolically refers back to the original creation – the garden paradise God created. And it is commemorated, each year, by eating apples dipped in honey. So right away, making apples so readily available tells you that they weren't dissuaded by the Garden of Eden debacle. That they kind of expect a little conflict, or at least are somewhat used to it. By the way the honey is not to encourage us to enjoy our sins, but to remind us of the sweetness of life.

That, to me, is the interesting thing about Rosh Hashanah – that just as the new year is under way – before we get any further - we are immediately asked to begin preparing for forgiveness. Ten days after Rosh Hashanah comes Yom Kippur – the day of atonement and repentance. These ten days are referred to the days of awe – they are marked by a careful examination of any wrong doings that might need to be mended in our relationships. You wouldn't think you could get into too much trouble in just a few days. But the Jews, apparently realized two things.

First, that like Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, it's easy to get off to a bad start. A little gaff, even at the very beginning, can really stick with you and set a tone that will follow you around. And before you know it people are smothering and smiting one another left and right. It's important to remember that it didn't stop after Cain and Abel. A few pages later, in chapter 6, it said that 'God noticed wickedness had covered the land.' So much so he wanted to wipe everything out with a great flood. A few more pages and He wipes out Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins. Not too much further he is threatening to wipe out all the Israelites because they appear to prefer a golden idol over Him.

It didn't stop until Moses stepped in and intervened. It's at this point I think we come to the real spirit behind the Jewish High Holy days. And it occurs in a talk Moses has with God after God reveals that he is considering destroying the Israelites because of their sins. Moses has this to say.

“Alas, it is true we have done wrong for worshipping golden idols. But now if you can forgive, we can come together again. We can be as one. At peace. But if not – if it is all about hurt and resentment and revenge – then blot my name from the book you have written. I will not have my name written on pages that are without forgiveness, for that is a story where nothing but misery will ever be seen.” (Exodus 32:31-33)

Which brings me to the second point: having your name in the book of Life does not mean happiness. Or good fortune. Or that we can sin with impunity. It means we have shown that we are willing to practice forgiveness.

So, as you hear this blessing around Rosh Hashanah, 'May your name be inscribed in the book of life,' remember, it is not a blessing meant for the faint of heart. It is for those who are serious about community. About relationship. About peace. About doing what they can to end the misery around them.

Yes, the Jews are quick to draw in recommending we sort through our actions and our conscience and seek atonement in our relationships. But for good reason. When we look at the world today, it is not hard to see conflicts ranging from warring countries to warring spouses and everything in between. All of us, at any given moment, carry with us numerous unresolved conflicts at any given time. Conflicts that seep into our idle thoughts, demand our attention, affect our mood, alter our response to the world. Given the number of relationships we each have, it is impossible not to.

For you, right now, those conflicts may be with your children. Your friends. People at your work. People where you do business. Or, for crying out loud, they may be with the very people who go to your church. Who are sitting right next to you! Especially those new people! Man, where did they all come from? People who don't know how much work it took for us to get to this point. People who don't know how things are supposed to be done around here! People who are just now beginning to wonder what it might take to have their names blotted out of the book! You might very well be carrying a little conflict with them. And rest assured, founding members, they might very well be carrying one with you.

It is a phenomenon familiar to all such creatures who are given free will. So, people, if you thought it was a problem for Adam and Eve, you better believe it's an issue for Unitarian Universalists. Because if Adam and Eve had been UUs, they would never have stopped after eating just one apple. They'd have picked that tree bare. And then started hassling God for only planting one tree of life in the garden – that's how much free will we want in our religion.

But so much free will, as the story points out, leads inevitably to conflicts. When free wills are asked to merge, someone's free will is going to be taxed. And someone will have to bend. Or they will break. And that's when forgiveness becomes so important. Because without forgiveness, 'nothing but misery will ever be seen.'

So, let me check in with our new members again. 30 minutes of membership under your belt now... How's it going? Offended yet? Feelings hurt? Don't worry. It's early. I haven't even finished the sermon yet.

I think Doug Kraft's words in the meditation do a good job of explaining why conflict can occur in a growing church. And why the practice of forgiveness is even more vital to Unitarian Universalists than even for the Jewish faith. We are constantly being asked to learn how to merge.

Having our name inscribed in this particular book of life means that we are given this little piece of paradise and a good dose of free will and we just try to use this church to help us steer our lives in a good direction. But before you know it, someone is driving up alongside us. And it's not as though they were trying to or anything, but somehow their karma ends up running over our dogma and pretty soon all kinds of theological gestures are being exchanged.

Like the Jews when they were growing their religion, we expect to find conflicts in a growing church. Especially when there is a lot of merging traffic. It's not enough to try and avoid getting offended. Or to grit out teeth and bear it with a smile. We may think we are doing everyone a favor holding it in. But, as those who believe in the true power of Yom Kippur know, it's not avoiding conflict that is important. It's dealing with it.

Very few of us ever blow our cool. Lose control. We can all manage to hold it together even when someone slights us. I don't think there's any one of us here who can't resist the urge to body check the old lady in to the frozen food bin when she takes the last turkey pot pie at the grocery store. But most of us will make a little note of it. We'll remember her. Her and her turkey pot pie - and the condescending way she smiled at us as she walked away knowing she got the last one and is probably going home to gloat about it! We'll remember her, alright. We'll gnaw on that bone all the way home.

Frederick Buechner talks about this in the book, "Wishful Thinking: Theological ABCs. Right at the very beginning, under A, he talks about anger and compares it to gnawing on a bone. There's always a little bit more tendon. A little more gristle or marrow, he says, and so you keep gnawing. The trouble is, he says, the bone you're gnawing on is you.

That's why in the days of awe, after the new year and leading up to Yom Kippur, we are not asked to grit our teeth. Grin and bear it. Avoid the people or situations that are hard for us to be with. We are asked to seek them out and make amends. We are asked to practice forgiveness and make things right. It is true, for-'give'-ness is a gift we give others. But the more important part is the gift we 'give' ourselves. Being able to look upon that person who took our turkey pot pie with eyes that no longer see them as a thief, with a presence that doesn't recoil or avoid - it is an act that has the power to make the rest of our new year much more enjoyable. That is why we do it at the beginning. So that in the year ahead we won't carry the burdens that separate us from others. And keep us at bay from what is holy to us.

There is a story about a man who had a hard time with forgiveness. A hard time even knowing why he should forgive. He failed to have any real close relationships, and yearned to know some sense of God - something which eluded him for years. He spoke of this with great irritation each week at his scheduled appointment with his therapist. He talked about his parents - how they had always channeled so much of their energy into their bickering that they had no time or attention left for him. He said he was angry because they neglected him. He talked about how he was angry at his friends for betraying him. Angry at his children because they rarely called. All the while, each week, the man looked upon the bowl on the table next to his therapists chair. He watched the colorful blue and orange fins gracefully fan out as the single fish swam calmly and peacefully.

Finally, after many weeks of noticing his patient's pre-occupation, the therapist took from his desk a small mirror which he showed his patient. "This fish you have noticed is an interesting one. Besides being beautiful, he has much to teach us. He is a Siamese

Fighting Fish – a species known for its fierce territorial instinct. This fish will not tolerate any other presence in his bowl. He will rail against them and eat them alive if he gets a chance.”

Then he held the mirror up to the side of the bowl. And immediately upon seeing his reflection, the fish became very agitated. He darted back and forth and began attacking the reflection. “The thing about this fish, though, is even when he is looking at his own reflection, he still tries to destroy what he sees.” Then he paused. “You are like this fish in that you are both trapped in a very small bowl. The only difference is that you have a choice to see people a different way. But that way requires your ability to forgive.”

Then he told his patient about an encounter between two friends who had, years before, been held prisoner in the same Nazi concentration camp.

“Have you forgiven the Nazis?” one asked the other.

“Yes,” came the reply.

“Well, I haven’t,” said the first. “I still hate them every day for putting me in prison.”

“It sounds like,” his friend said gently, “they still have you in prison.”

And that is the point I wish to leave you with this morning. The point, the Jews have been asking us to consider for centuries. The reason, I believe, why apples and honey are eaten as part of the Rosh Hashanah ritual is because free will is a good thing. It is one of the things that makes life sweet. And worthwhile. But we can’t really enjoy it – we can’t really have our names inscribed in the book of life - until we learn to practice forgiveness. For how free can we ever truly be if we are always looking out at the world through eyes that have gotten used to seeing grievances. And how can we ever discover what is truly holy if we aren’t free.

It is as Mahatma Gandhi would say, “If you cannot see God in the face of the person next to you, it is a waste of time to search for him further.

To our new members and old members alike: happy new year. May your names be inscribed into the book of life. May you know true freedom because you have, here, discovered true forgiveness. May it help you discover the holy, and may you find it in the faces of the people around you. And may peace accompany you in this place, in all your comings and goings.

To the Glory of Life.