

GUILT, ATONEMENT AND FORGIVENESS

September 14th is the Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashanah. From that day until September 23, Yom Kippur, followers of the Jewish tradition are expected to check in with friends and family to see if they have done anything to hurt or offend them. If the answer is yes, then apologies and atonement are expected. On Yom Kippur, Jewish people meet at the synagogue, and the whole community apologizes and atones, reciting a Litany of Atonement. These “Days of Awe” are a time to get rid of all the old guilt baggage and begin anew. I think we UUs can learn a lot by examining how we deal with guilt, atonement and forgiveness (of self and others).

First let me say that I don’t think guilt, per se, is always a bad thing. Guilt helps keep society in check. Psychopaths don’t feel guilt. For the healthy personality, guilt is that part of the human conscience that reminds us that we have fallen short of the standards we wish to live up to. Guilt can motivate us to change our behavior and to mend damaged relationships. However, continued guilt can weaken the immune system, increase cortisol (a stress hormone), increase blood pressure and increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, depression and anxiety disorders, hence the need for atonement, for our health if not for our souls.

Rev Barbara Fast of the UU Congregation of Danbury says of guilt: “Psychic pain is the distance between what I say I believe and the way I live.” I think we all experience this guilt. Of atonement, Rev Fast says, “Atonement...calls us to return to our wholeness, our unified nature...calls us to unify our values with our actions, live our lives as a whole cloth—be one within and without.”

Lynn Ungar, a minister with the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship, writes in the CLF newsletter that on Yom Kippur Jewish synagogues atone for their collective guilt. The whole community takes responsibility for offenses and shortcomings that each individual may not be responsible for. I believe, with Rev Ungar, that this communal atonement is not only good, but necessary. Any one Individual white person isn’t responsible for the unearned privileges they inherit, but our society as a whole must face

and take responsibility for past and continuing injustices before we can help bend that long arc of history toward justice. In the same way, none of us can take the entire blame for what is being done to our planet by our lifestyle, although I am in continuous guilt about how I fall short of my standard of behavior toward this earth. As Rev Ungar says, “All of us together are doing tremendous damage to the Earth and its creatures. We need to find a way to atone as a community, as neighborhoods and countries, and as the human race, to make reparations so that there is room for all beings to flourish...Yom Kippur calls us to the difficult, ongoing work of recognizing that if we are all one—one human family, one precious planet—then we must all take responsibility for rebuilding the whole.”

Along with atonement must come self-forgiveness if we are to start anew to try and make a just and healthy world. And then we must forgive those “who trespass against us.” Unlike guilt, holding a grudge has no redeeming value, but it does have the same effects on our health. People who are able to forgive live longer, healthier and happier lives. I recall one of Dr. Ross Quinn’s sermons in which he told of the way in which Amish people were able to forgive murderers. Ross made the distinction between intellectual and emotional forgiveness. Of course, he said, even the Amish couldn’t reach emotional forgiveness right away, but by telling themselves that forgiveness was necessary, they paved the way for true forgiveness later.

Certainly most people would agree that harboring grudges is detrimental to one's mental and physical health, but it's not easy to forgive and even harder to achieve reconciliation. What are the choices for victims of wrong doing? One choice is to remain in denial, pretending nothing happened. But I don't think the memory will simply go away. It is more likely to become a festering wound. Another choice is to seethe in anger, continuing to seek revenge. But what does vengeance do to the victim of a wrongdoing? I once saw a bumper sticker with the Buddhist saying “You will not be punished for your anger; you will be punished by your anger. According to Martha Minow (*Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*) “Traumatized people imagine that revenge will bring relief, even though the fantasy of revenge simply reverses the roles of Perpetrator and Victim, continuing to imprison the victim in horror, degradation and the bounds of the perpetrator's

violence.” Minow also says that people who actually commit acts of revenge do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms; “rather they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances.”

I am reminded of Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* (made into a movie with Sigorney Weaver and Ben Kingsley). The main character was tortured and raped during the Pinochet regime in Chile. She is denied retribution because the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, which her husband had been chosen to chair, would only investigate torture that resulted in death. One night her husband has a flat tire, and he is brought home by a man she believes is her torturer. She ties him up and seeks a confession at gunpoint. Now having power over him, she begins to be the torturer, inflicting pain and humiliation because she can, although she says that no amount of revenge can satisfy her. She intended to kill him, but no longer feels the need to do this after he gives a sincere account of how he evolved from a doctor who was told to make sure the political prisoners being tortured didn't die (he said at first he tried to comfort them) into a rapist and torturer himself because he had the power. Dorfman seems to suggest that when the truth is allowed to be told, reconciliation and healing is possible. The trouble with the Truth and Reconciliation Council in Chile is that victims and torturers did not tell their stories, and the torturers and victims were forced to live side by side in unbearable silence.

In contrast, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave amnesty only after complete confession and allowed victims to tell their stories. Desmond Tutu, chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission said, “Revenge-driven bloodshed was avoided in South Africa partly because Nelson Mandela urged his followers to work for reconciliation,” and because South Africa's amnesty didn't simply let bygones be bygones, as happened in Chile. “They never become bygones,” Tutu says, “Our country chose a middle way of individual amnesty for truth. Not retributive justice, but restorative justice, because we believe in Ubuntu—the essence of being human, the idea that we are all caught up in a delicate network of interdependence....The greatest good is communal harmony, and resentment, anger, and revenge are corrosive to this harmony....Retribution leads to a cycle of reprisal, leading to counter-reprisal in an inexorable movement, as in Rwanda and Yugoslavia.”

In “Theology Ablaze,” retired UU minister Tom Owen-Towle gives an example of one man's realization that dialog, truth telling and recognizing the interdependence of all human beings can lead not only to forgiveness and reconciliation but also to making society better. The story he tells is of Azim Khamisa, whose son, Tariq, was killed by a 14 year old gang member while delivering Pizza in San Diego. Azim reached out to the shooter's grandfather, and together they created the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, dedicated to stopping the

cycle of youth violence. Another example of dialog promoting forgiveness, Owen-Towle says, is the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, which asks opponents to listen each others' stories and the reasons for their beliefs in order to “rehumanize people on the other side” of the issue. Owen-Towle quotes Unitarian Universalist Jay Atkinson : “Being agreed with isn't a human necessity, but being understood is.” Owen-Towle says “Listening brings us closer, for differences don't build walls;judgments do.” I wonder if we can apply this lesson to the rift in American politics today.

But forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring the need for justice. Martin Luther King Jr. forgave racists, but worked for civil rights. Pope John Paul forgave his would-be assassin, but Mehmet Ali Agca remained in prison.

A final bit of wisdom comes from the story of a Native American grandfather talking to his grandson about feelings of anger after 9-11. The grandfather says, “ I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other is the loving, compassionate one.” “Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?” the grandson asked. The grandfather replied, “The one I feed.” Forgiveness is a choice—a choice that requires us not to keep feeding the memory and the anger.

In the spirit of the coming Day of Atonement, Let us read together, responsively, A Litany of Atonement.



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF
THE HIGH DESERT

Order of Service September 13, 2015

Announcements and Introductions

Opening Words and Lighting of the Chalice

We gather this hour as a people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.

We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
In celebration of the life we share together.

Joys and Concerns

Reading of the UU Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth within our congregations;

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Offering

Story—“What if Nobody Forgave?”

**GUILT, ATONEMENT AND FORGIVENESS
(Diana Del Toro)**

Responsive Reading #637 A Litany of Atonement

Hymn # 347 Gather the Spirit

Closing Words

Let us go remembering to praise,
to live in the moment,
to love mightily, to bow to mystery. (Barbara Pescon)