

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
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THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*The gate to forgiveness
opens*

We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

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I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

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cloud and wings*

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the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

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Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

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When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
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No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

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328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
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THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

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*The gate to forgiveness
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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

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All human souls together.

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Period.

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On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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*The gate to forgiveness
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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

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I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

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in the days between
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*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

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in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

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Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
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No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

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I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

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I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*wind and clover
reed and river*

*The gate to forgiveness
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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

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All human souls together.

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*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*wind and clover
reed and river*

*The gate to forgiveness
opens*

The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
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opens*

We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

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In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

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I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*wind and clover
reed and river*

*The gate to forgiveness
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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

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Slowly the edges
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A poet writes about forgiveness:

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... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

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These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
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In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*wind and clover
reed and river*

*The gate to forgiveness
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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*The gate to forgiveness
opens*

We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

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On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

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roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

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... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

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I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

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When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
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No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

No Souls Overboard
Sunday, October 2, 2016

Reverend Victoria Safford

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328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

THE FIRST READING is by OMID SAFI. He is Director of the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University and the author of numerous books on Islam and the modern world. He is a regular contributor to the radio series and website *ON BEING*. This is adapted from a piece called “Her Father’s Daughter.”

I had just finished teaching a course that dealt with many of the “tough” issues around Islam: women’s rights, the Iraq war, Taliban, Saudis, Palestine/Israel, and so on. I tried to teach the class in a way that would affirm the dignity and sanctity of all human life. The hardest unit to teach was the 9/11 segment. The school I taught in at that time was in New York, and many of my students had a firsthand connection to 9/11. I still remember seeing teary-eyed and otherwise sweet students crying in the memorial service saying, “*I just wanna go nuke somebody.*”

I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

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*The gate to forgiveness
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The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

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We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

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All souls.

All human souls together.

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Period.

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I tried to teach the class with a radical premise, one that said the life of every Palestinian would carry the exact same dignity as the life of every Israeli; the life of every Iraqi and Afghan the same worth as the life of every American. In teaching about 9/11, that meant, yes, teaching al-Qaeda’s history of terrorism. But, it also meant teaching about the history of U.S. support for Saudis; for the Mujahideen (a significant portion of whom would morph into the Taliban); for dictatorial regimes, Guantanamo, drones, and the vastly greater loss of life on the Iraqi and Afghan side.

On the last day of class, one of the students came up to me. She thanked me for the class and said softly, quietly, “*My father was in the towers.*”

Her father had died in the World Trade Center. No- her father had *been killed* in the World Trade Center. Here, in front of me, was her father’s daughter : a girl who had listened to me for 14 weeks, 40 hours, talk about all these heart-wrenching issues. My mind began racing. I wondered if at any point during the semester, in my attempt to convey the full humanity of the Iraqi, Palestinian, Pakistani, and Afghani civilians, I had spoken too lightly about the full humanity of the Americans who had perished on 9/11. I wondered if in arguing that the lives of fellow human beings around the planet have exactly the same innate worth as the privileged lives of Americans, if I had done so with sarcasm and anger rather than with compassion and kindness. I wondered if righteous indignation could sometimes have trampled over compassion. I blurted out, “*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

She said she had taken the class to learn, and she hadn’t wanted me to censor myself in any way. She wanted to absorb the full blow of a professor who was known for his outspoken political views, though with a radical commitment to love and justice.

Her eyes, her words, and her intention have stayed with me over the years. When I speak on Palestine/Israel, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for “speaking their mind” instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

I recently got back in touch with Amy. She has become a teacher. On the anniversary of 9/11, she posted on Facebook a tribute to her father, and also to the class that she took to make sense of our mad world. She credits that experience as “eradicating” the hatred in her own heart, removing her own fear.

We do not speak about “others.”

They are us.

We are together - and we stare into each other’s souls.

How do we learn *with* each other?

How do we live, breathe, and love- *with* each other?

THE SECOND READING is from Jewish poet and translator Marcia Falk, from a collection of blessings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Opening the Heart

At the year’s turn
in the days between
we step away
from what we know

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

Slowly the edges
begin to yield
the hard places
soften

*wind and clover
reed and river*

The gate to forgiveness
opens

No Souls Overboard

A poet writes about forgiveness:

*At the year's turn
in the days between*

... between Rosh Hashanah tomorrow and Yom Kippur next week, between summertime behind us now and winter dead ahead, between whatever happened, whatever you did or said yesterday, last week, last year and all the years so far, whatever was done to you, and what might come tomorrow...

*... in the days between
we step away
from what we know*

*wall and window
roof and road*

into the spaces we cannot yet name

*cloud and sky
cloud and wings*

In the hard, hard process of seeking or granting forgiveness, we step from the known world, with its solid walls, maybe holding us safe, maybe boxing us in; we step from the known world, with our solid assumptions, impenetrable perspective and our set-in-stone habits, into the unknown...

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*wind and clover
reed and river*

*The gate to forgiveness
opens*

The Jewish calendar sets aside ten days for this work each year in the fall, stepping from the known into the unknown. Likewise, Christian liturgy requires and invites regularly, round and round, prayers of contrition and the sacrament of confession. In Islam, at Ramadan, an entire month is spent in fasting and reflection, symbolically emptying the body in order to cleanse the conscience, to clear out the cluttered mind and clarify

the spirit, which can be clouded by weariness or bitterness, muddled by dusty piles of resentments or guilt or both. With prayer and fasting all that is swept clean. These are old religions, ancient ways, and people all around us practice them. To speak of atonement is to speak of remorse and regret, which we don't generally like, but it's more than that. Atonement, at-one-ment is restoration, reconstruction, renewal, on either side of the equation; atonement offers us a second chance, the seven-hundredth, thousandth chance, to get our living right. We're all seeking to be whole, to be in right relation, especially with people closest to us; to be in right relation, with our own hearts, our uneasy, slippery conscience, the true self deep inside there. We want to be made whole, to be in right relation, with those we love and with ourselves, and with our God, or whatever for you is the wholeness and holiness of things, whatever for you is the peace that passes understanding, that which in the middle of the night presses in and presses down and all around, asking "Who are you, really? And whom do you mean to be?" We want to come round right with each other, with ourselves, and within that larger Love that transcends our understanding – and we are so afraid.

*Slowly the edges
begin to yield*

*the hard places
soften*

*The gate to forgiveness
opens*

We long for it– to forgive and be forgiven. Unitarian Universalists don't set aside a certain month or certain days each year or speak confessions in our worship, but we come out of a tradition, a Universalist tradition, that insists, on accountability and love. It insists, unsentimentally, on love, Our forebears so believed in a loving God that they disbelieved in hell, though hell was *really* trending at the time; hell was all the rage. They disbelieved in divine vengeance and fury and damnation. They believed that every heart could turn, every hard edge soften, every soul be saved, forgiven at the end of time. They believed our calling is to replicate on earth the very love of God, to act out grace and mercy. That looks like a sweet deal on the surface – *no hell!* – but it is really hard to replicate, to practice, deliberately to engage all the people we engage with God-like large-heartedness, God-like high-mindedness, God-like compassion and honesty. The early Universalists believed our calling is to try, and stumble, fail and try again. They believed that God would hold us like the moral toddlers that we are. And they knew that it was hard.

Marcia Falk, author of one of our readings, talks about "seeing with the heart;" she calls it "undersight:"

Not all seeing is the same, she says. There is seeing with the eyes and there is seeing with the mind. "Aha! I see," we say when we have an insight. We look back in hindsight, plan ahead with foresight, keep things in order with oversight. When we mis-step we all that oversight, too.

And there is a kind of seeing that we might call undersight. Seeing under, beneath the surfaces, seeing into, through and through, taking in the whole of what is. We might also call this heartsight – seeing with the heart – because seeing deeply renders us more understanding and compassionate. Is it not easier to forgive

when one sees beyond the actions, sees through to the humanity, in all its flaws and limitations, of someone who has caused us pain?

Forgiveness is not about cheap grace, pious platitudes or letting people off the hook for injuries and damage that can never be repaired and can't ever be condoned. It's never really possible, and hardly ever wise, to "forgive and forget," though to forgive and then move on, to forgive and then live on, shine on, even though everything's remembered – that is a mighty and glorious thing. When you're the one doing the forgiving, it is much more about you than the other person; it's about your own salvation (literally, from *salve*, like a salve, meaning *heal*, which comes from *hale* and *health* and *whole*). It's about the salvation, the survival, of your spirit, and your own inherent power. Writer Susan Griffin says

I can be angry. I can hate. I can rage. But the moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy has led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside, and my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meagre, for my enemy has stolen all of these.

When you're the one doing the forgiving, it's about strengthening your core; it's not about the other person. It's about eradicating enemies, toxins, from your system.

When you're the one seeking forgiveness, it begins with forgiving yourself. You must believe your own intention; believe in your own integrity, your worthiness, regardless of the outcome. You present your most honest admission to the other person as an offering, expecting no reward and not dependent on their blessing. Sometimes, asking for forgiveness begins *and ends* with yourself, if the other person isn't ready, if forgiveness cannot come, and somehow that has to be enough. It's not about blame and shame, sackcloth and ashes, perpetual penance and ceaseless repentance. Whether you've sustained the injury or caused it, the work of atonement looks forward, not just back. You decide the gates will open now. Truth is spoken, truth is owned, and each person answers for herself, they answer for themselves, whether and how they will step through, reclaim their worthy lives, set their sights on the days they've got left, the path that opens before them, not the door that slammed behind. In the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the new year, the birthday of the world, and so fitting in our part of the world, in the fall, which always feels to me like the start of the year, cool and bright and shiny as new school shoes. Rosh Hashanah says, "Here's a brand new year, a whole new world," and then for the next ten days before Yom Kippur, the people consider, they think hard, about how they want to live in this new cosmos. Bitter, resentful, guilty, afraid, suspicious, victimized, meager, confined within the safe box of the known past... or open? What needs attention or mending or repair before, in good conscience, they can accept again the gift of life?

How do we start again? Think of someone who has hurt you. Can you *undersee* their humanity? Think of some hurt you've inflicted. Can you *undersee* your own worth still? This is no religion for the faint of heart. The Buddha, who had a strong heart, said famously,

*Let us cultivate boundless goodwill
 Let none deceive another,
 or despise any being in any state.
 Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm.
 Even as a mother watches over her child,
 so with boundless mind
 should we cherish all living beings,
 Radiating friendliness over the whole world.
 Above, below, and all around, without limit.*

Even your enemies. Even yourself. Easy to say, if you're the Buddha, but according to him, not even for him so easy to do. How to navigate this life with no one cast adrift from your own private roster of worthy souls, with no one tossed aside, dismissed as beyond care? You don't have to like everybody, you don't have to be friends with them or let them live in your house or even talk to them if circumstances make that an ill-advised idea, for your mental health, or physical health, or emotional well-being - but can you love them, in principle? Can you honor their light?

Omid Safi writes about the young woman in his class on Islam and contemporary issues, and how his own pluralistic and progressive politics, his world view, his understanding of the causes and the historic context and the consequences of September 11 were all shaken up by the quiet, open-hearted presence of this student whose father was murdered 15 years ago when the Towers fell. She was brave to take the class, and brave to say later that she said the discussions there "eradicated" the hatred in her heart, removing her own fear. Safi responded,

*We cannot speak about "others."
 They are us.
 We are together- and we stare, daily, into one another's souls.
 How do we learn to live with each other?
 How do we live, breathe, and love – with each other?*

No souls overboard, no matter what. Omid Safi says

We live in an age of bluster. We have presidential candidates praised for "speaking their mind" instead of inquiring about what is on their mind and how much wisdom and compassion is in their heart. How do we preserve sanity, compassion, humility, and empathy?

And this is a good question, especially as we lurch to Election Day and then lurch to Inauguration Day, and then lurch on beyond. How are we going to go forward, as a nation, as a people, no matter who wins, be indivisible, with no souls tossed aside? Already vast numbers of our people are disregarded, disrespected, forgotten in prison, in poverty, and this election rends the fabric of community yet more, perhaps beyond repair. It threatens to dis-integrate us. If half of the electorate, or even almost half, identifies with messages of white victimization, racism, misogyny, and exclusion, if millions and millions of voters (our own

neighbors, relatives, co-workers) say, “Yes, this represents me,” then where will we be in January, no matter who wins? Who will we be? For me, in this season of deep trouble, this question is most troubling of all.

Omid Safi thinks of his young student, the daughter of a man who was killed by terrorists, and he says that because of her, his imagination has been re-set, renewed and his heart has expanded. *When I speak now on Palestine/Israel, he says, I imagine the Jewish granddaughters of Holocaust survivors in the audience, and I imagine the Palestinians whose grandparents were driven out of their ancestral Palestinian homeland. When I speak about what I see as an immoral war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I imagine the soldier’s spouse whose loved one is on his or her fifth tour of duty, and I imagine the one whose loved ones have been killed by an American drone.*

All souls.

All human souls together.

In the 19th century the Universalists named dozens of churches *All Souls*.

It is hard work, hard and holy work, to practice this religion. You think of those people in Charleston, who faced the terrorist who killed their loved ones in their church, who said to him, to his sullen face at his arraignment, *We’re praying for you. We forgive you. You have no power over us. We’ve got you, and God’s love holds us all.* That was in no way spontaneous speech, but rather the result of a lifetime of prayer and discernment, a lifetime of striving and stumbling and failing, I’m sure, a lifetime of learning how to “undersee,” beneath the surface of human bluster and bravado, bigotry and violence, into the soul, the humanity, the holy portion that Dylann Roof himself could not even begin perceive.

I read last year about a program in Rwanda, a national program for Hutus and Tutsis both, a voluntary reconciliation process twenty years after the genocide there. These are people whose homes were burned in the night, whose families were tortured and slaughtered, their children, their parents. These are people who themselves did the slaughter. By choice, they submit to many months of counseling, which may culminate in a perpetrator’s request for forgiveness, which may or may not be granted by a victim. If it is, the local community celebrates with a great party, music and dancing and food. The intimate act becomes a public good. An international arts organization has been photographing the unlikely couples, Hutu/Tutsi, perpetrator/victim if they’re willing to allow this: *in one, a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman stands with the man who looted her house, whose father helped murder her children. In many of these photos (says one writer) there is little warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together.* Pieter Hugo, the photographer, says, “The relationships vary widely. Some pairs showed up and sit easily together, chatting about village gossip.” Others can barely talk – yet they have done this thing. They are side by side. He says “Forgiveness here is not born out of some airy-fairy sense of benevolence. It’s more out of a survival instinct. These people can’t go anywhere else,” he says. “They have to make peace.” One Hutu perpetrator says, “My conscience was not quiet. When I would see her in the village, I was ashamed.” The Tutsi woman who pardoned him, whose family he killed, says she lived in fear of him, until she granted pardon. “Now,” she says, “Things have become normal because in my mind I feel clear.” Another woman whose family was killed said she was so lonely, living

just with hatred, so when the son of the man who murdered her people approached her, she decided to receive him, she accepted his humanity. She said, "I could not live a lonely life." Her people are still gone, but she is less lonely in this world without hatred in her house.

It is lonely in this world, the more people we cut out of it - because we're righteous, because we're right, because they did us wrong, because they are the other, because we are afraid. There's no end to damnation once you start. The Universalists knew it, knew that the God of judgement and vengeance, the hellfire God was no God at all, but just a big projected image of ordinary, anxious human beings, ranting and raving as we do, nursing our grudges and plotting revenge. There's no end to damnation once you start, and there is no end to love, once it begins.

Thou art giving and forgiving says the old hymn in our hymnbook (not Universalist, but Lutheran). Giving, and forgiving, like a net beneath us, giving gently as it holds the weight of us, love is like a lifeline, strong but some give in it, so it will never snap. We are the net, the lifelines, for each other.

No souls overboard.

Period.

-silence-

These words are from Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.
 We are embraced by arms that find us
 even when we are hidden from ourselves.
 We are touched by fingers that soothe us
 even when we are too proud for soothing.
 We are counseled by voices that guide us
 even when we are too embittered to hear.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 We are supported by hands that uplift us
 even in the midst of a fall.
 We are urged on by eyes that meet us
 even when we are too weak for meeting.
 We are loved by an unending love.
 Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
 Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
 Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
 We are loved by an unending love.*

Let us love with an unending love.