

## 2007-9-23 Days of Awe

### Opening Words:

We are here

*\*once again, to worship,*

to hold up the habitual reality of our lives

*\*to the light of the greater reality*

of unrepentant honesty.

*\*Claiming ancient insight for our own days*

we bless this time of song, silence and word

*with our unrestricted hope and these words:*

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

### Sequence for the Days of Awe

The last tomatoes, red as the rising late September moon floating low on the horizon. Sweet Ohio Pawpaws dropping from their branches. Apples that grow fragrant with ripeness on backyard trees. Grapes that offer their sweetness as extravagant gifts at Krogers. Figs from the Tree of Life packaged in cellophane at the North Market.

Who says the ancient story of the Garden of Eden is a fairy tale? Doesn't fruitful abundance extend itself to the edge of my being?

Men and women and children line up for hot meals at Faith Mission. Others barely survive by eating the cheap ramen noodles found on the dusty metal shelves at the corner liquor store. There are those who shelter their precious bodies in unsafe houses, or needle-strewn dens. How many have known hurt, betrayal, and violence beyond the imagination of those who dwell in paradise!

Who says that the ancient story of expulsion from the garden is a fairy tale?

Doesn't misery extend itself all around me?

And when I know that I must find a way to live an honest and compassionate life in a world tightly woven of both paradise *and* misery, how else can I begin to respond except with a silence that alone might begin to prepare me to take the next step.

*silence*

Joys and sorrows; sorrows and joys. The world is woven of both. Our lives are woven of both. Our moments. Matching our next heartbeats with the pulse of our love and remembrance, we call to mind all whom we love, all who love us, all whom we miss, all whom we long to hold unto healing. We name them or imagine them quietly, one heart beat at a time.

naming

Ancient Songs, Rich Heritage, Roots and Wings. Who says that today cannot benefit from the sacred serenades of yesterday?

## Readings

**The First Reading** *is from David Richo's most excellent book "How To Be An Adult."*

Guilt is not a feeling, but a belief or judgment. Appropriate guilt is a judgment that is self-confronting and leads to resolution. Neurotic guilt is a judgment that is self-defeating and leads to unproductive pain. Appropriate guilt is resolved in reconciliation and restitution. Neurotic guilt seeks to be resolved by punish-ment. In appropriate guilt there is accountability. In neurotic guilt there is blame. In short, appropriate guilt is an adult response; neurotic guilt is the response of a scared child within us.

In every experience of neurotic guilt, there is something we are refusing to acknowledge. This kind of guilt is a tactic we use *to avoid* feelings and truths:

### 1. *Guilt as a Disguise for Fear*

Guilt that holds us back from acting can be a disguise for the fear of assertiveness. Guilt that follows a strong choice can be a fear of loss of love or of approval. We may fear the consequences of not being liked or of losing control when we have strayed too far from an inhibition.

### 2. *Guilt as a Downplay of Responsibility*

Neurotic guilt limits us to one single course of legitimate behavior. In this respect, guilt inhibits imagination, the creative basis of choice. As long as we are caught in guilt, we do not see possibilities or know what we really want. This is how guilt subverts assertiveness.

### 3. *Guilt as a Mask for Anger*

Guilt can mean justifiable anger toward a respected parent, authority figure, or friend who seems to have obligated or inhibited us. We believe it is unsafe or wrong to feel or to express this anger. This leaves us to be wrong and so the unexpressed anger turns inward as guilt.

### 4. *Guilt as A Dodge of Truth*

Guilt is sometimes used to avoid an unacceptable truth. For example, during childhood, rather than face the painful truth that my parents did not love me, I believed myself to be guilty of not measuring up to their expectations. Then their lack of love became all my fault. "They had the love stored up for me, but I could not merit its release."

**The Second Lesson** *is a poem by the American poet Marge Piercy, who has, in recent years, contributed much to Jewish Liturgy. The word niggun, used in this poem, is a kind of music from the Jewish traditions, a driving pulse of music that immediately moves the heart and the hips. I have shortened the poem for this service...*

**Coming Up On September**

White butterflies, with single  
black-finger-paint eyes on their wings,  
dart and settle, eddy and mate  
over the green tangle of vines  
in Labor Day morning steam.

The year grinds into ripeness  
and rot, grapes darkening,  
pears yellowing, the first  
Virginia creeper twining crimson,  
the grasses, dry straw to burn.

I begin to reconsider my life.  
What is the yield of my impatience?  
What is the fruit of my resolve?

I turn from my frantic white dance  
over the jungle of productivity,  
and slowly a *niggun* slides  
cold water down my throat.  
I rest on a leaf spotted red.

The New Year is a great door  
that stands across the evening  
and Yom Kippur is the second door.  
Between them are song and silence...

I will find there both ripeness and rot,  
what I have done and undone,  
what I must let go with the waning days  
and what I must take in.  
With the last tomatoes,  
we harvest the fruit of our lives.

### **Sermon (Drash...the Jewish word for a sermon)**

I don't know about you, but when people I meet tell me that they despise "religion," they very often don't get around to the crusades, the pogroms, the Inquisition and other historical atrocities until much, much later.

No, what I always hear first is that religion (by which folks that I know almost always mean the Western religions of Christianity and Judaism) is nothing but a system for making people feel guilty. The purpose for making people feel guilty, of course, is to keep people under someone's thumb. The purpose of keeping people under someone's thumb is, obviously, to get every cent out of their wallet and into someone's fabulous bank account.

And then I hear the guilt contests. I don't know what else to call them. Guilt contests. You know. Someone says: "I went to Catholic schools for 12 years. You know what that means, don't you? Guilt for breakfast, lunch and dinner." To which someone responds

“Oh yeah, well my Jewish mother, the daughter of a rabbi, could get me to convulse into a fit of guilt with just one glance that would paralyze me for two whole days.” Then, some strict Baptists will pipe in and say, “Well at least you Jews have Yom Kippur, and you Catholics have Confession. You can get rid of your guilt, if you want to, just like that, and feel better. And both of you guys can drink wine, and dance until you drop. Your religion allows it. We feel guilty if we even *think* of dancing, or worse, slip out for a night on the town. No, we strict Baptists have it the worst.” And finally, the Unitarian Universalist from Columbus Ohio pipes in... “You know, we don’t really talk much about things like guilt or sin or wrongdoing at our church...we try and stress the good people do rather than dwell on their mistakes. But you know, every year for many, many years now we have been singing this lovely line on the Sunday closest to Yom Kippur, this gorgeous piece of music where the congregation chants over and over again: (sung) ‘We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.’ And you know what? Even though we don’t talk about sin or guilt much, I always feel better when the piano score resolves so beautifully at the end. I feel as if all my...wrongdoing...doesn’t define me any more. I almost feel free...at least for a while.”

Maybe you have heard these guilt contests too. I certainly have heard them for over 40 years in one form or another, and I suspect they might outdate me by decades.

But I always find these bragging contests especially odd in the light of the simple fact that the word “guilt” *doesn’t occur any place in the entire Bible*, neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor the New Testament. Oh, the word “asham” occurs ten times in the Torah, and once each in four other books. But it doesn’t mean *guilty* in the sense of *feeling guilty*, but only in the sense of a legal trial. Someone is found *asham* of an actual crime, like murder. This is certainly very different from the concept of “*feeling guilty*.” Our Baptist, Jewish, Catholic and Unitarian Universalist friends are clearly not talking about trials, but about their hearts. About their feelings. Their inner life.

Same thing in the New Testament. And there, even the word “guilty” in the legal sense is not used even once. Just the word “*enochos*” which means “subject to,” and which is *mistranslated* as legal guilt, “Because he did what he did, he is *guilty to suffer* the most severe penalties.”

So when folks insist on bringing up the religious basis of guilt, I have to put their concerns on hold, step back, pause, take a break, take a look at this strange subject which seems to make people so disappointed in their religious upbringing, yet which cannot be found, even as the barest concept, in the supposedly authoritative scriptures which underlie that upbringing.

Now, I have always been a bit of a maverick in regards to religions and guilt. Unlike many people who associate guilt and religion right off the bat, I have long said that I’m convinced it’s an individual’s family style which contributes more to a person’s *feelings of guilt* than any religious teaching per se. It’s in the family where we learn how either to live in our own truth, or to live instead in someone else’s truth. If “what other people think of you” is the most important thing that you were taught in your family of origin, you will be led to feeling guilty whenever you do not meet the expectations others have of you. But if you were raised in a family that invited you to think for yourself, and not worry about what other people think of you, then you are less likely to walk in someone else’s truth, and more likely to walk in your own truth. (But, of course, always with courtesy, understanding and kindness. Please and thank you. Eye contact.)

This does not mean any healthy person can escape feeling guilty sometime or another. After all, you and I might walk outside the circle of our own personal truth sometime, and that just won't feel good for a while, if everything is in order. Healthy guilt is just that, healthy. It's not neurotic. This is why David Richo in the reading calls guilt a belief *disguised* as a feeling, not a feeling per se. I believe I should not gossip about other people, or triangulate a relationship, or talk about anyone behind their back. And then I do just that. It's perfectly fine to feel a brief moment of guilt for grating against my own well-worked-out ethical belief system. A sign of integrity. Proof, if you will, that I am not a sociopath; evidence that I might even have a most useful and elegant conscience.

But if I dwell in guilt, pitch a tent there, grovel there, and complain about it all the time, Richo tends to call that noisy wallowing *neurotic guilt*. Neurotic is just the fancy word for "acting something out inauthentically." What does *that* mean?

It means what Richo suggests...that often, when someone says they are *feeling* guilty, what they are doing instead is *not feeling* something else..like their own anger, for example. Or their resentment at having to take responsibility for something they simply do not want to do. Or even, he says, guilt can serve as a nifty substitute for the sinking stomach feeling we call "fear."

In other words, although I hear people, including myself, complain about excessive guilt within religion...I am beginning to wonder if all this complaint about guilt is actually a way of disguising how *useful* neurotic guilt can be in a person's life. It can be a well-paved escape route from more difficult issues. There have been many times that I have come to realize that guilt... neurotic guilt...can serve me very well indeed as a substitute safe harbor sometime. It's much easier, after all, to feel guilty than to face something terrifying, like telling a truth which might bring someone to be disappointed in me. And certainly, the feeling of guilt is a much cushier feeling than the jagged hard, red angles of anger which many of us were warned (*shakes finger*) not to feel (*shakes finger*) as kids. Especially anger directed at someone I am supposed to love. Like a parent, as Richo so poignantly suggests from his own life story. And certainly *feeling* guilty costs me far less than actually facing some responsibility I'm avoiding at all costs.

I have never thought about guilt in this way, but I am considering it now. It makes some sense to me. Both because of how Richo says what he says, and because of my own self-reflective experience.

This, to me, is why the noble and central themes raised by the Jewish Days of Awe are so powerful. I've spoken of forgiveness many times, an almost infinite subject you may agree. And shame. And habits and self-reflection. I lifted up the history of Yom Kippur for you, and the astonishing poetry, and had the shofar call to you. But I have never addressed guilt per se. This morning I am doing so.

This is how I see it. The Kol Nidrei and other rituals of the season invite us to face reality as it is, and not shelter ourselves against it. Even if the reality is difficult, like fear, anger and shouldered responsibility. The rituals of Kol Nidrei and the Jewish New Year do not invite us to sweep things under the carpet and throw them into a sack, sink the sack in the sea, and pretend they are not there. Like in the story of Gershon we told the kids this morning. Not at all. The rituals of this season invite each of us to look reality in the face. Unless we take up the courage to look at ourselves in the mirror, and respond with humble candor (the rabbis remind us over and over), there is nothing this day can do. The chant is ineffective. The prayer, the Kol Nidrei, empty. Hollow.

Let me conclude with a story.

An elegant woman named Roz Reynolds died some years ago in her 80s. She was a good friend of Nancy Lee, of this congregation. And my good friend too. This painting behind me (an abstract painting that compliments the show now blessing us throughout the church) used to greet me from its easel, whenever I used to visit her lovely channel-side condo out in Ross, California. This pastel blue canvass, painted slowly and inexorably in the watery light of California, was one of my favorites, and I am so glad she left it to me. Nancy has one of her soft canvasses too, but with a different set of soothing colors.

Roz was widowed most of the decades I knew her. Roz's husband Bob had suffered from Parkinson's for years and finally died. Toward the end, his poor mind played tricks on him. He would have serious hallucinations. He would see lots of people in the house, sitting on the couch or at the table. He called them the "friendlies." And if Roz was about to sit down on a chair, and one of the friendlies was sitting there, Bob would say, "Roz, don't sit on the friendly"! And she wouldn't. But as time went on, the friendlies were not so friendly any more. They irritated Bob, tormented him somehow, and he was scared of them. So good old Roz got a big straw broom, and swept the nasty little friendlies out of the room so they wouldn't bother Bob anymore. It always worked.

Roz was a realist you see. She didn't see any point in trying to convince her husband that he was only hallucinating, and that there were, in fact, no friendlies. She responded to his fear as fear. To his vision as a real vision. She didn't try to say he ought to behave otherwise. She did not try to get him to live in her truth. She was strong and self-assured enough in herself to live in his truth, to put an end to her husband's fear.

The themes of Yom Kippur, suggested by both sweeping stories, Gershon's dishonest sweeping, in the children's story this morning, and Roz's honest sweeping, urge us too to grow up enough to be realists. To name what we do and what we leave undone; *not to make us feel bad*, but to encourage us to grow, or, as Marge Piercy says, in this harvest season, to ripen. Like apples on a tree or grapes on a tangled vine. After all, even the most beautiful apple is subject to insects, bird beaks, yeast and rot. Just as the most marvelous people are still subject to disease, hurt, unfairness and fear. But for a fruit to ripen, it cannot escape reality, but has to live squarely in it, as another great religious leader, the Buddha, said, 2500 years ago. And for a human being to live as an adult, a grown up, says David Richo, she or he also has to live in the *real* world, not in a play-act world of escape and denial.

You heard what I said at the beginning of this sermon. The claimed source for the two major western religions, the Bible, doesn't use the world guilt. Any place really. I wish that religions which depend on it might at least pause and notice that astonishing reality. But this ancient collection of texts *does* suggest, over and over (at least when read with a good and not an angry and bitter heart), that the world just works better if we agree to live with greater loving-kindness today than yesterday, more honesty today than yesterday, and more humility in the face of reality today than yesterday. I say, with the children's tale this morning that the world grows and matures and ripens if we remember with our every action that the world does not belong to us so much as it belongs to our children. And their children. Whether or not we see them laughing at the shore.

And believe me, I don't feel the least bit of guilt in saying any of that.



## Offering

This is the time in our flow of morning celebration when some of our members and friends bring a portion of the pledges they have promised to the church, for the church is the congregation of the people who agree to make it. If you are a guest this morning, or just visiting, it's ok to let the basket pass you by in peace this morning. Should you one day choose to share in the work of this good community, we will welcome your generous gift with gratitude, for generosity of spirit is the power that sustains any community of justice, learning and love.

## Kol Nidrei

All vows we have made to live  
the unexamined life are now cancelled  
by the invitation of these words.

Gone are the promises we made  
because of pressure or praise.  
Gone are the promises we made  
because of shame.

Gone are promises and vows we made  
because of habit, because of custom, or  
because of confusion. Gone they are, vanished! I see them no longer. They are no more.  
Gone the excuses for why I can't live  
within my own truth, but must orbit some other truth.  
Gone the vows I made to confirm myself  
by jumping through someone else's hoops.  
Gone my vow to never have dreams,  
so I wouldn't offend anyone else.  
Gone, vanished, just like that!  
As magically as sunset,  
as wondrously as moonset, it disappears,  
this habit of refusing to live on the edge.

Cut is the knot of all the choices  
I did not make, could not make,  
would not make,  
sundered by the sharp knife of this prayer,  
just like that, just like that.  
The paper is blank, the field is empty,  
the map has not been made.  
The pretend guarantees, like morning dew  
have evaporated.  
And thus now I no longer have to hide  
in the shelter of guilt, but I can show up,  
and be present to myself and to others.  
Now I will no longer define myself  
by my failings and the strains of my life.

*Nishmat hayay 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!

### Sung Portion

For remaining silent because of fear or guilt,  
instead of speaking up because of care and  
mindfulness.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For all the times when a sense of guilt or  
an unnamed fear kept us rigid, righteous,  
raw and resentful.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For each time we have moved toward anger  
and defensiveness faster than we have welcomed the saving intrusion of the truth.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For each time the seduction of our own consistent comfort has turned us away from  
acknowledging or responding to the need of our neighbors.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For the times we have confused our feelings of loneliness with other things, like  
self-worth or the need to blame others.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For trying to be perfect when no measure  
of perfection is even possible in this life  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For trying to earn love, instead of welcoming it; for trying to control every minute of life  
rather than accepting it as a wondrous gift.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*

For these and for so many attitudes and acts,  
both obvious and not so obvious, which have fostered the illusion that we are truly  
separate from each other and completely self-derived.  
*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*