“BEGINNING AGAIN IN LOVE, AGAIN AND AGAIN”

High Holy Day Sunday, September 16, 2012
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Readings

(1) My colleague Reverend Victoria Safford speaks of the reality of human evil, in addition to human potential for good. I like her forthrightness in naming evil for what it is, as well naming our radiance.

Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

(2) I recently read about “Learning to Apologize.” (Rochelle Melander of the Alban Institute in “A Pattern So Vast” by Rev. Kate Tucker, Quest, CLF, 9/2011) Rev. Kate Tucker describes Rochelle Melander’s observations this way:

The first step is to listen and learn how we’ve hurt the other person. It’s usually not comfortable. “We want to say, ‘No, you’re wrong, I’m not that bad!’” Instead, the idea is to be still and listen, and then ask, “Is there more?” And when we’ve heard the whole story, we check to see that we’ve heard well. “Is this what you are saying?” we ask, repeating the story until we get it right.

The second step is to say, “I’m sorry.” Period.

We do not qualify our apology by saying, “I’m sorry if you took offense at what I said.” Or “I’m sorry if you felt that way,” or “…if you heard me say that.” That’s like saying, “I’m sorry you are hyper-sensitive; I’m sorry you are mixed up; I’m sorry you don’t hear well.” The best apology is just, “I’m sorry.”

The third step is to make it right. Both parties talk about what can be done to bring healing. They ask: “What are our needs here?” “What do we do or say differently from now on?” They look each other in the eye and agree on a plan.
The fourth step is to ask for forgiveness. Receiving forgiveness—officially—is essential. It isn’t helpful when the offended person brushes off our apology with, “No big deal,” or “What’s done is done.”

Melander says, “It’s hard to be content with ‘no-big-deal’ responses when we suspect that it was a big deal. These responses don’t have the healing power of ‘I forgive you.’ To say ‘I forgive you’ is to say we are letting go of any claim for punishment or payment. We’re ending our hold on the other person. We’re setting them free.”

“If the wronged person does not offer forgiveness,” Melander says, “simply ask, ‘Do you forgive me?’”

Four steps: Hear the hurt, say “I’m sorry,” make it right, ask forgiveness. And then, I’m thinking, we might be wise to go through the whole thing – all four steps – again with ourselves.

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With the Jewish New Year, the Days of Awe, I am often called back to wisdom of a Hasidic story. It tells of the rabbi who instructed his disciples to carry always two slips of paper in one’s pocket. On one is the Biblical verse: "I am but dust and ashes." (Gen. 18:27) And on the other, a rabbinic teaching: "For my sake was the world created."

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, the generations come and go... And, each of us is infinitely precious; for each of us the world was created! We Unitarian Universalists can easily embrace that grace arising equally out of our faith tradition.

With that invitation and instruction, we in our pilgrim faith keep trying to hang in here, thinking for ourselves, building lives of compassion, celebrating differences over against tribalism, helping each other get up when we fall down, and taking upon us the mystery of things “as though we were God’s spies,” as perhaps we truly are.

At this new season, isn’t it better, and it is certainly possible, in this wounded world, to forgive Life’s wounds, forgive God if need be, to forgive each other, to forgive ourselves, and to begin again in love?

This past week I came across a different saved scrap of paper. It depicts a curious relationship that for me illuminates friendship, expectation, inattentiveness, and reconciliation, with a heart-felt but unnecessary apology – all this in a brief moment and illustrates the grace of harmony, connections, right relationship – a measure of companionship and of mindfulness.
It appeared a few years ago in the *Metropolitan Diary* section of the Monday *New York Times*. Sarah B. Lawsky writes,

Dear Diary,

It was a beautiful Sunday, so I went to sit by the pool in Central Park with my dog, Tonka. We were relaxing and taking in the sun when Tonka suddenly lifted her head and stared a few benches down, where … [a] middle-aged man with a large bag had just taken a seat.

Then I saw a large raccoon climbing up the far side of a low fence behind the man (this must have been what … [my dog] noticed).… (The raccoon) got to the top of the fence, reached out, and tapped the man on the shoulder.

The man turned around, said, “Oh, I didn’t see you!” and then found what he was looking for in his bag: a sandwich, which he gave to the raccoon, who took it, climbed back down his side of the fence, held it in his paws, and ate it delicately.

The man looked up to see me staring.

“I didn’t see him,” he said to me, apologetically. “That’s why he had to tap me on the shoulder.”

[As Sara Lawksy reminds us,] Just another day in Central Park, (9/18/06, B2)

Of course, although unsaid, surely no apology was needed in elaborating upon that humble and, apparently ordinary, gift-giving. There is nothing here that is of enormous, world-shattering significance, except for that oddly charming mutuality, the man’s friendliness both to the raccoon and to the curious stranger on the bench….

This morning in the spirit of the New Year and Judaism’s Days of Awe, the theme is the centering moment, the discipline of assessing one’s spiritual state, and restoring right relationship – choices we can make … or forget about. It is about Life’s way, Creation’s gift … beginning again and again in Love.

The encounter in Central Park, with its observer and participants, is multi-layered, and I simply cast it in all its simplicity and provocation for your imagination.

The Days of Awe, which we celebrate as part of our embrace of Universal Religion, invite us into ten days of deep reflection:

- Who are we?
- How have we lived this past year?
• How do we make amends for hurtful behavior?
• How do we leave behind bitterness, regrets or anger, and how do we work with self-inflicted wounds?
• How shall we guide our lives for the year ahead?

Perhaps it’s the season at hand…. While channel-surfing the other day, I came across a financial commentator seemingly on a nearly empty trading floor on Wall Street. It was the 4th anniversary of the demise in 2008 of Lehman Brothers, the 4th largest investment bank in the United States. He was raising again the issue that none of the four key leaders of that company, who had destroyed it, had ever been prosecuted for their actions.

However, on the topic of Lehman’s demise, the reporter/commentator’s focus was not criminal prosecution. He was concerned about something of the Spirit… that none of them had ever apologized, … for example, to those who lost their jobs, or lost money. Not even an apology … then or now. His emotion was not so much anger as lamentation, sadness about apparent indifference, if not arrogance of those one tenth of 1 percenters, who had done so much financial harm to so many.

Turning in a way closer to home, I have been thinking about Christopher Reeve, and his inward journey, because he had been given/dealt an enormous amount of time for reflection. Christopher Reeve, perhaps you recall, was an actor who played Superman in those films, as well as having had well-received dramatic roles in theater and television. He was also a director, a husband, a father, and an activist.

During a horse-riding and jumping competition, he had a severe accident in 1995 at age 42, severely injuring his spinal cord, surviving with loss of use of his arms and legs, paralyzed from the neck down. One of his poignant memoirs was titled, Still Me. The second was titled Nothing is Impossible, and Christopher Reeve speaks of his own faith journey. Early on in his life, he had rejected the Christian God of his childhood and wandered into Scientology for a while as a young adult. Then he writes,

But the truth is I only recently found a religion I can reconcile with my search for the meaning of spirituality. Over the years I have come to believe that spirituality is found in the way we live our daily lives. It means spending time thinking about others. It’s not so hard to imagine there is some kind of higher power. We don’t have to know what form it takes or exactly where it exists; just to honor it and try to live by it are enough. As these thoughts unfolded, I had no idea I was becoming a Unitarian. But now my wife, Dana, my son Will, and I attend services regularly. What I like about Unitarian Universalism is that God isn’t terrifying. … [God] asks us just to do our best, trusting our ability to discern the truth.

We are “just to do our best, trusting our ability to discern the truth.”
Here is a man who easily could be embittered – at war with God. But he begins again in love and affirms, “Spirituality is found in the way we live our daily lives.” Sadly, he died in 2004 at age 51 from an adverse reaction to antibiotics for an infection, which were common after his paralyzing accident. His Memorial was held at the Westport Unitarian Church in Connecticut, his church.

Tempted to give up, he chose to live and to love… and his activism only increased.

He was deeply grateful for his life, especially his family, affirming, as he said that “the quality of relationships is the key to happiness.” On a spiritual level, he also writes, “I’ve had to take a hard look at what it means to live as fully as possible in the present. How do you survive in the moment when it’s bleak or painful and the past seems so seductive?” [yet] “There is no other way to survive except to be in the moment.” “I know how to do it now.” – A skill learned in part through his career in acting.

The High Holy Days, I would add, are in this spirit and make an ontological claim. [That’s a big word that refers to a claim about the very nature of existence, of the universe, about the way reality is, and the way it is structured, claims which we ignore at our peril.] Those claims:

- The doors of Life, New Life are open.
- New beginnings, for those of us who have survived to this day, are possible.
- We can begin again, not only, to live but also to love, now in this moment.

Not that it is always easy; that’s why for example, Judaism offers an annual ritual.

After all, who are we, really, even as we know and cherish the gift or our own brief days?

Sometimes, perhaps we are like a job applicant I read about. When asked to list strengths, she/he answered, “Sometimes I am trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” (That’s from scouting for those not familiar with it.) Under the heading, "List your weaknesses," the applicant wrote, "Sometimes I am not trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

Most of the times, yes, on the side of angels … and sometimes?

And sometimes we need to forgive ourselves. Sometimes to forgive others when they seek our forgiveness … seek to make things right, not with casual words, but with humility, self-awareness, and actively making things better. As Rochelle Melander in our reading advised: “four steps. Hear the hurt, say ‘I’m sorry,’ make it right, ask forgiveness.”
Again, this season is an invitation, this New Year, an invitation to take a spiritual audit. It’s an invitation in this wounded world, not only to overcome bitterness and to seek the taste of forgiveness in personal relationships, but also to take a spiritual audit about this moment in your life.

An annual spiritual audit – if only once a year, an audit – and what in the world is that?

Who have you - have I - hurt? What have you - I - done about it? To make it right?

What have I done - you done - out of carelessness, or willfulness?

How is it with thy spirit, as the Quakers would ask?

Your wounds, or anger, do they keep you from seeing the wounds, fear, and anger in others? Do they keep you from feeling the stronger light within?

What voices do you listen to within yourself? What vices?

How have you - have I - used or abused my privileges, and many, many of us here are more privileged than most on this planet?

Where is your gratitude and where is your Reverence for Life, for Love, for the freedoms we enjoy, and what are you doing to nurture it?

Are you even in these times able to commit to the work of “repairing the world,” as Judaism lifts up?

Are you growing your soul – honoring your sacred Creative potential? Or succumbing to forgetfulness, busyness, and inattention?

Such questions, just a beginning, are useful to me, because they call me back to the Creativity and divinity within, to the Spirit of Life, to God. With attention to them, I become less likely to betray myself… more likely to honor my better self.

Is there someone or several where there is need for healing? Just maybe this week you can do that hard thing and reach out? In your life, if a relationship needs healing – perhaps a son or daughter, your mother or father? A sister or brother, a friend, spouse, or co-worker? A fellow church member? Maybe now, even today, take a chance, reach out, put away some pride, or anger, or hurt… or stay stuck, poisoned, for that’s what it is; I know I’ve been there.

Any bitterness of soul – take it to God, to the silent stars and to your soul’s still, quiet place.
To those whom you may have hurt, ask for forgiveness. Make it right, with deeds, not words alone.

And if all is well, and you are at peace, give thanks, and may your spirit continue to bless others.

In this political season, it is hard to ignore candidate Mitt Romney. His campaign book is titled, NO APOLOGY. His campaign has become focused on falsehoods, attacks, lies, and mischaracterizations of President Obama’s actions and policies, especially those about the President making apologies to other nations for American values. I personally happen to think many apologies are needed because of many of our nation’s actions not in keeping with our values, but that is not our President’s position. The Associated Press repudiated Romney’s claims this week in reference to the Libyan tragedy, joining the chorus from PolitiFact and FactCheck.org who have also reviewed President Obama’s and Mitt Romney’s statements in detail. Mitt Romney seems truly out of touch with reality. It is actually quite sad to think he is unable to offer any apologies.

At this season, I often think about a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon. Calvin says to Hobbes: “I feel so bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry I did it.”

“Maybe you should apologize to her,” Hobbes suggests.

Calvin ponders this for a moment and then replies, “I keep hoping that there is a less obvious solution.”

I err, I make mistakes, and I need forgiveness from those I hurt if I wish to sustain right relationship. And so do you. You err. You make mistakes. You do, you know. Well, we have two or three absolute saints here, but most of us make mistakes. Apologies help.

There is nothing more fundamental to who we are as a human being: We can begin again in love, sometimes hard, and in doing so, we grow in spirit and health. We are capable of such greatness of spirit, as an ordinary, daily path.

Finally, this morning, what are the possibilities that await us when Life scares us, wounds us? Where do we find our best self?

I turn to my colleague Kate Braestrup. She is a keen and spirited spiritual writer, who spoke here a couple of years ago. She recounts first a few thoughts about heaven and hell. She offers:

If you are, in Christian terms, following … [Jesus], or in Unitarian Universalist terms, completely and wholly [centered] in love, then you are in heaven no matter where you are. If you are not in love, you are in hell, no matter where you are.
The stories we tell of heaven and hell are not about how we die, but about how we live. (*Here If You Need Me*, 135)

Then, Kate Braestrup reports how one of her sons and one of her daughters were badly burned as children when some gasoline her cousin was using to ignite a pile of “backyard brush essentially exploded in their faces…. A classic image of hell…. being burned in a fire.”

As she drove to the hospital, she spoke to a dispatcher on the phone who asked her if her children and cousin were having trouble breathing… fearing their lungs had been singed. But they were boisterous in their crying. She reports that her cousin

George was cursing and crying because his burns hurt and because he knew that the fire that had injured these children was his mistake, his fault. He was the adult who had decided to use gasoline to start the fire, and his was the hand that struck the match.

She held the phone up for the dispatcher to hear:

George, beside me in the passenger seat, said, “Oh my God. Oh hell. I am so sorry. I am so sorry.”

(My son) Zach was sitting behind him in the backseat. In the middle of his own loud litany of “Oh God” and “Oh hell,” Zach leaned forward. He reached out with his burned arm, an arm blistering and shredding before my eyes, and put his burned hand on George’s shoulder.

“It’s all right, George,” he said, “We love you.”

My good colleague, who had the choice to curse her cousin to this day because of the scars left upon her children and did not do that, concludes,

“If you are living in love, you are in heaven no matter where you are. May heaven hold you. May you always, *always*, live in love.” (136)

May we be inscribed and sealed for a good year. May the final seal on the Book of Life be for Good and for Love.