

Draft

**MORNING HAS BROKEN: ATONEMENT AND YOM KIPPUR**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**September 19, 2010**

Many of you probably know that Yom Kippur ended last night at sundown. Rabbi friends of mine have said that Jewish Day of Atonement has the highest attendance at synagogue each year. There must be some imperfect people out there who need to atone. How about us?

How might we approach the weighty question of transgression and atonement as Unitarian Universalists? I somehow suspect that none of us here are without flaw or blemish when it comes to misdeeds.

Well, here's one solution for you.

I saw this little towelette container in a store some time ago and had to purchase it.

On the front of the towelette container are these words: "Wash away your sins towelette" followed by smaller letters that read "anti-bacterial formula kills sins on contact." The back of the packet even has directions for use. 1. Remove moist towelette. 2. Devoutly wipe away wrongdoing. 3. Spot-check for stubborn guilt. 4. Wipe again as needed. 5. Discard sins in waste receptacle. And finally, 6 - go forth purified and moisturized.

If only it were that simple.

Almost all religious customs have doctrines regarding transgressions and atonement; what in Jewish and Christian traditions are called "missing the mark" or, to use a word seldom heard within a Unitarian Universalist sanctuary "sin". It's a word so loaded with emotional and religious baggage that it is seldom heard in our churches and with good reason. It has been transformed from a very specific usage in Jewish tradition to an all-encompassing concept of guilt and victimization.

Dr. Marcus Borg, whose book "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" will be our text in the forthcoming class "Jesus Reconsidered", writes at some length about how the word "sin" became such a volatile expression. Originally in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, the term "sinner" would have meant those who were outside the Jewish purity system. They included tax collectors and shepherds and a whole class of people who were untouchables. People who were "sinners" were literally untouchable and hence the deeper meaning of the Good Samaritan story where the priest and the Levite literally could not go near the body of the injured man because

then they would become impure. It was only the Good Samaritan who was already impure according to the purity laws that could help the man.

Later, as we know from early Christian history, St. Augustine helped to shape the doctrine of Original Sin by Adam and Eve and the whole human race then became collectively sinful and fallen from grace. Atonement became possible only with confession, work of atonement and conditional redemption. It was the worst kind of religious power trip. In “A History of God”, scholar Karen Armstrong writes that western Christianity made the death of Jesus into a sacrifice for the sins of the whole human race. It magnified the concept of a harsh and judging God and a depraved human race carrying the burden of sin from birth. To orthodox Christianity, you and I are all bearers of that Original Sin and have only the path of redemption and salvation through Jesus Christ.

In Buddhist tradition, the concept of “sin” and atonement is based more on karma or “cause and effect”. If one does a harmful deed or word to another person, Buddhism teaches that there are negative consequences. However, in Buddhism there is no concept of a creator God who is judging us.

In Islamic tradition, The Koran says, "To those who repent . . . , and make amends— Allah is All-forgiving, All-compassionate."

These examples tell us that most religions have means to acknowledge transgressions and to atone for them. Unitarian Universalism in its present incarnation does not. There are very good reasons going back in our Unitarian history. For most of our North American history, Unitarianism has utterly rejected the concept of Original Sin. In the *Manual of Unitarian Belief* by James Freeman Clarke written in the early nineteenth century, Rev. Clarke touches upon the concept of Original Sin. Rev. Clarke begins the document with this disclaimer:

**"As Unitarians have no creed, and as their union is one of sympathy and co operation, and not of formulas, no one among them has any right to define the views of others.**

Clarke then goes on to say in the section on humankind:

**“Unitarians reject the Calvinistic doctrines of original sin and total depravity, the responsibility of the human race for Adam's fall, and the belief that, until converted, man is under the wrath of God.”**

With the rise of Unitarian religious humanism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the belief that humankind was inherently good took yet another step. Religious humanists argued that redemption and seeking forgiveness from a God who might not even exist smacked of supernaturalism. Salvation by character

became the rallying cry in Unitarianism. As Rev. Jane Rzepka said in a sermon, **“we have a different spin on sin.”**

So we fast-forward to the present day. Most of our churches don't utter the “s” word. Our failings or conflicts seem to be left to our own personal ethics or ways of approaching resolution and healing.

Let me hasten to state that I am not suggesting that we return to the practice of confessionals, public confession or the like. I have come to believe, however, that we do ourselves a disservice when we avoid the whole topic of “transgression” because more orthodox religious communities have distorted it. We are, after all prone to make mistakes, misjudgments and foolish decisions in our lives.

So what are we to do about atonement – or as someone said on our UUFC Facebook page “at-one-ment” - returning to wholeness and right relationship? What honors our core belief in the conscience of the individual being paramount and no creed forcing us to believe a certain way?

Not surprisingly, Judaism has thoughts about the process of owning up to our failings and finding ways to resolve them. One Jewish rabbi and scholar offers this approach. We might see these steps of acknowledging our failings and making amends as a Unitarian Universalist form of atonement at many levels.

The first step is the initial request to be forgiven. To ask for forgiveness is to say to the "injured" party, **"I am sorry for what I did; I sincerely regret having done it, and I will never do it again."** The appropriate response to this request is to believe that the petitioner is sincere and "open the door" for him or her to "come back to right relationship." A person who refuses to do this is considered a cruel person.

The second step of forgiveness is the washing or "wiping away" and is a desire on the part of the offender and the one offended to return the relationship back to a place of balance and mutual equality.

The third step of forgiveness is "atonement," as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the response to the person who says, **"My conscience will not let me live with myself, because of what I did to you and to our relationship."** In the Jewish tradition, this step requires the intervention of God because it is beyond us as imperfect beings.

It is possible to use these levels of forgiveness ourselves? The first level is acknowledging that we have caused harm in word, thought or deed to another. That certainly is within our power. And it is also within our power to accept the request for forgiveness as well.

The second stage of forgiveness is to wipe away the misdeed and its power and return the relationship to its best health. This task is harder, I

suspect. You've no doubt heard the expression about carrying a grudge against someone. No religious tradition says this is a healthy habit. One expression of this is, **"Holding onto resentment of another person is like taking poison yourself and waiting for them to die."**

This is not an easy step to take. This level of forgiveness requires that we give up our dreams of vengeance or getting even.

The third level of forgiveness – that of asking God to help us atone for our sins – is a whole other sermon and so I'd like to invite us to concentrate on the first levels of forgiveness in a meditation.

So if you would like to get into a comfortable posture and either close your eyes or set your gaze on a neutral spot. Breathing deeply but not forcefully...back upright as possible and alert. You may wish to repeat these words silently.

First, forgiveness from others – I would invite you to think of those you have harmed or hurt in your life and that harm never been resolved. And then saying these words, **"there are many ways I have hurt and harmed others, betrayed or abandoned them, caused them suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, anger, fear and confusion."** And imagining yourself in front of that person or those people, asking for their forgiveness one at a time.

Second, forgiveness for yourself – **"there are many ways I have hurt, betrayed or abandoned myself through thought, word or deed."** Thinking of all those ways we have been self-destructive...then say, **"for each of the times and ways I have harmed myself through actions or inaction, I name them, recognize them and I forgive myself and by naming those deeds to myself, I atone for them."**

Third, and finally, we begin to forgive others who have harmed us. Thinking of those people or one person who has harmed us in our life and imagining that person in front of us or in our heart.

**"There are many ways I have been wounded and hurt by others or this person. Knowingly or unknowingly, through word action or deed, this person or these people have hurt me."**

And then these words, **"In the many ways others have hurt or harmed me, out of fear, pain, confusion or anger, I see these now. To the extent I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. I have carried this pain in my heart too long. To the extent I am ready, I offer you my forgiveness. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you."**

**(Silence and then bell)**