

**Theodore Parker Church**  
**Rituals of Remembrance**  
**September 27, 2020**

The idea of renewal, our theme for September, presupposes reflection. On this day, when Yom Kippur -- the highest of Jewish High Holy Days -- begins at sundown, we'll consider the practice of review. How does looking back help us to move forward?

**Opening Words**      from Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*

“Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish - separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when (the Holy) does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”

Today, friends, in the midst of our concerns and worries, let us be reminded of the altars we too often fail to see - let us crack our shins a bit together as we grow towards understanding -  
Come. Let us worship.

**Story for All Ages**      Rose Gallogly, Coordinator of Religious Exploration

*This week's story is inspired by one written by Jesuit Priest Anthony de Mello titled, "Sin."*

*I'll first read the original story, and then expand on it. There is some language in the story, in particular the word sin, that as a Universalist, I have a hard time with — you may feel the same way. As I read the story, I invite you to understand “sin” more as harm, mistake, or disconnection, and see if that opens up the original message.*

It is said that God up in heaven holds each one of us by a string. When we sin, we are in essence cutting the string; the connection between ourselves and God, ourselves and what we know, ourselves and others. When we cut the string and realize what we have done, we ask for God's help or forgiveness, and she ties the string again, making a knot—and thereby bringing us closer. Again and again, we cut the string—and again and again, our Creator reties it. With each knot our strings become shorter and shorter, and we are drawn closer and closer to God.

*I'm curious if we can imagine all of our relationships being held in a string. Our relationships with one another, our relationships with our ancestors, our relationships with what we call sacred and holy — each bound by a simple string.*

*When our relationships are healthy and strong, those strings hold us up through the push and pull of life. But there are so many things that can make those strings of connection fray or break. Not tending to our spiritual core can fray the string of connection between ourselves and the sacred. When we cause harm, say or do something that is out of line with our values and hurts another person, it is so easy for those strings of connection to break.*

*When any of us have done something that we know has caused a string of relationship to break — whether that is a relationship with a loved one or with your own connection to spirit — admitting that harm can feel impossible. It can be easier to leave a string broken for years, for generations, than to admit it has been broken in the first place.*

*But, when we do acknowledge it — when we turn towards the hurt and ask for forgiveness — repair is possible. “When we ask for God’s help or forgiveness, she ties the string again, making a knot—and thereby bringing us closer.” In asking for help or forgiveness from each other, we also allow for those strings of connection to be tied together again: stronger, this time, and closer.*

Reading      **Nothing to Fear**      the Rev. Marta Valentin

Go forth, young child, and know  
that you do not walk alone,  
nor ever have.  
You carry with you ancestral bonds  
that do not sever.  
You carry with you familial love  
that does not end.  
You carry with you  
the scents of sweet friendships  
a long time blooming . . .  
Go forth, young child,  
with nothing to fear.  
Open your heart  
to the crosscurrents of living.  
Let others enter the circle  
of your tender loving arms.  
Let others know the profundity

of your sharp, inquiring mind.  
Go, leave your mark upon the world,  
and continue to lift up your voice,  
there are many waiting to listen.

### **Meditation/Prayer    the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

As we come into this quiet time together, settling our bodies, joining our breath - I want to invite you into an awareness of what prayer can be for us - the string, the connector, a way of being . . . that during the most unsettling times - like these days - can re-orient us towards calm; towards grounding, towards grateful. "When I look up from feeding the outside dogs to see the full moon coming up through the bare trees . . . - when I feel the beam of it enter my busy heart straight through the zipper of my fleece jacket and fill me full of light - I am in prayer. When I spend all afternoon chopping onions, stewing tomatoes, and setting the table . . . I am in prayer. When I am so sick that I cannot do anything but lie in bed with . . . all the time in the world to remember whom I love and why, I am in prayer." (p. 180-181 Taylor)

May we imagine together those times in our own lives, even now, when we have been - or are - in prayer, and not even realized it. Remembering can be such a doorway to peace.

Let us take this time to be in prayer together . . .

### **Homily            Rituals of Remembrance            the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

I am especially grateful to the Jewish tradition for the reminder of review that is Yom Kippur, which begins tonight, by the way - the time when the Book of Life is open and our Jewish friends hope and pray to be inscribed for another year.

I am always reminded at this time of year that our tradition has left much of the practice of looking back, of review and apology and the repair that Rose mentioned earlier, behind us. We are a faith for the future! "Onward and Upward Forever!" was a Unitarian slogan of the last century. We are often so busy looking ahead at how we want the world to be, at the way we hope the arc of the universe is bending, that we often forget to take the time to look back - so, again, I am grateful for the encouragement from traditions that engage with it more regularly and remind us of its value and importance.

I was looking through the hymnal for music for this morning's service - and discovered the Opening hymn that Michael shared with us - *Who can say, "I am free, I have purified my great*

*heart?" There are none on earth. May we now forgive, atone, that we may live."* It wouldn't surprise me if it was not overly familiar! On the bottom of the page where the hymns are printed are references to who wrote the words and/or the music itself. This particular music was a gift of Max Janowski, who was a composer of Jewish liturgical music. The words are adapted from *Gates of Repentance*, which is a book written by Rabbeinu Yonah of Geronah (d. 1263), nearly 800 years ago, and considered one of the most important books of Jewish literature.

The text deals in particular with the practice of teshuva, which I understand to be translated as "return" as in return to the holy, return - or as Rose might have inclined us to understand, to seek being "retied" to G\_d.

I haven't read the book - even though it has been translated into English (!) - but I have learned more about the practice of teshuva - and how it is understood. It felt, as I was reading and learning, especially relevant to these times we are living in, and as a practice we might all be inspired by. I learned, for example, of the six reasons one would be inspired to seek return, all on behalf of moving from spiritual mediocrity to spiritual excellence. The six things include: 1. When you are overrun by troubles; 2. When you grow old; 3. When you're admonished by a sage; 4. When you delve into Torah; 5. When you face the onset of the ten days of repentance (the ten days of atonement that have just passed); and, 6. When you realize how vulnerable and mortal you are.

Well, let's see: overrun by troubles? Check. Growing older? Hopefully. Admonished? Maybe. Realizing our vulnerability and mortality? Every day, unless we just love living in denial.

There was a prayer somewhere in my review: *"May G\_d grant us the wisdom to be moved to teshuva of our own volition. But may He (or She) also grant us the wisdom to take advantage of these six instances in case we don't come to it on our own."*

Chicken and the egg.

That prayer reminds me of the person waiting on the roof during the flood, waiting for God to save him. A neighbor offers a hand: no, no - I am waiting for God to save me. A boat comes by: no, no - the holy is no doubt on the way. A helicopter: no, no. So that - you know - when he dies and gets to the gate and is angry and wondering what happened, God says: I sent a neighbor, and a boat, and helicopter . . . how did you think I was going to get you out of that mess?

I don't mean to be appropriating Jewish practice here. And, I know that many among us may not find comfort or connection in the word G\_d; but I believe there is something to be understood for us around the idea of moving from spiritual mediocrity - a passiveness, maybe even a laziness, sometimes - to a place of greater connection, a practice that helps us not get too big for our britches, maybe - too full of ourselves. We humans are so inclined to arrogance, being so clever and all.

It is not news that a bit of review, and a bit of apology and a bit of forgiveness is good spiritual practice for each and every one of us. It is good spiritual practice for us to do collectively, as well - don't you think? I think that's what is going on in the parts of our culture that are looking back at our history, at our failures as a society, at the inequities and injustices. We know how hard it can be as individuals, so it shouldn't surprise us that there is pushback, that we are having a hard time reviewing tragic history and making amends.

There are 20 principles of teshuva - things like remorse and being sad; feeling ashamed; knowing and recognizing the consequence of each disconnection; taking them seriously, even the small ones. But one in particular stood out to me this year: the practice of confessing not only our individual brokenness, but those of our ancestors. "We are each an amalgam of self and lineage . . . we carry our own baggage AND that of our ancestors."

As a white, upper-middle class cis-gendered, straight woman of privilege, that one stood out to me especially during these days of struggle and justice-seeking for and with black and brown people. It is easier for us to hear the words we heard earlier . . . that (we) carry with (us) ancestral bonds that do not sever, that (we) carry with (us) familial love that does not end. Well and good and true, but we also carry with us ancestral mistakes, right? We carry with us ancestral misdeeds, many of which we have never sought forgiveness for. I suspect we have not come to this collective practice of teshuva on our own . . . we have been led here and it is uncomfortable.

It's uncomfortable for those of us who are willing to acknowledge the mistakes. It is even more uncomfortable for those who are not, and this is what we are seeing: rejection of past sins, denial of our collective behavior, avoidance.

But this is the big choice. I think our willingness to engage in the task of review and apology - of retying the bonds we have broken - is a function of how we want to live in the world: connected, or not. And of what we are willing to prioritize: oneself, or one's community, i.e., me, or us.

I find scraps of paper in a lot of the books I have read before . . . the danger is that I'm never quite sure if it's an original thought, or one I wrote having seen it elsewhere while reading that particular text! I found one recently that said, "It's an indulgence to think we get freedom for nothing." Whether an original expression, or not, I still agree with it. And I'm pretty sure I was focusing on the "big" concept of freedom - freedom of belief, freedom of spirit, freedom of our souls to experience a bigger Love. There are so many layers of complication in our existence, so many challenges to our senses of wholeness and wellness - not least the weight of our ancestral baggage - that we have to be willing to work for it. Spiritual excellence takes attention . . .

In the book I referenced earlier by Barbara Brown Taylor, she quotes a monk named Brother David who says, "Pain is a small price to pay for freedom from self-deception." (p. 180)

Oh, that we would all be willing to pay that price! Imagine how our ties would bind us so much more closely to the ethereal reality of love in this world, *from* which we are born, *into* which we are born, and in which we could live but for our blindness.

Let us be willing to make the choice for wholeness, for connection - individually, yes, AND collectively, together. Let us be willing to suffer the discomforts of our pasts on behalf of a wholeness for our futures.

How much more beautiful the Book of Life when we are all in it together.

Amen.