

**“Atonement and Reconciliation”
The Unitarian Church of Lincoln
October 23, 2016**

“I want to try making things right because picking up the pieces is way better than leaving them the way they are.”

— Simone Elkeles, *Perfect Chemistry*

Gathering of the Community

Ring of Bell

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude: “Emer's Lament” by Mary Kahmann

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

read by KK Munson

Opening words: “On Turning” by Jack Reimer

read by Gretchen Woods

Hymn: #315 “This Old World”

Time for all ages

Shared Story: “Bear Snores On”

Read by John Sangster

Children’s Song: #214 “Shabbat Shalom”

Deepening

Reading: “*Kol Nidre*” (an adaptation) by Mark Belletini

Musical Interlude:

Sermon: “Atonement and Reconciliation”

Offering and Offertory: “An Indefinite Road”

by Harper Tasche

Returning to Community: the work of the people

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows
Meditation**

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: #219 “O Hear, My People”

Postlude: “New Leaves” by Kim Robertson

Closing Words: “Bless Us with Peace”

from *The Gates of Repentance*

Stating Intent

Chalice Lighting: by G. Woods

Read by KK Munson

Around the world, in many cultures
candles/flames symbolize energy:
energy that charges our bodies,
illuminates our minds,
represents our inner knowing,
our spirits.

So we begin this service concerning what is of value
by kindling a flame for each and all of us:
to refresh and renew our own energies,
and to become a light for the world.

Opening words: “On Turning” by Jack Reimer
read by G. Woods

Now is the time for turning.

The leaves are beginning to turn
from green to red to orange.

The birds are beginning to turn and
are heading once more toward the South.

The animals are beginning to turn
to storing their food for the winter.

For leaves, birds, and animals turning comes instinctively.
But for us turning does not come so easily.
It takes an act of will for us to make a turn.
It means breaking with old habits.
It means admitting that we have been wrong;
 and this is never easy.
It means losing face;
 it means starting all over again;
 and this is always painful.
It means saying: I am sorry.
It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.
These things are hard to do.
But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever
 in yesterday's ways.
God (Source of Life), help us to turn –
 from callousness to sensitivity,
 from hostility to love,
 from pettiness to purpose,
 from envy to contentment,
 from carelessness to discipline,
 from fear to faith.
Turn us around, O God (Source),
 and bring us back toward You.
Revive our lives, as at the beginning.
and turn us around toward each other, God (Source),
 for in isolation there is no life. (adapted, GLW)
Hymn: #315 "This Old World"

Time for all ages

Shared Story: "Bear Snores On"

Children's Song: #214 "Shabbat Shalom"

Deepening

Reading: "Kol Nidre" (an adaptation) by Mark Belletini

(The prayer, *Kol Nidre*, opens the Yom Kippur service and is among the most popular in Jewish liturgy. The literal translation of *Kol Nidre* from the Hebrew is “all vows.” The chant is recited three times and is the disavowal of oaths made during the past year or for the coming year. (Source: *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1981.)

We vowed, not so long ago,
to live lives that added, not subtracted.

We promised, not so long ago,
to live lives that matched our words,
lives not hard and brittle with anger,
but soft with letting go.

We made an oath, not so long ago,
to live lives that reached for the stars,
and did not consist of strings of little disappointments,
or fragments of the shattered dreams we once used
as mirrors to see how good we looked.

The days have flown quickly,
and they will flow quickly in the year to come.
Circumstances, stress, and brokenness come to all –
it is the human condition.

And thus I say before the witness of the blue sky
bending above,
and before the nodding blue chicory flowers
of early autumn still growing here below,
and before the clear eyes of children not yet born,
children who will inherit the world from us,
that all the vows we will make not long from now,
all the promises we will make,
all the unspoken oaths we will declare,
are hereby cancelled, annulled, voided,
and made unbinding.

We are free, not to promise to be good,

but simply to get on with loving each other.
We are free, not to vow great transformations,
but to engage life with tenderness and understanding,
and outpourings of kindness.
We are free, not to swear oaths of everlasting loyalty
And righteousness,
but to continue to be generous to each other, to ourselves,
and to the common good.
At the start of the new year, we begin again in love.

Musical Interlude:

Sermon: “Atonement and Reconciliation”

On Rosh Hashanah, Jews say to one another, *Le shana tovah tikatevu*,” “May you be enshrined in the *Book of Life*.”

I add my greeting to theirs today, though we passed the end of the High Holy Days (Yom Kippur) Wednesday a week and a half ago (10/12/2016). ([Much of the information regarding Jewish traditions that follows appeared in “Wiping the Slate Clean” by Charles Blustein Ortman , in Quest, the newsletter of Church of the Larger Fellowship of September, 1999.](#))

Jewish people, like many earth-based peoples, celebrate the end of a year and beginning of a new year in Autumn, rather than winter or spring as many other cultures do. Each year ends on Rosh Shashanah, which begins at

sunset on the first of Tishri, the seventh month of the Jewish year. The New Year truly begins on Yom Kippur, sunset ten days later. The time in between is to be spent seeking atonement or at-one-ment in our lives and relationships.

Jews spend these ten days in fasting and reflection, seeking to turn their lives around. There is an old theological word for this: *repent*. The goal is to intentionally re-engage your life, get it back on track, and start over. Turn around your life. As Charles Blustein Ortman writes, “These holy days are an invitation to focus on atonement, achieving a greater balance in our lives, and being more at one with our universe.” (Ibid. p.3.)

This offers a more cyclical understanding of the progression of our lives, one less linear and more circular. It does not demand that we only move forward in one line. It reminds us that we may stop, rewind, and go forward in a better way. This is a basic Unitarian Universalist understanding as well: that people can make the conscious

choice to change for the better. As Charles observes, “The reason we don’t make the changes we say we want to make in our lives, is, perhaps, because we *really don’t* want to make them after all.” Or, I would add, we value something else more. For example, I want to eat more than I need to eat and still expect – or hope – to be slim. So we go on doing what we’ve always done, even while claiming that we want to change.

For the time we have today, I want us to examine some of our concepts of forgiveness (which Jews seek during Holy Days), reconciliation, and atonement. What can we unlearn, learn, or relearn about these powerful ideas? Here we go . . .

Forgiveness: How many times have you been told you ought to forgive someone who has hurt you? I bet a whole lot more times than others have sought your forgiveness. Maybe this is only my experience. . . One day, while lamenting that I find it hard to forgive wounds inflicted by

someone long dead, I heard a congregant and counseling psychologist say, “I like to say ‘You don’t have to forgive and forget, but you could remember and release.’” I was gobsmacked! What an amazing insight.

Prior to that, I learned from Marie Fortune that responsibility for forgiveness is almost always placed upon the wrong person. People mostly tell the victim to “forgive and forget!”. Marie is emphatic: for forgiveness to take place, the *perpetrator* must do three things: recognize that they have injured the victim; repent, i.e., turn their lives around and not repeat the injury – to anyone; and offer restitution, to repay at least some of the harm; make amends. This could take the form of paying for therapy or returning stolen goods. You get the idea.

Now, how often does this really happen, I ask you? Right . . . So, my psychologist friend offers an alternative for a victim/survivor: “Remember and Release.” Remember, so you do not allow yourself to become a victim again.

Release, so the perpetrator no longer rules your life.

Excellent advice, but actually doing it takes real tools – hence the *Language of Emotions* class that I will be offering in January. (There are still three books available in the book store.)

What about reconciliation? How can we actually reconnect with those for whom we care, but from whom we have been estranged by some hurtful action – our own, or the other's, or both? I submit I first have to examine my responsibility in the disconnection. Have I also behaved irresponsibly? Have I been hurtful? These are questions that Jews ask themselves during the Holy Days. Then, I need to reach out; make amends, if appropriate; and honestly seek connection. We should not do it if we are not ready, for the in-authenticity will be read well by the other. Count on it.

If, as is often the case with childhood abuse, there is no living person responsible for the hurt within the now-adult “child.” So one can only reconcile with the reality of

the abuse, and reclaim one's life for one's self, beyond the impact of the abuse. Remember and Release.

As practiced by Jews and, on occasion, in South Africa, reconciliation requires a moratorium on angry reaction to allow perpetrators to express their culpability and seek forgiveness. It also allows victims to reclaim responsibility for their own lives and power to change one's life. Reconciliation begins with Truth, a prime value for Unitarian Universalists. One must tell his or her truth, openly, and with regret and the commitment to repentance. Only then can reconciliation be considered freely by the victims.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the VERY stable triangle of victim, perpetrator, and rescuer, as understood in addictive systems, is that, eventually, every single person plays every single role sooner or later. Think about it: how many times have you watched the victim become a rescuer (Can you say "Helping Professions") or a perpetrator. A perpetrator can become a victim or rescuer. The rescuer

may be placed in the role of perpetrator or victim. What an insight! We truly are all in this together, and we had better watch our own behavior: “the log in our own eye,” as Jesus said.

M. Scott Peck offers some insight about this as well: he notes, “The essential component of evil is not the absence of a sense of sin or imperfection but the unwillingness to tolerate that sense.” (from *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* by M. Scott Peck, M.D. (pp. 76.)

It is only through humility, through recognition and acceptance of our full humanity, with all its foibles and quirks and hurtfulness, that we have any possibility of reconciliation or atonement.

Atonement is a deep human longing: a desire for connection, to belong, and for the ability to love and to be loved. There is a wonderful Jewish story, first offered by 16th century Jewish Kabbalist in Palestine, Isaac Luria, that both foreshadows the Big Bang theory by centuries and offers

some insight into the human longing for reconciliation and atonement:

Isaac Luria, the renowned sixteenth century Kabbalist, used the phrase “tikkun olam,” usually translated as repairing the world, to encapsulate the true role of humanity in the ongoing evolution and spiritualization of the cosmos. Luria taught that God created the world by forming vessels of light to hold the Divine Light. But as God poured the Light into the vessels, they catastrophically shattered, tumbling down toward the realm of matter. Thus, our world consists of countless shards of the original vessels entrapping sparks of the Divine Light. Humanity’s great task involves helping God by freeing and reuniting the scattered Light, raising the sparks back to Divinity and restoring the broken world. . .

Tikkun olam encompasses both the outer and the inner, both service to society by helping those in need and service to the Divine by liberating the spark within. As we are, the Divine spark lies hidden beneath our layers of egoistic self-centeredness. That spark is our conscience, through which the promptings of the Divine Will flow toward us. By pursuing spiritual inner work to strengthen our soul and purify our heart, we grow more able to bear that spark without shattering, more willing to act on what we know to be right, less willing to act in harmful or grasping ways, and more able to notice the quiet presence of conscience beneath the din of our chattering minds and reactive emotions. The work of transformation, of building a soul creates a proper vessel for the Divine spark, for our unique share of

the Divine Will, returning that spark to the service of the One Who made it. By working to perfect ourselves, perfect our soul, and serve society, we each contribute in our own unique way to the perfecting of the world. This is our duty and our calling as human beings.

(www.innerfrontier.org)

Many Jews understand this story as an injunction to focus on social justice, but Kabbalists also perceive it as essential to spiritual renewal for all people: finding one's own spark of divinity, honoring and cherishing it, and joining its energy to the divinity in everyone else for the greater good of all.

The desire for reconciliation and atonement is both intellectual and affective, both thinking and feeling. It requires of us a little humility, a willingness to reach in to one's self and out to others, honesty in both directions, and an openness to wider knowing and deeper love.

This longing is expressed eloquently in the *Kol Nidre*, the prayer for atonement, which frees us of our vows and acknowledges – even accepts – our humanity.

As a closing, let me repeat part of Mark Belletini's
interpretation:

We are free, not to promise to be good,
but simply to get on with loving each other.
We are free, not to vow great transformations,
but to engage life with tenderness and understanding,
and outpourings of kindness.
We are free, not to swear oaths of everlasting loyalty
And righteousness,
but to continue to be generous to each other, to ourselves,
and to the common good.
At the start of the new year, we begin again in love.

Offering and Offertory:

Returning to Community: the work of the people
Sharing of Joys and Sorrows
Meditation

Integration and Release

Closing Hymn: #219 "O Hear, My People"

Postlude:

Closing Words: "Bless Us with Peace"

from *The Gates of Repentance*

O Source of peace, lead us to peace, a peace profound and true; lead us to a healing, to mastery of all that drives us to war within ourselves and with others.

May our deeds inscribe us in the Book of life and blessing, righteousness and peace!

O Source of peace, bless us with peace.

Kol Nidrei:

**Ve'esarei, Vachamei, Vekonamei, Vekinusei,
Vechinuyei, Ush'vuei.**

**D'indarna, Ud'ishtabana, Ud'acharimna, Ud'assarna Al
nafshatana**

**Miyom Kippurim zeh, ad Yom Kippurim haba aleinu
letovah**

Bechulhon Icharatna vehon, Kulhon yehon sharan

**Sh'vikin sh'viti, betelin umevutalin, lo sheririn v'lo
kayamin**

Nidrana lo nidrei, V'essarana lo essarei

Ush'vuatana lo shevuot.

ALL VOWS

All vows:

Prohibitions, oaths, consecrations, vows that we may vow, swear, consecrate, or prohibit upon ourselves -

from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur, may it come upon us for good -

regarding them all, we regret them henceforth.

They will all be permitted, abandoned, cancelled, null and void, without power and without standing.

Our vows shall not be valid vows; our prohibitions shall not be valid prohibitions;

and our oaths shall not be valid oaths.

Note: The chazan (cantor) recites Kol Nidrei aloud three times, each time louder than before, and the congregation recites along in an undertone.