

“Hold a Lantern”
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In the book of Micah in the Hebrew Scripture it is written that our sins will be cast into the depths of the sea.¹ Often this is translated as “hurl;” our sins will be hurled away from us. As a lifelong Jewish Unitarian Universalist, I follow the annual Jewish practice of asking myself how I have hurt or caused pain to others, intentionally or otherwise, and then I try to make it right. I can say, therefore, that this image of hurling feels pretty accurate! Making amends is hard work. It’s sweaty and embodied, like hurling something heavy off a steep, muddy riverbank.

The High Holy Days are sometimes described as “getting right with God.” But what actually happens is that we focus on our interpersonal relationships and on repairing anything weakened or broken in our friendships, families, workplaces and neighborhoods. I love this humanist theology; it puts into beautiful practice what the first Humanist Manifesto articulated in 1933 (many signers of which were Unitarian), that “[R]eligion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant.”²

In our Call to Gather, Rumi embraces the same theology; it is not some superior and removed deity-being who holds the lantern. It is our very own heart that holds it up and out, to keep us from stumbling over each other, huddled beneath the sky as we are.

Still, no matter what kind of poetry gets wound around it, taking responsibility for hurting others is difficult and scary. My hardest apology was last year, when saying “sorry” didn’t repair the rift. It felt like hurling the most vulnerable part of myself from high elevation and then watching the freefall as nothing ever landed.

Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were, in fact, good friends. The historical record reflects their deep respect and appreciation for each other. Yet the movements they represented weren’t able to keep alive the calm, secure connection conveyed so evocatively in our story. Unfortunately, as their ideas about rights gained traction globally, public conversation got framed as a contest in which only one side could emerge victorious.

People—especially those with an interest in keeping folks from being friends across difference—began to ask, *well, whose rights should come first, women’s or African American’s?* Brutal infighting ensued. Leadership of neither “side” handled it well. Rather, they seemed to lose sight of the fact that some people are *both* African American *and*

¹http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16193/jewish/Chapter-7.htm

²http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/humanist_manifesto_i

female. Where did their rights fit in? Ultimately, leaders failed to see that all causes are strongest when we refuse to compete, when we won't be divided.

The story of *Two Friends* is true and complicated, and this makes it just like many of our friendships. Sometimes it's hard to stay in relationship across difference, whatever that difference might be.

Sipping tea by candlelight with two slices of cake is a wonderful way to spend the day but those same great friends we enjoy tea with can let us down, hurt our feelings, even stop being in our lives for a variety of reasons; death, a falling out, someone might move out of the area or become emotionally distant. Langston Hughes, the activist, writer and early innovator of the jazz poetry art form wrote this very simple verse about friendships broken and gone:

I loved my friend
He went away from me
There's nothing more to say
The poem ends,
Soft as it began-
I loved my friend.

Doesn't that say it all? We love our friends but that doesn't mean it's always easy—or even possible—to keep every friendship.

Personally, I sometimes struggle to stay in close touch to even beloved people after I move geographically due simply to practical considerations. Or sometimes we might discover that nothing on the surface has changed but one or both people in a friendship have evolved away from previously shared interests or values. I've heard from a few of you here in the last few weeks that even simple social media connections have gotten challenging to maintain in this political climate.

Friendship takes labor. It's work, kind of like assembling a puzzle. Even if ultimately worthwhile, it can be frustrating. There are bound to be funny shaped holes here and there but, if you can piece it all together, you have an amazing art form right there in your hands and a lot of satisfaction. Puzzles evoke absence and presence, apt themes when it comes to the joy and turmoil of trying to figure out how to be a friend or keep one, grieve or develop one.

Let me tell you this story about a time I faced one of my fears. About ten years ago I made a good friend. Eventually, the universe brought to her something that I very much wanted and never got to have. She knew nothing about my struggles in this area or my secret longings and so she wasn't sensitive to my pain. She wasn't even aware of it!

I was more jealous than the word can convey. For whatever reason, I am not usually envious and so the intensity of my bitterness shocked me. I abruptly withdrew from the

friendship. No calls, no happy hour, no contact. I was aware I was being mean but I couldn't stop. I felt a literal chill when I thought about her and her joy.

The resolve to explain and apologize seized me every High Holy Days but it took a few years to soften, reflect, soften a little more, sip a little more wisdom from the bitter tea I had brewed.

Finally, last fall, I picked up my courage and the phone. My former friend was gracious. She returned my call, listened and forgave. I am so grateful for that kindness. It was not required. Yet she asked no questions, expressed no emotion, projected no warmth. Maybe she simply needed time to digest, or had moved on from our friendship in her own way and was disinclined to re-open that door. I don't know and I respect that I may never. After all, our apologizing does not obligate the receiver to open their arms to us.

I am glad I told her I was sorry. It was the right thing. But did I feel better? Yes and no. I felt free of baggage—this huge, unwieldy ratty suitcase I had been lugging around—but I didn't feel the closure I had sought. The suitcase was gone but my arms were still frozen into the posture of holding it.

Everyone has baggage and so ancient Judaism developed a practice called tashlich to help us let go of whatever is not serving us well. The ritual is this: you literally hurl something into flowing water to signify emotional release and freedom. Some Jews empty their pockets of whatever might be caught there—an old receipt, crumbs from a long forgotten snack, lint. In my family it has always been stale bread.

The story goes that the water must contain fish because just as fish eyes are always open, never blinking, so do we pray that we may always be open to ourselves, to others and our world starting afresh.

My apology didn't go the way I wanted and I've been hanging on to that disappointment all year. I crave that moment when I can feel my burdens and bags, trunks and boxes dissolving into water and being absorbed into a universe big enough to hold it all.

If you have ever missed the mark and longed to start afresh, I invite you to join me for tashlich next week, after you've had a chance to reflect on what you'd like to move past. Next Saturday, meet me and Jaclyn at the pavilion at Peabody Park at 10 am. Bring some old bread or crackers. We will lead a simple ritual—just a minute or two—at the Fox River and then, if you have a metaphorical suitcase of your own to discard, you can cast it (hurl it, if you will!) into the water.

In this way—or in whatever way makes most sense to you—may you feel yourself forgiven for whatever shame or mistake might be lingering within your heart. After all, if our hearts do not hold a lantern, we will stumble over each other, huddled beneath the sky as we are.

Amen.

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