

## Turning of the Wheel

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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*[T]hat old September feeling, left over from school days, of summer passing, vacation nearly done, obligations gathering, books and football in the air ... Another fall, another turned page: there was something of jubilee in that annual autumnal beginning, as if last year's mistakes had been wiped clean by summer.*

Wallace Stegner wrote these words, but they hold a lot of power and memory for me. Somehow I never left behind that childhood notion that September starts the year rather than its last quarter. And now, as a UU minister, I return to September as the beginning of my yearly calendar. September is a time to start fresh. Others have their New Year's resolutions in January, but for me a fresh look down the clean sweep of the calendar is in September.

For those who follow the Jewish calendar the fall is also the beginning of a New Year. Rosh Hashanah, the head of the new year, often falls in September, sometimes in October. This year Rosh Hashanah began last Sunday and concludes this coming Tuesday as Yom Kippur begins. Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement. During Rosh Hashanah, faithful Jews have reflected on the year past, the ways in which they lived into their full humanity and the ways they fell short. It is a time of asking forgiveness for the ways they may have harmed others in the past and a time for offering forgiveness for the ways in which others hurt them.

Yom Kippur shifts the idea of forgiveness from humanity to the divine, considering the ways in which our actions harmed the sacred. It is that last chance to make amends before another page turns in the book of life.

This year, another religious holiday that marks a new time also falls in September. As Yom Kippur concludes at sundown on Wednesday, the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha begins. Eid al-Adha falls at the end of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the five obligations of Islam. Although the Hajj is associated with the life of the Prophet Muhammad, some of the practices re-enact the story of Abraham and his son Ishmael. Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice, completes the time and commemorates Abraham's greatest sacrifice. While Christians and Jews believe that God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Muslims understand this as God calling Abraham to sacrifice his eldest son, Ishmael. The Feast of Sacrifice commemorates the event and celebrates Abraham's pure faith and willingness to submit to God's command. When God stayed Abraham's hand and substituted the ram for Ishmael, the meat was used to feed the poor. Thus Eid al-Adha asks Muslims to go beyond the normal obligations of charity, and make further sacrifices to feed the poor.

It's unusual that these two holidays coincide in time. Though they stem from the earliest stories of the Religions of the Book, they have almost no connection to each other. But their proximity in time this year makes me wonder if their urging us to consider the values of forgiveness and sacrifice aren't a bit more related than it seems at first glance.

Forgiveness and sacrifice are not concepts we talk about in Unitarian Universalism all that much. Forgiveness probably gets more play because magnanimity can be empowering and noble, but by and large we Unitarian Universalists have set aside ideas of confessing our sins in hopes of a divine pardon. Personally, I think there's great value in confession, but that's another sermon. Still, maybe there is some role for forgiveness, but sacrifice? Sacrifice isn't really the darling of contemporary culture except perhaps in the context of ultimate military sacrifice, and it's certainly not something you'll find in the index of a Unitarian Universalist hymnal which jumps right from "Rosh Hashanah" to "Seasons and Cycles." Sacrifice in religion is so often associated with the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins and many of us reject the idea that the involuntary suffering and death of a person is salvific in any way. But in rejecting that type of sacrifice we have perhaps lost connection with other ideas of sacrifice. It might serve us to find ways to engage with ideas of forgiveness and sacrifice, ways that are intentional and that enhance life.

What I appreciate about the holidays of Yom Kippur and Eid al-Adha is the intentionality of regular practice, the yearly opportunity to focus on how we want to live in relationship with others, *in* community and *in* sacredness. It's so easy to get caught up in what daily existence asks of us that it is important to me to have this time to really look at the ways in which I have and have not lived my values and intentions. Let's just take the ways in which I may have harmed my connections with others. When have I been impatient and snapped at someone? When have I acted in irritation at an honest mistake? When have I let my sense of humor harm another person by making them the object of laughter? When have I hugged my own sense of superiority to my heart when it is really only that I am more guarded than others? For all these things and others I must ask forgiveness.

And if I am to seek forgiveness, I must also be willing to grant forgiveness to others for all the times I have been the recipient of harmful actions. Offering forgiveness is not about erasing what happened. It is not ignoring the consequences of our actions or removing the need for restitution. It is certainly not about forgetting what happened so that it can happen all over again. It is, rather, about seeing the fragile humanity of those who failed you or harmed you and letting go of the pain in your own heart. In *No Future without Forgiveness*, Bishop Desmond Tutu wrote these words:

*Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good. To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. [To forgive] gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.*

It is well to remember that it doesn't always come easily, that forgiveness doesn't happen because the calendar says it's time. We may need to do it over and over again, every year or

every day, but we can find some measure of peace and healing for our pain if we are intentional about working on it, even just once a year.

Sacrifice, too, takes intentionality because I think, like forgiveness, we often misunderstand what healthy sacrifice is all about. We are a culture that has embraced the message of the harmful self-sacrifice. Do you know the children's book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein? It typifies this kind of sacrifice.

It is about the relationship between a female apple tree and a boy. When he is young, the tree gives the boy apples and shade and place to play. When he grows older and wants to make money she gives him apples to sell, and when he wants a house she gives her branches for lumber and when he wants a boat she gives her trunk. When as an old man he encounters the stump of the once beautiful tree she gives him a place to rest.

Many people see this as a lovely story of selfless and unconditional love. It seems to me unconditional in only one direction and not the sort of mutually empowering sacrifice that we might practice as a religious discipline.

I cannot help but be mindful right now of the involuntary and disempowering sacrifices that millions of Syrians have had thrust upon them. The United Nations estimates that something over 11 million people have now been displaced by years of fighting. But I am also mindful of the sacrifices that some Europeans, especially those in Germany, are making voluntarily to help the refugees. These are mutually empowering sacrifices, offering sanctuary to those who need it at a cost that more financially and politically secure people are able to bear. While we watch footage of a Hungarian camerawomen kicking young girls and tripping fathers carrying their children, Angela Merkel has taken a more compassionate action in welcoming Syrian refugees. I have little doubt that being a bold voice for compassion will cost Germany's Chancellor even more than it already has. The political and economic issues are complex, tangled and well beyond my scope, but the moral issues seem a little more clear cut. Sacrifice and forgiveness might be a good starting point, not only to respond to the refugee crisis but stop the root of it, the civil war that causes families to flee.

Even for those of us not caught in the grip of war, the concepts of forgiveness and sacrifice can be valuable in our everyday living. What do Unitarian Universalist principles ask of us, and how do we make sacrifices in order to make those principles real in the world? If we aspire to live in ways that affirm and promote not only the inherent worth and dignity of all persons but also the interconnected web of all existence, well what then? What must we give up of our own egocentric existence to live that into being?

Well, oh dear. I said I was going to preach on happiness for the four months leading up to my sabbatical and here I am talking about refugees of civil war and self-sacrifice. How have I gone so far astray? I don't think I have really because although these questions of sacrifice and forgiveness may not be happy ones, they are questions of morality. As Sam Harris wrote in *Letter to a Christian Nation*, "Questions of morality are questions about happiness and suffering. This is why you and I do not have moral obligations towards rocks. To the degree that our actions can affect the experience of other creatures positively or negatively, questions of morality

apply.” And so to fully engage with happiness, with creating lives of fullness, we have to consider questions of morality including the roles of forgiveness and sacrifice. It can never be about saying you are not enough or unworthy or somehow less than, but *only* about recognizing your own inherent worth and living into that in the ways of deepest calling.

The holidays coming up this week, Yom Kippur and Eid al Adha, share something else. In addition to raising religious questions of value, they are both about the ending of one thing and thus the beginning of something new, a turning of one time to another. The turning of the wheel, the turning of the page, the turning of the year is a powerful symbol that brings us to take stock of what has been and consider what can be around all sorts of actions. As TS Eliot wrote:

For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.

When it comes to happiness, one of the most hopeful things is a fresh start, a new day with no mistakes in it yet. Whether that means wiping the slate clean and starting fresh or whether it means continuing to build on the progress already made, a new day brings new hope. Yet we have to acknowledge that starting anew can be awfully difficult—again whether it means starting from scratch or taking one more step—sometimes it can be just really hard: disorienting, isolating, exhausting. New beginnings don’t always feel like a new chance at happiness, particularly new beginnings that were not of your choosing. Anyone who has ever lost a job, been forced to evacuate because of wildfires or hurricanes or civil wars, anyone who has suffered loss has had to start over in ways that may have been full of pain. And still... there can always be hope in new beginnings. It may require sacrifice and forgiveness, but starting over can be a way of accepting that we cannot change the past but that we can use what it taught us to make a different future.

I return once again to the words of Desmond Tutu. He writes:

*... the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, has an embarrassing and persistent way of returning and haunting us unless it has in fact been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage.*

So lest we be taken hostage by a past that no longer fits or is inhabited by things we wish were otherwise, let us take the opportunity to engage with past and future both—thoughtfully, intentionally, and in the light of our deepest held values. Before the wheel turns once more let us ask ourselves how we can express that we are fully worthy participants in a divine creation.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.