

Yom Kippur Letting Go

September 15, 2013

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

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 anticipation, and these words:***

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Ingathering *Blessing for the Beginning of the New Year Lane Campbell*

Sniff, Sniff... Do you smell it? Fall is in the air this week, a time of a new season beginning, a time for change.

Let's see a show of hands here- how many of you all started school this past month? How many of you started school in a new school? It's quite a change and sometimes change can be hard.

This is a time of change, of new beginnings for many of us and our church is no different. As many of you know, this is our first Sunday of the year for our new Religious Education classes. This is a first day for you all gathered here and for your teachers. There's a little garden just around the corner from this church. In this garden, they have many different kinds of plants and flowers: ones that grow tall and strong, ones that are viney and leafy, growing over the ground, ones that have beautiful colored blooms, and ones with tiny blossoms. Has anyone here ever seen a garden like this one? In this church, we are like a garden, with all kinds of people. People who look different, people who talk differently, some people seem the same, others stand out. We need kids here who are different from us and others that seem kind of the same as us. We need kids

here of all kinds: some with big blooms and others growing short and sturdy. Each one of us is different, just like those flowers in that garden, because even when they are the same kind of flower, something is always different about us.

But we all share something in common and this is what is important. Each one of us is constantly growing. As we learn new things, our minds grow; as we get older, our bodies grow, and when we are here in this church, our hearts grow.

I have three wishes for you this year:

My first wish for you is that you never stop growing. I bet you couldn't, even if you tried. Never ever stop growing.

My second wish is that you know your roots, that part of each plant that goes deep under the soil. I wish for you to know this church and know what Unitarian Universalism is.

My third wish for you all is to love the ways you are different. To see ways we are not the same and to be together in this community, in all of its differences.

And now I want all of our teachers that are here to stand up, please. Let us all – the entire congregation – extend a “Thank you” to our teachers this year. Will you repeat after me?

Thank you.

You all have taken on the mantle of tending to this garden, of helping each of these children and youth gathered to grow. In the coming weeks, may you tend to your own selves, may you too continue to grow right next to these young people. And may you know this congregation supports you in your growth. Thank you, please be seated.

As I said before, this entire church is like a garden – each one of us different and each one of us growing. Our community is the soil and it has an important role to play in the growth of each and every one of us. This is a part of our lives we all share; may we all continue to grow, to learn, to be here with each other.

Let the year begin as you all head back to your classes, as Nathan plays us out, knowing this church loves you and supports you.

May this year be fun,

May it be playful,

May it be filled with growth and beauty just like this lovely garden we have here.

Greeting announcements and JAM presentation: Cathy Elkins (Mark to invite her forward)

Affirming #461

written in 1952 by Reinhold Niebuhr in the Irony of American History

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;

therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of

history;

therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;

therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.

Singing: #216 Hashiveinu

Communing: Love, I am weary of holding on tight to my life without reflection, as if life was not life, transient, flowing, moving...but rather some still lake I'm floating in, where I am holding on for dear life to a block of ice. Love, I want to let go of the ice. Now. I want to loosen my clenched muscles, desperate to hold on no matter what. I want to remember what I already know, that I am not floating in the deepest part of the lake, but close to shore. I want to stop clutching my legs up to my chest, but to slowly let them hang down below me. They will reach the bottom not far below me. It will be formless, that bottom, soft and sandy, but firm enough to let me stand on my own. The bottom will not at all be like my fear, which is cold as steel, icy, and slick. So now I can let go, and breathe again freely; deeply too, not those little shallow puffs when I am afraid that people will somehow find me out to be not what they think I am. But I know very well that the deepest me is soft like a lake bottom, shifting, yet real. The deepest me, I mean, the "me" that is not crusted over with calendars, schedules, deadlines, duties, urgency, planning, worrying, past hurts, or the felt shame for having hurt others. The deepest me is none of these things. They could all vanish, and I would still be me. The me that can be, not do. Be, not self-flagellate. The me that can breathe, not clench. The heart that can feel, not deny. The me that can sit in the silence, without concern for how long it goes...

silence

Love, I am *never* weary of the shapes you take in my life. The friends whom I love, the family members, even the strangers. Sometimes you get distorted, and there is hurt, but how glad I am that there is healing too, and recovery. I miss those whom I love who are

gone now as well, and that great love which doesn't seem to ebb. So, without weariness, I name them all in my heart, or whisper them aloud: the loved, the ones hard to love, and the departed in peace, that they too may know atonement, that is: At One Ment.

naming

Love, you are beautiful when you shine in people, but you *really* let go in the music!

The First Reading *is from my colleague Tim Kutzmark, who wrote these words in 2008.*

Most of us tend to identify with the obvious surface of our lives. Most of us tend to identify with the way we feel at any given moment. Consider the thoughts that float through our head over the course of our day. We have thousands upon thousands of thoughts. *I'm happy. I'm discontented. I know what's right. I'm not sure. I need to do that. I can't do that. I really want to eat that cookie. I really want to lose some weight. I'm bored. I have so much to do. I love you. I hate you. I miss you. Give me some space. I feel great. I feel lonely. My body aches. I'm looking pretty good. My wrinkles aren't going away. I can't get sick because I need to take care of things. When will he die? How will I die?* Round and round and round.

Most of us identify with this commotion of emotion that swirls inside our head. We think *that is who we are*. And it is unceasing, isn't it? Thought after thought after thought, always shifting, changing, sweeping us into a new feeling. It is like a ride at the state fair. One of those rides that spins you around and around and around. You're pressed to the sides, the bottom drops away, and you just hang there, helpless in the endless whirling.

Spiritual teacher, Philip Moffitt, says: "Many people fail to distinguish between their true nature and their personality traits, particularly their less desirable traits. The fact is you are not the worst characteristics of your personality..... You may feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of your present life or bound by past traumatic events. Again, this is a failure in perception. They can be seen as impermanent (just like everything else) and, therefore, they do not, ultimately, define your true nature."

The Second Reading *also comes from a colleague, Cricket Potter, who serves our Follen congregation in Lexington MA. These words date from last year, 2012.*

I want to tell you about the trees in my yard – two big maples in particular. They suffered a hard summer this year that was too hot and too dry for them.

I remember seeing the top branches with their leaves looking so sad and wilted during the worst dry spells. Well, I started noticing several weeks ago, as I was waiting for the bus with my daughter, that the leaves on these maples were turning color much earlier than usual.

They weren't turning the usual brilliant mix of orange and magenta that is absolutely stunning during a normal fall. They were turning brown or a dull yellow

And, just as quickly as these leaves turned their dull color, they dropped to the ground. Usually, these maples turn their bright colors, and then stay that way for a few weeks to everyone's delight. But, not this year. The trees had suffered, and now they were letting go. They were letting go of what was left from a difficult summer, because those withered and brown leaves could no longer serve them well. The trees, in their deep wisdom of the seasons, could not change what had happened to them, but they could let go. They were turning their tree-energy toward making the new buds that would grow next spring. How smart is that?

Sermon

I assure you, if you show up here on a Wednesday or Tuesday afternoon, when I am in my office, there is a very good chance that you will hear me running down the hall to our Administrator Brian's office, screaming in despair about what my stupid computer is doing now!

He knows when I peer around the jamb of his open doorway that we are not going to be talking about the roof leaks, the overflowing commode, the new sound in the copier, or the banging sound in my office air unit. No, no budget talks, no capital campaign questions. He knows I am going to have him come down to my office, and help me find lost documents on my computer (which seem to have just disappeared from my screen without me touching anything, honest!), or explain why my cursor has flown the coop, or ask why the spell-check feature keeps on making stupid assumptions, not just correcting my spelling, but actually changing my words entirely. Which is changing my ideas, as if "it" knew something that I don't know.

To his eternal credit, Brian smiles his patient smile, and comes and shows me what I have been doing wrong (although sometimes he admits I have some very unusual problems he's never seen before).

The spell-check function is particularly irritating. I am not a master speller by any means...ask Olwen when she edits the order of celebration. But often, when someone asks for my email address, the spell-check device changes it to *macrocell* instead of *marcobell*.

I have no idea why the computer function assumes I don't know my own address, but it does. And, I waste a lot of time during the week just being peeved by having to always be conscious, aware, attentive and focused to double check everything I write so something the machine writes on my behalf doesn't go out.

But when I survey the various, but most respected religious teachers and secular philosophers of the world, most of them also seem to be asking me to be more conscious, aware, attentive, and focused. They offer me words to define what they want from me, like: mindfulness, self-awareness, and watchfulness. People often make the mistake of thinking this idea stems mainly from Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, but it's

found in all the non-conservative sectors of the Western Religions. The Muslims call it *taqwā* (تقوى), the Jews *kavanah* (קבנ"ה), and in the parochial school I attended, the word was *contemplatio* i.e. *contemplation*, always described as the highest form of prayer or meditation, much deeper than mere traditional words or liturgy. The Greek Orthodox use the word *θεωρία* "theoria" from which English gets its word "theory," interesting enough. Makes sense to me, since any physicist offering a well-thought-out theory must be mindful indeed.

But mindfulness, as my computer experiences outline for me day after day after day, does not blossom without prompting. Our daily habits are just that, habits. I don't have to think about brushing my teeth, or turning the pages of my calendar. And it goes deeper...if someone's face reminds me of a person who hurt me deeply once...obviously through no fault of their own... I still might find myself cutting myself off habitually, as I did for years, to save myself from another wound. When I was ten years old, the principal got so mad when I spoke out of turn that she told me to go soak my head in a bucket of vinegar. I was humiliated. Since then, I have a tendency to respond to any rule or regulation with an inner, but undeniably defiant, "Oh yeah." And yet I have hurt people because I reacted from my humiliation, not mindfully.

However, "I am *not* the worst characteristics of my personality." There is something deeper than my wounds, or the hurts and mistakes in my past. As Tim Kutzmark reminds me, I am not the sum of my daily cascade, cascade, cascade of thoughts. He gave his list...remember? Here's part of it: *I have so much to do. I love you. I hate you. I miss you. Give me some space. I feel great. I feel lonely. My body aches. I'm looking pretty good. My wrinkles aren't going away. I can't get sick, because I need to take care of things. When will he die? How will I die?* To which I add a few more" *This fool computer! Now what? She said WHAT to you? I always stand in the grocery store line when the cash register breaks. Why, God, why? OMG I know I am not supposed to eat that cinnamon role, with all the sugar in it, but I can't help myself. I am too tired to go to the gym. Why did I say that? WHY DID I SAY THAT? Did I leave the burner on in the stove? Oh, goodness, I left my card at the restaurant last night. I am sooooo stupid. etc. etc.*

The great Jewish Day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, serves as one of the most powerful summons, or prompts, to mindfulness, that I can think of. "Yeah, but it's just a ritual" I sometimes hear. Sure, it's a ritual, yes, but so is going out for a drink every night to dull our pain, so is the habit of overeating to deny discomfort, so is the ritual of explosive anger every time you hear anything that personally does not go your exact way. Not rituals with chant and sacred languages, but rituals nonetheless. Automatic practices that have been going on for years.

I will say again what I have said many times...namely, that the day of Yom Kippur is not about guilt. Oh, you may feel guilt. But you are bringing that with you yourself. The word *guilt* is not found *once* in the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Not once. I repeat. Not once. We might find a way to inflict flinches of guilt on each other, or on ourselves. But it's simply not part of the scriptural tradition behind atonement.

But being mindful of our deeper lives *is* part of the tradition. Deeper than our hurts and the ways we have hurt others. Deeper than our present address, phone number, or computer preference. Deeper than our floodgate of thoughts which tries every day to wash away any trace of mindfulness. Deeper than our self-flagellation, our regret, or our flinching. And as Paulus Tillich, the most quoted progressive theologian of the twentieth century puts it...the religious life is refusing to define oneself by our habitual and quite superficial torrent of thoughts we might think is us. "Religion," he said, "is depth."

The Kol Nidrei is the ritual that reminds us to break any unspoken vow to remain in the superficial flow. It calls us to remain far from the unspoken, unconscious vows or promises we have made to ourselves to spend the rest of our days avoiding the hard stuff, the pains and the regrets, the hard memories which freeze our present life into a mold of the past.

Let go! Let go! the ritual says, calling us to mindfulness. The word sin is used in many of the traditional formulas, but let go of something else, the baggage around that word. The Hebrew simply refers to an archer missing the center of the target. You might be aiming for love, but miss the mark and settle for something a lot more transitory. You might be aiming at wisdom, but you miss the mark and settle for flashy or even sexy authority telling you what to do. You missed the target. Get mindful of your deeper self, and take better aim. Today is practice for doing that. For example, the ritual of voting is simple, you press a few buttons next to someone's name. Aiming at doing only that is missing the target completely. Learning something in advance about the people or policies you are voting for, like at the forum Cathy Elkins mentioned earlier, is the depth behind the ritual. Ritual for its own sake can often be empty. Ritual that calls us to mindfulness about our unconscious rituals is essential in my book.

The second reading from Cricket Potter uses a metaphor for the Yom Kippur ritual. She speaks of the trees in her backyard releasing, letting go of their leaves far earlier than usual, because of the rough and dry summer they suffered. She writes: *Usually, these maples turn their bright colors and then stay that way for a few weeks to everyone's delight. But, not this year. The trees had suffered, and now they were letting go. They were letting go of what was left from a difficult summer, because those withered and brown leaves could no longer serve them well. The trees, in their deep wisdom of the seasons, could not change what had happened to them, but they could let go. They were turning their tree-energy toward making the new buds that would grow next spring. How smart is that?*

A wise image indeed. Let go. Let go.

Well, there *are* rules for spelling in English. I have to admit it. They enable clear and efficient communication. The spell-check device, which I have *not* turned off, any more than I will turn Yom Kippur off, reminds me of that everyday, and drags me into necessary mindfulness. Spelling rules can be broken, sure, as anyone who has texted can tell you. The English word YOUR is now just two letters YR. But the rules are not

ultimately foolish. Look, I have no respect for the people who want to put up the Ten Commandments in the courthouse. An empty token indeed. But I am not against the idea of ethical rules per se, *rationality and mindfully thought out*, instead of dictated by Authority, for me to review. Will people cross the boundaries of those rules? Sure. But they are there, as far as I am concerned, for the same reason that piano scales are there for the learning piano player, frames are there for the artist's canvas, referees are there for the game, and covenants of mutual care are there for religious congregations. They are forms for practicing mindfulness.

And you know what? Honestly, my spelling has improved a lot since the spell-check was invented and installed. It keeps me in practice. I'm letting go of my resentment about the mindfulness it calls me to daily. I can communicate better because of it. How smart is that?

Offering

We give each other gifts all the time, gifts of time and support and an arm around the shoulder, gifts of wisdom and truth-telling. The gifts we offer to support our common community, whether given electronically on a Wednesday evening, or given now in this ancient form, are of a piece with all such gifts.

Returning: Kol Nidrei A Contemporary Kol Nidrei for 2013

Mark:

(sung) Kol Nidrei Ve'esarei, Ush'vuei, Vacharamei, Vekonamei, Vekinusei....

All vows we have made to live the unexamined life are now cancelled.

Let go! Let go! Gone are the stuck places, the automatic promises we made because of pressure or praise. Gone the struggle to hold onto the past tightly in order to out-match our sense of liberation. Let go! Let go!

Gone are the promises we made to cover our shame. Gone the sway that affected us because everyone else seemed to be doing it. Gone is the unreflective mind which habit or custom has dulled. Gone are the choices we made out of the confusion of information in our modern age. Gone they are, vanished! I see them no longer, like a river that flows into the deep lake. Gone the excuses I make for why I just can't live within my own truth, insisting on orbiting some *other* truth instead. Gone the vows I made to confirm my identity by jumping through someone else's hoops. Gone, my vow to forgo my dreams, so I won't disturb anyone else. Gone my vow to not face the ways my choices and omissions may have pained others. Gone, vanished, just like that! Gone, this seductive habit of refusing to live in the freedom of redemptive honesty. Let go! Awaken and let go!

Steve: The paper is blank, the field is empty, the map has not been made. The pretend guarantees are far away now. And thus now I no longer have to hide in the crumbling shelter of guilt, or the cold cave of shame, but I can show up, and be more and more

present to myself, and more and more present to others. Now I will no longer define myself only by my failings and the strains of my life, but also by my joys and strengths, and my willingness to be accountable.

Mark: *Nishmat hayay tevarykh v'kherev libi yahshir: Kol od neshamah bekirbi.* □ The breath of my life will bless, the cells of my Being will sing in gratitude, awakening!
(Marcia Falk)

Sung Portion: Confession

For the times when we felt entitled, or felt that the world owed us, so we could try and keep up like others and not ourselves:

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when a sense of guilt kept us righteous or frozen, or a cultivated shame sheltered us from hard reality.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time we have refused a genuinely possible reconciliation so we can nurse our hurt.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when our discomfort at *being* forgiven has kept us apart...

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 working to be perfect, and always in control, instead of risking the vulnerability of truthfulness...

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when we speak intemperately, or listen to others, only in order to contradict or correct.

We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For these, and for so many attitudes, actions and omissions, 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.

Hymn: 218 Who Can Say

Blessing *Forgiveness, I always say, is a journey, not a final arrival place. And as the poet Mark Strand says, "If you don't want to go on a journey, better not waste your money on shoes." Journey in peace...*

Go in peace...