

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 23 September 2007

## *Early Morning Eyes*

The Reverend Victoria Safford

\$2.00 two dollars

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*The readings this morning are for Days of Awe in the Jewish calendar, which began last week with Rosh Hoshana, and ended yesterday with Yom Kippur.*

*The first is a modern parable, from an anonymous source.*

A respected rabbi was asked to speak to the congregation of a neighbouring village. The rabbi, rather famous for his practical wisdom, was often approached for advice wherever he went. Wishing to have a few hours to himself on the train, he disguised himself in shabby clothes and, with his withered posture, passed for a peasant. The disguise was so effective that he evoked disapproving stares and whispered insults from the well-to-do passengers around him in the train car. When the rabbi arrived at his destination, he was met by the dignitaries of the community, who greeted him with warmth and respect, tactfully ignoring his appearance. Those who had ridiculed him on the train realized his prominence – and their error – and immediately begged for his forgiveness. The old man was silent. For months after, these Jews – who, after all, considered themselves good and pious people – implored the rabbi to absolve them. The rabbi remained silent. Finally, when almost an entire year had passed, they came to the old man on the Day of Awe, when, it is written, each man must forgive his fellows. Each woman must forgive her neighbors. But the rabbi still refused to speak.

Exasperated, they finally raised their voices: “How can a holy man commit such a sin – to withhold forgiveness on this Day of Days?” The rabbi smiled seriously. He sighed, and spoke:

“All this time you have been asking the wrong man. If you would be forgiven, you must ask the man on the train to forgive you.”

*The second reading is a selection from our hymnal, #637, "A Litany of Atonement" by Robert Eller-Isaacs.*

For remaining silent, when a single voice would have made a difference,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For the selfishness that sets us apart and alone,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For losing sight of our unity,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For these and for so many acts, both evident and subtle, which have fueled the illusion of separateness,

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

## Early Morning Eyes

Down in New Orleans this summer, a teacher has been putting as many markers and crayons, pencils and paints as she can, and as much paper as they want, into the hands of young children and teenagers. “Draw a house for me,” she says. “Draw me the house you were in when the hurricane came.” She is an art therapist. Over and over, no matter what parish or school or shelter she visits, she finds a remarkable pattern: instead of the standard square box topped with a triangle, with shapes colored in for windows and doors (the way children always make houses), these children are drawing only triangles. Sometimes the area around them is dark and sometimes the whole page is filled, covering the triangles with swathes of grey or black or blue. All over New Orleans, the children are drawing rooftops, bobbing in the rising water. That’s how they make their houses now, no matter what age they are. When she looked more closely, the therapist saw that sure enough, on the tip-top of many of these triangles were little black dots, and those dots are the children themselves, and their families, holding on. “This is the collective unconscious of New Orleans,” she says. Her job is to work with the children and their pictures, going deeper, asking them to add into the scene how they got down from the roof. Sometimes ladders appear, and ropes and helicopters and boats, and she asks them then if they can put any dry land on the page, any solid ground to stand on, and sometimes they do, and sometimes then, playfully, they’ll put more tiny dot-people there on the ground, and they’ll look up at her, smiling, as if they themselves have just arrived there, safe and sound. Sometimes they’ll add a great yellow sun.

And sometimes, they can’t do this part at all; they’re not in any way ready to begin to imagine safety or make an image of home. They don’t remember what it looks like. They can’t picture the world before - or after – Katrina. Her job is to draw out of them what’s happened, how they felt when it was happening, and how they’re feeling now, on this side of those events. (1)

In some ways, that, I think, is the work of the Jewish Days of Awe each fall, these high holy days that stretch in an arc of time from Rosh Hashanah (New Year’s Day) across the days in between to Yom Kippur. The high holy days move the community from celebration, of the new year, of everything new, of fall, into deep reflection on the year just past: what’s taken place in their relationships with one another, with family, co-workers, lovers and neighbors and friends, what’s taken place between each person and God, or between each person and her deepest conscience, deepest self-knowledge, whether stormy weather or bright skies. They stand on the threshold, each person alone, and before crossing into the new year

they have to make some kind of livable peace with the old one. Your work as a Jew in this season is to draw out of yourself an honest picture of what's happened, your own role in what's happened, and how you feel now, on this side of those events. The specific work is to ask forgiveness of any people you have wronged, and to stand ready to answer, ready to hear, anyone who asks forgiveness of you. It is a personal, not a pious, ritual – face to face, in your face. This is not a religious tradition likely to dispense breezy advice like “forgive and forget” (*get over it, move past it, get on with your life, let it go...*). The message here is *forgive and remember*. Remember – and forgive.

Try to bring back an honest artist's rendering of what you've done to others and what they've done to you. Decide, and then do, whatever is needed to restore your own soul's dwelling place, the house of your spirit, which is to say your daily life. Do whatever you need to do to reduce the amount of guilt and the amount of resentment you carry; try to smuggle as little toxic waste as you can over the border of the new year just beginning.

To forgive, I think, is not to absolve someone from blame, nor to let the person who has done a grievous thing get off, nor to condone or justify or pretend things that happened never happened, or *they weren't so bad and it's really okay*. To forgive, I think, is to decide to walk in the light of your own truth. Anger and hurt and permanent scars may be with you the rest of your life, but their power over that life, your life, is diminished. You walk in your own clear light.

It is complicated work to remember and forgive; complicated work to dare to ask someone to forgive you, which of course requires beforehand that you might be able to consider forgiving yourself, that you might deem your own self worthy of the new day dawning. In every aspect, it is very complicated, as every person must discover, every human person who has ever walked the earth. For Jews it takes ten days; for the rest of us- a lifetime.

There's a poem by A.L. Hendricks called “An Old Jamaican Woman Thinks About the Hereafter” that hints at this complexity in all of its simplicity. An old woman is musing about heaven:

*What would I do forever in a big place, who  
have lived all my life in a small island?  
The same parish holds the cottage I was born in, all  
my family, and the cool churchyard.*

*I have looked up at stars from my front verandah and have been  
afraid of their pathless distances.*

*I have never flown in the loud aircraft nor have I seen  
palaces, so I would prefer not to be taken up high nor  
rewarded with a large mansion.*

*I would like to remain half drowsing though the evening light  
watching bamboo trees sway and ruffle for a valley-wind,  
to remember old times but not to live them again;  
occasionally to have a good meal,  
with no milk nor honey for I don't like them,  
and now and then to walk by the grey sea-beach with two old dogs  
and watch the men bring up their boats from the water.*

*For all this,  
for my hope of heaven, I am willing to forgive my  
debtors and to love my neighbor...*

*although the wretch throws stones  
at my white rooster and makes too much noise in her  
own  
backyard.*

This forgiveness business is a messy, complicated, never-ending business, with chickens running around and rocks flying and resentments always simmering to boil. It is never finished, never perfect, and perhaps it *is* the entrance fee to heaven, that we forgive each other and ourselves, if heaven means contentment or at-one-ment, here on earth, a grateful heart and a satisfied mind, a livable peace inside you.

A few years ago I read about a pair of Dutch filmmakers who designed a project involving people in the seven nations that once comprised Yugoslavia – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia. So many people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds who had once been neighbors, colleagues, close friends, even relatives, were torn asunder by the bloodshed in the Balkans in the 1990s. Thousands were killed or became refugees or just disappeared, and all the ancient, intricate tapestries of trust, the beautiful disciplines of respectful, lively coexistence, were shredded in the violence of that time. In 2000, the film crew went into villages and cities, into parks and kitchens

and factories, into living rooms, inviting people who had lost contact with a neighbor or friend, a coworker, to make a “video letter” to that person, to express on camera how they were feeling now about that loss, anything they wanted the other person to know. Then the crew would track down the recipient. They went all over Europe searching for people, and when they found Emil, or Marie, or Ivanna, they’d ask whether that person would like to see a video letter from their long-lost friend, Ahmad or Constantine, or whomever it was. The recipient could then tape a response. What’s captured on film is not always simple; the people confess to each other terrible betrayals and dark suspicions, and they relay hard news of mutual friends who were arrested or murdered or whose houses were destroyed. But with only two exceptions, everyone wanted to send a response, and everyone wanted to be physically reunited. (One exception was a man who was ordered by his priest not to respond to a Muslim friend; another was someone who was afraid that his family might be hurt if he was shown on film.) Mostly, people simply longed for the restoration of relationship, even if they might never be neighbors or even friends again. To have left conversations unfinished, to have never said, “goodbye,” or “I miss you,” or “I love you,” or “I hate what this war did to our country and to us,” or “How is Senad, the Muslim boy with cerebral palsy whom we, though we are Serbs, cared for at the hospital?” These filmmakers from the Netherlands could not reweave the tapestry of shredded lives, but they were able to gather up loose threads, and hold them out like lifelines to people whose lives had unraveled. Their sense of their own humanity had come undone, and the “video letters” gave them a way to braid it back, to speak what must be spoken, to hear what must be heard, not to accuse, nor even to apologize necessarily, but to live again like human beings in a co-created truth, which is the only truth there is. The only truth we really know, you and I, any two people, is the one we make together and speak and hear out loud together. (2)

I think that’s what Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (at-one-ment), and all the days leading up to it, allows and requires – the construction of truth as a two-part shared invention, and the restoration of relationship.

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So a rabbi is traveling by train, and because he is well known and his advice is often sought by strangers, he disguises himself as a shabby peasant so he can ride in solitude. His fellow passengers are not kind to him; they insult him and abuse him because of his appearance, but when he’s greeted at the station by upright citizens who see through his disguise and ignore it, the train people just feel terrible. They ask for his forgiveness right away. He looks at them in silence.

They ask again. He does not speak. This goes on for a year, till finally at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the moment for making amends with your neighbor and with God, they shout in despair, “How can you, a learned rabbi, a good rabbi, commit such a sin by ignoring us, and failing to grant us forgiveness?” He looks at them, and tells them they’ve been asking the wrong man. The rabbi can’t answer their longing. They need to ask forgiveness of the peasant who was riding with them on the train. Which means they need to reckon with that guy, with what he is, and each one reckon with himself or with herself, and come to some conclusions about what it means to be a person. What could be the value of the blessing of a homeless vagabond? Would it be worth it to ask forgiveness, ever, of such a person, or of a child, or a servant, or someone you supervise at work, or of anyone with whom you are in relation but with a clear imbalance of power? A waitress, a person with mental illness, or developmental disability? A prisoner? (Did you see the story this summer about the man released from prison, an African American man who’d served 35 years, I think, from the time he was 18, for a murder he did not commit? He’s middle aged now, exonerated after DNA testing conducted at the urging of The Innocence Project, which also found that his first trial had been laced with racist travesties. Reporters asked him at the prison gate when his sister came to pick him up, “Are you bitter? Are you resentful? Angry?” And he said, “Am I angry at a justice system that some of the time but not all of the time is unbiased and fair? Am I resentful on my first day of freedom? I don’t think so. I’m a happy, grateful man.” He looked at them, and he walked away, radiant, in the light of his own truth. But no one asked for his forgiveness, or if they did, and if he answered, it did not make front page news. What would that have meant, to ask someone like that for his blessing?

What would it mean if wealthy nations, led by the United States, asked forgiveness of the people in a place like Darfur, or Iraq, or Guantanamo? Not if we made an apology, which is a one-sided conversation, which does nothing to disturb any balance of power - but what if we asked a question with the kind of humility and forward-looking hope that suggests your life, your physical and moral life, depends on it? Would that be wise, or foolish?

Would it be wise to approach, say, a polar bear that way, as it floated by on a melting piece of ice?

Wise or crazy, to approach a tree standing in a clear-cut field? It’s not absolution for past action that we seek – it’s right relation going forward, into the new day. How do we mean to walk over the threshold of a new day?

In Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur is the most solemn moment in the calendar. But it takes place along with Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of New Year, filled with honey and apples and hope, and everyone's name inscribed in the Book of Life for a sweet and fruitful year. Yom Kippur is solemn, rightly so, but it's not meant to discourage the people, or diminish them, or demean them with guilt or fill them with shame. It's more like the Powdermilk Biscuit of religious observances, instilling in the people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done, tempering, toning, testing their own innate spiritual power, power you need to go round the wheel of life another year, or at least to go round with integrity, and an upright sense of your own agency, a sense of confidence. Somehow, all this rigorous self-examination is supposed to make you feel stronger, not weaker, better, not worse. And tradition suggests that this is so.

From Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet who lived in Persia in what is now Iran, comes wise counsel in this vein:

*When you start some new work,  
you give in completely to it.  
You're excited.  
Because the Creator keeps you from seeing what's missing.  
Your heatedness hides that,  
So you do the work, and then look back  
And see the nature of it.  
If you'd seen that at first,  
You wouldn't have done anything!*

*Don't worry about repenting.  
Do the work that's given,  
And learn from it.  
If you've become addicted to looking back,  
Half your life will be spent in distraction,  
And the other half in regret.  
You can live better than that!  
Find happier friends.  
Say: Show me the faults  
of my destructive actions, but don't  
show me what's wrong with my good work.  
That way I won't get disgusted and quit!*

*Solomon had a habit of visiting the mosque at dawn  
 Because he could see  
 With an early morning eye  
 The new spirit-plants that were growing.  
 Encourage that freshness  
 In yourself, and not what clouds you with dullness and futility.*

This is the time of year to look on the world with early morning eyes. This is the time of year to look on your life, whatever it is, whoever you are, with early morning eyes, like Solomon. With all of your past held in your own strong hands, fully owned, accounted for, and all of your future stretching wide with such freshness, you step over the threshold of the day, the threshold of the year.

Open your early morning eyes... No matter what has come before, what you do with it now is what matters. *Our lives are in bud*, we say when we welcome babies here, *vulnerable and powerful, grace-full, we say, and open to every possibility...*

Le shana tovah.

May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a sweet and good new year.

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(1) and (2) These stories, about New Orleans and the “Video Letters” project, were both found in articles in the *New York Times*, in 2007 and 2005, respectively.