



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Opening Our Hearts to Forgiveness”

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Reflections delivered on September 24, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

The gates of repentance are always open and anyone who wishes to enter may enter.

Exodus Rabbah 19:4 (Midrash to the Book of Exodus)

When you haven't forgiven those who've hurt you, you turn back against your future.

When you do forgive, you start walking forward. Tyler Perry

Today I decided to forgive you. Not because you apologized, or because you acknowledged the pain that you caused me, but because my soul deserves peace. Najwa Zebian

Sermon:

I think one of the most difficult things anyone does is look at their own reflection in a mirror. It's one thing to stand before the mirror to brush teeth or comb hair, but to really look at ourselves, that's another matter entirely. Do any of you like looking at yourself in the mirror?

Personally, I don't. I don't want to see the way I'm aging—the wrinkles, the sun spots, the gray hairs, and the sagging skin. It's too bad you have to look at me!

Self-assessment of our physical bodies challenges not only me because we're so judgmental. Are we pretty enough? Thin enough? Youthful enough? I doubt I'm alone in wishing for a miracle to improve me overnight.

Because there are few miracles, at least in my theology, self-examination in a mirror can be depressing. No matter how perfect we think are, the reflection in the mirror isn't what we want to see. And we think less of ourselves for it. So, if you're like me, you avoid it. We brush our teeth, comb our hair, and then we run away from the mirror as fast as we can.

Self-assessment of our spiritual bodies, of the person we are within, elicits similar responses. Looking in the mirror and seeing our inner imperfections may disappoint or depress us, too. Who wants to see their character flaws? Who wants to see, for example, unkindness, selfishness, dishonesty, or unreliability reflected back?

Some people may feel blessed with perfection in both their physical and spiritual bodies so that they willingly spend long hours gazing in front of a mirror. But unless you're a narcissist, you, like me, are harsh on yourself and don't believe you're perfect. We know we can be better than we are. And that's why I appreciate the Jewish tradition of the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

During the ten-day period we're in right now, Jews are reminded to look in the mirror. They call this time 'Days of Awe' because it is intended to be a time of reverence, a time to focus on the fundamental questions of human nature, human destiny, and how we relate to our fellow humans and to God, as they understand God. (*page 2, Entering the High Holy Days, by Rabbi Reuvan Hammer*)

At the end of this self-assessment time, Jews use the metaphoric threat of God's judgment which will determine their destiny, whether their name is written in God's Book of Life or Death. God's judgment is final when God closes the book on Yom [key] Kippur.

But before that annual judgment day, Jews have these ten days to right any wrongs to improve their spiritual reflection and insure their names will be written in the Book of Life.

We Unitarian Universalists need not be practicing Jews to be reminded to look in our own spiritual mirrors. We can use the example of the Days of Awe to create a time to reflect on what we hold to be of ultimate truth or value, and to consider our own personal nature and destiny. If in our reflection, we see we're not living up to our high ideals, such as our Seven Principles, then we, too, can decide whether to change or correct our behavior.

For me, it's one thing to know I made a mistake or that I may have hurt someone, even if unintentionally. It's another thing for me to face the person and apologize. It means I have to open my heart or bear my soul, which simply means opening myself to vulnerability. It means setting myself up for the possibility that the person will not forgive me. Looking deeply within and being willing to be hurt by another demands spiritual strength. I gain that strength by attempting to right the relationship, even if the person doesn't forgive me. At least I know I tried.

I needed that strength when I forgot my younger son's birthday for two years in a row! I remembered before the day, but on the day I totally forgot—and not once, but twice! The second year he called a few days later, never said a word, but the call made me remember. And I felt awful. I apologized and he accepted it both times, but I have to remember this year. The apology alone isn't enough. And, I know I need to forgive *myself* for potentially harming the relationship in the first place, but that's difficult because I feel so bad about the unintentional message I may have sent that he doesn't matter to me. He does!

In some religious circles, the errors might be called sins. Traditional Christian theology stresses that human nature is sinful, and that we need to be saved from our wicked selves by an act of faith or divine intervention. Unitarian Universalists typically do not believe humanity is basically sinful or born in sin. Jews do not believe this either.

Included in the *Tanach* or Hebrew Bible which Christians call the Old Testament, is the narrative

of Adam and Eve. The pair disobey God by eating a forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This act symbolizes human frailty and our freedom to choose how we'll behave. To sin in Jewish tradition means turning away from God's commands, as Adam and Eve did. God represents all that is good, our highest ideals. When we turn our backs on, or go against our values or whatever we hold to be of ultimate worth, we sin.

The Hebrew word *chet* used in the Tanach and translated into English as sin, derives from an ancient archery term for missing the center of a target. But just like an archer can keep trying to hit the target, we can try again, too. Repentance, or *teshuvah* means to return to God or the Good.

I believe people are born basically good, but we aren't perfectly good. We make mistakes. We can be unkind, selfish or greedy. I believe that inner voice we hear, call it God or conscience, tells us we did something we shouldn't have. That feeling of guilt or shame is one way we know we made a mistake in our behavior. But asking forgiveness for our mistakes can improve or cleanse our spirits, and make our image in the mirror much easier to look at. It might also make us more likely to have our name written in that symbolic Book of Life.

But there's more to this work of repentance, or returning to who we truly are or want to be. Others will ask us to forgive them. If their request is sincere, we must do for them as we want done for us. We should forgive them.

But forgiving does not mean forgetting. If the person continues to behave badly toward us and makes no effort to change, then their insincerity cannot right our relationship. Their name will not be written in the Book of Life. And we need not stay in relationship, despite our forgiving them.

As poet Najwa Zebian suggests, sometimes those who harm us may not know what they've done or may not be mature enough to ask for our forgiveness. She writes, "Today I decided to forgive you. Not because you apologized, or because you acknowledged the pain that you caused me, but because my soul deserves peace."

'My soul deserves peace.' If we feel anger or resentment over someone's behavior towards us, that anger acts like a weight we carry around and it can depress our spirits. Forgiveness frees us of that weight and lightens our spirits. As a proverb tells us, "To forgive is to set the prisoner free only to realize the prisoner is you."

If we recognize the truth that we all make mistakes, that's freeing. We're released from the need to be perfect or from somehow feeling like a failure. We can't be perfect. If we pretend we won't hurt someone, intentionally or unintentionally, we deny our own fallibility. Repentance demands that we not hide from who we are—it's okay to be imperfect. But we can also choose to make up for some of our imperfections, our broken relationships. The Days of Awe give us a chance to return to our better nature, to turn back towards the good. That remains our choice.

I'm likely to forget my son's birthday again. If not that, it will be something else. But I want my spirit to be free. I don't want to be weighed down by regrets or broken relationships. I'll ask my family and you for forgiveness again and again.

Love calls us to forgive and be forgiven.

Love calls us to open our hearts and recognize our mistakes.

Love calls us to be better than we are, to keep trying to be who we want to be.

Love calls us, God calls us, Goodness calls us, conscience calls us, Spirit calls us to kindness and compassion for ourselves and for others.

May we hear Love's call.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you have difficulty looking in the spiritual mirror, of reflecting on who you are as a person? What feelings encourage you or discourage you from looking too closely?
2. This past year, what made you notice time passing—a new beginning or ending, joy or sorrow, missed opportunity or accomplishment, etc? How did these events change or transform you?
3. What frailty, failure, or blind self-interest might you need to acknowledge and atone for?