

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Abandon All Attachments

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READING #1 The Place Where We Are Right *Yehudi Amichai, Israeli poet*

From the place where we are right
flower will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, like a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

READING #2 *from The Gates of Repentance, a Reformed prayerbook for the Days of Awe*

For the sin of silence
For the sin of indifference
For the secret complicity of the neutral
For the closing of borders
For the washing of hands
For the crime of indifference
For the sin of silence
For the closing of borders
For all that was done
For all that was not done

Let there be no forgetfulness
Let there be remembrance within the human heart,

and if possible, forgiveness...

... from which may flow freedom

... from which may flow peace.

Abandon All Attachments

I wish for you a troubled heart.

I wish for you a troubled heart at times, as woes of world and friend come close beside and keep you sleepless...

This is a strange blessing. I don't remember when I first heard these words, written by Charles Stephen, minister in Lincoln for many years. I love the truth suggested there, and the courage required to speak it. "A troubled heart, at times" is a beautiful thing to wish for someone else, or for oneself: an open, gaping, bleeding heart, not a closed, complacent one; a heart that breaks, strives, struggles, *when woes of world and friend come close beside...* I think that's what we want.

This morning I'm holding in my own heart Forrest Church, minister of All Souls Unitarian in New York City and author of more than 20 books on liberal religion and contemporary culture. He died on Thursday after a long struggle with cancer. When he wrote to his congregation two years ago about the cancer's return, a parishioner wrote back, "My heart has been broken again, and for that I am overwhelmingly thankful; without love this would not be possible." (Forrest quoted her in a book he wrote last year called *Love and Death*.) A human heart in good working order is constantly susceptible to breakage, to being cracked open, and to other kinds of worthy trouble.

I wish for you a troubled heart, at times (that's one way to know it's still beating in there, when it feels heavy), and troubled mind, troubled spirit - not all the time, but sometimes. You think of "the religious life," "the spiritual life," and it's easy to call to mind candles, soft music, inner peace, serenity, but as far as I can see, it's rarely like that, if it's real. The human heart is like a plumbing fixture, either broken or overflowing with some messy material (gratitude, sometimes, or happiness). Likewise the mind, at its best, is restless, doubting, searching, from birth until it closes its great inquisitive eye; and the soul stirs and is easily bestirred, easily moved; and the conscience, when it's oiled and working, stays awake.

This is not to say that the soul, the mind, the heart, can never be at peace, but peaceful souls work hard. When the Buddha sat under his tree, with his calm demeanor, his closed eyes, his Buddha smile and comfortable Buddha belly, his quiet aspect was an illusion, or maybe a paradox. Outside, he was the Buddha, cool as a statue carved in jade, but the interior work was desperate and hard: to focus all energy and attention on the very center of mindfulness (and he was a young man when he began his Buddha-life, young and wild), to let go of all desires and distractions, all bitterness, disappointments, resentments, which meant first to let them come parading by to be itemized, named, acknowledged, owned and admired, and then to relinquish them, to decide to abandon all attachment to these cherished bits of baggage. That's hard and troubling soul-work, and the only way to peace of mind.

I think of a woman who told me once, "I'm afraid to let go of all my grudges and regrets, all the mistakes I've made, the wrongs I've done to others and the wrongs they've done to me. These things are the story of my life. If I let them go, I'm not sure what will be left of me." Precisely, says the Buddha. This is the housekeeping of the spirit. Open your windows and let out the stale

dust that's settled so thick it's begun to shape your very character. Focus all of your attentiveness on letting go of your frantic attachments. What do you really desire?

The peaceful heart has to be a troubled heart at first, not complacent. That woman was living in the midst of the high holidays, observing with her community Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the ten Days of Awe in between, this season of repentance and renewal, atonement and forgiveness. Rosh Hashanah marks the threshold of the New Year in the Jewish calendar, the "birthday of the world" when everything is new, renewed, just like New Year's in the winter, but tradition holds that the Book of Life is opened on Rosh Hashana, and every person living needs to decide how they wish their chapter to be written. What *is* the story of your life?

The assignment for Jews is to trouble the heart, to think back, hard, on the year just past, to think about each relationship, intimate or casual, with your parents and children, your partner and friends, your neighbors and colleagues, a deliberate ingathering in your mind. You consider, hard, whether you are in right relation with each person, and if with any you are not, tradition holds that you will visit them (maybe now you could just send a text, or write something on their *Facebook* wall). Somehow, ideally face to face, you acknowledge what is yours to own, what neglect or injury, deliberate or accidental, and without any investment in their answer, you ask that person for forgiveness.

Imagine for a moment one person whom you might approach if you were a Jew at this time of year. [...silence...]

And the question now, of course, is what to do with this person who's taken a seat in your consciousness, by your own invitation. Do you chase them back into the shadows now, with a nervous laugh and a quick disclaimer, "Oh sorry. I won't really be coming by to visit you. I know we have issues, but I'm just a Unitarian; I don't really need to do atonement." ... or what?

The flipside of this work, of course, is even harder. You have to be ready and waiting for any person who may come visit you, anyone who's wronged you grievously or casually. Their asking imposes no requirement on you, except that you consider their request with an open heart, which means you stand ready to be troubled.

Again, I invite you to listen. Try to imagine who might need to ask for your forgiveness, this fall, right now, and whether you could grant it, and why or why not. You might also think about those whom you'd expect to come, whom you need to have come, but who won't, who never have before and won't be coming this year - and what you might do with your expectation and your hope, your need. Whom are you ready to forgive? Whom are you not? [...silence ...]

What attachments are you ready to abandon?

Stephanie Dowrick, a writer says,

Forgiveness deeply offends the rational mind. When someone has hurt us, wounded us, abused us, when someone has stolen peace of mind or safety from us, when someone has harmed someone we love, or when someone has simply misunderstood or offended us, there is no reason why we should let that offense go. No reason why we should try to understand it. Not reason why we should hope for enlightenment for that person. No reason why from our own pain and darkness, we should summon feelings of compassion and insight for that person, as well as for ourselves.

...It is one of life's most terrible ironies that [resentment] can be as connective as love. It can fill your mind and color your sense. It can keep you tied to a person or to events as tightly as if you were bound, back to back – or worse, heart to heart. The person you want to think of least may become the person you think of constantly. It may only be by giving up while not surrendering that you catch your first, precious glimpse of freedom. You do this by withdrawing your attention from the person who has hurt you and returning it to yourself and whoever else is in your care; by taking your attention from the past and bringing it into the present moment. You do it by giving up the illusion that your prolonged suffering will ultimately affect that other human being and teach a meaningful lesson... Offering our forgiveness takes nothing away from us. It restores us to something that is always within us but from which we have become unbound ...

“...something that is always within us but from which we have become unbound,” unraveled, dis-integrated. Forgiveness is about restoration of relationship, but also of yourself. It is not about caving in or giving in or giving over. It's not about surrender, or pretending cheerfully and insincerely that all's well when it isn't. It's not about condoning bad behavior, or winking at evil, or turning the other cheek, even, nor any sign of weakness. It is not about Christlike character, and it is not always required, despite what we may have learned in church or from our families. I believe you need to think about it, and to feel about it, to trouble your heart about it, but you don't need to do it if it can't or should not be done. It can never be about forgetting. Forgiveness may be about loving the person who's wronged you, his inherent worth and dignity, her potential for grace, but it is more about loving your own life.

Early in the summer I heard a story about a Palestinian doctor, Izzeldin Abuelaish. Trained at Harvard, he specializes in fertility and treats patients in Israeli hospitals. He lives in Gaza. This past winter, during the offensive launched by the Israeli army there, he lived at home with his family, and appeared often on Israeli television. He is fluent in Arabic, Hebrew and English, so the Israelis relied on him for reports from the center of the siege. That world is full of ironies.

In January, Israeli tanks began moving from house to house, destroying them systematically, a policy that is now under review precisely because of what happened next. A tank stopped in front of his home. “A shell crashed into a bedroom, killed his daughters, 14 year-old Aya, 15 year-old Mayar, and 21 year-old Bissan, and his niece, 17 year-old Noor” – four young women. They could have been part of our Youth Group here.

He says: “All of Israel, they knew I am at my house. [He'd been on TV all winter, interviewed from there.] I felt secure. It's unbelievable what happened. I lost three precious, beautiful

daughters [and my niece]. How modest and helpful and lovely they were. They were killed full of dreams and hopes.” This is a story among thousands of stories that have played out in that place for thousands of years, so many that we can hardly hear them any more - and then I heard him say: “I could be consumed with bitterness and anger at what happened but I see those emotions as harmful. I am a physician who treats patients and I don’t want to feel diseased. I want to help others.” With money the Israeli government has agreed to pay in restitution, he set up a foundation in Gaza “for only girls and women in education and health. Something good will come. Because what has happened in Gaza, it was craziness, practiced against the Gazan civilians. No one [knew.]” And now, they do.

I looked for a photograph of this doctor who said, “I don’t want to feel diseased,” so I could see his face. The one posted on the NPR website shows him crying, screaming in the hospital just after the attack. It was not the face of a man in denial or out of touch with reality or scientifically, stoically stifling his emotions. Somehow, he’s decided how he needs to carry his reality, his story, and where he needs to stand.

Yehudi Amichai, an Israeli poet writes,

*From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.*

*The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
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*But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, like a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.*

Izzeldin Abuelaish decided somehow that he did not need to be right; he just needed to be. He abandoned certain attachments. Whenever this happens, in small gestures, in public gestures, it seems miraculous to me – that a person could willfully relinquish the very thing that could make sense of a crazy life, the thing that you might cling to when it seems that there’s nothing else to cling to – hatred, righteous anger, fury for revenge, his grief. It seems miraculous to me, but people do this all the time. In Judaism, it’s called *teshuvah*, turning and returning. In Christian teaching, it’s the same, and this Palestinian doctor says it is his Islam that’s taught him restoration. The Buddha knew it intimately, and Forrest Church, Unitarian, wrote not long before he died, *The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can’t be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.*

There is love of the world and love of self in this. In Jewish tradition, all the messy reckoning with other people takes place after Rosh Hashanah and before Yom Kippur when each person will stand not before relatives and neighbors, but before God, which is to say, eternity, which is to say, in front of the mirror, which is to say, the hardest place. Are you ready now to be written into the Book of Life, to abandon your steadfast, impressive commitment to blaming the self, deriding the self, loathing the self? For some the answer comes by the grace of God, for others, by some other means, but either way it is the absolute conviction that in spite of everything, you are a good gift, and good enough. It is the core of Universalism, as the founders of our movement preached it and were shunned as heretics therefore; it is what we mean in every baby dedication and in the Call to Worship. You are, in spite of yourself and all you've done and not done, a good and worthy gift. That's the blessing the people wrestle for on Yom Kippur. It's what we wrestle with all the time.

And every time I think that the old Universalist theology is quaint and out of date or a little too historic to be relevant at all to our shiny, self-aware 21st century, every time I think this goes without saying, someone proves me wrong. Someone will make an appointment or call on the phone or stop me in the hallway here and tell me a story about something that's happened or something they've done, or something they've carried all their life, some exclusion or hatred or sense of unworthiness that has been hammered into them by others, or maybe they found on their own.

Deeds, or misdeeds, are one thing, but when a person tells me in so many words that they are unworthy, worthless, irredeemably, I say, with all my heart, "That cannot be. This is against our religion. No matter what you have done or left undone, that cannot be." And it is so interesting that so many of us can grasp this theoretically, theologically, so that few of us would point at someone else, even someone who's done a heinous thing, and say "that person, that human being, is **worthless**." But about the *self*? We say and think and cling to all kinds of unholy attachments.

The peaceful heart seeks right relation with everyone, including its own self. From Derek Walcott, Caribbean poet and Nobel Laureate, comes this poem:

*The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,*

*and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you*

*all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,*

*the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

The custom at Rosh Hashanah is to eat apples dipped in honey as a sign of a sweet new year to come. They share the apples, as we will do now, as say, “*L’shana tova*. May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a sweet and good New Year.”
So may it be.

Closing words, from Charles Stephen:

*I wish for you a troubled heart at times
As woes of the world and friend come close beside
And keep you sleepless.
I wish for you the thrill of knowing
Who you are,
Where you stand,
And why.
Especially why.
Not prosperity, but dreams I wish for you;
Not riches, but a sense of your own worth I wish
For you.
Not even long life, however proud we'd be to have it so.
But life that is crammed with living,
Hour by hour.
And love I wish for you;
May you give it frequently.
I wish for you solitude in the midst of company,
And a mind full of company within your quiet times.
Full today I wish for you, and full tomorrow.*