



*What If Nobody Forgave?*  
**Unitarian Church of Staten Island**  
**September 28, 2008**

*Reflection: “For those and so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness. We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.”*

*--Rob Eller-Isaacs*

**Call to Community**

We come together this morning with different needs and experiences. Some of us have experienced sadness and brokenness; others joy and exhilaration. We come here seeking something to wake us up to the promise of a new day or hopes for healing and transformation of the economic crisis in this country or to lessen the suffering of so many living beings in this world and the pain of Mother Earth herself. This Sunday we lift up the value of forgiveness and reconciliation as fostered during the High Holy Days of the Jewish religion, particularly during Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Let this passage from the Jewish Prayer Book for Yom Kippur, *Gates of Repentance* call to us as a community: “A new heart will I give you, a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart that feels.”

**Reading** *Love and Survival: the scientific basis for the healing power of intimacy* by Dean Ornish

***What If Nobody Forgave***  
Rev. Susan Karlson

Universalist heavyweight Hosea Ballou wrote a groundbreaking thesis called *Treatise on Atonement* over two hundred years ago. He completely upended the refrain sung by orthodox Christians—that humans were past hope and totally depraved. Ballou sounded a different chord—one that has its root in the very first chapters of the Hebrew Bible—that creation and humankind along with it is good and worthy. You can hear strains of his passion echoed in the first Unitarian Universalist principle about the worth and dignity of every person (Charles Howe’s *Hosea Ballou’s Universalist Manifesto*, <http://www.uua.org/WRLD/2005/03/lookingback.html>).

The Jewish High Holy Days begin this coming week with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and continue for the next ten days known as the Days of Awe or the days when you can turn your life around before the Book of Life is closed for another year. Yom Kippur signifies a day of Atonement, a day set aside for forgiveness and confession. The subject of Atonement from a Christian perspective fascinated Ballou and prompted him to write his *Treatise*. Atonement has been central to the Jewish religion for millennia as you heard in the reading by Dean Ornish on admitting shortcomings and seeking forgiveness for wrongs done to one another.

I broke down the word “atonement” further and borrowed a term I heard from a yoga teacher many decades ago. You won’t

find the word “at one ment” in any dictionary but to me it refers to a process where there is a degree of self-acceptance and understanding, an ability to look into the magic mirror that never lies and feel at peace with the person one finds there. This is difficult and very deep spiritual work. It requires some digging down into the parts of ourselves we aren’t so proud of, the shadow part of ourselves that I spoke about several weeks ago. To make peace with this shadow side we are willing to honestly look at our actions and interactions.

Twelve Step groups do this by taking a searching and fearless moral inventory and making amends if it won’t cause any further harm to anyone to do so. This moral inventory is like a Twelve Step version of practicing atonement for hurtful actions— “forgiv[ing] themselves and each other; begin[ing] again in love” (responsive reading # 637 by Robert Eller-Isaacs in *Singing the Living Tradition*).

The Twelve Step idea of making amends is another variation in confession, repentance or forgiveness most religious traditions encourage. The forms and purposes differ, but there is an impulse among human beings to forgive and be forgiven. In his book, *Love and Survival*, Dr. Dean Ornish says cultures and religions have found ways to share these painful parts of ourselves because the “healing potential is so great”. He says it has nothing to do with “God’s judgment”, but everything to do with “our own” (*Love and Survival*, p. 127). In other words, “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.”

Generally, Unitarian Universalists find little value in the word “sin” that is pretty central to atonement. We see it as oppressive—nailing us as excessively wicked and guilty people. In Judaism, the Hebrew word “sin” simply means to miss the mark. It is a metaphor for archer taking aim and missing the target. There is no need for the archer to despair or berate him or herself. The archer simply makes a mental note to take more careful aim the next time. Likewise, on Yom Kippur, the community recites their sins in the plural form. Individually,

people don't commit all the sins in the prayers, but collectively a congregation will likely cover the gamut.

By confessing their sins together as a community, no one is looking around to point fingers or accuse anyone. Though confession is done as a group, each person acknowledges a responsibility to address one's own wrongdoing and seek forgiveness. In essence, they work to forgive one another and themselves and "begin again in love." They form the beloved community by refusing to break down into those two splintering words, "us" and "them."

The Rev. Charles Howe is a noted Unitarian and Universalist historian who wrote an article for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ballou's book *A Treatise on Atonement*. Howe writes, "Orthodoxy considered sin to be infinite evil,... Ballou, on the other hand, regarded sin as finite, and therefore far less serious...". To Ballou, we'll inevitably fall short of the mark and sin, because we are imperfect. We can still strive to live better lives; we don't need the threat of hell hanging over our heads to be more just and compassionate. Ballou believed it is possible to seek forgiveness and "begin again in love'.

Ballou argues that orthodox Christianity has it all wrong. One of the central tenets of traditional Christianity revolves around atonement, that humanity is punished because of its sinful nature and Jesus pays for humanity's sins through his death. Ballou stressed a rational reading of Scripture.

<http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/hoseaballou.html>).

Hosea Ballou's understanding of Universalism and atonement suggests humankind punishes itself by failing to follow the "road less traveled"—by refusing to examine our actions and striving to become better people, we do great harm to ourselves and our relationships with one another while we're still alive.

The concept of atonement has been present in Judaism for thousands of years as people confess how they harm others and seek reconciliation and forgiveness. The Universalist side of our progressive religion encourages us to

love one another as ones-self. Dr. Ornish's midrash (his interpretation) on Yom Kippur and forgiveness and reconciliation is that it is good for our hearts, physically, emotionally and spiritually to admit our wrongdoings and seek forgiveness (*Love and Survival*, p. 126-7).

Religious liberals often abandon age-old concepts like atonement, repentance, and confession. Perhaps, we forego some form of these practices at our peril. I don't mean that our souls will perish. No one is privy to absolute confirmation about how such things work. We may miss out on finding a greater sense of "at one ment" through taking personal responsibility to repair the brokenness in ourselves and in our world, another Hebrew word, "tikkun olam"—one day at a time.

Surely the concept of a Day of Atonement where many Jews worldwide spend time fasting and praying together, and seeking the **strength** to repair broken relationships has some value for religious liberals. Even the most loving and close-knit community of individuals isn't perfect. We all miss the mark. We hurt someone unintentionally or intentionally through our words or actions. We don't speak up when we hear gossip or we help to spread rumors ourselves. Our wrongdoings, our sins, will be different, but we all commit them. The question is can "we forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love"? Can we turn around and look behind us so we can move forward in the year before us?

Oriah Mountain Dreamer wrote these soul searing words in her book, *The Invitation*:

"It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here.

I want to know if you will stand in the centre of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.

I want to know what sustains you from the  
inside when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself  
And if you truly like the company you keep in  
the empty moments.”

It is not easy to “stand in the center of the fire” and search our souls for our all too human failings, but it can be healing and transformative when we do. Confession in the spirit of honest acknowledgment can “sustain us from the inside”. It does not rob us of self-esteem—ironically it can strengthen us when “all else falls away.” And atonement leads to “at one ment”, to a discovery that we may well “like the company [we] keep in the empty moments” when we are alone with ourselves. And find that we are able to truly “begin again in love.” May we do just that.

## References and Resources

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