

JEWISH NEW YEAR: THE ART OF FALLING FORWARD

We aspire to be a religion that's universal in scope, drawing respectfully from various world scriptures and holy days. As theological hybrids we can chuckle with comic, Mark Russell, who warns of requiring prayer in American public schools, let alone finding one that fits everyone's religious background. So, Russell suggests the following generic prayer:

Our Father or Mother, who art either in Heaven, Nirvana, Mecca or Salt Lake City, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, providing Thy will is that America is always the big winner over the foreign heathen.

Give us this day our daily white bread, black bread, Italian bread, Jewish rye, English muffins, tacos, or a quarter-pounder with cheese and a large fries to go.

And lead us not into temptation or onto school buses that take us to neighborhoods where the kids are different.

For Thine is the queendom and the power and glory, especially for people who still use words like Thine.

Seriously though, we liberal religionists do quilt our spiritual journeys from every corner and era of human existence. A prime example is our saluting the Jewish New Year. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, serves as a wakeup call, the season for repentance, stock-taking, garnering spiritual clarity and resolve for our lives. Rosh Hashanah begins Wednesday at sundown.

So this current season marks a critical time to ponder our purpose, to look at who we really are and what we deeply cherish—in short, to bring our identity and vision into closer alignment. This is our chance for soul-searching without breast-beating.

The Jewish New Year reminds us that we've spilt more than milk, that we've committed personal and social wrongs...yet, more importantly, we're always more than our wrongs. It pulls us toward our better selves. It declares that we're renewable creatures; yes, as we Unitarian Universalists put it similarly in one of our central affirmations, *semper reformanda*: namely, everyone possesses the capacity to keep on reforming, all the way home.

There's a painting somewhere in a European gallery of the scene in which Faust sits opposite the Devil at a chess table. Faust's face is contorted in anguish, for he retains on the board but a Knight and the King, and the King's in check. Thousands of people have walked by this painting, aware that in the very next move the Devil will secure the victory. But one day a chess-master happens by to stop and stare. The minutes change to hours, but still the master stares. Then suddenly, "It's a lie," he screams. "The king and the knight have another move. They have another move."

Well, so do you and I; there exists, this very Fall, another move we can make, one we must make...perhaps at home or work, here in the Fellowship or in the larger world. Deep down, only we know what the precise move might be. So I urge you to negotiate the move, minor or major, you need to make to advance your spiritual journey.

There's no greater tribute to our human fortitude than to see us down, even nearly out, then to see us rise heroically from the ashes. As the Zen poem puts it: seven times down, eight times up. So, that's my special Jewish New Year message for each of us today: seven times down and eight times up! Or the art of falling forward, if you will!

So, I ask you, my fellow comrades, what's the challenge facing you this Fall? Are you making a recovery from a broken dream or a withering relationship? Are you

launching a new post, like myself, or entertaining a crucial year, like our Fellowship? Are you emotionally worn out or jittery about an exciting option? Are you tired of a life composed of mainly highs and lows but few solids? Tired of a world torn apart by bitterness and terror? Just tired of being tired? Does your life seem to be a series of bumps and bruises with brief periods of sleep in-between?

Now, believe me, I'm not trying to depress anyone. It's neither in my temperament nor in my theology to do so. I'm as hopeful and life-affirming a guy as there is. I'm just trying to set the scene for the Jewish New Year. Our Unitarian Universalist faith, you see, is a positive one but **not** maddeningly cheerful. We're not a sunshine religion, and we tender no snake oil. For we know well that you and I frequently have to die spiritually or relationally in order to be reborn.

But we're a people of hope, however chastened, a people of faith however realistic, and a people of love, however imperfect. So have no fear, as your interim minister I'll never leave you in despond, in hell, at wits end. I'll always support a viable move, individually and institutionally, through your apathy or anguish to the other side.

As your pastor, I vow to companion you through fair and foul weather. There's nothing you can say or do that will drive me off. You can vent, cry, scream, or grow silent, but I'm going to be your ministerial buddy for the duration. That's a promise I won't break.

Now mind you, the tips I pass on today aren't panaceas, not even prescriptions, merely soul-sized lessons that have assisted me, as well as others, in making healthy choices. I offer them this Jewish New Year so that we might transmute some of our pain into possibilities, so that we might carry on as "sweet survivors," to use the title of one of

my favorite Peter, Paul, and Mary folksongs.

First, a general comment, to set the context. It's taken me the bulk of my days to realize that it's not what happens to us that's critical but what we do with what happens in our lives. Be that a divorce or a sudden death, our child's rejection or a job loss. Fate doesn't make or break our souls. We ourselves do. The bottom-line practice for contentment is to give up wanting what you can't possess combined with accepting what you can't change.

Now, some of us are inherently luckier than others, or so it seems. But we all have the chance to do something constructive, maybe even creative, with the batch of blessings and curses that come our way.

However, the painful truth is that some of us turn *down* the chance to turn *around* our lives. Some kids don't outgrow their problems. Some adults don't manage an amazing comeback, or any kind of comeback, for that matter. Sometimes we stay hobbled or partially recover, for reasons either within or beyond our control. Like my broken elbow that remains numb and slightly crooked, 20 years later after a freak accident during a church volleyball game at deBenneville Pines.

Actually, I'm kind of glad that my elbow was fractured in the line of duty, at an intergenerational camp, for two reasons: first, I, the paid pastor, had to be comforted upclose by children and adults; and second, after the accident, parishioners never mistook me for being anything but a wounded healer.

But that we can return at all from losses, large or small, reveals the magnificence of our supple humanity. That our souls can be healed even when our bodies aren't cured...remains a wondrous marvel!

I'm thinking of many of you in our own San Dieguito family—hospitalized, despondent, or crippled by this or that infirmity. You've taken both seriously and valiantly our liberal, make that our liberating, religious commitment to share and redeem life's pain. But none of our families are immune from torment and travail. Ours certainly isn't, and I'm sure you, like we, must hold close in your heart the fragile, frustration-soaked lives of beloved relatives and friends. But our faith won't let us forget, as my wife Carolyn notes, that “even the bird that cannot fly has a song!”

Or as Unitarian Universalist songwriter, Libby Roderick, puts it: “How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle; how deeply you're connected to my soul!”

The story's told of a monk who lived in a monastery high on a mountain. One day he descended to the village below and a peasant 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 yeh, we fall down, and we get up. That's pretty much what our lives look like—how about yours, down there in the valley?”

Yes, my friends, we all fall down and “go boom”, monks included. I can't speak for my ministerial colleagues, but I've always required truthful friends, support groups, therapists, tons of inner resilience, a patient and loving family, and an uncompromisingly hopeful faith to assist me through life's thicket. The key thing, at least for me, has been to make my mistakes mean something, like a jazz musician—to keep falling forward.

On to a second piece of counsel. Friends, don't deny your sorrows: instead, get on with naming and facing them. There are certain crises that we'd really rather ignore and suppress. So we do just that. For example, our partnership isn't crumbling, it's just coasting. Our family doesn't need outside help; we just need to care more about one another. We're simply too stubborn to admit that there are times when love is not enough. Or we disguise death, cover addictions, camouflage unresolved grief, try to assuage bone-deep hungers with pabulum.

And yet, where can we turn in crisis if we don't even admit that there is one? So we turn it all—the anger, frustration, loneliness—in upon ourselves. We de-press, thus compounding the problem. It's axiomatic: if we repress, we will depress. But the converse is also true: “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” You see, falling to pieces can indeed hold us together sometimes. There's a German word, *durchleiden*, for which there's no good English translation. *Durchleiden* means to experience and get to know something by suffering. To “suffer a thing through” with our entire being, rather than trying “to figure it out.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in reflecting back upon the premature death of his teenage son, offers sage perspective:

The sense of loss still hurts years later, though I've learned to live with it. More than that, I believe that it was supposed to hurt. In the same way that dead cells, our hair and fingernails, feel no pain when they're cut but living cells bleed and hurt, so I believe that spiritually dead souls can be cut into, separated from other souls, and not feel pain. But living, sensitive souls are easily hurt.

So, we need to call a loss by its real name: a loss. We need to confess a failure as being a failure not some minor mishap. To see what we cherish injured, hurt, or destroyed isn't just bad luck. It's a tragedy. And to call it such puts us, you see, in spiritual shape to

grow toward healing—not necessarily a cure but sufficient healing of soul.

Another piece of counsel is to avoid self-pity. Remember Rosh Hashanah is the season not for self-pity but for self-review. Self-pity is one of the most popular, non-pharmaceutical drugs in our society, and one of the most debilitating. It's narcotic because it's addictive. It gives momentary pleasure yet separates us from reality.

Self-pitiers cry out: "The situation is hopeless, poor me, there's nothing I can do." And guess what, it becomes just fine to whine and do absolutely nothing.

A friend of mine says that misery is optional. Now that doesn't always prove true. There are times when misery is, as it were, mandatory. If you've recently suffered the death of someone close to you, you may for a time have no real option but to be melancholic and miserable. But for most of us, most of the time, my friend's right: misery is indeed optional.

I like the story about the woman in Budapest who goes to her rabbi and complains: "Rebbe, life's unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The woman's incredulous, but the rabbi insists, "Do as I say and come back in a week."

A week later, the woman comes back looking more distraught than before. "We can't stand it," she tells the rabbi. "The goat's filthy." The rabbi then tells her, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week." A radiant woman returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming: "Life's beautiful, rebbe. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat—only the nine of us!"

You get the picture: grin and bear your condition with appropriate fury and gracefulness, but drop the self-pity.

Fourth, be persistent, keep plodding, keep your faith.

My brother, Phil, has been a practicing psychotherapist for 45 years, most currently working with sports figures like former pro football coach, Dick Vermeil, rock groups like Metallica, and a slew of movie stars who shall go unnamed.

A few years back Phil was the therapist for Chad Carvin, a young man who made the 2000 U.S. Olympic swimming team—actually one of the two oldest swimmers on the team at 26 years old. Carvin finished 6th in one Olympic race in Sydney, a meager hundredths of seconds beyond the winning medalists. He also garnered a silver medal in a relay race. But the medals hardly tell the incredible story of Chad Carvin.

Just a few years prior, after being so emotionally exhausted and physically debilitated by an internal virus, and seeing his swimming times climb and climb, Chad became deeply depressed and tried to commit suicide. Since Carvin's looking death in the face, my brother Phil had been an integral partner in assisting this stouthearted young man in simply getting back into the pool, then making the astounding strides to become a world class swimmer again. Chad Carvin, with his inner fortitude and impressive circle of support, exemplifies the genius of persistence, plodding, making a comeback, falling forward.

So, as we take stock and make resolves this Jewish New Year, I caution you never to travel unaccompanied. We're simply not self-sufficient creatures, you and I. Or as my buddy, Alex, put it starkly in our men's support group of some 23 years standing: "I'm a pretty self-reliant guy, but if I had to do it over again, I'd definitely call in others earlier!" The truth is we need coaches, friends, family, and spiritual companions...a beloved community such as UUFSD. We require all the divine and human resources we can

muster along the journey.

Naturally, no one else can feel as you feel. Your pain is your own, and mine is my own. We aren't literally in the same boat, never have been and never will be, but we are in the same ocean, and we can swap signals and support, even life-jackets.

My final piece of counsel is for those of us troubled or hurting to extend comfort to others...for loving others amazingly, more often than not, assuages our own anguish. We humans suffer, we die; ah, but we can love. So, don't get lost in your own messes. I promise you, your sorrows will be halved whenever you risk lifting the sorrows of others. "Weep with those who weep" is healthy scriptural wisdom to heed.

So my message this Jewish New Year is for us to become persons who major in beginnings without end. For our dignity ultimately lies neither in our innocence nor in our ease but rather in our being scarred and healed, in our comebacks, in being born again and again and again, in falling forward. Seven times down, eight times up!

Shalom, salaam, namaste, blessed be and amen!

Tom Owen-Towle

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