

September 15, 2013

Reading: Our reading is a poem by Unitarian Universalist minister, Nancy Shaffer, from her meditation manual "Instructions in Joy."

Because we spill not only milk
Knocking it over with an elbow
When we reach to wipe a small face
But also spill seed on soil we
thought was fertile but isn't,
And also spill whole lives and only
later see in fading light how
much is gone and we hadn't
intended it

Because we tear not only cloth
Thinking to find a true edge and
instead making only a hole but
also tear friendships when we grow
And whole mountainsides
because we are so many and
we want to live right where black oaks
lived, once very quietly and still

Because we forget not only what
we are doing in the kitchen
And have to go back to the room we were in
before, remember why it was we left
But also forget entire lexicons of joy
And how we lost ourselves for hours
yet all that time were clearly
found and held and also forget
the hungry not at our table

Because we weep not only at jade
plants caught in freeze and
precious papers left in rain but
also at legs that no longer walk
Or never did, although from the outside
they look like most others
And also weep at words said once as
though they might be rearranged but
which, once loose, refuse to return
and we are helpless

Because we are imperfect and love so

Deeply we will never have enough days
We need the gift of starting over, beginning
Again: just this constant good, this
Saving hope.

Sermon: Regret

*Because we are imperfect
We need the gift of starting over.*

Unitarian Universalists are open to finding religious inspiration from many sources, including wisdom from other faith traditions. There are many Unitarian Universalists who call themselves Christian UUs, or Buddhist UUs, or in the case of my household, Jewnitarians.

As a good Jewnitarian, I spent Saturday evening having dinner with all the Jews in Amesbury, Mass, which is about three families. This dinner was to celebrate the holy day of Yom Kippur, which ends with a “break fast”—not breakfast, but rather a breaking of the fast. I don’t think anyone there had actually fasted that morning, although we should have just to make more room for our hostess’s delicious cheese blintzes. I dream about those blintzes all year.

Yom Kippur is a holiday that invites Jewish people to look back on the past year and make amends. As Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it, at Yom Kippur a person can say to God:

“I’ve done and said some things this past year that were wrong,
things I’m embarrassed to have said and done,”

and [God will] answer,

“That’s all right. Imperfect people are welcome in My presence because imperfect people are the only kind I’ve ever seen.”¹

*Because we are imperfect
We need the gift of starting over, beginning
Again: just this constant good, this
Saving hope.*

Each year, the Jewish calendar gives its people a chance to start over, to right their relationship with the Holy and humanity.

¹ I always seek out Rabbi Kushner’s High Holy Day sermons. He is the author of *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*.
http://www.tiofnatick.org/uploadedFiles/site/About_Us/Our_Clergy/Rabbi_Laureate_Harold_Kushner/YK12%20Rabbi%20Kushner.pdf

Now when it comes to Unitarian Universalism, there is a different approach to the year. And here may be what is our religion's greatest strength—and greatest weakness. (Isn't that always the case?) Unitarian Universalism tells us that we are already saved. We are already loved. Unitarian Universalism holds as its first principle that each person has inherent worth and dignity—no matter what. And so when we make a mistake and do something wrong, our faith tells us we can start over, every day. Every hour. Every minute!

Here is my definition of the ancient theology of universalism: God—the Holy—the Universe—whatever nickname you like to use—loves us just as we are, and has loved us from the start: imperfect and beautiful. No creed or statement of belief is required to receive this gift; no special sacraments or rituals are demanded. Instead of original sin, we have original blessing.

But knowing that you can start over every day can be sort of like saying: "I'm starting a diet!...tomorrow." Or, as St. Augustine prayed 1500 years ago, "Lord, give me chastity...but not yet."

And so, in our church year, there isn't that one big day where everyone just HAS to start over, to be a "good UU." When it could be any day...sometimes it turns out to be no day at all. And then we never get pushed to say, "Well, I know I have inherent worth and dignity. I know I am loved and lovable, as imperfect as I am. But...I have said and done things this year I am ashamed of. I have hurt people's feelings; I have withheld compassion; I have been selfish. And *today* is the day I'm going to do something about that."

So let's start now.

*Because we spill not only milk
we also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light
How much is gone and we hadn't intended it.*

What stops us from starting over? What stops us from trying to make amends, and heal the relationships in our lives?

Sometimes the reason is because we get really caught up in the idea of who we are. It is as though we believe that our innate self will be damaged or destroyed if we reconsider a strongly held opinion, or find a way to apologize sincerely for something we still don't feel that sorry for. Sometimes the thing that keeps us back from healing a relationship is the belief that it is the *other* person's job to change, not mine! "This is who I am, don't try to change me." "I didn't mean to hurt you, so it is your fault you feel hurt." "*I'm* being helpful, *you* are being difficult." I know I have felt those things at times! Yet, in trying to bolster our sense of self, we may hurt our relationships with others.

Harriet Peterson sent me an interesting resource that contrasts a common Western concept of the self with the South African philosophy called "*ubuntu*."

René Descartes said: “I think therefore I am.” This statement assumes that human existence can be self-reliant, and gives birth to various terms in the English-language with “self” as a prefix. For example, we often hear of self-confidence, self-criticism, self-discipline, self-esteem, self-importance, self-improvement, self-interest, self-respect, self-sacrifice—and the list goes on! Amazingly, the equivalent of these “self” words cannot be found in many non-Western languages, which reveals a great deal about our continued fascination with...the so-called...“self-made man.”

In contrast to “I think therefore I am,” the [South] African philosophy of “*ubuntu*” states, “*I am because we are.*” [In *ubuntu*] a person is only a person through being in relationship with other persons. [A]ll people are products of their environment, and thus all people have to rely upon others each and every day. While *ubuntu* recognizes personal initiative...and the ability to shape our surroundings, it also acknowledges that relationships shape existence, and thus connectedness is essential to a full understanding of life.²

Ubuntu: I am because we are. A good word to add to our lexicon of joy.

South Africa is not the only place that challenges the Western concept of the self vs. relationship. In Japanese Zen Buddhism—and in the Japanese language—a human being exists within the context of a relationship.

There is a great book called “Zen Action Zen Person” that describes what I’m talking about. The title sort of says it all. The actions we take create the person. In English when we talk about communicating, we might imagine that our language is the bridge that spans the gap between me and you. I stand over here, you stand over there; from our isolated positions as singular entities we create a relationship so that communication can take place.

In Japan, however, the event is viewed quite differently: the [relationship] is primary. The [relationship] is the given out of which I and you take our shape. Accordingly, although the Japanese language does not lack personal pronouns, it is generally considered improper or even impolite to use them except when absolutely necessary for comprehension.

So, say I bump into someone in the hallway. This is a very common occurrence for me because I am terribly clumsy. I say, “Excuse me.” And the other person says, “That’s okay, I’m fine.” Our language focuses on ourselves. Politeness through “I statements.”

² Brian Konkol, Chaplain of the College, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minn; edited and adapted.

In the Japanese language, instead of saying “excuse me” I, the bumper, would use a phrase that means “Indebtedness does not end.” And the person I bumped, the bumpee, would say “Oh no, this way (goes the indebtedness).” Instead of speaking about how we each individually feel about this awkward bumping situation, in the Japanese language we would describe the nature of our relationship.³ Politeness through a decided lack of “I statements.”

The author writes:

We must restrain our Western tendency to regard Mr. A as a person going from one context to the next, from one situation to another. In the Japanese secular framework, Mr. A is only a person insofar as he is in these contexts. If we could list...all the ‘roles’ [Mr. A plays—like father, coworker, boss, friend, customer]—we would have what Mr. A *is as a person*. A person achieves meaning *through* relationships.⁴

It reminds me of the saying that the way to tell, on a date, what someone is really like is to see how they treat waiters. If they are nice to you but rude to the waiter? Uh uh. The way we handle every relationship is part of who we are as a person. There is no such thing as a “self-made” man or woman, because we don’t single-handedly create our self. We live, always, within the context of relationship.

The hardest thing about that is there are relationships in our lives that will *never* feel right. Almost everyone has that person—or three—where the relationship is always in a state of flux or brokenness. A Follen member gave me permission to use her words. She wrote:

My relationship with my sister has been a long and tumultuous ride. There is a deep affection there but also a huge amount of hurt and confusion. ...I very much want to support her but seem to always feel like I’m doing it wrong.

I think a lot of us have someone like that in our lives. Many people here have had relationships that started out bright and loving, and became difficult, tense, or estranged. As the poet says, sometimes we tear friendships when we grow. Sometimes the tear can be mended; and sometimes it can’t.

It hurts to think that some relationships may never feel *right*, no matter what we do. Some relationships might only begin to be “healed” when we end them entirely, like scar tissue growing over the place a limb used to be. I remember again the words that Rabbi Kushner imagined coming from God’s mouth: “That’s all right. Imperfect people are the only kind I’ve ever seen.”⁵

³ Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person*, 6-9

⁴ Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person*, 130-132

⁵ Every year I seek out Rabbi Kushner’s High Holy Day sermons. He is the rabbi emeritus of a synagogue in Natick, MA, and is the acclaimed author of *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

To end, here is another story from Rabbi Kushner, which he shared with his congregation in Natick for Yom Kippur last year. He said:

When...couples would come to me with their problems, I would often say to them, "What do you really want? Is it more important to you to win an argument or to have a happy marriage?" I would share with them a story I had read many years ago in the Globe. A young mother sitting in the park sees two young boys in a sandbox get into a fight, and one says "I hate you. I'm not going to be your friend ever again!" For three or four minutes, they play at separate ends of the sandbox, and then they slowly edge closer to each other and after a little while, they're playing happily together.

The young woman says to a woman next to her, "How can kids do that? Be so upset with each other one minute, and the best of friends the next?" The other woman replied, "It's easy. They choose happiness over righteousness."

May we, as people of faith, take today as our time to start again.

May we choose joy and generosity over hard-hearted righteousness.

May we make today a promise to be our best selves, in every context.

And when—not if—we fail at all those tasks,

May we once again open the gift of Universalism.

Just this constant good, this
Saving hope.

May it be so, for all of us.

Amen.

Please rise in body or in spirit for our closing hymn, number 22 "Dear Weaver of our Lives' Design."