

“Book of Life”

Rev. Lyn Cox

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Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, began on Wednesday evening and continued through Friday. As you may know, I have an interfaith family, and my kids are Jewish. After synagogue services on Thursday morning, our family visited a creek for a practice called *Taschlich*. The idea with *Taschlich* is to let go of your past sins by casting them into the water, thus freeing yourself to start fresh. Bread stands in for your sins as you release the past.

As we stood beside the creek, I thought about the kinds of sins that I get into when I'm anxious. I can be impatient and cranky with others, make rash decisions, or fail to show up for someone who needs me. Every year, I commit to trying not to yell at my children as often. I think I probably will miss the mark again, but maybe I can make little improvements. The practice of *Taschlich* helps me to acknowledge my mistakes and make amends for them rather than dwell on them.

We've included the children in this ritual every year since they were born. Each time, they are a little older, and we can explain a little more and hear more about their ideas. The year completes a cycle, and yet we add something and have a new perspective with each go-round. We always bring a snack or PBJ sandwiches, as well as bread to release into the water. The year she was two, when we talked about what we were done with or wanted to do better, my daughter said, "We have our own bread." Probably what she meant was that snack is the most memorable part of any religious ritual.

If I read into it, her comment evokes some thoughts about what we emotionally release and what we keep. There are some thoughts and feelings that feed us; the peanut butter and jelly of our spiritual insights. We hold on to those. On the other hand, some things don't do us any good to ruminate on, but naming those experiences and releasing them out into the world might be a benefit to someone else, like the ducks in the creek feasting on bread. When there's a chance for reconciliation, mistakes become learning experiences.

Another Rosh Hashana tradition is to wish for each other to “be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.” The image is of a giant ledger of rights and wrongs, open for updating during the High Holidays. For me as a Universalist, I think of the Book of Life as an ongoing story. One of the ways we know we’re working with Life is when we recognize flow and change. Biological life is ongoing, persistent, dynamic, and a little bit chaotic. When someone tells me, “May you be inscribed in the Book of Life,” I hear, “May you be an active participant in a story about positive change.” May it be so for all of us.

Although I do celebrate the Jewish holidays at home, and I know some others in the congregation do as well, the larger question for us as a congregation is what do we learn this time of year that resonates with our own UU tradition? A few ideas come up: Return to sources of strength and resilience. Maintain a spiritual practice. Connect with and care for the divinity in each other. I think if we can do these things, we can write our stories into an ongoing, thriving Book of Life: Return. Practice. Connect with each other’s divinity.

Return

The metaphor of turning is a strong theme in the Jewish High Holidays. That can mean turning toward a spiritual life, or returning to a direction congruent with your values, or turning toward sources of strength and resilience. Returning means remembering the resources that empower us to connect with the source of blessing as we understand it to be, address suffering, and confront evil.

There is a lot of suffering and evil to work with right now. I can tell you that some of the evil is in my own heart. I work to try to keep it from having the last word, but it’s there. So is heartbreak. Maybe you are in the same boat.

In the next circle outward, there is pain among families and communities. In between people in relationship, there are always broken places that need attention. It takes energy to return to place of pain in a relationship, to acknowledge the hurt and to make repairs. Sometimes people can’t stop harming the ones who love them, and we have to set boundaries and love them from afar, and that hurts in a different way.

And then there is the evil in the world. There are the natural disasters, and the humans who make them worse with careless stewardship, and the human mistakes of neglecting disaster relief. There are world leaders who incite rather than prevent war. There are threats to the safety and wellbeing of those who can't count on being served or protected by our government. There is pain within, among, and beyond us. It can be overwhelming.

Sometimes we do turn away. We are diverted by the illusion of escape through busyness, or numbing, or denial. The spiritual practice is to return again, to come back to the path of healing. We seek the truth and we speak the truth in love, and the truth is that humanity has a lot of work to do before we can dwell in peace together, with the earth thriving in beauty and all her people as one.

Yet there is another truth. Returning to the liberating forces that create and uphold life also means reconnecting with sources of strength and resilience. We return to each other. Together, we reconstruct our relationship with the eternal presence of Love. I can imagine that the enormity of the world's grief makes it tempting to avoid church and all the places where people might ask how you are feeling. Return anyway. Recommit to resilience.

Returning to communities that are dedicated to repairing the world reconnects us with a history and a present moment full of people who witness to the transforming power of love. Returning to the path means remembering ancestors who imagined that we would someday be here with these opportunities. Returning means joining with companions who will hold us up as we travel toward hope. When we return, we remember that we are not alone.

Maintain a Spiritual Practice

Something else we can do to align ourselves with the story of life, a story of change and growth, is to maintain a spiritual practice. A spiritual practice is something you do regularly that brings you back to your center and keeps you accountable to your deepest values.

One of my spiritual practices is singing. Last week, we included singing in our vigil at the Berks Residential Center, where refugee and asylum-seeking women, men, and children are incarcerated. One of the purposes of the vigil was to let the families know that they are not forgotten, that despite the miles and fences that keep us apart, they have friends outside who are working for their release. We were not allowed into the center, and the residents were not allowed outside the fence to come and meet us, and so singing helped close the distance between our vigil and our incarcerated neighbors. I hope we were able to convey some measure of comfort.

Another purpose of the vigil was to guide those of us on the outside to recommit to the path of justice. By singing, we repeated words of intention, thereby cementing in our hearts the work ahead. And by singing, we shared breath, finding ourselves in an interdependent community with people who will support one another and call each other back to community.

Singing in that moment accomplished a lot. Our individual experiences of music from before last week helped prepare us for that moment. Every time we sing together, we open up future possibilities for a time when singing can comfort, challenge, and call us back to our deepest values.

I realize that not everyone loves singing. Sometimes being in a community of faith means accepting and encouraging one another to spiritual growth, and accompanying each other when it is not comfortable. We try to leave room for a variety of ways that people in our community might encounter the sacred, and to celebrate when our neighbors find it, even if that route isn't the most direct one for us. Next week, we will celebrate communion as part of the regular service. This is a spiritual practice that some among us long for and need for their spiritual centering, and some among us find uncomfortable. We support each other.

Spiritual practices help us keep our inner "tools" handy for the challenges that come along. I believe that we can maintain our life-affirming, growth-encouraging resources by using them regularly. Whether your practice is mindful walking, prayer, yoga, baking, writing thank-you notes, or something else, I believe that habits of the soul help us to find creative solutions.

Find and Care For Divinity in Each Other

In Jewish wisdom, it is said that when one saves a life, one saves a world. UU's would say we are interdependent. We know that the health of the whole depends on all of us. Our communities are stronger when more of us are fed and housed. Reaching out to someone who needs help has a positive ripple effect. Save a life, save a world.

One of our UU principles is respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This comes from the Universalist side of our heritage, which says that no one is beyond the reach of Divine love. For some of us who are theists, we see a reflection of the Holy in every face. For some of us who are not theists, we look for all of the holiness we expect to find in the people around us and in the world as it is. I think we can agree on finding and caring for divinity in each other.

I preach about caring for each other a lot. That's not because I think something is missing. It's because UU's constantly teach me about caring and I want to reflect it back. The talent and energy that is drawn forth from people in this congregation in the service of compassion is astounding. It matters. If you sent a card, held someone in prayer, brought a meal, showed up to a memorial service, sent an encouraging text message, it matters. These acts of kindness add up to sustain bodies and spirits. Save a life, save a world.

What I'm asking here is that this congregation continues to practice compassion. Keep doing that, and may others can follow your example. Offer a kind word to care for someone's spirit, and let that kindness ripple out to everyone they meet. Care for the entrances to our buildings, removing obstacles to others, and broaden all of our pathways to wisdom. Care for each other so that we have the strength to find creative solutions in the year ahead.

Conclusion

The Jewish High Holidays and the fall equinox and the beginning of the school year may all call us back to the idea of starting over, of re-committing to our values, of seeing the big picture of our whole system. The turning seasons may set us in motion, calling us back to communities of justice and healing. The rhythms of the days and nights may

inspire us to maintain a spiritual practice. The cooler weather may bring us together, in close view of the divinity that we care for in each other. May these changes help us to adapt in life-affirming ways. May we all be written into the Book of Life.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.