

Opening Words

We are here
to turn, and see ourselves in worship's mirror
and review the promises we have made
to ourselves and others,
and note the ways we have kept them,
so we might thereby begin again in love.
And so once again, the morning finds us saying:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,
moved by the beauty of the world
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,
we open our hearts to greater loving,
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and
hope of peace.**

Sequence: Psalm

Barukh atah, emeth! Blest are you, o Truth.
As the fabled Moses,
I too have never seen you "face to face."
Too often, I've hung my own face on you
and pretended that I know something I do not.
Indeed, my most honest heart confesses
that at most, I have only caught the briefest glimpse of you
at the very edge of my eye, and only
when I get out of my own way,
my own rush, my own fury.
Sometimes I imagine I sense your cool shadow on me
when I grow hot from the tears I've been holding back,
or when I notice the sadness or whimsy
hiding in the silent eyes of those around me.
I sense your closeness when I gaze
at a star suddenly unveiled by a toreador cloud,
or catch an early yellowness in the leaves of the oak.
It's then when I feel a brush of wings nearby,
and realize that I am only a small part of it all.

Then I know that I am not the
great high power of the world,
but only a puff of breath hidden amid the
mighty blasts of the great whirlwind called the universe.
Like a lacewing barely floating on the tip of
a small blade of green grass is my life
from beginning to end, a short footnote to
a vast essay of stars and space unbounded,
an essay neither signed nor finally symbolic.
And yet this truth, your truth,
is no sadness, but a joy,
no lack but a blessing, like the sight of a child at play,
totally absorbed in the moment, and glad.

Blest are you, O Truth, who plays in this silence
like a child in the waves of an infinite sea.
Barukh atah, Emeth.

silence

Barukh atah, Emeth.
Blest are you, O Truth.
The truth of friends and family, of love and loss, of struggle and surrender.
By naming the people in our lives who embody
that truth, aloud or in silence, we catch another glimpse of you, O Truth.

naming

Blest are you, O Truth. For truthfulness flows into
the beautiful, and the beautiful flows into us by
the tenderness of music and psalm. Barukh Atah, Emeth.

Readings

The first reading is a poem by Jane Hirschfield, Changing Everything written in 1997

I was walking again
in the woods,
a yellow light
was sifting all I saw.

Willfully,

with a cold heart,
I took a stick,
lifted it to the opposite side
of the path.

There, I said to myself,
that's done now.
Brushing one hand against the other,
to clean them
of the tiny fragments of bark.

The second reading is the main part of T'hillah, or Psalm, 131.

This is an English version of part of the text just sung by the choir in the moving setting by Bernstein.

O Eternal,
I know now my heart is not superior.
And I no longer sneer,
thinking myself above it all.
No more do I aspire to great fame,
nor pretend I understand
things that are beyond my power to understand.
Slowly I have learned to be content,
like a weaned child held in the arms of its mother;
like a newly weaned child I am.

Sermon

It's been one of those weeks for me.
So many of my friends in Columbus are going through hard times all at the same time.
One faces a difficult divorce. Another, an upheaval in his career and heart. And still
another, the ravages of alcoholism.

Watching this friend wrestling with his powerful alcoholism has invited me to think
about the topic of this week's sermon in a very different way.

As I prepared this sermon, I kept remembering a course in addiction and alcoholism
I took in seminary. The professor asked us to refrain from alcohol during the course.
I thought this would be easy, since I was not much of a drinker. So I promised to do it.
But boy, was I surprised! It was not easy at all. Everyone around me seemed to
have some *investment* in getting me to drink. At weddings, folks openly ridiculed me

for not sipping the champagne toast. “I thought only Southern Baptists and Methodists didn’t drink,” they would say, caustically. “I thought Unitarian Universalists were sophisticated, and didn’t buy that teetotaler nonsense.” Dear friends would say to me during supper: “Oh come on, you have to taste this cabernet. It’s incredible, so rich and spicy. Just take a *little* sip. I won’t tell.” Wine lists accompanied every menu whether I asked for them or not. Beer was poured at home-cooked dinners without consulting me. Ministerial colleagues brought bottles of good scotch to the retreats we students were allowed to attend. Bartenders looked up their nose at someone ordering a cheap soda water with lemon instead of a five dollar Long Island Ice Tea.

And my poor promise to not drink for six months didn’t last very long. Because, simply to avoid the rather constant hassle, I *would* just take a little sip, or down the fool toast. The realization that this relentless gauntlet is what alcoholics trying to give up drinking must go through the rest of their lives was quite literally, sobering.

As I worked on this sermon, I thought of all the people in my life I have known who were alcoholic. The friends. The family members. And the members of the six congregations I have served in some capacity, throughout my 25 years of ministry. One story in particular made me think of the topic of today’s service, “how to do it”... how to forgive, that is.

I remember one fellow who was a pillar of one of these churches. Sat on committees. Sat on the board, several times. Taught classes. A very talented man, he was. And this brilliant man used to put away five huge glasses of gin on ice every night, but especially before coming to church meeting.

Now, when he drank, like many alcoholics, his body processed the alcohol differently from a non-alcoholic metabolism. Five full glasses of gin would knock most people to the floor. But this man was never prone to stumbling or wobbling no matter how much he drank. He didn’t get sick or pass out. He just changed from the good Dr. Jekyll to the awful Dr. Hyde. For example, at evening church meetings, he would offer cruel commentaries or insult other people with sarcasm, innuendo and his superior mind. Sometimes, I was the butt of his cruelty. And then the next day, without fail, he would walk up the driveway to my office, at exactly 3 PM, like clockwork, and apologize for his behavior. “I’m sorry,” he would say, “I really shouldn’t have said those things. I really think the world of you, and I just don’t know why I said those things.” Oh he was charming and undoubtedly sincerely sorry. He never mentioned his drinking, mind you; he just apologized.

And for many years, inexperienced as I was, I would say something like, “Don’t worry about it. No problem. Everything’s forgiven.”

But finally, one day, I realized that I was not forgiving him at all. I was excusing him. Because his apology sounded so sincere, I was moving to the strings he was pulling. I realized I had been foolish.

And so, the next time he ambled up my driveway to apologize, I met him at the door, welcomed him into my office, and then, when he “apologized,” I said to him, “Apology not accepted. And your drinking is not going to be accepted at this church site anytime I am in it. For years I have watched you terrorize people, including me, with your cruel, controlling and demeaning comments. People in this congregation have come into my office in tears after one of your sarcastic tirades. I am telling you, here and now, that it will go on no more. I promise you now, if you ever come to the church drunk again, I will get all the others in the church you have hurt. Then we will pick you up bodily, put you in my car, and we’ll drive you home, and dump you on your steps till you sober up. You leave these people alone.” He went red and silent, got up and left without a word.

This is a promise I *did* keep. And once, yes, a bunch of us *did* pick him up and take him home. But no one would accept his apologies any more. We demanded he keep his promises to work on his admitted drinking problem. And eventually he did.

“That doesn’t sound like you,” people have said to me when they have heard this story. “We think of you as somewhat warm and personable, but what you said to this man was hard and very cool.”

Exactly.

My history with such chemical turmoil in every area of my life has convinced me that for forgiveness to be real, it cannot be warm, it must be cool. It can never be that foolish thing I said earlier in my ministry, “Oh, not to worry. Everything is forgiven.”

All I was saying by that phrase was that I felt powerless to do anything at all.

All I was saying by that phrase was that I didn’t want to deal with such an issue because it was so messy and required me to be so hard, setting boundaries of stone instead of giving a great big Italian hug.

I say this: in order to make any change in this world, including the positive change called “forgiveness,” you have to be cool, not warm.

Our poet makes it clear, does she not? In her poem “Changing Everything.”

*Willfully,
with a cold heart,
I took a stick,
lifted it to the opposite side
of the path,*

thus “changing everything.”

With a cold heart, she says. Without “codependence,” is the way some “12 step” (i.e. Alcoholics Anonymous, ACOA etc.) folks might put it. With an honest love that insists that all real trust must be earned, not given freely. Forgiveness is not frivolous and fuzzy. Forgiveness is serious stuff. Forgiveness begins when you demand that relationships be right, not wrong, loving, not controlling. It begins when you set boundaries, not cross them. It begins when problems are named for what they are, and when excuses are not created by the supposedly well-meaning.

Excuses like this:

“Oh, he really means well, you know.”

“Oh, he’s a big softy on the inside; don’t take his growl so seriously.”

“Oh, don’t take it personally!”

All of these commonly heard statements are warm and cozy, “make nice” statements. They are indistinguishable for me from the statements of all my well-meaning friends, colleagues and strangers trying to get me to drink when I had promised I would not. Sorry, I think those statements are trouble. They are attempts to magically control something beyond magic control. They are not kind or sensible at all. They are part of a whole social system that consistently bucks against the plain, unvarnished truth.

So how *do* you begin to forgive? How do you do it?

Well, first, you don’t walk around the problem. You name it for what it is. You don’t make excuses. You insist on right relationship. And you do this, not out of the warmth of your heart, but out of the coolness of your mind.

But second, to begin to forgive is to admit your own humanity. Forgiveness, despite the famous proverb, is not “divine,” but purely and fully human. The Jewish feast of Yom Kippur speaks of human beings forgiving human beings, not human beings being granted magical redemption by G-d. Yom Kippur speaks of right relationship between *people*.

And what most people don’t know about this feast is its origin in the most purely human story you can imagine. I’ve even met Jewish men and women who are surprised, sometimes, to find out that the *Kol Nidrei*, the greatest prayer of the highest day of the year, the Day of Atonement is not found nor suggested by anything in the scriptures. It was not part of the ancient temple liturgy, nor was it found in synagogue services the first 1400 years that followed the destruction of that temple in the year 70.

Although forgiveness is the main theme of Yom Kippur, the *Kol Nidrei* actually speaks more of failed promises.

That's because this prayer was created to help 16th century Spanish Jews who pretended to convert to Christianity in order to save their lives and property. Once a year, they would meet secretly, and the prayer was said...

"All vows, all promises you have made in the last year* are cancelled, nullified and made as nothing." You are not really a Christian. You are still Jewish. The awful pressures and threats of death would make any human being quake. You were not a failure or a liar or a cheat or a coward by making such promises. You were keeping yourself safe for your family during these terrible times. Promises made under duress are false to begin with. We're just formalizing that.

(*although some version reverse the tense and say will make in the year to come)

Note, the Kol Nidrei isn't a magical forgiveness ceremony that blots out sins. It does not speak of errors, or mistakes. It speaks only of forced promises. And it ritually cancels them.

Now listen. I don't know about you, but in all *my* life I have never met a human being who was not just that, human. Human to the core. Made of flesh and blood. Not perfect. Not capable of being perfect, even. Not knowing everything. Flawed and yet wonderful.

Now when I begin to talk of human brokenness and vulnerability, some folks may be thinking I am going to make excuses for those who have hurt them. Maybe I am getting ready to let them off lightly.

And I know, this idea of claiming that people who hurt us, and whom we find it hard to forgive, are actually emotionally sick, or biologically different, or socially wrecked by their upbringing can be misused. It's this misuse, *and this misuse alone*, that is so easy to ridicule, as in the famous *Officer Krupke* lyrics from *West Side Story*:

*Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,
You gotta understand,
It's just our bringing up-ke
That get us out of hand.
Our mothers all are junkies,
Our fathers all are drunks,
Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!*

*Dear kindly Judge, your Honor,
My parents treat me rough,
With all the marijuana,
They won't give me a puff.
They didn't wanna have me,
But somehow I was had.*

Leapin' lizards, that's why I'm so bad!

Yet, despite the laughs in these brilliant lyrics, there is truth, deep truth in what is being sung. People *do* have terrible upbringings. People *do* have violent parents, cruel circumstances, abject poverty, social and cultural *divergencies* that make for high stress and deep confusion. Moreover, human beings suffer from disease, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, brain chemistry problems, and a hundred other human realities. And despite all of our progress to date, medicine, especially brain chemistry medicine, is still in a rather early stage of development. There is so much we simply do not know about the origins of human behavior.

But, to not take these vulnerabilities into account when relating to any other human being is simply bad anthropology. And *worse* theology.

Too often, people talking about forgiveness speak as if someone woke up one morning, said, “Gee, who can I hurt today, since I just want to sin real bad just to be evil?”

This is simply terrible theology, the theology of many of the followers of the Protestant reformer, John Calvin, in disguise. Some people think they have given up, this theology, but they haven’t. Forgiveness is not about angels and devils, or abstract good and abstract evil...it comes down to human beings in human circumstances. How do you forgive? You get down to the human part of the story, the contextual part. And you recognize that social systems and chemical problems are the real powers behind much of what hurts us, not the myth of weak will-power. Social systems? Yeah, like the unnamed *pro*-alcohol culture here in the States. It’s this culture which gathered all those people around me when I was not drinking, and invited them to desperately and consistently try and get me to drink *even though I told them I had promised not to*. Were these villains acting this way? No, they were my friends, my good friends. But they were moving to unconscious rhythms, unconscious promises they themselves had made to be cool, to be sophisticated, “with it”, part of the “in” crowd, and to do that, you have to tip the glass.

Those are the promises that people have made that are comparable to the Jews in Spain promising themselves to the Church. They were forced by the culture, the pressure of conformity. They were trying to save their lives. And the people who tried to get me to drink were trying to save the lives they knew...where all their friends drink, and everyone simply expects it. To change that is, after all, terrifying. It questions identity and group cohesion. It brings up swept-away family histories.

And yet, as a religious liberal, informed by Jewish wisdom, I find I *have* to question the unconscious promises we make to uphold the status quo that helps keep so many people down. By class, color, culture, and salary. When some day a Kol Nidrei is said that

can help us to actually help to undo *those* harmful promises, liberal religion will have made progress indeed.

Does the fact that my alcoholic friend grew up in poverty and a violent neighborhood contribute to his alcohol problem? Perhaps. Does his physical processing of alcohol, which is different than mine, contribute to his alcoholism, and thus to the hurt he has brought to my life, other lives, yes, to his own? Undoubtedly. Does that mean I have to say, “Gosh your life was so hard, and your metabolism betrays you so much, I just have to forgive you and condone your sad condition. Go ahead and drink away. And I forgive all of your hurts just like that because your life has been so hard. Everything’s forgiven. ”

Absolutely not.

I say I am still called to demand *right relationship* between him and me, between him and himself, between him and his co-workers, and other friends. He can address his problems, hard as they are. He can go to AA. Or he can go to Rational Recovery. Or there are a hundred other methods and approaches. I really don’t care which. Most folks, as deeply affected by alcoholism as he is, need all the help they can get. And, of course, the old wisdom is true: he has to decide to move away from his problems *himself*; I can’t do that for him. But what I can do is draw boundaries, continue to demand right relation, and not let the warmth of my love for him thaw the coolness of mind that paves the path of forgiveness.

The psalmist was right. If I am ever to walk the road of forgiveness, I cannot be haughty. I cannot claim to have all the answers. I cannot claim to have more power than I have, or know more than I do. I have to simply relax into the love that’s there for me on this earth. And then return that love a hundredfold. Yes indeed, my love for those I love is real. And very warm. Full of Italian hugs. And I care about my friends deeply, and pray for their welfare and peace. As fully human beings.

But even as I celebrate my warmth, I have to preserve the coolness of my mind, in this day and age of so many problems and frustrations and pains. For it’s that coolness that leads to the kind of forgiveness that frees me to live my life unbound to my resentments, wounds and hurts. It’s that coolness that invites me to then release my love so that it blesses the most. May each of us, by our coolness and by our vulnerable humanity, walk the path of forgiveness more and more each day.

Offering

To offer our gifts at this particular time, to pay our promised pledges, is to say

to ourselves and to the world that we are not defined by the mindlessness of the marketplace, but by our hearts, and by our deeper values. The offering that helps to build both a better world and a better church will now be given and received.

Kol Nidrei: A Unitarian Universalist Version MLB

All vows are cancelled.
For now comes the hour when I turn,
turn from all the promises I made
because of pressure or praise.
I turn from all the promises I made
because of shame or guilt.
I turn from all the promises I made
because of habit, custom or confusion.
Gone they are, vanished, like autumn
leaves blowing in the wind.
I see them no longer.
They are no more.
Gone are the excuses for why I can't.
Gone are the excuses I made
to confirm my vanity.
Gone are the dreams I dreamed that cut me
off from everyone else's dream.
Gone are my vows to never have dreams
so they won't be taken from me.
Gone, vanished, like the setting sun,
like the moon dipping below the horizon.
Gone, the habit of refusing to live on the edge.

The paper is blank, the field is empty.
The map has not been made.
The guarantees were illusions anyway.
And thus, I now set down my burdens
and define myself no more by the past,
by my failings, or by the immense reality of my wounds.
Instead, I define myself by my capacity to love more and more each day.
Nishmat haya tevarykh v'kherev libi yahshir. Kol od neshamah bekirbi.
The breath of my life will bless, the cells of my being sing in gratitude, awakening.

Reading 637 for Choir, Congregation and Reader

