

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Out of Control

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FIRST READING *from Sam Kestenbaum* “Yom Kippur at Sea”

Deer Isle, Me.

TODAY is Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is the Day of Atonement, a day of meditation, of repentance and redemption. Many Jews will spend it at temple or in a house of study, meditating, reading Torah and chanting contemplative psalms together or quietly to themselves.

Last year, right after graduating from college, I took a job on a commercial lobster boat here in my hometown as a sternman, one half of a two-man crew. A few days before Yom Kippur, I told the captain that I couldn't work on the holiday.

This is not a typical day for lobstermen to take off, at least not on Deer Isle, and he looked puzzled. I explained, “You see, it's a High Holy Day.” It was 4:30 in the morning and the sun had yet to rise. We were sipping coffee on the dock as the row of diesel boats beside us sputtered to life. I wasn't sure how much he knew about our holiday, or how much I should tell him...

On the island, the name Kestenbaum is often met with this kind of puzzled look, then followed by, “You're going to have to spell that.” ... [Y]ou will find only one Kestenbaum family in Hancock County. And you won't find too many other Jewish lobstermen (perhaps not particularly surprising considering the non-kosher status of the catch).

Despite this, I feel close to my faith when I'm on the water. The work is difficult, but meditative. Fishermen grapple daily with the elements: the wind, the tide, the shifting of the seasons. Jews also keep their eyes on the elements, recognizing the great, sacred powers that are present in the world. And wherever we go, we believe God travels with us.

It is said that when the Jews went into exile, the Shekinah, the divine presence, went into exile, too — hovering over us, around us wherever we were, waiting for us to invite the sacred into our lives. This is one of the great gifts of diaspora: we travel, move, but remain who we are.

Last year, during the week of Yom Kippur, ... I drove the hour and a half to the Bangor temple to meditate on teshuvah — on turning and returning to God, on starting fresh. It wasn't boat work, but it was work — a kind of repair, a checking of the knots and wiring, refueling for another year.

And today I'll do the same. On this Yom Kippur, I wish my fellow Jews “gmar chatima tova,” may you be written in the Book of Life for good. And to my fellow fishermen: I wish safe waters and good hauls. May the price per pound of lobster rise. May we weather the coming storms.

SECOND READING a prayer for Rosh Hashanah, by Marcia Falk

We cast into the depths of the sea
our sins, and failures, and regrets.

Reflections of our imperfect selves
flow away.

What can we bear?
With what can we bear to part?

We upturn the darkness,
bring what is buried to light.

What hurts still lodge?
What wounds have yet to heal?

We empty our hands,
release the remnants of shame,

let go fear and despair
that have dug their home in us.

Open hands,
Opening heart-

The year flows out,
The year flows in.

Out of Control

A poet writes, in a poem called, "Revenge,"

*At times ... I wish
I could meet in a duel
the man who killed my father
and razed our home,
expelling me
into a narrow country.
And if he killed me,
I'd rest at last
and if I were ready -
I would take my revenge!*

The poet is Taha Muhammed Ali, from Palestine.

*But if it came to light,
when my rival appeared,
that he had a mother
waiting for him,
or a father who'd put
his right hand over
the heart's place in his chest
whenever his son was late
even by just a quarter-hour
for a meeting they'd set -
then I would not kill him,
even if I could.*

*Likewise ... I
would not murder him
if it were soon made clear
that he had a brother or sisters
who loved him and constantly longed to see him.
Or if he had a wife to greet him
and children who
couldn't bear his absence
and who his presents thrilled.*

*Or if he had
friends or companions,
neighbors he knew
or allies from prison
or a hospital room,*

*or classmates from his school...
asking about him
and sending him regards.*

*But if he turned
out to be on his own -
cut off like a branch from a tree -
without mother or father,
with neither a brother nor sister,
wifeless, without a child,
and without kin or neighbors or friends,
colleagues or companions,
then I'd add not a thing to his pain
within that aloneness -
nor the torment of death,
and not the sorrow of passing away.
Instead I'd be content
to ignore him when I passed him by
on the street - as I
convinced myself
that paying him no attention
in itself was a kind of revenge.*

How do people do that? How do we do it? This is a dramatic story, but you have seen this happen on a smaller scale many times; you've done this thing yourself. How do we muster the imagination and the courage, the presence of mind (and heart and spirit), how do we muster the will, which melts into a kind of longing, to recalculate, when we've been wronged, what we think we need and want? The story in the poem is a little bit about compassion, about humanizing the enemy, but more, it is about shifting the balance of power; it's about the reclamation out of ruins of moral and spiritual power. This is an interior alchemy, changing one passion into another, into something you can use.

If I met that guy – that guy who killed my father, that guy who destroyed my city - I'd kill him.

What could be more human, what could be more natural and right, more justified and just - than this impulse, this instinct, for revenge?

If I met him, I'd kill him – unless he had a child, or a mother or a father or a neighbor who looked out for him, or unless he was lonely, unless he had a human, beating heart like mine...in which case, says the poet, not denying his injury, but in fact mustering all of the rage and hurt and sadness, all the churning forces of humiliation, grief, and fury, in which case, he says, I'd ignore him.

He doesn't mean "ignore him," as in "cut him dead, de-sanctify him," or "act as if the man does not exist," – he means, "He surely does exist, yet over me this person, this enemy, shall have no power any more. I will reclaim my own humanity, my human-ness, humane-ness, by refusing to

rob him of his own.” This poem about the transformation of revenge is to me a poem about forgiveness.

Something shifts, something is shift-able in us, when we realize or remember that what we really want in this life, even when we’re injured, even when we’re wronged, abused and hurt, what we really want is to be a human being, to emerge intact from every injury, every wound and insult, to remain viable, morally, spiritually, emotionally. What we really want in this life is freedom, freedom from the power of resentment to constrict us or constrain us, the power of bitterness, or hatred – or fear – to define us, to distort us, to dim the shining inner light of us. We really want to shine. Forgiveness is transformation within the injured person, and thereby of the world.

It is not the same as pardon. It’s not the same as justifying someone’s actions when they’re clearly wrong. Forgiveness is never about forgetting, or pretending something didn’t happen, pretending no damage was done and everything’s okay when obviously it’s not. Forgiveness is not restitution, nor revenge, nor reparation, nor even repair of a damaged relationship, necessarily - though any of these may be part of it; they may or may not need to be part of it. Forgiveness is choosing your own freedom. It’s not a virtue, it’s a decision. And strangely, paradoxically, the work of forgiveness, to grant it or to ask for it, is about relinquishing your control in order to reclaim your power. You claim or reclaim your power, your humanity, your grace, by stepping into the unknown, walking off a cliff, into a kind of freefall, because you can’t control what happens next when you say, “I forgive you.” (It’s not about the other person, really.) You can’t control what happens next, when you say, “Please forgive me.” Those are words that must be spoken without any strings attached, without any expectations. You’ve released control. Whether you’re speaking to another person, or speaking to God face-to-face, or talking to a mirror, to yourself (perhaps the harshest judge), you don’t know what’s going to happen next. You’ve let go of the secret or the shame or the self-loathing that had wrapped itself around you like a cloak or like a shroud. Exposed now to the light, you can’t control what happens next. You can only choose who you are and who you’re called to be.

I remember a moment years and years ago when my partner, Ross, and I decided in our kitchen late one night that we would never again call my parents after dinner on the phone. As long as he was living my father was always the one to answer the phone, and by seven or eight o’clock in the evening, he’d always had three or four or more drinks, and he was always pretty mean then, irascible, unreasonable, looking for a fight. He’d start shouting about something that was nothing and end by slamming down the phone. It amazes me now to realize how many years it took me to not like him very much, to begin to resent him, even hate him, to at least hate calling him. It took a long time because this was the same father who sang my brothers and me to sleep when we were little, the man who taught me to read. It took a long time to realize it was not okay - until finally one night, shaking and crying, with Ross’s help, I named it what it was. He’s an alcoholic. He’s not hateful; he’s human. The behavior was hateful, but my father was a hurting human person: fragile and sick and afraid. We stopped calling for a couple of years, and then in time we had a baby, and took to calling on Saturday mornings, or Sunday afternoons, and this was better. We did some of the things that dysfunctional alcoholic families are supposed to do to get healthy, which is to say we did our muddy, messy best to be more honest with ourselves and with each other, and though he never asked, I forgave him, because I knew I wanted to love him for the rest of his life and mine. He never asked and I never told him he was forgiven, because he

would have started shouting – we never got that healthy. Somehow though, with help, I shifted what I wanted, from resentment to freedom, from victimhood and fear, to freedom. And it was freefall for a while, it was scary; I had to let go of control, let go of an old story, a story exactly as old as I was, that had defined us and defined me all that time, a crazy story, but comfortable somehow, familiar. Once I let that go, it felt for a while as if I had no story to live in at all, until I began to own a new one.

In Judaism Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the year. It was this past Wednesday; it's called the Birthday of the World, commemorating the creation, when everything on earth was new and clean and filled with hope and possibility. I love that in Minnesota it happens in the fall. The Book of Life is opened in heaven and Jews pray to be inscribed therein by God's own hand for a good and sweet new year. Yom Kippur is ten days later (so, this coming weekend), the most somber, sacred day, when the people standing side by side in the synagogue come before the Holy to express in silence and in ancient spoken prayers their brokenness, their sins, all the ways they've fallen short or missed the mark, done damage to each other, to themselves, and to all the covenants that weave this world together. On these ten days in between, the Days of Awe, people visit one another; they call, they write letters, they text, so that on the far end of that week, on the Day of Atonement, on the threshold of the year, they can stand before God without shame. It's expected that you'll own what's yours to own. And while you are not required to forgive anybody, it's expected that the door of your heart, the door of your house, your phone line, will at least keep open. It's a strange and mighty thing, to focus all of your deliberate intention on becoming absolutely vulnerable, relinquishing control.

I know a woman who carries in her wallet a folded card she found in a book a few years back. She received it first many years before that when her son, who's now completely grown, was just a little kid. She'd forgotten all about it. In backwards block letters, all wobbly capitals and invented spelling, he wrote, Hi Mama. I'm sorry for what I did. It made me sad. Beneath and all around these words is a crayon drawing: a big stick figure and a little one side by side, with a yellow round stick-figure sun above them, shining down, and they are holding hands and smiling. She says she can't remember at all what grave infraction brought forth this confession, but still it makes her cry. She says she keeps it close because to her it represents Tikun Olam, which in Judaism means "to repair or heal the broken world." She says it reminds her to stay open, in case somebody close by is trying to forgive or be forgiven and she should give them her attention, open the gates of the heart. It reminds her of the words of Rumi, the Persian mystic, words she's written on the back: "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." That's where we want to live, in that wild, unclenched, sun-drenched, open place.

We cast into the depths of the sea our sins, and failures, and regrets, writes Marcia Falk. She's describing the ritual called tashlich, literally casting little stones or breadcrumbs into moving water during these high holy days, to bless them with a prayer for transformation, and then to let them go.

We cast into the depths of the sea our sins, and failures, and regrets,

Reflections of our imperfect selves

float away.

*What can we bear?
With what can we bear to part?*

*We upturn the darkness,
bring what is buried to light.*

*What hurts still lodge?
What wounds have yet to heal?*

*We empty our hands,
release the remnants of shame,
let go fear and despair
that have dug their home in us.*

*Open hands,
Opening heart-*

*The year flows out,
The year flows in.*

I think of Sam Kestenbaum, the unlikely Jewish lobsterman in Maine:

I feel close to my faith when I'm on the water. Fishermen grapple daily with the elements: the wind, the tide, the shifting of the seasons. Jews also keep their eyes on the elements, recognizing the great, sacred powers that are present in the world. It is said that when the Jews went into exile, the Shekinah, the divine presence, went into exile, too — hovering over us, around us wherever we were, waiting for us to invite the sacred into our lives. For Yom Kippur, I drive an hour and a half to synagogue to meditate on teshuvah — on turning and returning, starting fresh. It isn't boat work, but it is work, and a kind of repair, a checking of the knots and wiring, and refueling for another year.

We keep our eyes on the elements, he says, on the wind and the tide and the shifting of seasons. There is so much in this life that we cannot control. As recent days remind us, and especially this week in Mexico, in Puerto Rico, there is so much we do not control. Each year in the golden fall, the Days of Awe are a stern and generous reminder to tend with care to the wild weather within. It's time to claim what's ours to claim and own what's ours to own, to write our own stories into the Book of Life, to release the bonds of fear and hate, the bonds of shame, that make us smaller than we really are. This world is worthy, and we ourselves are worthy, of the largest love that we are brave enough to imagine and to risk.

silence

CLOSING MEDITATION

Bring into your conscious mind someone against whom you currently hold some resentment. Take a moment to decide who this will be. It could be someone you see every day, or someone whom you rarely see. It could be someone who has died, or someone very much alive. Bring one person into your mind, who has slighted you or injured you or wronged you in some way. Breathe deep.

Is this someone you are able to forgive?
Is it someone you want to forgive?

Either way, imagine holding your resentment not inside you, but in your two hands. How heavy is it? How much does it weigh? Is there any way that you could lay it down, and walk more lightly?

Breathe in, breathe out. Let that person drift away.

Bring into your conscious mind someone you have wronged. Take a moment to decide who this will be. It could be someone you see every day, or someone whom you rarely see. It could be someone who has died, or someone very much alive. Bring one person into your mind, whom you have wronged. Breathe deep.

In your mind, come before that person. Speak their name, and say I have wronged you. This is what I did. In your mind, say exactly what it was. Speak their name, and say I ask for your forgiveness.

Breathe in, breathe out. Let that person drift away.

Imagine you are looking in a mirror, at your own face, exactly as it is. Take a breath. Look into your own eyes, and smile. In your mind, speak your own name, and say, forgive and be forgiven. Speak your own name, to your own self, and say again, forgive and be forgiven.

Breathe deep.
