

To Purify – a sermon for Ramadan and Yom Kippur
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So, there we were... a group of ten friends, celebrating a birthday last year. We sat around a large table in the middle of a loud restaurant in Logan Circle in DC, trying mightily to convince our server that we'd eat enough food and drink enough wine to make it well worth her while to take good care of us... even though two of us were very pregnant – like, two days past my due date in my case – and not drinking wine. And so the first *two* bottles of wine and the first round of appetizers were ordered.

The wine? Seven Deadly Zins. Mischievous halo on the label. Cute little poem on the back. And the encouragement to “Indulge!” Very tasty (so I am told). It was a great conversation-launcher, too. What is *your* sin, one friend asked? If you had to pick *one* to which you are most vulnerable, what would it be? Lust? Gluttony? Greed? Sloth? Anger? Envy? Pride?

Quickly, I thought through the list. No. No. No. No. No. No. (Do I honestly believe I'm not vulnerable to any of these deadliest of sins?) Ah... *yes*, there it is. Pride. That's the one. There in the middle of that party, having good food and a fun time with a group of friends, I had this epiphany of sorts – a moment of real self-awareness about where there is a particular vulnerability in my character.

I am not *particularly* or persistently lustful or gluttonous or greedy or lazy or angry or envious... But I know I am prideful. I think highly of myself and find that mistakes are quite anxiety-provoking. This is not to say, of course, that I think I don't make mistakes... but I go out of my way to avoid situations in which I don't feel up to the task. In my life it manifests primarily in stubbornness and the need to be in control – in my effort to orchestrate things so that even the worst case scenario won't be utterly humiliating – in my insistence that if I want something done “right”, then I'll need to do it myself. I notice and accept my small mistakes – the venial sins, if you will – quickly and easily. But, especially poignant in these days of self-reflection, I am far quicker to notice others' cardinal sins than I am to acknowledge my own.

This was a strange insight because I genuinely hold humility – the corresponding holy virtue to cardinal sin of pride – as perhaps *the* highest virtue. And I try sincerely to live out of an attitude of humility – listening well to others perspectives, recognizing that I am not right all the time, acknowledging and respecting my own limitations. But all of that takes real effort. I guess that's why it's called a “virtue”.

Now, the seven deadly sins are a decidedly Christian articulation of those most threatening, damning acts in human life. And the accompanying cardinal virtues also arose out of the Christian church – specifically, the Roman Catholic Church. And that church offers specific cleansing rituals in response to sin – confession and absolution.

But the recognition of fallibility – and the admonition to turn away from wrongdoing and distractions from the spiritual life – is in no way unique to Christianity. Today we find ourselves in a unique concurrence of holy days – in the middle of both the Muslim fast of Ramadan, and also the Jewish high holy days, or Days of Awe.

In both these traditions, these holiest observances are calls for individual and communal self-reflection, humility, and turning.

Most of us are familiar with the fasting of Ramadan, and maybe even its series of daily prayers – every day during the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast and pray during the daylight hours, and break the fast only after the sun has set.

But also during Ramadan, Muslims are expected to put more effort not only into following the teachings of Islam, but also into refraining from anger, envy, greed, lust, sarcasm and gossip. (Sound familiar?) The goal is purity of thought and of action, as they avoid “obscene and irreligious” sights and sounds, as well as sexual relations. Through self-discipline, sacrifice and sympathy for others, during Ramadan, Muslims seek a raised level of closeness to God, redirecting their hearts away from worldly activities, seeking to cleanse the inner soul, to achieve peace and calm, and to be more generous and charitable.

The Jewish high holy days are somewhat different – but not significantly so. Not unlike Ramadan, these holy days are signified by community gatherings for ritual and prayer; by self-reflection, turning, humility... and on Yom Kippur, by fasting.

The Days of Awe began this past week with Rosh Hashanah, the new year – it is a time of celebration, but also of judgment... when G-d is said to pronounce judgment in the Book of Life. And yet, that book is said not to close until the end of the ten Days of Awe, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The days in between offer the opportunity for repentance, for forgiveness... for that judgment ultimately, perhaps, to be changed.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, prayers often are recited near natural flowing water, where one’s sins are symbolically cast into the water – some throw bread or pebbles to symbolize the “casting off”. Others burn pieces of paper on which their sins have been written. But, of course, the very act of casting off one’s sins requires first a self-awareness of those sins. The humility to see one’s frailty, one’s misdeeds, one’s pride or greed or lust or anger. And to recognize how those things harm oneself, and others.

The great human wisdom in this religious observance is the expectation that before seeking atonement with G-d, the repentant one must first seek forgiveness for the sins and grievances committed against other persons. G-d, they say, cannot forgive those sins. We must seek this atonement among ourselves. Only then may we ask forgiveness from G-d.

One of the most moving rituals of Yom Kippur is the recitation of a prayer call *al cheyt* – it lists alphabetically a series of common sins and categories of sins (misuse of speech, wrong thoughts or attitudes, etc.). No names are spoken in this unison prayer – rather, each prayer is spoken from the perspective of “We”, representing the unity of community, and the inherent aptitude of everyone to do wrong, to miss the mark. But this communal prayer follows the days of repentance – of our recognition and acceptance of our individual culpability in wrongdoing.

As in so many religious traditions – especially the “ancient” ones, or those not born here in North America – in the rituals of the High Holy Days and Ramadan there is a lot of seemingly arbitrary movement – sitting, standing, bowing, facing in particular directions – and recitation of rote verbiage. To our reasonable, non-dogmatic, non-creedal Unitarian Universalist minds, these rituals seem sometimes silly. But they actually are very pragmatic. In this over-stimulating world, our distractible human minds need tangible reminders of what is holy, meaningful, inherently true and important.

Anyone who spends time in pediatricians’ offices or preschool bathrooms has seen a sign that provides detailed instructions for hand-washing:

When washing hands with soap and water:

Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.

Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.

Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. Need a timer? Imagine singing “Happy Birthday” twice through to a friend!

Rinse hands well under running water.

Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.

Now, you scientists and germ-a-phobes out there might argue that hand-washing protects us from very real dangers that can cause discomfort, at least, and death and disease, at worst. But are the dangers to our emotional, psychological and emotional well-being really any different? We are, *all* of us – even we who have long ago rejected religious traditions laden with guilt-mongering – we are all hurting, disappointed, in need of renewal. Not unlike the hand-washing, our souls and spirits need cleansing, too – and reminders with specific instructions can help.

Many of us Unitarian Universalists have come to this community out of other traditions – some of us have been hurt by rituals of public confession and absolution, and we now, rightfully, celebrate inherent blessing over inherent sin. We have seen the underbelly of some organizations who use such powerful rituals to manipulate, to solicit money. Our disillusionment is not unjustified. But, too often, we Unitarian Universalists – to use that overused but apt cliché – have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Abuse and misuse of such meaningful rituals should not lead us to abandon the very real truths to which they point.

Because we, too, *know* the consequences of “missing the mark” – of pride, lust, envy, anger, gluttony, sloth, greed. We know the loneliness that comes of separation from one’s loved ones, from oneself, from that which is sacred in our lives. We know guilt and shame. We know the weight we carry in our hearts, the anxiety, the grief, the despair. And we know that we humans are inevitably works in progress – that there’s always the risk of harm, misguidedness, shortcomings. But that there’s also always the potential for healing, transformation, real growth.

The traditions and rituals of these holy days stand out as especially powerful among religious traditions because they take a distinctively whole approach to what it means to be human... recognizing the frailty and fallibility of humanity, but also recognizing the capacity for humans to make their own amends. In other words, whereas many religious traditions are very clear about the shortcomings of humans, they also (often) insist that the only remedy for those shortcomings is a non-human, divine remedy. Judaism, in particular, tells us, though, that we humans have the power to right our human wrongs.

In a culture that seems only to grow in its encouragement of rampant individuality, self-indulgence and the dismissal of personal responsibility, we are wise to consider the transformative power of these traditions that, in a sense, remind us that the kingdom of God is here, among us, not in some faraway place we’ll get to later. The kingdom of God is here, and we are its guardians.

In a recent collection of sermons (*Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*) the Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner said that, “Biblically speaking, to repent doesn’t mean to feel sorry about, to regret. It means to turn, to turn around 180 degrees. It means to undergo a complete change of mind, heart, direction. Turn away from madness, cruelty, shallowness, blindness. Turn toward the tolerance, compassion, sanity, hope, justice that we all have in us at our best.”

Repentance may come in surprising forms. Something in me turned on that February evening last year, as I recognized in myself a debilitating sense of pride. I have not turned 180 degrees. I do not hold myself up as the model of a repentant soul! But I *have* been more mindful, more careful, and – I hope – more humble since then.

And that is my prayer for each of us in these days of fasting, of repentance, of humility and awe... We are not Muslims and Jews. But we are humans. Frail. Fallible. Hurtful. Proud. In these holy days, let us, too, be repentant as we devote the time to be solemnly and honestly aware of our own misdeeds. To reach out to one another in humility and to ask forgiveness – to be brave enough, bold enough, compassionate enough, to seek wholeness in our relationships and our lives.

Just imagine the healing, the peace, the love that might prevail.

So may it be. Amen.