

## Renewing Our Commitments to Each Other—UUFM September 27, 2020

What a lovely morning—cool air on skin, the sound of acorns falling out of the oaks, leaves turning color. Just a few days ago the autumnal equinox, earth balancing day and night. A season new yet again. This **time** reminds us that the rhythms of the earth and the universe continue, regardless of human activity, disruption, or will. And yet, our world feels so broken. We are not worshipping in our Fellowship building, a sanctuary from ordinary life and a gathering place for the community. We feel loss and anxiety about this, frustrated by Zoom and isolation, impatient that here we are in the autumn season once again and it is not a return to where we were last year at this time. The number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise in our region. People continue to die in this country and around the world. Too many of our leaders trample the political process that had made our country seem special and unique in the world. Those living most precariously within the shreds of constitutional promise protest unceasingly for justice. Glaciers and ice sheets collapse into the warming seas, and more animal species disappear from the earth.

The world feels very broken as we enter this season of gathering and reflecting. After-summer. Harvest time. Return to school time. A time to turn inward, toward darkness and the internal. But nothing is quite right. In the cycle of Jewish life, today is Yom Kippur, the highest holy day of the calendar. It is the time of year to acknowledge that the world has been **forever** broken, not just now but always, a time to acknowledge that we, each of us, contribute to the brokenness of the world. Within history and maybe even before, humans have always sinned against the world, because humans have always harmed each other, intentionally and unintentionally. Our Jewish siblings acknowledge this human reality by setting aside a time every year to pursue reconciliation for those sins, for those harms. The world is broken. We have broken it. And we can be agents in the repair of the broken. This is the day of atonement—a time to ask forgiveness, to make repair, and to seek unity and oneness within the community.

We Unitarian Universalists generally, not all of us of course but many, struggle with the idea of that we might cause harm, that we have been sinful. Some of us struggle especially since a concept of “sin” may have been used by some religious traditions to induce a sense of unworthiness or shame. Our First Principle—to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person—that would seem to settle the matter against bringing up any notion that we have sins to confess. Yet consider a fuller translation of the poem by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Sufi mystic Rumi, a version of which we have been singing regularly as a welcoming song: “Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, it doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vow a hundred times. Come, come again, come.”

Wanderer. Lover of leaving. Even if you broke your vows a thousand times. When you think of sin in this way, it might not seem so foreign, certainly not shameful. All of us have felt the desire to run away from pain, to avoid a conflict. All of us have broken promises, made to ourselves or to each other. All of us have made mistakes we wish we had not. We can continue to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of ourselves and each other, even if we also acknowledge our flaws. Even **because** we acknowledge our

flaws. This is not an either/or situation. Like our Jewish siblings are, we Unitarian Universalist are part of a religion defined not by creed, not by a set of shared beliefs, but rather by agreement, by covenant. We do not profess a belief that binds us together. Rather, we make an agreement to move together in the world as a body of faithful seekers.

And from within our agreement, we strive to live in a good relationship with one another. We **seek** to affirm human dignity and worth; that our human relationships be full with justice, and equality and compassion; that we accept each other and foster spiritual growth; that we engage in free and responsible search for truth and meaning; that we operate by democratic principles; that we desire a world community filled with peace, liberty, and justice for all; that we recognize ourselves as part of the interdependent web of all existence. We affirm these principles and we seek to live within them, through them to make them manifest for all people. And we know that we all struggle to live into all these promises. We don't understand them. We don't understand how to make them real. We resist them. But those difficulties are not a problem in themselves. The Rev. Gretchen Haley reminds us that our "covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also we become human when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again – when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other."

We are in a frightening time, a time of loss and despair and longings unfulfilled. We seek each other on a Sunday morning, and sometimes on other days, looking for community to uphold and sustain us. And yet we are a faith tradition and a religious community of wanderers. When spirits are filled full enough from the wells of our religion, people move to other wells for more. When no longer fulfilled by what our faith tradition or the religious community has to offer, people wander away. Even as we welcome new members into our Fellowship, into our religious community, we are mindful of who is not with us. And we wonder why? Do they not love us anymore? Are we not lovable? Are we not welcoming? Even with our new members, how will we hold together as a community when some of us are missing? This frightens us, and we feel broken because of our fear.

Yes, this is a frightening time, full of uncertainty. I say this with all compassion, aware of how uncertainty unnerves me. But also, a time of great hope and great work. Our Jewish siblings offer a path from the brokenness of the world, a way to bind wounds and to bind us together when we harm each other through actions or neglect. They offer atonement, at-one-ment. A way back to unity and connection. Apology. The hardest word is not "good night" or "rock" or "ridiculous" or "rhinoceros" or "Rumpelstiltskin" or even "spaghetti." No. "Sorry" seems to be the hardest word. When, like the giant bird from our story this morning, we block out the sun of someone else's joy, when our actions make holes in the earth, when we wreck someone's garden, we must make repair.

And repair is not easy, because saying the hardest word is not enough in itself. Getting to "sorry" is the beginning. It is how we tell ourselves that we see we have done wrong. How we learn to admit and not feel destroyed by failure. And then repair can follow. Repair that is action, that is doing something to make up for the wrong, such as when the giant bird brought food from his garden to make up for the food he accidentally destroyed in the children's garden. Even though the giant bird never meant to

break a thing or to harm a soul, he did. Once he sees that he did, he does his part to rebuild the broken world. What might you do to make repair—to a relationship, to this community, to the larger world?

Remember, too, that the giant bird does not reach atonement alone. He arrives at understanding and he forms his actions of repair in relationship with another, with God. We practice atonement in religious community. Recently, our UUA president the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray reminded us that “religious community is one of the containers to express our collective grief and to be strengthened by the knowledge that we are not alone.” It is easier to admit one’s culpability when you know that we remain held in compassion by a loving community. Rev. Frederick-Gray goes on to say, “this experience of interdependence creates compassion and calls us to act from that place of love for the things we hold most deeply.” It is time now, to admit that we unintentionally harm others in the way we live our lives. As Gray says, our participation in religious community “kindles in us the courage to confront systems of injustice and nurture new practices of justice and care.”

And what a time to be alive! In all this breakage and disruption—in this time of COVID and social restlessness and political rupture and climate crisis, this is a time of what Quaker activist and educator Joanna Macey calls a “Great Turning.” And in this time, we shall be known by the company we keep, we shall learn to lead in love with companions who circle round to tend fires of compassion and of commitment, passion for equality and justice, passion for moments of wholeness and community within fractures and confusion. What repair can you offer to the world and to this community we need to sustain us?

Our world is so broken. We may not be able to repair all of it, regardless of our intentions and our desires. But we are better for understanding the world as it is. We will be better, each of us and collectively, for building, in love and forgiveness, our religious community with new ideas, new energies, and new commitments. Spirit of Life and Love, we live in a fragmented world that tempts us to despair. Yet, in a world of cruelty, doubt, and division, there is still power in every act of kindness, in every act of hope, in every act of unity. When we love, when we give our love in the service of justice and to create a larger community, we end up having more.

So, let our hearts not be hardened. Let us end our wandering away from community, too burdened and undone. Let us sing a new beginning of care and repair. May you feel there is room at the table for everyone, there is room at the table for you, we are building the table together, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved you are worthy, you are welcome and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, “Amen.”