

Healing from the Center

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South Nassau UU Congregation, Freeport, NY

The Healing of the High Holy Days: A reflection by Harriet Arnold

Last Sunday evening, Jews all over the world celebrated the start of the year 5776. Rosh Hashanah literally the “Head of the Year,” began that evening with the blowing of an ancient horn called a shofar. And thus began the High Holy Days of Judaism.

These are the 10 days that began last Sunday and will end on Wednesday evening when Yom Kippur ends with another long, loud blast on that ancient horn.

Often these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called The Days of Awe. But why? What is so awesome about these days?

As a child, forced to sit in an often-stifling synagogue, listening to a foreign language that meant nothing to me, my sisters and I called it The Days of Bore. Through the years I came to appreciate the confluence of the new school year and the Jewish New Year. They both offered another chance; a clean slate, pure white notebook pages—and I embrace this wisdom today because the essence of these days, which reflects our theme for this month, is the possibility of healing.

It is said that on Rosh Hashanah one’s fate for the coming year is entered in the Book of Life but it is not sealed until Yom Kippur. This gives each person 10 days to review, reflect, repent and decide how to conduct one’s life for the next year.

For Jews, this is the job of God. But as a Unitarian Universalist, I believe the Head of the Year is ruled by this head (tap head.)

On the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, it is customary to go to a body of water (ocean, river, pond, or the canal in my yard) where we ceremonially cast our sins into the water. Here again—although I reject the notion of sin—I have yet to have a year in which I lived up to all of my best expectations of myself and so I review. And I toss out the guilt and shame of my unkind words and deeds and reflect on how I will better become the BEST that I can be.

I continue this and other rituals of these days although I no longer accept the basic tenets of Judaism. But I continue because now as I sit in synagogue on Yom Kippur, I recognize the chanting of prayers as meditation, a chance to connect to myself in peace. I say Yiskah, the prayer for the dead, because it is a strong connection to the community of my parents and grandparents and 5,776 years of my ancestors.

I look forward to the cantor singing a plaintive, inexpressibly beautiful song called the Kol Nidre because music always heals my soul. The Kol Nidre also reminds me that ignorance of the faith of others can cause horrific misunderstandings.

I fast because I believe those deeds I symbolically threw in the canal should have consequences and self-discipline and the denial of food for one day of the year grounds me in the principles of my Unitarian Universalist faith.

I am so blessed to have rediscovered the wisdom of the faith of my forefathers and foremothers without the dogma that I could not accept. It has enabled me to see and accept the wisdom of all those who sought to heal themselves and, thus, the world.

RESPONSIVE READING:

Cure may occur without healing;

healing may occur without cure.

Cure alters what is;

healing offers what might be.

Cure is an act;

healing is a process.

Cure seeks to change reality;

healing embraces reality.

Cure takes charge;

healing takes time.

Cure avoids grief;

healing assumes grief.

Cure speaks;

healing listens.

Words by Fred Recklau, "Partners in Care: Medicine and Ministry Together"

SERMON: Let's Talk about the Ordination!

When I went to the minister's meeting at Community Church in NYC on Wednesday, the Rev. Nancy Arnold made a comment to me about The Ordination. "That was the nicest ordination that I have ever been to. And I've been to a lot." (Nancy is my mentor for this interim work and she and the Rev. Carol Haag offered the right and the left hand of fellowship, while making the point that there is no gender-neutral word for fellowship.)

When I pressed her as to why she thought the ordination was so nice, she said. "It was integrated. The theme of Building Community, Deepening Connection was echoed everywhere. From the greeting and hospitality for guests, from the food, from the way that the ordination service elements were forever blending two voices."

And it was magical! It was transcendent.

Carrie Mason-Draffen, proud mother of Tyler Mason Draffen of the Freeport High School Alumni, wrote in an email: "We are a small church but that day we turned some water into some serious wine."

We, all together, created a sanctuary space for the holy. We created, all of us, what we had never done before. We carried forth a centuries-old tradition. And, according to the Rev. Dr. Hope Johnson, "We changed the face of ordinations to come."

Now, I am imagining that there are some of you that are saying, "Well, Laurie, you created the vision. You created the container."

And that's true.

But what Nancy Arnold said was that the whole of the ordination was integrated: from the greeters to the food. All of it!

So let's reflect on some of the lessons that we can take from this experience.

Lesson number one is: When we are all walking, talking and responding to the same vision, a special kind of energy is created. Within that space of shared vision is the potential of creative transformation.

Process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman tells us that any time that we truly walk in each other's shoes, a creative transformation occurs and human beings are the best that they can be – a divine spark is manifested. He surmised that Jesus had this innate ability to be a catalyst to cause people to walk in each other's shoes.

When we experience life as the other, we are changed. (It makes sense, right? We add a new experience to ourselves. And this new perspective allows us to experience something outside of ourselves. We become expanded. And we become more whole as an individual. We become an individual connected to something beyond ourselves. We are responding from an interconnected place. We become our better selves.

So this is not about the vision of one person: this transformation occurs when everyone shares the same vision. And not only do we share the same vision, we actively apply ourselves to living it in our own way, in the present moment.

That's another lesson from The Ordination: Being in the present moment is very powerful. At The Ordination, we were all in the present moment together. I felt it in the silence when Rebecca Parker was delivering the sermon. The room was focused on her. I could feel the energy whooshing over me. I swear. And I don't usually notice those things. (I guess that I was totally present!)

In review:

Ordination Lesson One: Great things can happen when everyone shares the same vision.

Ordination Lesson Two: When we are in the present moment, our energy is the strongest. That makes sense, doesn't it: When we are all focused on the same thing, we are all focused on the same thing. It's not all diffused. It's not distracted. (Again, we are acting from that connected space.)

Ordination Lesson Three: How we frame our experience makes a difference in how we experience our life.

In a conversation with Harriet (Arnold, the RE Coordinator) on Thursday, she asked me if I felt different. When I said that I did, she offered this explanation: "It's funny. Sometimes we have to hear it from other people and then we can do what we always could."

For me, it's not that I feel empowered because you have called me a minister. More specific, it's that the affirmation has added something to my life. I feel recognized, seen, charged to be coming at life with theological and spiritual reflection.

And it was not that I had to hear that I was a minister from you and then do what I could have done anyway; it's more that your affirmation has made a difference to me.

So Lesson Three is that there is great power in framing how we look at things; our interpretation is the most important reference for the experience of our life.

In feeling this affirmation, and not making it into "Gosh, why did I wait so long to become actualized;" or some other kind of negative self talk, I am made more whole. I am transformed. I am healed.

Last week, in introducing the theme of healing and asking whether you have experienced this sanctuary as a sanctuary of healing, the Rev. Dr. Linda Anderson said that "religious communities can offer what state-run programs and non-profit services generally cannot – the transformation of hearts and minds and the building of relationships that support people. A healing community considers and responds to the human consequences of the ways of the world."

Sharing a vision, being in the present moment, and consistently framing the ordination as an event to offer heart-felt interconnections had us all functioning and responding to the ways of the world. We were focused on our vision; and within that vision, we were flexible and nimble.

We changed the venue from inside and out and decorated the outside of the building with the props that we had collected for our party under the trees. (They remain outside now, and the place looks lively. There are pumpkins by the sign; it looks great!)

We accommodated the late addition of the Senator Michael Assido, and he participated in our format and presented a proclamation with one sentence.

We connected around the food that each of us brought and created a bountiful reception. We accepted the abundance of food – and joyfully sent home its abundance with the community.

And now, today, we reflect on the lessons that we experienced and apply it to the transition work ahead. You knew I was going to get there, right?

What you and I have experienced is the power of a shared vision. What you and I experienced was an ordination and a congregation on a mission. A mission to create a vision of an ordination that was authentic and heart-felt.

With that vision in top-of-mind awareness, we created a mission to pull it off. We worked to achieve that vision in all of our preparations. We communicated the vision and it became the mission of all of us. Fundamental to our vision was that we wanted to build community and deepen connections. We asked everyone to contribute. Our success depended on creating and communicating that shared vision.

And we didn't do that because we couldn't have done it a different way. We did it that way because that was the vision and it was our mission to accomplish the task.

The ordination committee created to do lists – and goals to be accomplished. We divided up the work, trying hard not to overburden any person.

This was excellent committee work. And we held it up as a marvelous example in our Leadership Development workshop that the Board held yesterday afternoon.

As we looked at the committees of the congregation, we started a process by which all of the committees would articulate the vision for their work, and their mission to make the vision manifest in the world.

The committees will be presenting their vision, mission and goals at a Congregational Forum after service on October 30. This is the interim work of the congregation. This exploration strengthens the committees and the interplay between the committees and thereby bolsters the congregation.

Well done!

All of this is not to say that we will not have our challenges this year. As we open the doors and the spaces in our mind for structural development, all of the places where structural development is needed are going to show themselves. Everything that needs to be healed will reveal itself.

This is good news. Right, I hear you saying, it's good news that systems that have been ailing will break completely. This is good news?

Yes. We are on a mission to finish our interim work and all that needs to be addressed will reveal itself. We will get the opportunity to heal it all.

This harks back to Lesson Number Three. There is great power in framing how we look at things; our interpretation is the most important reference for the experience of our life.

So as we look at our organizational structure, I ask you to take the spiritual perspective to encounter that which challenges us as an opportunity to heal. Rather than have ourselves be caught in drama and recriminations of self or of others, let us apply our intention to heal.

Let us look at whatever challenges us, not as a disruption, but rather as a guest whose timing couldn't be more perfect.

And that is Ordination Lesson Number 4: We find salvation in our spiritual perspective.

In closing, I return to the words of Rebecca Parker, who, in her sermon at The Ordination, told a story of a Thai monk who for decades preached about the need to stop cutting down the forest. People would listen, but then go home and cut down the forest to plant maize. However, when he started to ordain the trees as beings who held the dharma, there was a change of heart. That is when a healing community was created that "considers and responds to the human consequences of the ways of the world."

We see this power of spirituality in the Native Americans who are actively protecting the water and resisting the building of a pipeline in North Dakota. The native Americans are disrupting the dominant narrative by embracing their spirituality and actively holding a shared vision of the earth as sacred. As water is life.

It is most fitting that as a nation we are starting to understand that "Columbus Day" is actually a day of mourning. We are beginning to understand that this celebration of conquest needs a healing.

What an auspicious moment! On this weekend when we are

reminded that the Book of Life is open for inspection for 10 days and that we could practice atonement and intention to be our best selves,
when cities around the nation are changing the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day,
where Indigenous People are disrupting the dominant narrative and reclaiming their spiritual heritage of a people of peace and reverence,
where the rape culture is being reviled in the political process,
where this congregation is celebrating its magnificent hosting of an sacred ritual of Unitarian Universalism, and our committees are digging into vision and mission, let us rejoice in the opportunity and the gift of being present.

Let us be agents of this healing, in our lives, in our congregation, in the world.

Congratulations on hosting a most successful ordination and may its lessons of the power of shared vision and a mission to support that vision, the power of the present moment, the power of interpretation and spirituality continue to inform our days and be a healing presence in our previous world.

May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS:

Words by Lyla June Johnson, Facebook, September 27

The exact nature of our actions in the world will necessarily fade from human memory, as every hero is forgotten, and every celebrity is returned to the dust.

But the essence of our actions will echo through time forever. The dominos we choose to push today, either through love and courage, or hate and faithlessness, will weave themselves into the fabric of space and time eternally.

The seventh generation from now will not remember our names.

But they will drink from the water that we have safeguarded for them.

And the flow of this water down their esophagus will carry with it the faintest scent of our love for them.

In this way only are we remembered by time and by life, just as we can still feel the love (and the hate) of our ancestors all around us today.