

The Spirituality of Imperfection

Rev. Roger Jones, Acting Senior Minister
Unitarian Universalist Society
Sacramento, CA
Sunday, September 8, 2013

New Member Welcome Ritual (Printed Insert)

Music after Prayer:

#218: "Who Can Say?" solo by Lucy Bunch

Hymns: #399 (round): Vine and Fig Tree; #126: Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing; #201: Glory, Glory, Hallelujah (Since I Laid My Burden Down).

Pastoral Prayer

On these warm and shining days, it is a blessing to draw the breath of life. Let us give thanks for this day and for all our gifts. Sitting near us are fellow seekers on the journey toward wholeness, joy and hope. We give thanks for this time to be still and reflect with one another.

We come together, in part, for celebration of the joys and achievements of life. On this opening day of a new year of Religious Education, we give thanks for a committed corps of adult volunteers and for so many full-hearted youth, children, and babies. Today we say farewell to four homeless families after a week of hospitality here through Family Promise, and give thanks for the generosity of our many volunteers. At this time, let us call out and give voice to the glad occasions of our own lives and of those people we celebrate. PAUSE.

On many hearts are those who need healing and care. We embrace those among us mourning a loss, living through transitions, tending an injury, worrying about jobs or finances, facing an unwelcome diagnosis, wrestling with addiction, or working a recovery program, one day at a time. We send our love to you. We send our love to all who are healing from surgery and other treatments, including Mary, convalescing after a broken hip. Tami, home after surgery. Ginny, regaining strength after a heart attack. Jerry, back with us after a long bout of pneumonia while out of the country. Now let us speak the names of others on our minds. Whether whispering to ourselves or saying a name aloud, let us bring into the space of our sanctuary those who need our loving wishes. PAUSE.

On this day also we hear of wars and rumors of wars. So many are living with fear, pain and loss in zones of conflict, including the civil war in Syria. Wedded to power, the Syrian tyrant kills children and

adults without mercy, even with chemical weapons, dealing death and agony to hundreds. A hodgepodge of rebel forces, understandably outraged, now has grown to include extremists. They use weapons, fighters and money from terrorists; they bring boys into battle and scar their souls. We, as caring people, feel helpless. American leaders debate an American military action, bombing. Such an action seems to have no clear objective, but has many unforeseen risks. Many of us may protest against military action, but we must also grieve the bloodshed that continues. There is no good answer to this dilemma. Who can say? There may be no answer at all. Certainly, no answer can make us pure.

We contemplate this tragedy in humility and in mourning. Now two million Syrians, having fled the strife of their nation, try to stay alive and sane in refugee camps. Let our hearts reach toward them. Let our efforts our nation's generosity hasten to their aid and their survival. As we speak for nonviolence, let us pray for mercy. As we long for mercy, let us act for healing in all the ways we can, wherever we may be.

In all the choices of life, let us act for healing and wholeness, and give thanks for all our gifts. On these warm and shining days, as we draw the breath of life, let us remember how fragile is the gift of life. Now let us take a minute of silence, just for the simple gift of being alive, here, together as members of the human family. Amen.

1 MINUTE OF SILENCE.

SOLO VOICE SINGS #218: "Who Can Say?"

Sermon

This congregation's architectural master plan is one big step closer to implementation. The county's planning commission voted unanimously to grant us a use permit. In late spring we can begin working on Phase 1A of our multi-phase construction project, an inspiring plan of improvements and expansions.

After that Monday night meeting, two dozen of us hugged and chatted. As the chief planner walked by us, I stepped up to thank her for the work her staff had done. She said, "You're welcome. Good luck--it's a great master plan." I felt good. Yet I wondered why the commission had not inquired about one feature of our plan--a simple, small, windowless building out where our driveway meets the road. Even our concerned neighbors did not seem to be concerned about it. I know it won't happen until phase 13C, but we do need that little shed-like structure at the entrance. It's called the Perfectionizing Machine.

It will provide a brief, painless experience to remove all imperfections from every person who enters this campus. If new people go through it, they will meet every expectation of the people already here. Of course the people already here will also have gone through it, so we will meet the expectations of every new person who arrives.

The Perfectionizing Machine yields church members who don't make mistakes. Never miss a meeting, never be late for church, never use a term that seems unkind, ungenerous, or insufficiently inclusive of the diversity we claim to seek. Everybody will know the right words to say all the time.

We will never run out of coffee after church, or volunteers to make it, and folks will be generous in their donations to the coffee fund. Every activity group will have enough people helping out. New volunteers will be able to read the minds of staff and experienced volunteers. They will know the precise time to step in and help out, and just the right amount of help to provide, so as not to step on toes. Veteran volunteers and church leaders will read minds also. They will no longer have to get to know members first, and ask about their gifts and interests before inviting them to help out in church life. Nobody will have unrealistic expectations. All will possess boundless empathy.

Every child here will be as cute and attentive as every other child. All parents will be perfect, notwithstanding the diversity of child-rearing philosophies among them.

Oh, when I can brag to other ministers that we have a Perfectionizing Machine—oh boy! Of course, it will *not* be a show of superiority on my part, but a more *humble* pride.

Every member or pledging friend will make a financial commitment of 10% of annual income, and send in a check every month like clockwork. Everybody will recycle. Every singer will have perfect pitch. Every sermon will seem wonderful, to everyone.

There will be enough salad, soup or other food at a church event. If we somehow do run out, nobody lose patience.

All of this, when we complete Phase 13C!

Meanwhile, however, we are stuck with each other... as we are. Imperfect. Imperfectly getting through life, bruised, uncertain, distracted,

falling short of our values. Letting down one another and ourselves.

So, for the time being, this congregation will continue to be a place where we get to practice being human. We practice, not to become perfect, but to find more wholeness as human beings.

This sermon is the first in a series I'm calling Everyday Spirituality. For now, my definition of spirituality is "that which moves us toward wholeness."

An important part of moving toward wholeness is the acknowledgement of our disappointments and our own regrettable acts or failures to act. Moving toward wholeness takes honesty, humility, apology, making amends, acceptance, letting burdens go, and starting over. That's a tall order. Hence the words "moving toward wholeness," NOT "arriving at wholeness." In the famous phrase of the 12 Step Movement, "Progress, not perfection."

In the Jewish calendar, we are in the week named the Days of Awe, between the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah, or new year's day, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. During this week, religious Jews examine their conscience and their deeds of the past year. In prayer they confess their sins, lament their misfortunes and losses, and ask for the Holy One to inscribe their names in the Book of Life, to give them another chance, another year, a clean slate.

[Once upon a time a rabbi was asked] by his disciple how a person should pray for forgiveness. [Rabbi] told him to observe the behavior of a certain innkeeper before Yom Kippur. The disciple took lodging at the inn and [watched the owner] for several days, but could see nothing relevant...

Then, on the night before Yom Kippur, he saw the innkeeper open two large ledger [books]. From the first book he read off a list of all the sins he had committed [during] the past year. When he was finished, he opened the second book and [recited] all the bad things that had occurred to him during the past year.

[Then] he lifted his eyes to heaven and said [to God]: "It is true I have sinned against You. But You have done many

distressful things to me, too. However, we are now beginning a new year. Let us wipe the slate clean. I will forgive You, and You forgive me.”¹

The word *atonement* means reconciliation, and seeking wholeness, and oneness. If you take apart the word *atonement*, you get at-one-ment. The goal of honesty about our imperfections is not endless torment, but atonement. Reconciliation. More wholeness. Healing. Acceptance.

The Unitarian philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Everything which God has made has a crack in it.” Emerson says that nothing and nobody is without a flaw or an imperfection. He was a minister, and he had been the son of a minister. Yet Emerson was not cut out to be a minister. He lost his way making pastoral calls to parishioners’ homes. He showed up at the wrong houses, visiting with strangers. Oh—and he didn’t like church! As a minister, he lasted only three years.

His later work was more fruitful. His writings on Transcendentalist philosophy and spirituality are classics of American literature. “Everything which God has made has a crack in it,” he said. Whatever your theology, God or no God, whoever you are, you cannot be without flaws. Nor can others. So forgive others for not being perfect. Forgive yourself for thinking you must pursue perfection.

The drive to do it all, to keep it all together, and make it look easy keeping it all together—this is a drive that can hurt you. It will not help you. It will not help those to whom you think you must seem perfect. Trying to be perfect is a jail sentence that has no time off for good behavior.

Last spring the Reverend Doug Kraft led us through a ritual of confession. He passed out white index cards and invited us to write down just one thing we wished to confess, and turn in the cards. They would be anonymous, and only Doug and I would read the cards. In silence and in private, each of us would bear witness to whatever confession you chose to make, and we would release the cards in fire. After receiving the cards, Doug led the congregation through a ritual of pardon and forgiveness.

This was a voluntary exercise, of course, so we don’t know how many kept the cards and left

them blank. But afterwards, we had a pretty thick stack of cards. I read them quietly. The words reflected pain, longings and sadness, and lessons learned. We carry around so much. I began to notice patterns in the confessions: regret about having caused pain to those we care about. Patterns like impatience, holding on, judgment, avoidance, withholding, lying, being too busy, choosing fear over love. If any of these terms brings to mind a regret of yours, let me assure you that you are in good company! If these regrets were shoes, all of them would fit me.

The words on the cards reflected the spirituality of imperfection, an honest acceptance of imperfection, an embrace of our humanity.

Not long ago I handed out another stack of white cards to a small group of UUSS people. I asked them to write—anonously—a question each one had been considering, or struggling with; what you might call a spiritual itch. These cards reflected a good range of spiritual themes, and some commonalities.

The most common themes sounded like this: If I say that my values are love, kindness, and acceptance, why is it so hard to live by them? Why is it hard to forgive others, and forgive myself? How can we love ourselves and love each other?

I think about all those poignant pencil markings on so many white cards. I realize how much pain and hope these words indicate. It makes me think of what I wish I had not done in my life, things I wish I did better. It’s frustrating to confront the many human burdens that we carry around.

Sometimes it just makes me want to give up. Just drop it all, just run away. Surrender. Give up. *Oh, surrender!*

And you know, that just might be the right thing... Give up. Let go. Surrender our goofs and regrets. Surrender our disappointed expectations of ourselves and other people, and our expectations of how life should be. Clean the slate, and start fresh. Hit the reset button.

This may be just what the Day of Atonement is all about. Atonement: At-One-Ment. We call ourselves back from the fragments into which we have spun ourselves. Back toward wholeness. Being friendly to our imperfections. Letting go of burdens. Remembering our common human dignity.

Back toward wholeness. First step, surrender. The reset button.

This is one of the benefits of a spiritual practice. It's a way to hit the reset button on our bad attitude, the tightness of our body, the shortness of our breath, and the constriction of our spirits. A spiritual practice can give us fresh eyes, a new start. Do you have some tools or techniques for deploying your own spiritual reset buttons?

In my practice of mindfulness meditation, I try re-setting by sitting. I try it for 45 minutes a day, most days. But even when I can sit in silence for only 20 minutes, it makes a difference. Even if all I have is 5 minutes for silence—that can help.

Of course, it's not magic, not an automatic benefit. Over time, meditation helps me see other choices for a reset button, other options in my daily life for starting anew.

Even if I have time enough only to stand at the window and look out at the trees, and notice the feeling of my feet on the floor, and notice my breathing. That moment of noticing, that mindful practice can keep the reset button in working order. I've heard busy parents of little kids tell me that even one minute of silence can be a reset button, for them and for the child.

For some of you, perhaps writing in a journal is that reset button. Helpful ideas appear as you write. Scary and unwelcome emotions arise, and you honor them with words on the page. Over time, you can read how your perspective can change about burdens that used to weigh heavily.

If you're feeling old fashioned, like the Jewish innkeeper on Yom Kippur, you could write your burdens and hurts in a ledger, or in chalk on a slate, and then wipe it clean. Or in pencil on an index card and burn it.

Perhaps for you, the reset button could be a walk around the block, or a vigorous workout, a Yoga session or Tai Chi.

Just an aside about using email and Facebook. You might think of them as a reset button, but I think either one can quickly become a flamethrower. Venting is not the same as reflecting. Unloading is not the same as laying down a burden.

When I feel a specific burden or source of pain, it helps me to pray. When my burden is resentment, judgment, withholding compassion, guilt... *I have to pray.* Say prayers for myself and for the person around whom I feel pain. This is not

an automatic fix, either. Yet sending a prayer of good will and compassion can begin to soften my heart. Bit by bit, it can ease my burden. Sometimes I pray for the courage to be myself, or the grace to be my best self. Pray for guidance. Pray to remember that I am not perfect, but I am enough.

The spirituality of imperfection is the journey toward wholeness, not the clinching of this goal. This is why religious traditions give repeated rituals for atonement, healing and forgiveness. Why Judaism's High Holy Days happen once a year instead of once and for all.

Most of us can learn more patience and practice more empathy. Most of us can give more generously, speak more kindly, and act with more mindfulness than we have. Growing in these ways is called spiritual growth. We come here because we seek the path of growth, not the assurance of perfection. "Progress, not perfection."

Emerson said, "Everything which God has made has a crack in it."

God or no God, Emerson means that every being in the world is a blessing. His words mean that everything and *everyone* is a blessing and a gift. You are a gift. All whom you encounter are gifts. Blessings.

None perfect, none failsafe or foolproof or free of goofs. Just worthy of appreciation and acceptance. Worthy of kindness, of ease, of compassion. So may it be.

So may we strive to live, one day at a time.

¹ *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. New York, 1994 (Bantam), p. 225.