

Yom Kippur
September 27, 2009
Mark Belletini

Opening words

We are here
after a week of wet skies, wet sidewalks,
to worship, to release our burdens honestly
as we learn to fall like moving water
over the hard, unmoving places in our lives.
And so we say together:

Mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence

Cosmologists say: We are ultimately all born out of the stardust once flung from exploding stars.

Biologists say: We are all born of the ages,
billions of years of slow, painful changes,
species by species, all the way to us.

Parents say: We are born of love, born from the womb of nurture and care.

Spiritual teachers say: We are born of transformation, born of release and forgiveness, of principle, mission and faith.

I say we are born all of these ways: we are born many times in our lives....

Grievors say: Part of us dies when
we lose someone or something we love.

Philosophers say: Since everything rises and falls, death is simply part of life.

The religious say: Dying to selfishness and entitlement is a sign of positive growth.

The wise say: Death comes to us all.

I say: We die in all these ways: we die many times in our lives.

Spirit of Birth and Death, of Life and Love,
hold us, both tenderly and with strength, as now we pour ourselves into this moment, this beautiful vessel of honesty, balance, and especially silence, the only reality I can think of which itself has no beginning and no end.

silence

Blest are all those who have brought us to this day: those whose love has steadied us and bestowed us to ourselves like no one else could. We name these people in our hearts or whisper their names into the common air.

naming

Music too, like all things, has a beginning and an end. Music more than most things, is an emblem of you, Spirit of Birth and Death, Live and Love. Barukh atah, Zemar, chefetz ha-olam. Blest are you, songs of praise, the purpose and pleasure of the world.

The First Reading *is taken from psychotherapist Thom Rutledge's 2002 book with the intriguing title Embracing Fear.*

A common fear – and criticism of psychology – is that self-forgiveness is a snazzy, socially acceptable way of letting ourselves off the hook by avoiding accountability and personal responsibility. This is absolutely not true...self-forgiveness is the natural starting place for anyone who wants to lead an ethical life as free from hypocrisy as is humanly possible.

Think of it this way: When I was a kid, my father owned a dry-cleaning store. As an adolescent, I drove his delivery truck, picking up and delivering dry cleaning all around the small town where I grew up. I was working to meet the needs of my dad's customers. Was my father selfish for taking excellent care of that truck? Was he being selfish to make sure its tank was full, that the oil was changed on schedule, and that the tires were aligned?

Of course not. My dad's priority care of that truck was not about being selfish. It was about being smart. Without regular, quality maintenance, the delivery truck would eventually require much more time and attention, not to mention money, than he could afford. People are the same way.

Self-forgiveness is that regular maintenance that keeps us on the road. The self-forgiving person is not – as many believe, or at least fear – a selfish person. It is the person who remains stuck in self-doubt and self-condemnation who will lead the more selfish, less productive life. Self-forgiveness keeps us from being stuck; it keeps us moving.

The Second Reading *comes from Joan Borysenko's book Minding the Body, Mending the Mind, now 22 years old.*

You can be clear about whether or not a person's behavior is acceptable without judging the person. "You are stupid" is a very different statement from "Your behavior is not acceptable to me." If a person knows you respect him or her, your

comments about behavior are welcome. If you are attacking a person's character, however, no comment, no matter how perceptive, will be heeded. Forgiveness starts with ourselves and extends to others. Accepting that the core of your being is as precious and wonderful as that of any other person is the greatest gift you can ever give yourself.

Sermon

"You always have to start where you are," my preaching professor Ron Cook used to say. "You can't deliver a very convincing sermon on the redemptive power of love if your heart was broken the day before, and you can't offer many helpful words on the wonders of compassion if you're still nursing a deep grudge. Start with where you are...but then," he added with a twinkle, "get to where you very much need to go."

So on this Sunday, when we celebrate the wisdom found in the most important holiday in our Jewish tap-root tradition, to wit, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, I have to begin with where I am.

I am grieving.

As you heard during the caring card announcement, my colleague and friend Forrest Church died this week. At 6 PM Thursday. Because of the speed of modern electronic media, Jolinda Stevens, bless her heart, got the news and called me at home by 8 PM. I wept a good while, as is my personal grieving practice; and then I sat down and started to write, which is also a personal grieving practice. Here is what I wrote:

On Hearing of the Death of Forrest Church, □
Thursday Night, 24th September, 2009 □ □

"On and on they went, singing 'Rest Eternal,'" □
pens Pasternak at the beginning of Zhivago. □
I've always loved that simple line □
of dark peasants gathered around a grave
in autumn, □ the ancient, steady and rhythmic
emblem of love and death. □
Maybe Forrest might rest now too.
But, even so, □ I can't imagine that the stars
will stop their singing □ or close their eyes.
Or that the laughter of maple leaves □
giggling in the park will flutter asleep any time soon. □
I can't see any memorial causing the relentless force □
of the love he gave away to swerve off path, □

or make tepid his simmering sense
of the just and holy. □ I can't believe his skipping,
playing words will □ refuse to finally sink
into the soul's shimmering depths, □
or that his tomes will close because his lips have. □
Forrest's rest, I sing with those other peasants,
will indeed be eternal, □ but so will his living,
the aliveness his body only weighted, □
but which, untethered now, freely soars
high above □ and deep below
even his own best metaphors.

Since my broken foot makes going there next weekend difficult, I am satisfied that Carolyn, Forrest's wonderful wife, and Galen, the senior minister at All Souls Church in New York City (who served with Forrest for many years) found those words useful for their own grieving practice and had them read yesterday at his first memorial gathering.

But after I had written those words, and shared them, I felt something people often feel after the death of a loved one.

I felt guilty.

I recriminated against myself: "I should have called him last week when I thought of it. Instead, I just rushed off to do my laundry and wash a huge pile of dishes that had been building up in my sink." I said to myself: "I wish I had written him a poem *before* he died instead of afterward. After all, I knew it was going to happen, that his time was limited... even last year, no one thought he would live a whole year beyond what the doctor had solemnly foretold.

But such feelings often follow a death. Not just in me, but in so many people I have talked with over the years. Moreover, such feelings of guilt follow the birth of a child too...or a marriage, or *any* transition. "I didn't do enough to get ready; I haven't prepared...I'm going to make a mess of it because I don't have it all together."

And so with these clear feelings of guilt, I fulfill Ron Cook's directive, and arrive at the place I need to be this morning, namely, self-forgiveness, one of the compelling themes of Yom Kippur. I often talk about forgiving others on this day, or the whole concept of habits or promises, which are great themes. But every year we sing, to our own Les Kleen's haunting composition, "*We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.*" *We forgive ourselves....* The author of these simple words, my friend Rob Eller Isaacs, placed self-forgiveness first, forgiveness of others, second. And I don't think that he wrote it that way just to make it sing

better either. Because Joan Borysenko, author of the second reading, affirms what Rob wrote completely. “Forgiveness,” she insists, “starts with ourselves, and *extends* to others.” She gives us a very powerful image to take home with us, too. “You can be clear,” she says, “about whether or not a person’s behavior is acceptable without judging the person. ‘You are stupid’ is a very different statement from ‘Your behavior is not acceptable to me.’ If a person knows you respect him or her, your comments about behavior are welcome. If you are attacking a person’s character, however, no comment, no matter how perceptive, will be heeded.”

Let’s add that little dialogue to her first affirmation, about forgiveness beginning with ourselves. Which means I have to admit, I sometimes dump on myself mercilessly, and judge myself as “stupid” or “worthless” when I make a mistake. If I ever heard a parent in a public place like a store shouting at his or her child and calling them “stupid” or “worthless” I would be angry, appalled, and tempted to interfere. Yet when I dump on myself, and call myself names, I am *not* angry. I don’t interfere. And this gets me into all sorts of trouble later.

One fascinating study I read this week was an examination on procrastination: you know, putting things off, making excuses for not going ahead right now. And to the researchers’ surprise, the habit of procrastination could be clearly traced back to a reluctance to forgive oneself for all sorts of things... relatively little things. We’re not talking about murder or mayhem here, but putting off phone calls, paying bills, delaying housecleaning, procrastinating routine health treatments, like new glasses, hearing aids, dentistry...and not for financial reasons either.

Now, that really rang a bell with me. In my busy life, I can find all kinds of reasons to procrastinate almost anything. And I have not been very good at forgiving myself about that. Which leads to more procrastination. Oh, I tell you I really can be hard on myself. For not doing enough, not completing, not returning, not following through. I suspect some of you could tell me the same story back and claim it was your own.

And maybe you, like me, have come to fear “self-forgiveness” as a kind of shuffling off of responsibility, thus making the singing of Rob’s words every year a tad uncomfortable. But this morning I want to underline what Thom Rutledge reminded us all about in the first reading: “The self-forgiving person,” he says, “is not – as many believe, or at least fear – a selfish person. It is the person who remains stuck in self-doubt and self-condemnation who will lead the more selfish, less productive life. Self-forgiveness keeps us from being stuck; it keeps us moving.” Yes. Moving toward our goals, toward our ideals, toward each other, toward the deep, non-superficial lives liberal religion outlines for us. Rutledge offers us the homely but clear example of changing oil in a truck...if you don’t

maintain your vehicle, he says, you can't go anywhere or do anything, because without maintenance, it will just stop working at all.

And folks who think of self-forgiveness as escapism have probably fallen for the worst definition of forgiveness I can think of, namely, that forgiveness means saying, "Oh, that's OK. It's all right. I'm not really that hurt."

Well, you are *too* hurt! When we hurt each other, or hurt our own selves, it *does* affect us. To forgive, we have to admit that. Just like I did at the beginning of this sermon, we have start with where we are. In this case, the fact of being hurt, or reality of hurting others...and then, go from there. And even though "I'm sorry" may indeed be the most difficult word to say, as our children's story made clear, I'd like to suggest that it's important to speak that word not just to others, but to ourselves. I think we need to apologize to ourselves for treating our own selves so unforgivingly at times.

Which brings me back to Forrest. Forrest used to always define religion as our human response to the dual realities that we are born to live at all, and that we will some day die. As Forrest grew older, and then looked his cancer in the face, he told me that his own religious sense of wonder about everything only increased, and his sense that he knew very little at all about this mystery of birth and death that we all share grew greater by the day.

That's been my experience too. My sense of wonder grows, and never shrinks. I know less and less each passing day. But I do know that this life is what we have right now, and that whatever its larger meanings may prove to be, at the very least we need to keep ourselves well tuned and honest for the living of it by the act of self-forgiveness. Over and over, not just on Yom Kippur.

And, in memory of Forrest, I can only end this morning's talk by praying that each of us, no matter our circumstances, can find some of sense of the real joy Forrest knew through out his life...even, I know, up to his last day. And, as he used to end all of his sermons at All Souls: "I love you."

Offering

Rain and sun draw up life from the earth. In like manner, when we give, our giving calls forth life within the congregation and within our own hearts. There are many other ways and times we give, for we don't follow a strict schedule any more than the rain and sun do. But this time is important to many as *their* time. Let the ushers come forward.

Kol Nidrei for 2009

All vows we have made to live
the unexamined life are now cancelled.
Gone are the promises we made
because of pressure or praise.
Gone are the promises we made
because we were shamed into them.
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 I make 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 arbitrary hoops.
Gone, my vow to forgo my dreams,
so I won't disturb anyone else.
Gone, vanished, just like that!
As simply as water running swiftly over stones and disappearing from
sight,
it goes away, this habit of refusing to live in the freedom of complete
honesty.

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 crafted.
The pretend guarantees, like yesterday's
river water, are far away now.
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 all the things we never got done,
or were not able to do; for all the

words we spoke in good faith but
never were able to fulfill:
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For all the times when a sense of guilt or
shame kept us rigid, feeling righteous, or just right, and raw and resentful.
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time we have moved toward defensive anger and procrastinated
the healing intrusion of the truth.
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time any comfort with unearned privilege has opened our mouths
to place blame on others:
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times we have been surprised or disappointed that other people do
not think or feel exactly like us:
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For trying to earn the love of others by trying to be perfect instead of
opening ourselves to vulnerability and risk:
We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when we have spoken about others without ever talking to
them directly; for putting our own health behind the very real needs of
others.
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.

Naming Ceremony:

***Eric:** We are here to Name and Bless this child in the presence of this beloved
community. For we affirm that this child is a good gift, not just to the parents, and
larger family, but to all of us.*

Mark: Nick and Rachel, you are the parents of this child who, in the words of
poet Gibran, embodies “life’s longing for itself.”

You already, by now, know well the responsibilities parenthood asks of you. You already, by now, know thoroughly the dedication, time and strength of heart it requires of you. Therefore I ask you to express your experience in the form of promises:

Do you bring self-examination, self-care and the fullness of your vulnerability and strength to the raising of this, your son?

We Do.

Eric: And do the loving family members from both sides of this family, four grandparents and friends and other family members here gathered in both love and witness, speaking both for yourselves, on behalf of others who are not able to be here, and recognizing that it takes a whole community of love to help raise our children, herewith offer your support both to this young child and his parents?

We will.

Mark: Bina and Andy Fish, you have been called to serve as godparents of this child, which is a rare and sacred privilege, something I know well from my own decades as a godparent. So now I pray that you shall always seek to guide, but never contain this young child. Be kind to him, listen to him, tell him your stories and share your wisdom with him, but always remember to bless him for being exactly who he is, and no one else. This is the most important thing you will do for him. Help to shape his trust and his confidence and character. Introduce him to the wider culture, help him to discern true from false, the merely beguiling from the authentic, and listen when, even as a young boy, he asks you spiritual questions about the meaning of things. Respond with your heart and mind with care and gladness. Do you take up these responsibilities now with thanksgiving?

We Do.

Mark: Therefore, let us bless this marvelous child in eight ways, joining in an act of love and beauty to bless him with the elements of our common creation, and with the glory of his distinct and beautiful names.

Mark will hold the elements before the child. Eric will read:

With earth, which is as strong as your given frame, my child, we bless you. Take care of yourself as a body, be good to yourself - for you are a good gift indeed to this world.

With air, which moves and changes even as your given passions, my child, we bless you. You will know contentment and discontent, joy and sorrow, anger and deep love in your life – feel your feelings, my child, for they are good gifts.

With fire, which is as illuminating as your given intellect, my child, we bless you. Think things through, and reason and question carefully, for the light that shines in your mind is a good gift.

With water, which is as clear as your spirit, my child, we bless you. Enlarge in conscience, and grow spiritually, for the spirit too is a good gift.

Mark: Your name is Ferenc, the Hungarian form of the original Italian name which means “Frenchy,” and in English is pronounced Francis. Your grandfathers both share forms of this great name. It was a nickname first given to a young man named Giovanni, who sang songs from a faraway land, and who eventually became famous as the true saint of love for all earth’s creatures, Francis of Assisi. Ferenc is also the given name of the first and great Unitarian minister in the Hungarian speaking parts of Europe, Ferenc David. Your name is rich with insight and inspiration. Your name is Ferenc.

Your name is Calen, which is a Scottish form of your father’s name, Nicholas, meaning “power to the people.” Your name reminds you that to make changes for justice in the world, you don’t have to be a hero all by yourself, but you do have to join with others in organizing and working together. Your name is Calen.

Your name is Relle, through which the Danube River flows mightily, shadowed by the forests of Germany. Your mother’s cultures have made their home there too, the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, the green hills near Ireland and especially the colorful flowers, birds and great poets of Guatemala. Cherish your heritage, my child. Your name is Relle.

Let us say his name together.

Ferenc Calen Relle

Now in presence of all here gathered, and in the presence of Love, our true end and our best means, you are Named, dear child, and we dedicate you to the living of a good and grace-filled life within this beloved community, and wherever you shall go.

Eric: You are free to be who you are, free to grow into whom you shall become. Be blest in our words, be blest in our love and be blest in your good and wonderful names. Amen.