

It's Not About Pleasing Someone Else

Yom Kippur

October 5, 2014

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
with the yellow leaves of the locust trees
descending all around us,
to worship, to remember that we are part
of a larger story than the story of our own lives,
and to move forward with that insight.

**And so, in this common house of life and love,
may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and
kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to
the common good, let gratitude and question
displace any easy assumption. Knowing that
we are *within* this hurting, amazing world,
not outside it, we approach our earth and
social equity mindfully. Let each day express
our amen.**

Singing #218 Who Can Say *(soloist first, congregation, second verse)*

Perfect Justice: A Scifi Story by Pablo Pedro Sacristan

A long time from now, a kid named Pancho will meet a new friend, 00, on his computer's space website; and, as soon as he can, he'll buy a ticket for a spaceship to visit his new friend on *his* planet. But while 00 is showing him the wonders of his world, Pancho trips and falls, bumping his head on a sphere, a kind of gray bubble, that is lying near the path. He has cracked the bubble by falling on it. Suddenly, a little man steps through the crack, and *outside* of the bubble. The little man has a painful bump on his head, and is really hoppin' mad.

Pancho's new buddy, 00, suddenly looks scared. Pancho is just about to apologize for the accident, when a very big robot in a uniform shows up. From a slot inside its body, a small card pops out. The robot gives the card to the little man from the sphere. Without a word, the robot grabs both Pancho *and* the little man, and takes them away at top speed.

Before he knows it, Pancho is locked up inside a larger bubble, with the little man *and* a very serious-looking robot dressed in a black toga. Before he can figure out what is going on, the robot says: "Go ahead." Without hesitation the little man then smacks Pancho on the head. After

this, the robot checks Pancho's hurting head with a little machine, and then gives *him* a small card just like the one he had given the little guy. "He hit you *too* hard. It is now your turn. Do not go over the amount of hurt that is stamped on the card."

Pancho has no idea what is going on. He looks around. Through the transparent walls of the bubble he sees a lot of *other* bubbles, each one with a robot dressed in a toga, along with people hitting and pushing each other, and clutching little cards in their hands. Pancho then looks at the little guy from the broken dome standing before him, who is shaking with fear. The robot said: "Your turn to hit. Remember, no more than is written on the card." Pancho looks confused. The robot in the toga explains it to Pancho, who, after all, was from earth, and didn't know the rules on this planet.

"This is perfect justice. Don't worry. Both of you will receive *exactly* the same pain that you have dished out. If one of you goes over the limit you will receive another card with the exact amount required to make the pain perfectly equal."

Perfect justice? That sounds very fair. No one can come out worse than anyone else, and everyone will suffer what they had made others suffer. Pancho thinks, "Wow, how advanced they are on this planet." He wants to tell his friend 00 how fair he thinks it is, and starts to leave the bubble.

"You can't leave," said the robot, blocking his way. You must spend the points on your card."

Pancho does not want to hit that poor little man any further, even though he really whacked him one...

"It's ok. I forgive him," he says, finally. "No," repeats the robot, "you must use the points on your card. This is perfect justice."

"Oh bother," thinks Pancho! "How can it be impossible to forgive someone?" Pancho gets cranky about this rather snooty robot, so he takes his card, tears it in two, and says, "Look! Now there are no points left." The robot starts to make whistling noises, flash on and off all over its body, and smoke comes out of its ears. Just when it looks like it is going to explode, the robot returns to normal, and quietly says: "Everything is OK. Now you may leave. Thank you for using the system of perfect justice."

The door opens, but before he can greet 00, the little man he had forgiven was holding on to him tight, thanking him as though he had saved his life.

On leaving the sphere, Pancho begins to understand. All around he sees the people on this planet living in their bubble houses, afraid and very tired. He figures out that the main problem with the perfect justice system was that it was almost impossible to give out the exactly correct amount of harm, and the hitting would end up going on for days and days. Everyone on this planet was so scared of ending up in this crazy justice system that many people lived hiding inside their small plastic spheres, never going out.

A few days later, Pancho will go home, but his name will never be forgotten on 00's planet. Previously, no one had forgiven anyone anything, but, thanks to him, they had discovered that forgiveness is a necessary part of justice. (children leave to music)

Greeting

Affirming: the New Member Ceremony (insert)

Singing #1017 Building a New Way

Communing:

The leaves descend from the locust trees, and spread like slivers of gold leaf along the sidewalks. Orange and red and bronze are soon to follow. I look up at suddenly leafless branches.

The bare branches almost make me envious.

How *I* would like to let go of as much as the locust trees shed, throwing into the wind all that no longer serves growth and life. How I would like to unfold my fist, that clutches so tight onto old familiar resentments that my knuckles run white. How I would like to open my fingers slowly, carefully, till they resemble bare branches against the sky.

How I would like to reconcile myself to myself, no longer shifting blame to others, or myself, but looking into the mirror, not to blame, but to own and admit, and deepen and learn, and let go. Let go.

How clearly I see that shedding all that does not give life is a thing of beauty, full of astonishment and delight, like autumn trees.

So now, let the autumn of my soul begin in this sacred moment of silence, free of any panic or fear.

silence

I go round and round in my life, witnessing with my loving, aching heart, the rise and fall of the generations, the circling of the seasons. And so as I welcome autumn for my soul, I gather around me those that give me life – those I love, those who love me, those whom I miss, those whom I mourn. Let their names be spoken inside my silent heart, or spoken into the shared sanctuary of this house of life and love, that I might go forward in gratitude.

naming

Round and round I go, the holiness and the wholeness of life, always mixed with the fragmented and the broken. Before the wonder of this mystery, I hear songs which bow to that mystery and inspire.

Anthems

Reading *The First Reading* is from a review of the book you will hear a selection from in the *Second Reading*. The reviewer, Arianne Brathwaite Lehn, is a minister from Indiana. This story will certainly elicit lots of feeling and reactions from the hearts in this room. I know I felt many when I first read this.

When Dan and Lynn Wagner received the parole officer's letter, they had a critical decision to make. Lisa, the woman who had killed their two daughters in an accident, while driving drunk and high, was about to be released from prison. In order to continue their own healing and bring closure, the Wagners decided to meet with Lisa. They fully expected to release the relationship and move on, but a completely unexpected thing happened. "When we walked into the room and laid our eyes on Lisa for the first time, we both hugged her." Dan said, "I don't know why, but it suddenly seemed as if we had been through this war together. In that hug and in my heart I felt a sense of relief. We walked into that building in fear, thinking we were finally going to have an end. But it turned out to be a beginning."

The Second Reading comes from the very book reviewed by our first author. The Book of Forgiving is by the great Desmond Tutu & his daughter Mpho. Both are priests in the Anglican Communion.

There were so many nights when I, as a young boy, had to watch helplessly as my father verbally and physically abused my mother. I can still recall the smell of alcohol, see the fear in my mother's eyes, and feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways of which I was incapable as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much, and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted upon her.

When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he was in pain. But it is still difficult. The traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.

Are you hurt and suffering? Is the injury new, or is it an old unhealed wound? Know that what was done to you was wrong, unfair, and undeserved. You are right to be outraged. And it is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can for-give the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor. When we forgive, we take back

control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own lib-erators. We *don't* forgive to help the *other* person. We don't forgive for *others*. We forgive for ourselves.

Preaching

When the leaves start to slowly take on color in October, memories of autumns past pour into my mind – burning piles of scented leaves when I was a child, before it was forbidden to do so. The big piles into which we, as children, threw ourselves with the kind of glee that never gets tired. The afternoon sun painting everything orange in the early evening. The spiced stillness of an autumn night. Lovely.

When, however, in the same autumn season, I read the paper, or hear the news these days, as often as not I am confronted with disturbing news that clobbers me, and siphons off the comforting sensual images of the fall. This group called ISIS or ISIL or DAESH – all of these acronyms are perfectly correct...is executing people in a ghastly way. Executing people as terrorists might – to crumple the souls of the rest of the world, especially those in Europe and the USA. Muslim scholars and teachers, in great numbers around the world, are denouncing these terrorists as anti-Quran, just like Christians of all stripes denounced Westboro Baptist Church as a perversion of the tradition. In both cases, the horror is real, cold-blooded, and almost beyond belief.

Now, no matter the news, every year in the fall (at least in the northern hemisphere), the Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur comes with the descending leaves. The sacred day offers a yearly opportunity to reflect on one particular word, namely, *forgiveness*. Some of our congregations have joined our Jewish cousins in lifting up the themes from this holiday for a hundred years. Most of my colleagues are wrestling with this word today.

I welcome this yearly rhythm of wrestling with forgiveness, for my own life has convinced me forgiveness is an essential part of life's work, not just on one day per year in autumn, but on every day. How do I forgive others when they hurt me without even knowing they have? How do I forgive myself for saying stupid or thoughtless things to people I love? How do I forgive myself for neglecting my own health sometimes? How can others forgive me for my impulsivity? How do I forgive those in this state who pass laws against same gender marriage, women's health access, or voter rights? How do I forgive family members and friends who drink or drug themselves to death, or who led with explosive violent tempers that hurt one and all? See? Everyday can be a good day for wrestling with forgiveness.

Often after I preach about forgiveness on the Sunday nearest Yom Kippur I receive questions. Someone names Adolf Hitler and asks, "But how can anyone forgive a monster like him?"

I used to be irritated by that question, because it always sounded like it was intended to invalidate the whole idea of forgiveness at all. First, I cannot "forgive" someone who is dead, and never admitted wrong. Second, speaking a name that evokes great evil is not an argument for anything; it does not automatically devalue the word "forgiveness."

But I apologize now for my irritation. I don't think anymore that's why honest people evoke the name Adolph Hitler. The name is more than a name – it *understandably* symbolizes all the terrors of monstrous evil which have risen up from the human race through the centuries, including the decades of our own lives. The school or church shootings, lynchings, buildings blown up in New York and Washington and Oklahoma City. The Cambodian massacres by Pol Pot, the MyLai massacres in Vietnam, the tortures in South Africa, the Tutsis and Hutus debacle in Rwanda, and now, the catastrophic spreading of Ebola. I think the name Hitler dutifully symbolizes *all* of these horrific events.

How can anyone deal with such atrocities? What sense does the world make, with such horrors being commonplace? How can I have hope when terror is as frequent as sunrise? These are fair questions. I understand now.

But yet, despite the horrors, Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho keep answering: Forgiveness.

Archbishop Tutu knows terror firsthand. Not only did his drunken father hurt his mother all throughout his childhood, but he experienced first hand the cruelties and bloodshed during South Africa's *apartheid* decades. The stories he heard while sitting on the *Truth and Reconciliation Committee* of South Africa are almost unbearable to read. As I read his accounts, I found myself throwing the book against the wall, so disgusted and despairing was I to know human beings could act that way, think that way, do such things.

But Tutu's committee got people who killed to talk with the relatives of the murdered. Tutu's committee was able to slowly, but surely effect a change in the entire nation, with the help of others who claimed the power of forgiveness as the only final power that makes sense of the world.

Now remember, forgiveness does not mean "Oh, that's all right. We know you didn't mean it." Of course they meant it. The systems they created meant it. Forgiveness does not mean forgoing consequences, including prison terms. It does not mean forgoing justice in any way, shape or form. Just not the false justice of revenge, honor killings or avoidance.

When I read the story of the parents who lost their two daughters to a driver both drunk and high, I felt as if someone had hauled off and hit me on the face with a cast iron skillet. It hurt just to read the words. They met with the drunk who killed their daughters?

Yet, the story ends, not only with the parents meeting the woman who killed their children, but forming a relationship with her. The mother, and Lisa who had spent time in prison for the killings, now travel together around the country visiting prisons, houses of worship and schools, to be living examples, as Arianne Lehn puts it, "of how forgiveness transforms one's pain."

Note, does not end the pain. Transforms it.

In Rwanda, 20 years ago, the Hutu majority almost wiped out the Tutsi and Twa minority. It was a genocide, not a war. Yet now, 20 years later, they too are in the midst of a *Truth and Reconciliation* process themselves, derived from South Africa's.

Seems impossible doesn't it? In the New York Times not long ago there was a photo essay about just this amazing event. People, who had brutally killed whole families, reconciling with the few survivors. Reconciling. Meeting them. Hearing their stories. Embracing their anguished ask for forgiveness. One Hutu man got 50 other Hutus to build a house for the remnant of a family he slaughtered. One Tutsi reflected, "Sometimes justice does not give a satisfactory answer. When I granted forgiveness, I felt my mind at rest."

One Hutu, a perpetrator said, "I had lost my humanity because of the crime I committed, but now, after asking for and receiving forgiveness, I am a human being again."

Person by person, Rwanda is being transformed.

Can you believe it? Like South Africa was. Oh, you're right, it doesn't happen with everyone. Nothing in this world is perfect. Some are so bent that nothing in this lifetime will get them to even admit what they did, let alone ask for forgiveness.

But the whimsical children's story this morning affirms that, despite forgiveness not being a clean sweep, it's the only way out of the ridiculous and endless reality of reactionary living – be hit, hit back. Forever and ever. Amen. In the story, the whole population of the planet was isolated in terror because they thought justice meant one thing only – tit for tat. The reading from the Tutus sounded as if they were interpreting the story. They wrote: "If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of peace."

This is very hard to get, isn't it? It requires far more struggle and thought and pushback than can be found in a single service on forgiveness. So, please, take all the time you need. I know I will. I'll clearly be working on this to my last day. But no matter what, I do have to end, I think, with the Tutus' great final insight. For forgiveness is not finally about the other person (whether his name is Hitler, or something else). Forgiveness does not bless or excuse injustice, but recognizes that, without at least struggling to forgive, we cannot be fully who we are. In the Tutus' words: "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive *for* others. We forgive *for ourselves*."

And please remember, forgiveness does not mean spending time with someone who hurt you, especially as a child. You don't have to do any such thing. They were not trustworthy, and forgiveness doesn't have any magical qualities to make them trustworthy. Forgiveness is not some perfect reconciliation, but a way to live a free life.

The autumn is here. The leaves are turning yellow and red and descending. And we too, like the trees, have much to release. Release everything that no longer keeps us alive. And though we are

flawed and the world is marred, forgiveness is a kind of loveliness that sets us free. It may not be perfect, as Jane Hirshfield says, but "It is enough."

Offering

The offering time is to share responsibility for this place and its visions and programs. The congregation is not its leaders, but all of us. All of us together are responsible for this place, by the mutual sharing of gifts. May the ushers come forward.

A Contemporary Kol Nidrei for 2014

Mark: All vows we have made to live
the unexamined life are now cancelled.
Gone are the unconscious promises we made
because of pressure or praise.
Today is the day, now is the hour.

Eric: Gone is the habit of blaming others,
or ourselves, without looking at the systems
which hold us all tight in their web.
Gone are all the promises and vows we made
out of thoughtless habit or custom, or
even because we may have felt confused.

Gone they are, vanished! I see them no longer,
like water that flows past the horizon.

Gone the excuses I make for why I can't live within my own truth,
insisting on orbiting someone else's truth instead. Gone the vows I made to confirm
myself by jumping through someone else's hoops.

Gone, my vow to forgo my dreams, so I won't disturb anyone else. Gone, vanished, just
like that! Gone, this seductive habit of refusing to live in the freedom of transforming
honesty.

Today is the day. Now is the hour.

Mark: 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 shelter of guilt, or the cave of shame,
but I can show up, today, now,
and be present to myself, and 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

For all the promises we spoke in good faith but were not finally really willing to fulfill:
We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

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

For each time we have moved impatiently with bristling anger and procrastinated the often very slow intrusion of the larger picture:
We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For any time our comfort with our own lives
has kept us from seeing the real lives of 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 working to be perfect and always in control,
instead of risking vulnerability:
We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times when we have spoken irresponsibly, unaware of our impact:
We forgive ourselves, and each other, we begin again in love.

For these, and for so many attitudes and acts, both obvious and subtle, 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.

Blessing