



Rev. Paige Getty's Reflection **From Online Worship: "Repent & Renew"**

September 27, 2020

One of the beautiful things about our religious tradition, historically speaking, is its insistence on the inherent worth and dignity of each human being.

We are born, they say, not with original sin (as some traditions teach) but with original blessing. Our individual lives have value. Each of us comes into this world equally worthy of love and nourishment.

Even in acknowledging our human shortcomings and accepting that no one is perfect, in our progressive tradition there's always been a sense of optimism and positivity about human goodness and progress—we're continually learning, growing, evolving. In the early 20th century, when Humanism was gaining prominence among us, the Unitarian motto was "onward and upward forever!"

In more contemporary times, we have found resonance in the words of Bryan Stevenson, of the Equal Justice Initiative, who wrote in his book Just Mercy, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

We are not inherently bad. And even a single terrible act does not make one a Bad. Person.

Unfortunately, this theology sometimes gets applied in ways that have made us defensive and ashamed and less equipped to be our full, relational selves. When we accept theological principles and values only in their shorthand, platitudinal form—and then reject experience and insight that adds nuance to those principles and values—we are diminishing the fullness of our humanity.



By focusing too heavily on our inherent worth and dignity—which some interpret as inherent goodness—we are less practiced at withstanding the discomfort and awkwardness and vulnerability of acknowledging our own shortcomings. So we have conflated some things in ways that keep us brittle and inflexible and resistant to change and growth. We act as if...

to be criticized is to be rejected
to be asked to consider a different perspective is to be shamed
to acknowledge ignorance is to be unacceptably weak
to apologize is to reveal a fatal flaw

When, in truth, none of those things is inherently true. At its best...

Constructive criticism, offered sincerely, is not rejection; it is acceptance of another person's potential.
Sharing perspectives—even hard & challenging & painful ones—is not shaming; it is an invitation to continued relationship.
To acknowledge ignorance is not to be a failed human being and therefore to have no worth, but is to acknowledge that the world is full of insight and wisdom that we have yet to learn.
To apologize is not to reject one's own worth and dignity, but is to say, I know I messed up and I am committed to doing better.

Focusing too intently on goodness and worth and dignity and progress—without adequate attention to the very normal human ways that we express our imperfection, and mess up, and hurt each other—has kept us isolated from one another; has trapped us in superficial and habitual ways of relating with other people; and has



prevented many of us from experiencing the power of deep and meaningful connection.

We are not in the habit of voicing our mistakes and asking for forgiveness. We have valued comfort over awkward connection; we have valued the familiarity of a feigned truce over the risk of rejection if our apology isn't accepted.

But as Rev. Victoria Safford wrote, "The task is not about comfort, it is about truth. Awkward is irrelevant."

And that's the beauty in the traditions we are honoring today—traditions that promote the practice confession, repentance, atonement ... and renewal of deep and meaningful connections with ourselves, our human companions, and our God. Through practice we normalize the experience; it is, therefore, less awkward.

Those of you who grew up in conservative Trinitarian Christian churches, like I did, were probably taught that because you, as a human, are imperfect, you need Jesus, who—through his death—atoned for your sins. But one of the things that distinguished our Unitarian forebears from the Trinitarians was their rejection of this idea. The Unitarians focused on his life, not his death, teaching that that Jesus was a model for how to live. They did not believe that his death was a substitute for our personal atonement.

And that's part of why the tradition of atonement as observed in Jewish communities is valued among us in our modern Unitarian Universalism. The Jewish tradition insists that confession and repentance—and forgiveness, although that's not a requirement—are relational acts, between and among humans. One reflects on one's own life, honestly acknowledging the harm inflicted on others, and then goes to those other persons and says, "I'm sorry for the harm I have caused."



It is a matter-of-fact acceptance of our human fallibility. There is no caveat that says, If you've done harm, you need to apologize. No, there is an acceptance that by virtue of being human, each of us has done harm, and we need to acknowledge it and apologize for it.

And that leads to another powerful aspect of this tradition: Repentance is both an individual AND a communal act. In their Yom Kippur services tomorrow, Jewish communities will speak prayers in which they voice their confessions not as individuals, but as a community. We have fallen short. We have done harm. We must do better.

We who have held wealth and power for generations know that we must loosen our hold on that wealth and power so that others have more equitable access to it.

We who have lived comfortably in our White cisgender bodies and have projected our experiences onto others who are more vulnerable to harm in our world must acknowledge our limited vision. With apology, we remove our blinders and promise to restore and repair those relationships by listening and hearing how those experiences are different than ours.

We who have been so insistent that we have it all figured out must humbly acknowledge that we have more still to learn and understand.

[pause]

For those 20th century Humanist Unitarians I referred to earlier, “onward and upward forever” applied to humanity as a whole, not to individuals. ¹ An individual life may exhibit minimal change and

¹ Murder, Doug. “Onward and upward forever? The realities of an individual life—and of aging—reveal the limits of unlimited growth and expansion.” UUWorld. 10/1/2018 <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/onward-upward-forever>



progress over time—and certainly wouldn't be infinite, regardless—but humanity as a whole showed promise of progress.

But in order for that progress to be a reality, we must acknowledge the full complexity of our humanity. We must, in the tradition of the Jewish High Holy Days, repent—honestly acknowledge our failures and mistakes and shortcomings—and thereby renew our commitment to doing better and better and better.

In celebration of the wisdom of communal repentance, I invite you now to join in A Litany of Atonement. The words of the congregational response will appear on your screen: “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.”

“A Litany of Atonement”
by Robert Eller-Isaacs

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness [that] sets us apart and alone



We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle [that] have fueled the illusion of separateness

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Amen.