

Rosh Hashanah/Ramadan

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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Opening Words – (#476 - Von Ogden Vogt)

Before the wonders of life we acknowledge our failures to see and to revere;

Before the sanctities of life we are ashamed of our disrespects and indignities;

Before the gifts of life we own that we have made choices of lesser goods, and here today seek the gifts of the spirit;

Before the heroisms of life we would be enlarged to new devotion.

Readings (Dave Perryman)

#1: from Psalm 139 in the Hebrew Scriptures

O Lord, you have searched me and known me...Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there...If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart: Try me, and know my thoughts...see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

#2: from "The Family of Imraan" in *The Koran*:

Whether you conceal what is in your hearts or reveal it, God knows; and God knows what is in the heavens, and what is in the earth; and God has power over all things.

On the day when every soul will be brought face to face with the good it has done, and with the evil it has done, it will wish there were a great distance between itself and its evil. And God makes you cautious of God; and God is gracious to servants.

Sermon

The readings today remind me of a story that my mother-in-law told me. She said when her youngest daughter was about 5 or 6 years old, she came running into the house in tears. She'd been playing with a friend, a neighbor of theirs, and her mother thought at first that maybe she had fallen and hurt herself. There were no apparent scrapes on her knees or elbows, so her mother asked what was wrong, what had happened.

Through her frightened tears, she managed to sputter, "Wendy told me that God is watching every single thing I do...That's not true, is it?"

It was a terrifying thought to this little girl...and probably not much of a comfort to most of us. God, in young Wendy's description, and indeed in the Scriptures that Dave read from today, sounds more like Big Brother than Loving Father or Mother.

So, if we reject that idea of God...is there much that we can learn from the observance of Rosh Hashanah or Ramadan? Reflection, sure, we can handle that, maybe...but fasting? Repentance? Repent what? To whom?

I have mentioned before that Universalist minister Thomas Starr King, while serving a Unitarian congregation, once said of these faiths: "the Universalists believe that God is too good to damn us forever, and the Unitarians believe that [we] are too good to be damned." That doesn't leave much room for a judging God as an impetus for repentance. But might there be others? "The Last Judgment" probably doesn't hold much sway over the way we live our lives. But what does? What does effect the way that we live?

I believe the shofar is meant to call us to reflect on that very question, just as the Muslim call to prayer is meant to return us to that which gives meaning. And once a year, in the observance of Ramadan or the observance of Rosh Hashanah, we are called to reflect on ourselves and remember what is most important and to mark those places where we have been led astray from our own deepest understandings. Through fasting or prayer or seeking forgiveness or providing help to someone in need or in planning for how our lives can more closely match that which we know to be true, we realign ourselves *with* ourselves.

But who is that? Who is that self with which I seek realignment? If I am going to return to myself, my own best self, I should know who that is. But do I?

Let's face it: humans are complicated creatures, and no one more than our very own selves because, while we can see the crazy things that other people do, with ourselves, we also get to see the crazy things that are going on inside...and talk about complicated! Very often, and understandably, we shrink from introspection; we can't easily explain ourselves to ourselves; and so, instead, we hide things away; we push realizations aside; we shrink from the complexity of who we are because of a suspicion that the achievement of any true understanding is well-nigh impossible. Best just to live. Enjoy. Grab the gusto.

But what profit is it to us if we grab the gusto and lose our souls? (to paraphrase Jesus). What if, by giving up the quest for understanding our own complexities, we lose our selves in the process? Life is for living, we say, but who is that person who is living it?

In 2002, [Rosemarie Carnarius gave a Rosh Hashanah sermon](#) to this congregation in which she quoted Harry Scholefield, a former minister of the Unitarian Church of San Francisco, saying: "Our lives have an unlimited potential for joy, beauty and meaning. If we do not experience this potential...it is not because it is not there. It is because *we* are not there." The reflection we are called to may allow us to *be there* for life's potential, so that we aren't left asking, [in the words of an old Kinks song](#), "If life's for living, what's living for?" We know that our understanding of truth and meaning arises from our individual experience, that it is uniquely tied to our individual self, so we must know that self in order to recognize and embrace the meaning which we seek. Make sense?

It might be a piece of what Socrates was thinking when he urged his student to "Know thyself," and though that seems like a hopeless dream sometimes in our postmodern age, when religion and psychology and science and philosophy keep giving us conflicting pictures of who we are, the passages in the readings assure us that we *can be known*. And if we pair those understandings with our Universalist tradition, there is the concept that the spirit of life that holds us not only *knows us* through and through, but *accepts* us. There is the understanding from our principles that as we peel back the layers of our own beings, though we may be faced with regret or remorse, we will also inevitably find our own worth and dignity...that these qualities are *inherent* within us.

And that all sounds rosy enough...but how does it translate into life on the ground? It may be possible to know ourselves better, but is it really worth the effort? Why is it important to rehash our actions, our values, our *mistakes*? Weren't we supposed to leave all that guilt behind when we became Unitarian Universalists? Isn't that just a lot of navel lint-picking? Can't we just get on with it? What would repentance do for us? What does it mean to seek forgiveness and what good does it do?

Though we do not talk much about sin in this congregation, we do generally hold a notion that people are free to choose what is good. Given that free choice, we sometimes choose from among the other options. Whether that choice stems from insensitivity or selfishness or disordered priorities, it is important that we acknowledge that choice to ourselves, not to beat

ourselves up, not to avoid the wrath of a Divine Judge, but in order to avoid choosing it in the future. We may indeed want to seek reconciliation with a person that we hurt or who hurt us, but the only way to bring about a reconciliation is to see and acknowledge our regret. The only way we can let it go is to first grab hold of it.

Explicit repentance, like singing the Blues, does not leave us mired in the content. By naming where we have fallen short or that which causes us pain, we are pointing toward what we are capable of changing in the present time and expanding our awareness of our own potential.

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By the end of that passage, if we are living the words, we can feel ourselves already expanding to include new devotion, we feel empowered to choose the gifts of life, we begin to feel respect for the sanctities of life, and vow to see, to *notice*, and to revere the wonders of life.

The other thing to remember is that, though we Unitarian Universalists tend to think in individualistic terms, whole communities observe Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan. There is an additional power in reflection and introspection when you know your friend is committed to doing the same. There is an additional incentive to move toward reconciliation when you know your neighbor will meet you halfway. Renewal and restoration feel attainable when all reach toward it together.

And imagine if this did not only involve individuals and communities, but nations, organizations,

corporations. What if there was a season that called for reflection on our country's character in its internal workings and its relationships to other nations and people across the world? And what if we could know that other countries observed the same season and shared the same commitment to reconciliation and renewal in the interests of justice and peace? What if each religion squarely faced the atrocities committed in its name; sought forgiveness rather than justification; willingly relinquished elements embedded within each doctrine that promoted hostility between religions? It is tragic when the subject of religion brings to mind violence, intolerance, and confrontation. In this age, when warring fundamentalisms encourage judgment of others rather than introspection; when war ravages so many countries and governments brutalize their own people; when multi-national corporations set themselves outside the reach of moral accountability and lay waste to the world's natural resources; when societies relinquish their responsibility to the most vulnerable; it is only fitting that we acknowledge two important religious holidays that focus on reflection, repentance and renewal. For really, viewed on this global scale, the focus on reflection, repentance and renewal is not only a way of deepening our spiritual lives...it is a matter of survival. If we are not able to turn back from the ways we have been traveling; if we are not able to embrace the virtue of sacrifice; if we are not able to engage in tough, honest, unswerving introspection *as humans*...we risk losing it all.

On any scale, when we know ourselves better, we grow in our understanding of others. We become aware of what we can bring to others. We understand our own motives and thus act from a clarity of purpose rather than a muddled (and futile) attempt to control events or manipulate others. We move from what Martin Buber called the "I-It" relationship with the world--where other people are, at best, simply supporting actors in the movie of our lives and, at worst, unfortunate obstacles to the quenching of our desires or the satisfactions of our greed--we move to an "I-Thou" relationship, where we have bursts of awareness into the true person-hood of one another, the realization that each individual, while unique, is bound up in the sometimes-blissful often-frustrating inevitably-painful struggle that is human life.

Bursts of awareness, I say, because it doesn't last. There may be Holy Women and Men who live in that awareness consistently throughout their lives, but I have not met them and I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that none are here today. We can't live always with the gratitude we wish, with the awareness we wish, with the perception and attention and compassion we wish. We go back to automatic pilot, to do the things that need to be done in order to live and survive, and in the transition we often lose the experience and the intention of our best selves...until we hear the Shofar's call. Whatever form that takes in your life, however that sounds, somehow we are reminded, recalled to our ultimate concern, recalled to repentance, reflection, and renewal. That is why Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan are

recurring, cyclical events, because the truth is we need them now and we will need them throughout our lives. No matter how perfect our resolutions for the new year; no matter how sincere our repentance; no matter how powerful our intent to live in a state of gratitude, the daily details of our existence will reassert their importance, and in the midst of fulfilling those, we will lose some measure of awareness... we will revert to old patterns...we will forget. We will return to the world of "It." To paraphrase Martin Buber: without *It*, we cannot live. But if we live with *It* alone, what is our life? What he is saying to me is: Of course we will, again, forget our best selves. What matters is whether or not, when it comes, we heed the call to remember. The Shofar's call...Listen.