

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Hearts Will Work Again

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
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FIRST READING *from students at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York*

My memory fails me. Things happened. We both experienced them.

You saw them your way – colored by experiences in your past, or by resentment or impatience.

I saw them my way – colored by fear, by pride, by the fact that I am myself and not you.

So our memories of what happened were very different from the start.

And then, before we knew it, memories hardened into myths and myths into dogma.

Now we find ourselves divided. We stare across the chasm, but we don't see each other.

Parent. Partner. Friend. Child. Denomination. Nation. Race. Class. Creed.

I'm tired of being alone on my side of the chasm.

I'm using up so much energy fearing and resenting you.

Sometimes I wish you and I could crack the dogma, peel away the mythology, and trade memories. What would it be like if we could see each other's pictures of the history we share? If we could see each other?

What we need here, you and I, is a little humility and a lot of house-cleaning.

Humility: to say "only God sees history whole and knows the whole truth.

All I have is my perception. It's valid, it's precious, it's fragmentary.

Maybe I ought to try seeing as God sees, from all the angles."

Housecleaning: Memory is selective, and I'm carrying around years of slanted, narrow memories. I can't see past them.

It must be the same for you.

What we need to do is let se of them go. Trade a few. Listen.

Maybe, if I ask you how things look to you,

between us we'll see something

we never saw before.

SECOND READING *from Maya Angelou*

We,
 unaccustomed to courage,
 exiles from delight,
 live coiled in shells of loneliness
 Until love leaves its high holy temple
 and comes into our sight
 to liberate us into life.

Love arrives -
 and in its train come ecstasies,
 old memories of pleasure,
 ancient histories of pain.

And if we are bold,
 love strikes away the chains of fear from our souls.
 We are weaned from our timidity.
 In the flush of love's light,
 we dare to be brave.
 And suddenly we see
 that loves costs all we are and will ever be.
 It is only love which sets us free.

Hearts Will Work Again

There's a chant that Carol sometimes sings with us, an old one by the Jewish composer Shlomo Carlebach, It's in our green hymnal, and the text is beautiful; it reminds me of our theme this month: *Home: the practice of setting roots:*

*Return again, return again,
 Return to the home of your soul.
 Return to who you are, return to what you are,
 return to where you are born and reborn again...
 Return to the home of your soul.*

It's partly why we all come here, or do any other quiet, lovely thing with discipline and purpose, to return and remember the home of the soul, which is not a geographic place but an orientation of the spirit. You come to your practice, your spiritual practice, to get your heart working again.

This summer I clipped a letter to the Editor of the New York Times. The writer was responding to an article about turmoil in the Middle East, and he wrote these hopeful words, "Hearts will work again." He said,

Leaders from too many countries have failed endlessly to achieve peace in the region. Why do we still look to leaders? The solution is right there, in the human hearts in a circle growing outward from those of the parents of the murdered children. It wasn't easy in Ireland; it won't be easy in Israel and Palestine. Yet hearts worked in one place and time, and hearts will work again. It's the only thing that will work, the only thing we can trust.

For some reason I found this stunningly hopeful – the hearts of the actual people.

I grew up with two younger brothers. They are as different from one another as sun and moon, as desert sand and ocean salt. They have been estranged, these two, since they were in their twenties, all of our adult lives. Their hearts have not been working, and I don't know if either one remembers, really, what exactly happened. I know that each one has his story, the story that makes sense somehow, the narrative inside which he's chosen to set down roots, but I don't believe those stories are true homes for their souls. In the words of our reading:

*Memory fails me. Things happened, and before we knew it, memories hardened into myths and myths into dogma.
Now we find ourselves divided. We stare across the chasm, but we don't see each other.*

I wonder when I'm texting one and talking to the other, or looking at old pictures, or speaking with our mother, who is 92 and loves us all, I wonder if either of my brothers ever thinks, about the other:

*I'm tired of being alone on my side of the chasm.
I'm using up so much energy fearing and resenting...*

...What would it be like if we could see each other's pictures of the history we share? If we could see each other?

*Maybe, if I ask you how things look to you,
between us we'll see something
we never saw before.*

You may have people in your family, or in your wider circle, like this; you may even be such a person, caught in such a bind: you look back through the windows of memory, each through a different window on exactly the same scenes replaying over and over, and no one sees the same exact thing the same way. Memory is selective; truth is multifaceted and feathery, not solid. Sometimes this is comical in families, with legends and counter-legends rehashed at reunions hilariously every year, and sometimes it not comical. The presence of a past that people can't get past is a large, sad presence. What's shared, for sure – the common ground - is hurt. What's shared by all is loneliness. What's shared, but separately, is anger, sometimes, which smolders so remarkably tenaciously after all that time-- and the presence of loss, a continuous whisper of missed opportunity.

Forgiveness is not about absolving someone who has injured you, from the seat of righteousness where you preside, nor is it being absolved yourself by someone whom you've harmed, as if you could kneel down and thus be blessed. Forgiveness is not about forgetting, or pretending old wrongs never mattered; it's not about sweeping under the rug the insult or the wound, the negligence, abuse or wrong deed that changed everything, and cannot ever be revoked- and scars exist to prove this, psychic scars, or physical or both. Forgiveness can't forget all that. And sometimes – I think almost always - it isn't even about the other person. It's about freedom and the home of the soul, where you breathe deep the breath of life and know that you are safe. When you forgive someone, you are saying in effect, "You no longer have power over me. I will not allow it. Our relationship has shifted, the plates beneath our feet have shifted and we stand on equal ground. *Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around.*" You return to the home of your soul, to who and what you truly are. Forgiveness is all about freedom and living freely in the present instead of in the past. The poet writes:

*We,
unaccustomed to courage,
exiles from delight,
live coiled in shells of loneliness
Until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.*

*Love arrives -
 And if we are bold,
 love strikes away the chains of fear.
 We are weaned from our timidity.
 We dare to be brave.
 And suddenly we see
 that loves costs all we are.
 It is only love which sets us free.*

And that is not necessarily love of the other person, which may not be exactly possible nor even appropriate. It's love of life, your own beautiful and worthy life, and the future that you mean to dwell in. Love costs all we are and it is only love which sets us free. You can't afford to be tethered down by bitterness, resentment, grudges (they're heavy to carry), victimhood, or fear. You're more powerful than that. You can't afford to be tethered down by guilt, shame, remorse, embarrassment, self-loathing. You're more powerful than that. That's Universalist theology, and it's also true - the belief that we can grow. There are ways of atonement, means of mitigation. Our hearts are powerfully constructed, and hearts can work again, even when frozen, or broken, or caked over with rust.

Memory is unreliable and human beings are complicated. That is also true. The poet Pat Schneider has a wonderful piece in which she describes sitting with her mother as her mother was dying, and her mother told her stories, scraps of memories:

Sound of the Night Train

Only once in every twenty-four hours the train comes through my town—in the dark, still center of the night. Sometimes I am awake to hear it, its wail a long sound-tunnel back to another time, another place.

1934. Early March in southern Missouri, northern Arkansas. The air cold, the night wind hard in the open doorway of a boxcar headed south toward Louisiana.

My mother told me this in the winter of her dying. Always she said my father was just no good—her Ozark accent persisting to the end: a woman warshed and rinched the clothes. A man who didn't treat a woman right was just no good.

It was the heart of the Depression, she said. I never did tell

this

to anyone—I was so ashamed. We wanted to go to see Papa and Mama in the Socialist Colony down in Louisiana, but we didn't have any money. So we rode the rails. One night a man in the boxcar with us said, "If y'all know what's good for you, you'll jump right now." We were scared; we jumped. And me six months pregnant with you. Isn't that awful?

She lay very still then on her high hospital bed, the wedding ring quilt she had pieced when her eyes were good pulled up around her shoulders. What made me sad, listening to this story, was the strangeness of my mother's not saying, He was just no good. For the first time in her eighty-six years she said, He was good to me then. I was cold, and we were sleeping on the ground. He covered me with leaves. He covered her—covered me—with leaves.

Memory is fickle and human beings are complicated. How do you hold the wholeness of a person, and your own wholeness, and injury and tenderness, anger and resilience, through the mystery of memory? How do we hold each other, see each other, and hold the complicated stories of our complicated living? And where is the home of your soul?

Last week David Remnick, journalist, had a piece in *The New Yorker* about Charleston, South Carolina, and some of the history of that complicated place, including the murder there, in June, of nine people gathered on a Wednesday night in their church, Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Remnick wrote:

Appalling as the massacre at Emanuel was, it was not the only event in Charleston that shocked the country. At Dylann Roof's arraignment hearing, relatives of the Emanuel Nine, one after another, stepped up to forgive the man behind the massacre. "You took something very precious away from me," Nadine Collier, the daughter of Ethel Lance, said, addressing the accused. "I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. But God forgives you and I forgive you." Myra Thompson's husband said, "I forgive you and my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. ... Give your life to the one who matters the most: Christ. So that he can change it, can change your ways, no matter what happens to you, and you'll be O.K."

Others spoke the same. Remnick interviewed James Cone, the great African American theologian, who says this tradition of forgiveness is old in the black church and it is controversial, within the church and certainly outside it. James Cone says it's *hard to understand for anyone "who hasn't had to cope with that kind of powerlessness," he said. "It's victory out of defeat. It is the weak overcoming the strong. It's 'You can't destroy my spirit. I have a forgiving spirit because that's what God created me to be. You are not going to destroy that.' When they forgive, it is a form of resistance, a kind of resilience. It is not bowing down. That is misunderstood by a lot of people, even black people... Black people are a small minority, and we can't use physical violence. That's not a possibility. It has to be a spiritual resistance—defiant but spiritual—resistance.*

I think there's much to learn there, hard as it is. We all know people who've been taught by their religions that the only path to salvation, to virtue, to goodness, to God's approval is a kind of martyr-like forgiveness, where you're meant to rise above all manner of oppression, injury, harm, and abuse and just put a sweet face on things. *Rise above and then sink down. Suffer in silence. This too shall pass.* Battered women and others hear that doctrine all the time. But this is different, this spiritual resistance, spiritual defiance. It's not about virtue; it's about your own freedom, your dignity, your power, the strength of your own heart beating, working, toward your own large goal. Do you want vengeance (which is small), or freedom (which is large indeed)? Do you want to win, or do you want to walk in the light, powerful, unchained? When you think of your own life - not Charleston, not the Middle East, but your own life all intertwined and meshed with other complicated, messy people's lives, do you need to be right, or do you need ultimately, to be at peace in your own spirit, the home of your soul? I love the phrase "defiant, spiritual resistance." As the letter writer said, our hearts know how to do this. We are made for this hard work.

So take a deep breath.

It's beautiful, I think, that in our part of the world, the High Holidays of Judaism take place in the fall. This is so clearly the start of the year, when everything is golden, ready, bathed in clearest light. Rosh Hashanah -which is the gateway to a brand new year; Yom Kippur -the day of Atonement this past week; and the ten Days of Awe in between – when the awesome work of self-assessment is accomplished by ritual and prayer, fasting and asking for forgiveness. The people wonder what kind of story, what kind of future they mean to live in. They look around at all the people they're connected to or separated from, and they set their

hearts to work, each year, every fall, a new beginning. Each day a defiant new beginning.

For just a moment we'll be silent together.

This blessing comes from Marcia Falk, a prayer for Rosh Hashanah, the turning of the year when, like milkweed pods, hearts crack open:

*May the year bring **abundant blessings**—
beauty, creativity, delight!*

*May we be **confident, courageous,**
and **devoted to our callings.***

*May our lives be **enriched with education.**
May we find **enjoyment in our work**
and **fulfillment in our friendships.***

*May we **grow, may we have good health.**
In darker times, may we be sustained
by **gratitude and hope.***

*May we be **infused with joy.**
May we know **intimacy and kindness,**
may we **love without limit.***

*May the hours be **enhanced with music**
and **nurtured by art.**
May our endeavors be marked by **originality.***

*May we take **pleasure in daily living.**
May we find **peace within ourselves**
and help **peace emerge in the world.***

*May we receive the gifts of **quiet.***

*May **reason guide our choices,**
may **romance grace our lives.***

*May our spirits be serene,
may we find solace in solitude.*

*May we embrace **t**olerance and **t**ruth
and the **u**nderstanding that underlies both.*

*May we be inspired with **v**ision and **w**onder,
may we be open to **e**xploration.*

*May our deepest yearnings be fulfilled,
may we be suffused with zeal for life.*

*May we merit these blessings
and may they come to be.
May it be so. AMEN*

“May It Be So” is an abecedarian—a type of acrostic in which the initial letters of key words appear in alphabetical succession. Abecedarians were a popular form of liturgical poetry composed for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.