

***Ready for Anything* by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
fvuuf.org**

September 24, 2017

Reading: *A Kol Nidrei* by Mark Belletini

Let's set it all down, you and me.

The disappointments.

Little and large.

The frustrations.

Let's open our fists and drop them.

The useless waiting.

The obsession with what we cannot have.

The focus on foolish things.

The pin-wheeling worry which wears us out.

The fretting.

Let's throw them down.

The comparisons of ourselves with others.

The competition, as if Domination
was the best name we could give to God.

The cynical assumptions.

The unspoken, shelved anger.

Let's toss them.

The inarticulate suspicions.

The self-doubt.

The pre-emptive self-dumping.

The numbing bouts of self-pity.

Let's sink them all like stones.

Like stones in the pool of this gift of silence.

Let's drop them like hot rocks
into the cool silence.

And when they're gone,

let's lay back gently, and float,

float on the calm surface of the silence.

Let's be supported in this still cradle

of the world, new-born, ready for anything.

Sermon: *Ready for Anything*

Well, do you? Do you hear? Or maybe a better question is...do you take the time to really listen and, if so, what do you hear or see or taste or feel or sense...about yourself? How is it going, being you? Life can be a blur. I don't know about you but not only do I sometimes forget to check in and take stock of myself and how I'm living life but it can even slip from my consciousness *how* I might do that.

As someone who comes from Judaism, I grew up with some rituals that can help us remember how to listen to our lives. This past week saw the beginning of the High Holy Days, also called the Days of Awe. First comes Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year; that's what started Wednesday evening. In Judaism we begin our year by looking back. This is a practice that requires turning. We look back and assess, and then we figure out how to reorient to who we most wish to be.

It can be painful to welcome memories. Taking stock of what we have witnessed, endured and done can bring up the sad and hard, maybe especially when we focus on our own behavior. Each of us has probably not treated someone as they deserved. Each of us can probably identify some small incident or huge swirling situation where we regret our role. Each of us lives beneath the shadows of systems and cultures that sometimes make it easy to do wrong by others and ourselves. The point is not that we are wicked or irredeemable but the point most certainly is that we are human and therefore we have all failed to honor life in some way, at some time.

As tempting as it would be to forget any specifics that might spring to mind, to bury deeply any fault or error, Judaism teaches that it is spiritually required that we remember. I used to think that we are compelled to do so because it is the truthful thing to do but I actually don't think that's the most important nugget anymore, although it's not wrong. Our histories have to be faced because doing so is how we can shed the residue of what went wrong, and that has to happen for us to then be able to fully welcome who we wish to be.

Perhaps this welcome is a return to a truth or kindness that slipped away or got lost. Once, in a particularly busy stage of life, I found myself doing many things I deeply loved and while I wasn't unhappy, exactly, I realized I was carrying a growing anxiety I couldn't quite identify or manage. A friend pointed out that since no one was perfect, chances were I'd been out of whack before and, she asked, could I remember how I had handled other times of stress?

I thought back to my teens when, within six months, three friends my own age died, two by suicide and one in a car accident. For me, feeling sad often looks like feeling anxious. In the

aftermath of this season of loss, I grieved. I worried. My sister-friend, who grew up living next door to and often with my family, stuck close during this time. We took long walks together, in hilly NW Portland, Oregon near our high school, sometimes cutting class (my parents will be at the other service today so...sorry in advance, Mom and Dad). We would wind our way through the neighborhoods, for an hour or more at a time, sometimes chatting superficially, sometimes speaking deep truths and sometimes keeping companionable silence in which much mutual goodwill was communicated. And I felt so much more centered and grounded. I felt calmer in that moment but also in the moments, hours and even days that followed.

Recalling this in busy adulthood, I re-prioritized my schedule so that instead of hopping on public transit from north Berkeley where I studied to downtown Oakland where I worked, I walked. It was about three miles but it was pretty flat and in northern California you can walk outside almost year round without worrying that your nose will fall off. And I felt so much more centered and grounded. I felt calmer in that moment but also in the moments, hours and even days that followed.

My story is about welcoming a return (in this case restoring to my present a beneficial routine from the past) but some welcomes are about uncharted territory, some entirely new leap. Maybe you seek to improve a relationship with a family member that hasn't ever been good so you're not sure how to approach it; or maybe you want to take up a physical activity but have never spent much time moving your body so it's hard to gauge where or how to begin.

In our story, Toestomper has to figure out a whole other way to be, once he accepts his new role as family member and protector of the caterpillars.

Not only does Toestomper have to turn over a fresh leaf, he also has to deal with the Rowdy Ruffians' expectations. They do everything they can to de-stabilize his new beginning. Can't you imagine Toestomper at our service today, speaking the responsive reading? "Turning does not come so easily...It means breaking with old habits...It means losing face...It means recognizing that we have the ability to change." Toestomper has to turn away from his friends, or at least from their influence.

Sometimes in order to move forward you need to pull a Toestomper. (Can we make that a thing, please? "To pull a Toestomper?" I hope we can start saying that.) This is about getting clear that something has changed and that you are different. Toestomper just doesn't have time to be mean anymore; he's making breakfast.

Away from the pages of a storybook, it's a little more complicated. No matter what, you are still you. Beginning anew will not be made easier by the fantasy of some sanitized version of yourself. In fact, it will make it harder. Few if any of us are capable of total transformation overnight. Don't make that mistake that people do every year at the secular new year by declaring that at the stroke of midnight they will suddenly possess the ability to save more money, lose more weight and read more books by dint of pure and simple magical thinking.

There is a special magic in the world, I believe, that makes transformation possible. And it is partly in setting the intention. But it's just as much in the effort, the community and the ritual, and another helpful ingredient is the maturity to understand how change happens (because it is not often glamorous, swift and predictable). The Jewish High Holy Days offer something harder than simply sending out a press release that this year you're going to be new and improved. A deep look at one's self is not for the faint of heart! But it's meaningful, because you actually get to engage your life from the driver's seat, as the best expert on your behavior.

"I'm the boss of me!" my 5 year old screeched at me the other day when I unreasonably suggested she should wear both shoes to kindergarten. In that specific case I reserve my right to insist but in general she's right. I hope she is able to hang on to this knowledge (and that I am able to help her do so) even as her life continues to complexify. She is sure to encounter more instances of not getting to control what happens but she *is* the boss of herself. Not the dictator of the universe but certainly the core of her own world, moment by hour by day by year.

Rosh Hashanah reassures us that every year will offer another opportunity to face ourselves, and our past and future. There's no ultimate failure—just waves of trying, turning and turning again. The turning seasons keep us company too. Maybe this is why part of the observance happens outside, to emphasize that we are part of an imperfect, beautiful, always turning earth, with new phases forever in front of us.

If you would like to ready yourself for some positive change or to welcome in some fresh perspective on who you are, then I invite you to the ritual of tashlich, a modern practice with ancient origins. In the Hebrew Scripture's Book of Micah it is written that our transgressions will be cast into the sea. Tashlich is the annual practice of casting away whatever is preventing us from starting anew. It is symbolized by tossing something into water. That something can be, well, anything. Pocket lint, stale bread, a pinch of salt.

When you leave today you will find, on either side of the main doors, stacks of small paper specially formulated to dissolve in water. I hope you will spend the rest of the service

thinking about what you'd like to leave behind in the year ahead, like a challenging situation, past mistake, someone else's unhealthy expectation, an unrealistic vision that haunts you, or anything you would like to turn away from. All the RE classes are learning about how powerful it can be to do this, so teachers and students will be ready to join in this ritual.

As you exit the building, take a slip of paper. Hold it in your fist, or between your two hands, or even tuck it close to your body in a pocket or something and then drop it in the pond. Watch it float. It will eventually dissolve into nothing but the surrounding water and reeds and rocks and dirt and trees and air and sky and us. The universe will absorb your intention.

When you get to the next place—be it car, bike, home, whatever—say to yourself (I recommend out loud but you be the judge of what's appropriate) "Welcome. Here I am, ready for anything. Welcome." I want you to remember that so I'll say it and you repeat. That part, that welcome, is the other part of turning—turning forward. May you be truly ready for anything. Not immune from challenge or able to predict every hardship but ready in the sense of being able to hear when life calls to you. Ready to be open to life, mindful of its sorrows, flexible when it demands we turn, and able to welcome who it makes of us. May it always be so.

© 2017 Leah Hart-Landsberg. All rights reserved.