

## Fearless and Searching

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel

On October 2, 2016

At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist

North Andover, MA

*“Spirit of Love, of Life, of God, of Awe- help us to turn—from fear to love, from anger to serenity,  
from envy to contentment, from bitterness to forgiveness, from distraction to awareness and gratitude.*

*And turn us toward each other, for in isolation there is no life.”*

*-- #634, by Jack Riemer, adapted by L. Bluemel*

Imagine being part of a community-- a family,  
a neighborhood, a workplace, a society, a nation—  
where this season of forgiveness was a highlight of the year.  
Can you imagine us all looking forward to *this very day*—  
this chance to start over with anticipation, and hope, and relief-  
to be forgiven... and to forgive?

Imagine that, as a nation, we all paused at the same time—  
from the most powerful to the least-  
and honestly confessed our mistakes and wrongdoings,  
publicly vowed to make amends for them, and then asked for forgiveness.  
Imagine that we could listen when our fellow humans told us  
our words or actions hurt them.  
Imagine listening without defensiveness or negating others' pain.

We are entering into the holiest season of the year for Jewish people,  
Rosh Hashanah followed by the Days of Awe and Yom Kippur.  
It is a time for asking for forgiveness, *and* offering it-  
but only among a minority of people in our nation.

As for the rest of us humans, we tend to accumulate and carry around  
the burden of our regrets, mistakes, wrong-doings-

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and the things we should have done and did not do.

And we carry around another sack of burdens- the forgiveness we can not offer, especially to those who have no idea they've hurt us, or resist us when we tell them.

And so we humans can get accustomed to living with our two huge sacks of lifetime guilt and grudges, weighed down like unhappy Santas, unable to find the freedom we long for within our hearts, the liberation from a past that we cannot change.

We can see the cost in our personal lives, our society, our politics—the broken relationships and the depression, the defensiveness and lying, sometimes great rifts in families and society, the litigation and even the spending of large amounts of tax payer money.

Maybe it would help if, about two months ago, the stores started stocking up on Rosh Hashanah supplies—decorations saying “Forgiveness in Progress” or “Making Amends”, or matching coffee cups that say simply “Did I mess up?” and “Yes you did”.

That's what we *do* as human beings, after all! *Right?*  
*We mess up!* We make mistakes. We act out of line with our values, we hold back from getting involved, we get stingy and self-involved. Sometimes we even get mean and intentionally hurt others- not to mention what we do to other living creatures or our earthly home.

Even in our families and congregations, we mess up. Let's face it, family members, friends and congregations spend a lot of time together, which means more chances to annoy each other. And then you start adding complicating factors like differences in personality, communication style, opinions and personal sensitivities or hot buttons.

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You mix in different life experiences and levels of social privilege and rank,  
gender identity and expression, class and politics and *all* the differences  
that make us who we are... and viola!

We mess up! We step on each other's toes! It's a wonder we can even read in unison!  
As Wendy Page pointed out in her sermon last week,  
some of the time we won't even *know* when we've hurt someone.

We can see the challenge reflected in divisions in our society today.  
Despite all our social media, most of us aren't too familiar with the life experiences  
of those who've lived in different bodies or social contexts than our own.  
It's hard for urban Americans to understand the realities of rural life,  
or suburbanites the realities of urban life, or middle class folks to get working class,  
or Anglo Americans to have the faintest clue about what it's like to  
navigate our society as a person of color or as a Muslim,  
for able-bodied people to deeply understand the experience of a disabled person, etc.

Our varied experiences mean that it is *especially* easy to make assumptions  
or cause pain across such lines of social identity- *without being aware of it*.  
And those with societal privilege are at *special* risk  
of *continuing to deny others' reality* when they tell us about it-  
whether in person, in the streets, or at the voting booth.

The Catch 22 in all this is that when we don't *know* we've hurt someone,  
the *only* way we can *ever* make amends is *if they let us know- and if we believe them*.  
But it's hard to tell someone they've hurt you.  
We don't know how the other person will respond.  
We might worry that they'll brush us off,  
that the relationship will get worse instead of better, or that we'll get emotional.  
Telling the truth about a wounded or angry heart is hard to do.

It is a risk... because it's really hard to forgive someone

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when they don't even know that they need forgiveness.

But it is even *harder* to forgive once we've told them  
and they won't listen, won't acknowledge our courage  
and accept our experience and simply say, "I'm sorry."

For sure, making amends or practicing forgiveness in this lifetime is optional.  
But in my theology, this lifetime is the *only* time we get to practice this,  
and experience tells me that none of us knows how long our lifetime will be.  
So I am glad that the Jewish tradition reminds us that it might be worth a try.

In Judaism, the season begins not by focusing on others  
and what they are guilty of doing to us,  
but by focusing on ourselves, reflecting on our own actions.  
It starts with looking at ourselves and where we've gone wrong,  
where we've deviated from our values.

Now, some of us are very aware of all the ways  
we've made mistakes or messed up, been mean or wrong,  
been inadequate, or missed opportunities to be generous or kind.  
We may be good at this because we were schooled as children in shame.  
Or perhaps we were schooled in perfection, or hyper-responsibility.  
(Was anyone out there a parentified child?)

Some of us can be *hard* on ourselves- and good at tracking our failures.  
Can you imagine laying that burden down, and starting fresh, today?  
I invite you to do so.

Of course others of us might have a harder time  
thinking of *anything* we've done wrong in the last twelve months.  
I'd just like to say right now that I'm not advocating making stuff up!  
I've heard *countless* stories of children going to confession

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and desperately making things up because they couldn't think of anything to say to the priest.  
That's not what we're after here!

Hopefully, reflecting on the past twelve months  
might give you *something* to think about.

And if you're really stuck, you can always check in with a spouse, a friend, or one of your kids.  
They'll help you come up with *something*!

So then what? Unitarian Universalism doesn't "do"  
a lot of confession or repentance.  
Jews do it with the High Holy Days. Christians do it in their weekly liturgy.  
I was reminded last night at the blues concert downstairs  
that blues singers do it- when Sugar Ray opened up by singing,  
"Tell me baby, have I done you wrong?"

(And if you're tired of listening, that pretty much sums up the sermon.  
That's the job for this week: "*Tell me baby, have I done you wrong?*")

Another group of folks who do a lot of this are  
those in Twelve Step groups for addiction recovery or support.  
After all, the fourth step in 12 step programs  
is taking a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves-  
a *searching* and *fearless* moral inventory! This is not for the faint hearted!

That step is followed by others that include admitting one's wrongdoings  
and making amends to those we've wronged where possible.  
That could mean tough conversations, letters, emails, visits, restitution and more.  
I think this is a wise practice for people  
who are trying to be part of a religious community.

Every now and then, one of you will make an appointment with me,  
and I'll be looking forward to hearing about your life or some project at church,

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and you'll tell me that something I've said or done- or not done-  
felt hurtful, or disappointing, or came across the wrong way.

Usually, I am taken off guard by this; I am surprised.

I am usually clueless, oblivious to the impact of something I've said or done.

But knowing about it-- *knowing* about how I came across or some mistake I made,  
allows me to say "I'm sorry."

It allows us to start over again with a clean slate.

So I am grateful for those who care enough about our relationship  
*and* the congregation to take the time to let me know what's going on.

In fact, I don't know how to keep doing this work without your forgiveness.

I don't know how to do it.

So I'm just letting you all know—my office door is open!

Maybe I should have a sign-up sheet out at the back of the room!

Congregations are a place where we can practice these conversations.

It may not always go smoothly. There is some risk involved.

But if we can't do it *here*, where we at least *say*

that we want to help create a model Beloved Community,

how will we ever learn to do it "out there"-- where the stakes may be much higher?

The Rev. Victoria Safford shared a story in the 2013 summer edition  
of the UU World, our national UU magazine, that I'd like to share with you. She wrote:

"In the first weeks of my first ministry in an old New England congregation,  
a woman came to see me.

Nearly 90 years old, she was a lifelong member of that church;

her parents had joined in the late nineteenth century. She didn't like change, she said.

She wasn't sure that she likes me, or what she called my 'point of view'.

"Just remember," she said. "I have outlived all of your predecessors,

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and I will probably outlive you.”

This woman was a dedicated political conservative  
in what had become a progressive community;  
she was a liberal Christian in a congregation  
that had known gracious eras of theological diversity and also some fits of intolerance;  
she'd worked for the U.S. State Department through three wars  
and for the American Unitarian Association through the merger  
with the Universalist Church of America.  
In this church of her childhood, which she'd never left,  
most votes at annual meetings had not gone her way *for the past forty years*.  
She was no stranger to discord.

In the end she did outlive me there:  
she died shortly after I accepted a new call in another state,  
and I was saddened to hear the news.

Over ten years we cultivated a fierce, respectful love for one another,  
and what I loved in her most was her commitment to that church, no matter what;  
her fidelity to it; the ferocity with which she paid her pledge each year,  
no matter how wayward the budget or insufferable (in her humble opinion) the sermons.  
She kept her covenant with that people,  
with their proud history and the bright promise of their future,  
and with the free faith tradition they embodied.

I was a young minister then, and her way of being in relation, her integrity,  
taught me more about Unitarian Universalism than anything I'd learned in seminary.”

Can you imagine... 90 years in one congregation—  
*where most of the votes didn't go your way?*

If you didn't tell people when they disappointed you, if you held onto grudges,

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if you didn't know how to say "I'm sorry",

after 90 years there would probably be *nobody left* to talk to at Coffee Hour!

So I have a suggestion for today- and maybe even beyond today.

Can we practice being fearless?

Being fearless with and for each other, for the sake of laying burdens down,  
for the sake of freeing up our hearts, for the sake of each other's liberation?

What I'm talking about is trying out that idea of a personal moral inventory-  
not to beat ourselves up, but to accept ourselves in all our humanness  
and then to lay those burdens *down*.

And *after* that, we might think about a time we're been hurt  
by a family member, a friend, a fellow congregant-  
maybe just *one instance* that we haven't been able to let go.

We might consider being fearless by seeking out that person to let them know,  
to say, "*It was hard for me when...*"

And if we're the one approached, we might try listening without defensiveness,  
to try to see that such moments are a gift— a chance to wipe the slate clean,  
to restore the relationship, to practice saying  
*"I see. I am listening. I did not know. I am sorry."*

I was trying to think how we might indicate  
who among us is up for this- because we might not all be ready.  
I thought of stickers for our nametags: *Practicing Being Fearless*.  
I thought of code phrases, like "*Can I practice being fearless with you?*"  
*"Yes, can I practice with you?"*

Or maybe those matching coffee cups for coffee hour—"*Did I mess up?*" "*Yes, you did.*"

Or maybe we should just sing the blues to each other:

*"Tell me baby, have I done you wrong?"*

We can be a congregation of freely-flowing forgiveness-



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a place where messing up, making amends and offering forgiveness

is just part of what we do.

No doubt we will step on each other's toes now and then.

But perhaps we can learn to at least take off our shoes...

for when we are honest with each other, we walk on holy ground.

Let's join in meditation, as I share the words of the Rosh Hashanah litany  
written by UU minister the Rev. Rob Eller-Issacs.

The response is "We forgive ourselves and one another; we begin again in love."

*(Litany #637, Singing the Living Tradition)*