

**“Flawed and Forgiven”**  
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**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Harvard, Massachusetts**  
**September 25, 2011**

Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish New Year – will begin with the setting of the sun on Wednesday this week. It will usher in a 10-day period of introspection, known as the High Holy Days, which will culminate in Yom Kippur - the most important holiday of the Jewish year – on October 7<sup>th</sup>.

Yom Kippur is also known as the “Day of Atonement,” a day of fasting and intense self-reflection, and, according to tradition, the last chance to make amends before the Book of Judgment is sealed for the New Year. For the Jewish people, this is a time to acknowledge one’s own shortcomings and mistakes, to take responsibility for one’s errors and to make amends. It is a time to reckon and wrestle with who we are and who we have been and to resolve once again to learn and grow into the people we wish to be. It is also a time to offer forgiveness to those who have disappointed us. It is a fitting way to start a new year...with a clean slate.

Part of the slate cleaning process is the “Kol Nidre,” some modern interpretations of which we are hearing this morning. This is the prayer that will begin the Yom Kippur evening service. A more traditional version begins, “All vows and oaths, all promises and obligations, all renunciations and responses, that we shall make from this Yom Kippur til the next – may it come to us in peace – all of them we retract. May we be absolved of them all, may we be released from them all, may they all be null and void, may they all be of no effect.” Each year these words are repeated three times by the congregation at the beginning of the service.

The term “Kol Nidre” means “All Vows,” but it traditionally applies only to the promises one makes to God, not the promises we make to each other. It is an interesting practice which acknowledges that we will make promises to God over the coming year that we cannot fulfill and for which we ought not be, held accountable. Mostly these will be promises made under duress. Maybe when you were younger you vowed that if only you could pass that math exam, you’d go to church more often.

In a sense, the promises made are not unlike the resolutions some of us make on or around January 1<sup>st</sup> – the promises we make to ourselves that we will eat better, exercise more, be nicer to our parents, more patient with our children, more generous with our friends. The things we promise ourselves and perhaps God that we will do because we think we should or because if we were better people, we would.

And, in a sense, the ritual of “Kol Nidre” is really about forgiving ourselves ahead of time for failing to achieve all of the goals we will set. It’s like saying, “I know I’m about to make these promises to myself, but before I make them and before I break them, I’m going to just forgive myself so that I don’t have to beat myself up later for having fallen short.”

It's like saying we don't have to sacrifice ourselves on the altars of our own perfectionism. We can have mercy on ourselves. Beginning right here and now.

Although in Jewish tradition, the aim of these holy days has been traditionally to get on God's good side by repenting of our sins and forgiving those who've sinned against us, in our own Universalist tradition, God's forgiveness isn't in question. It isn't the issue. The Universalist assumption is that although we are most certainly flawed and we do fall short of our own and others' expectations all the time, we are already forgiven by God.

The harder part for us, theoretically, is not to earn God's forgiveness, but to learn how to forgive ourselves and others.

Of course it's sometimes incredibly difficult for people who believe in God to believe that God is that merciful. There exists a human tendency to imagine that God must be like us, to make God in our own image. And so, people throughout recorded history have imagined God to be vengeful and angry, and God's love to be conditional.

I know there were believers in God in this country this past week who truly believed that God wanted Georgia inmate Troy DAVIS to be executed. They made God in their image in the same way that some ancient Hebrews from Biblical times imagined that God wanted them to dash the heads of babies on rocks during wartime.

One thing I have always loved about The Universalists is that they were – and are – able to imagine a God who was – and is – actually better than they were.

Jesus was the same way. He, too, imagined a God who was better than the worst of human inclinations. In the Gospel of Luke, he told the story of the prodigal son...

<sup>11-12</sup>Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.'

<sup>12-16</sup>"So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

<sup>17-20</sup>"That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.

<sup>20-21</sup>"When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

<sup>22-24</sup>"But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

<sup>25-27</sup>"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.'

<sup>28-30</sup>"The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

<sup>31-32</sup>"His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

There is perhaps no better story to illustrate what it means to be flawed and forgiven. The father doesn't wait for an apology or even for an explanation. He's already got his party-planning hat on!

To whom do you most relate in that story?

Can you relate to the younger son...taking advantage of the generosity of others? Taking all that he has been given for granted? Living his life for so long without a care in the world until things get hard and he has to begin to admit that maybe he didn't make the best choices?

Can you imagine how much courage it must have taken for him to be able to return home and to be prepared to admit that he'd been wrong and to ask for help? Can you relate to that feeling of unworthiness that comes with realizing that you've made mistakes and fallen short of someone else's expectations...that you've failed?

Or can you relate to the elder son who cries out, "Hey! That's not fair! I've played by the rules, I've done everything I should! Why is HE getting the party?" "He wasted everything you gave him! How can you possibly forgive him for that?"

Or can you perhaps relate to the father and the love he felt for his son who had returned – a love so strong and a joy so profound that everything that had come gone before was forgiven with graceful ease?

Chances are most of us can relate to at least two, if not all three of them. At some point or another in each of our lives, we have been they.

There have been times in my own life when I have been very much like the elder son. I have sometimes read or heard this story and the father's response has unsettled me. It has baffled me. The poor guy seems so naïve, so simple-minded, that I have sometimes worried that he would be utterly taken advantage of once again by his younger son, whom I have sometimes thought was being disingenuous in his plea for mercy. I am not even the one who has been sinned against in this story, but I have in the past been angry on his behalf.

What is it about human nature that sometimes makes it so hard for us to forgive others...even when they haven't hurt us directly?

I am reminded of another story about being flawed and forgiven, this one from the Buddhist tradition. One day...

The Buddha was sitting under a tree talking to his disciples when a man came along, walked right up to him, and spit on his face. The Buddha wiped the spit off, looked up at the man, and asked, "What next? What do you want to say next?"

The man was baffled by this response, because of course it's not what he expected. He had insulted people before and they had either become angry at him or afraid of him. But the Buddha was neither angry nor afraid. He just matter-of-factly said, "What next?"

The Buddha's disciples, however, became very angry on his behalf. "You can't let him get away with that! He may do it again or someone else will!" But the Buddha just told them to calm down. He was not offended, nor should they be offended.

The next morning the Buddha was again talking with his disciples under the tree when the man returned. He again walked right up to the Buddha, but this time he looked at the Buddha and said, "Please forgive me for what I did to you yesterday."

But the Buddha said, "Forgive? But I am not the same man to whom you did it. The Ganges River goes on flowing, it is never the same Ganges again. Every man is a river. The man you spit upon is no longer here. I look just like him, but I am not the same, much has happened in these twenty-four hours! The river has flowed so much. So I cannot forgive you because I have no grudge against you."

"And you also are new. I can see you are not the same man who came yesterday because that man was angry and he spit, whereas you are bowing at my feet, touching my feet. How can you be the same man? You are not the same man, so let us forget about it."

Those two people, the man who spit and the man on whom he spit, both are no more. Come closer. Let us talk of something else.”

I am different, you are different...

How did he do that? How was the Buddha able to forgive an offense directed at him, when his disciples could not? Of what did he have to let go to come to that understanding?

In a word, he was able to let go of his potato sack.

...Which brings us back, of course, to our first story from this morning, our reading on the Tao of forgiveness. The disciple wants to know how to forgive. He is given a sack with potatoes in it, each representing some offense committed against him. He learns how to forgive each offense and remove each corresponding potato from the sack, thereby lessening his burden.

But when he realizes that this will be an ongoing task, since he cannot keep people from transgressing against him, he panics.

Which is when the master asks him, “If the potatoes are negative feelings, then what is the sack?”

"The sack [he goes on to realize] is... that which allows me to hold on to the negativity. It is something within us that makes us dwell on feeling offended.... Ah, it is my inflated sense of self-importance."

[You might say, it is his pride.]

"And what will happen if you let go of it?" [asks the master].

"Then... the things that people do or say against me no longer seem like such a major issue."

"In that case, you won't have any names to inscribe on potatoes. That means no more weight to carry around, and no more bad smells. The Tao of forgiveness is the conscious decision to not just to remove some potatoes... but to relinquish the entire sack."

In his commentary on this old Taoist story, author Derek Lin writes,

We talk about the "bruised" ego, or how the pride is "hurt," or how one's dignity can be "wounded" – as if egoism is part of the body, like a limb or an organ.

And yet egoism is nothing more than a construction of the mind. It springs from the false perception that we are separate and different from others.

Pride can be defined as an inflated sense of self or of one's self-importance. And as Christian theologian Walter Wink has written,

“There is a subtle pride in clinging to our hatreds as justified, as if our enemies had passed beyond even God's capacity to love and forgive, as if no one in human history had known sufferings as great as ours...” (*Jesus and Nonviolence*, p. 61)

It is sometimes this sense of being better than that keeps us from being able to forgive others. We just can't believe they could do such a thing, whatever it is, because we can't imagine that we would ever do such a thing.

But pride is not always a sense of being better than. Sometimes it's simply as sense of being different than others that keeps us from being able to forgive ourselves.

As Rabbi Chaim Stern has said, “...do not look into the mirror with loathing, forgetting the good in you. There can be a perverse pride in too much self-despising, for you are not a great sinner, merely average.”<sup>1</sup>

We are all flawed. Our pride is one among many flaws.

Can we come to see – to believe – that we are forgiven? Or, at least, forgivable? Can we come to see that the same is true of each and every other person with whom we share this planet? Can we come to a place of understanding and from that understanding move to a place of forgiving? Can we come to live in peace with ourselves and with one another, despite our flaws?

Every day we have a new opportunity to make a choice. As authors Philip Gulley and James Mulholland have noted,

“Jesus doesn't tell us whether the elder son repented and returned to the banquet. There's a reason Jesus doesn't finish the story. He's inviting us to resolve the story. What will we do? Will we turn from God and his grace? Or will we join the party?” (*If Grace is True*, p. 189)

May we come to know ourselves as belonging to the greater whole. In this new year, may we learn to put down the shields of pride that separate us, one from another. And may we come to know the blessing of forgiveness, whether as givers or receivers of its grace.

So may it be. Amen. And Blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup> in *Day by Day*, ed. Rabbi Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, Boston, 1998, (164).