

Sweet Blessings

a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak
on Sunday, 28 September 2014

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

A new season has arrived... the time of as Mabon... the Autumn Equinox signals a time of balance and harvest, marking the winding down of the growing season, ushering in a time of intense color and waning light, preparing the way for the quiet times of winter... which seems like a long way off as we enjoy these warm, sunny days. The season invites us to pause for a moment... reminding us that even though something else is *always* just around the corner, marking time and its passage gets us back into balance... balance with ourselves, with one another, and perhaps with our communities and with the world around us.

Unitarian Universalist minister Mike Young reminds us:

We arrive here, each of us, jostled and distracted, trailing clouds of many days of hurry and worry. We come to center and balance ourselves once more. Perhaps we are seeking to recover something deep inside where we are most at home with who we have become. Or we are here and totally unaware of that desire, that need to touch that wholeness.

One thing I am sure about these gatherings each week is that we are here to find again that place of calm where we're not isolated from each other. We come to re-connect with the larger human family, reminding ourselves that we belong, remembering what it is to which we belong. I believe that each week – whether we say so or not – we are here to re-affirm those values which we would have find their way into our lives and our relationships, that we might embrace the option offered by our better selves.

We are entering into a time of new beginnings in so many ways. The seasons change, moving almost imperceptibly from summer into autumn. The Autumn Equinox marks the dividing of day and night equally. And we may welcome or dread the shortening of daylight and the impending dark. Even in the heart of Center City, we sense the waning sunlight. But in the lives we lead, the days never really do get shorter insofar as how we spend our time. We just turn the lights on sooner, adjusting to waking or going home from work in the dark. We adjust... we keep moving, doing. But this is a time to think about *being*. Here in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days, in the days between, it is a time of turning... of beginning again.

In her book *The Days Between: Blessings, Poems and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holy Day Season*, writer and translator and poet Marcia Falk writes:

“We measure time in lines - forward and back. We count the years of our lives from zero to the end. We count the days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur: ten. But we also

measure time in cycles - birthdays and memorial days, monthly and yearly holidays, the weekly return of the Sabbath. Spring and fall and spring again.

And we count cycles not from beginning to end but from beginning to beginning.

Season begets season, month begets month, day begets day, without pause. No sooner has a year begun that we start counting the days until the next New Year.

The two kinds of time, linear and cyclical, are always with us, and never more so than during the High Holiday season, when darkness and light intermingle. A year has passed, and we are aware of being a year closer to our death. And yet, we are given a chance to start fresh. The turning of the year - t'shuvat hashanah, as the New Year is sometimes referred to in the Bible - reminds us that all ends are beginnings and all beginnings can be turnings. ... we turn, deliberately and with deliberation, to confront the great challenges of our lives.

... a central liturgical passage of Rosh Hashanah asks these questions: "Who will live and who will die?" And we may add: "What kind of life will we live in the time we have? Where in our life will we find purpose and meaning?"

These are important questions for all of us, whether the Jewish heritage is part of your background or not. Like our secular observation each December 31st, these days can be filled with celebrations and resolutions and hopes that things are going to get better next year. Yet this optimistic attitude is wisely tempered with the acknowledgement that any new endeavor, any change, is only truly effective and beneficial when done with preparation, humility, with as clean a slate as possible, including a reckoning of failings and talents.

The season, the world around us, the calendar all offer opportunities for transformation, for remaking our lives in some way, of reconnecting with our roots, with who we are, seeking "nothing less than the removal of sin and the renewal of love." The renewal of love... the renewal of our own sense of life, of a life that balances our own wants and the needs of others. This love is not limited to a romance of two people or deep affection for family members but the foundational spirit of our interconnected existence. In this cycle of time, we are given the chance, the opportunity to begin again, a *life-giving change of direction*, a willingness to move forward even when setbacks are too numerous to count.

This morning I invite us for reflect together on beginning again, on turning. And next Sunday we'll observe more deeply the essential act required of us in turning - forgiveness. I know - we all know - that beginning again - making changes in our lives or behaviors, whether they be big or small - is hard. We might be fearful of change, knowing all too well what beginning again asks of us. The fear arises not from outside, from some other power threatening harm, retribution or punishment if we change direction, or make a new start.

No, the biggest challenge to beginning again is the resistance within - the notion that change seems impossible. How many of you have ever tried to change something about yourself... a bad habit or practice that brings you or those around you pain? You know how impossible it seems, how hard it is, how we can so readily list our failures alongside what may be a shorter list of successes. We sometimes despair of ever making it right. And when we confront the world and find ourselves reckoning with war and climate change and rampant disease, and violence on our own streets and this farther away, we feel we are too small to make it right. This is all too big for us to alter the course of events. Letters and calls to legislators, demonstrations and rallies may seem pointless in the scheme of things.

Whether it be personal or global, we may think we have lost the ability to change or grow or renew; that those habits are too ingrained, the events too long past, the hurts too deep. But you know, this process is ongoing, like the cycles of the seasons, our growth and change is always *eight steps forward, and seven steps back*. No matter our present state of happiness or confusion or pain - it is always eight forward, seven back. This idea comes from a very old tale, and it's either about moving forward or getting up, again and again, over and over.

You see, there was a monk who lived in a monastery high on a mountain. One day he descended to the village below and a someone ran up to him and said, "Oh, father, surely yours must be the best of all lives, living so close to God, way up there on the summit. Tell me, what do you holy ones do up there?" After a thoughtful pause, the monk replied, "What do we do? Well, let me see. We fall down, and we get up. Then we fall down, and we get up. Then, oh yeah, we fall down, and we get up. That's pretty much what our lives look like - how about yours, down there in the valley?" *Seven* times down, *eight* times up — making comebacks, falling, if not stepping, forward. Always one more.

So it is with beginning anew - turning... Turning means we will look back even as we look forward. To take the past into account and begin to transform it into positive action in the present. I cannot change what was done in the past that I regret. Neither can I afford to keep reliving those moments. But I can change, do it differently this time around; or do something completely new... beginning again. Taking this time, slowing down, making the space needed for this turning is the first step, so we can know where we are and see what needs to change. We have done this before – maybe last year, perhaps just yesterday. We have made progress sometimes, and we have slipped back into old habits and old ways. But year after year, day after day, we begin again.

If this seems overwhelming to you, if the problems in your life, or the things that are wrong in this world, are just more than you can handle, or you can't begin to see how to change, or

where to begin again, how to take those next eight steps, then rest in the moment. Aware that you may fall back three, five or seven steps... but know you have moved forward. Now is *not* the time to figure everything out – to try to find blame for all that is wrong. And perhaps this is just *not* the time to get a new plan together and try to push it through. In these early autumn days, when summer still lingers but you know the change is just around the corner, it is time to be still, to center ourselves. And we need to trust what we've always trusted in: friendship, kindness, the power of our minds and the power of love. We cannot right every wrong or reverse the tide of world events, but we can be helping the poor, feeding the hungry.

Maybe you've felt scattered for awhile... like dry leaves blown in the wind. Maybe you've felt scared of dangers known and unknown. Maybe you are frustrated, angry, mad as hell, and feel useless, powerless, alone. Maybe it's all too much. Then now is the time to get quiet. To reflect, spend time with those closest to us, to step back from the edge of judgment... move away from the anger that wells up inside, no matter how righteous.

And now is the time to turn to each other, turn to the precious gift of life. Recognize and cherish those people who make our lives worth living. Take another step forward – maybe step four or five in those eight – and we turn toward life and embrace those who have joined their lives with ours and refuse to take them for granted for a single moment. We turn to one and other in this community and know we are not alone in our struggles, alone in facing an increasingly troubling and challenging world – both personally and globally. We turn within, looking to ourselves – appreciating our gifts, challenging our growing edges, and pledging anew to take that next step, to weep, perhaps, or to smile, and begin again.

We are all ceaseless time travelers as we move from moment to moment, event to event. But the maps of time are hard to attain - cycles and timelines and trajectories layered one atop of the other - and even harder to read. We may find ourselves seeming to stand still in our lives and yet time whizzes by. It moves, it does not stop for us. Marcia Falk says this about "time":

"We use it - wisely or not. We fill it and mark it.

We try to stop it, but there is no end to it.

And yet, we never have enough.

It is a circle, it is a line.

Moving forward, day by day, year by year, we come round and round again.

Again the spring, again the fall - but every leaf a new one, every fall a new shape falling.

Always starting, never finished, we live always in the between.

No time, we say, we have no time. Yet we have all the time in the world.

And there is no time like now."

My friends, L'shanah tovah ("for a good year").