

## Healing Shame/Engaging Conscience

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Rosh Hashanah, “the head of the year,” celebrates the birthday of creation and the sovereignty of the Creator -- “the one who will be what will be.” This is the birthday of time itself. There is a tradition that Rosh Hashanah is not the day that the world was created, but rather, the day that humans were created -- the day when consciousness emerged from creation.

The beginning of time is when creation becomes conscious of itself. The beginning of time and consciousness is the beginning of conscience.

Michael Lerner observes that “the Jewish people came to historical consciousness in a world dominated by great imperial powers ... (the) first issue confronting them was how to understand the nature and meaning of cruelty.” They lived in a world in which the systems of oppression were viewed as natural: as natural as the cycles of nature, as awe-inspiring as a sunset or a volcano.

Having a consciousness that begins with the notion that every human is made in the image of God leads to a belief that striving for that natural transcendence will unravel the roots of cruelty and violence that have been practiced for generations. We begin with the belief that humans are not flawed but, rather, really good at remembering how to survive in oppressive systems. We begin with the idea of returning to our original nature using consciousness and conscience rather than the shaming and blaming evoked by the belief in original sin.

We are living in interesting times -- we have enough consciousness to see the systemic results of greed, of racism, of cruelty. How shall we return to a state of being that knows how to be accountable and not simply beaten up by shaming and blaming?

We begin by affirming that change is possible when we involve ourselves in a communal process of transformation. Change is possible when we support one another and allow the energy of transformation to carry us to a new way of being. I hear this spirit in the voice of a Hopi elder from Arizona, reflecting on the future of human life on this planet. (2002):

*"You have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour, now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour. And there are things to be considered ...Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Are you in right relation? Where is your water? Know your garden. It is time to speak your Truth. Create your community. Be good to each other. And do not look outside yourself for the leader. This could be a good time!"*

*“There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are torn apart and will suffer greatly.*

*"Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above water. And I say, see who is in there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, Least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.*

*"The time for the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves! Banish the word struggle from you attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.*

*"We are the ones we've been waiting for."*

Some years ago, searching for a way to transform my childish and shaming religion, I discovered the Buddhist practice of mindful meditation as a way to live each moment in a sacred manner and in celebration. I attended my first week-long retreat with the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hahn in the summer of 2003, and came home a true believer ready to be transformed by mindfulness. In September of that year, when I was serving the Unitarian Universalist community of Waltham, I was still filled with the story of that wonderful, life-giving time. We began the church year with a retreat at Craigville Beach on Cape Cod. When we sat on the beach and shared our summer stories, I launched into a description of what I learned in community with my Zen teacher and his followers. As I looked into the inquiring and interested face of Anna, a young mother, I shared a memory of being stirred to great heights of gratitude and joy by noticing my breathing while chewing each mouthful of food 30 times, mindfully recalling the people and the earth that had provided me with such nourishment.

At the same time there was an insistent tapping on my arm, and the voice of a child repeating something over and over again. I barely registered this interruption, but returned to reciting my story of mindfulness with more focus and drama. Finally, Anna amplified her son's interruption, by saying his words with him and pointing her finger along with his. He was saying, with persistent joy, "Reverend Martha, look at the bird!" I looked at the bird and then looked at Anna. She giggled at the irony of my talking about mindfulness while missing the touch and voice of little Miles caught up in the wonder of the world.

At the time, I have to confess, I got the irony, I understood the mismatch between what I was saying and what I was doing, but there was no heart in my seeing. My embarrassment did not tend to the child's experience at all.

It was only as I began to imagine my yearly Yom Kippur sermon, and began to imagine asking Anna's permission to tell this story that I felt the pain of conscience and remorse.

My first response was all about me, and how I appeared to others, my public reputation. I was shamed, but not yet guilty.

When guilt knocked on my door, I began to hold the moment in a new way. I felt the real loss of connection I might have had with Miles. I felt the real loss of connection with Anna as well, because I was privileging a memory of gratitude and joy over an actual encounter. I felt the routine of it, too. I knew that this was the sort of sinning I did all day, every day. Still I asked Anna's permission to talk about that moment on the beach in a sermon, along with my guilty grappings with conscience. She asked me, like the good Unitarian Universalist that she is, "so what's next in this process of confession? Is confession enough?" I answered that I could go to Miles and apologize directly, but since he is such an "in the moment toddler guy," I didn't think that would help.

I told her that I'd stopped feeling shamed and embarrassed and started simply noticing the pattern, wondering what makes it possible for me to repeat it so beautifully and so regularly. I told her I noticed that I love the trajectory of an idea, but that my loyalty to that trajectory often required experiencing the rest of reality as an interruption. I was experiencing a capacity for conscience -- an ability to step back and notice competing loyalties.

Conscience relies upon the ability and space to make conscious choice in community.

As we spoke, Miles began telling Anna about the rain. Anna stopped and noticed the rain with him. As we spoke, I could hear her older daughter, Sophie, crying; Anna gently shifted her attention and made sure Sophie was being attended to by her dad. I connected what I was saying to what Anna was doing. We were able to manage several trajectories at once in a dance of attention between ideas, ideals, and living them out. There was an "inter-being" of our attention, thoughts, and actions.

While trying to make amends, I was being given a lesson by Anna and Miles in how humans manage to get things done *and* pay attention to life at the same time. We were tending a web of interdependent relationships together. To me, this awareness of our inter-being *is* the turning toward the holy that the Jewish community practices each Autumn.

Being an evolutionary grown-up," the ones we have been waiting for," means being conscious of and tending a whole web of interdependent relationships.

Being an evolutionary grown-up means knowing it is impossible to do this work alone. If I only confess these wrongs to myself in the privacy of my meditations or journal writings or sleepless nights, I am only doing half of the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation requires community in order that a mere idea, a lofty ideal, become a flesh and blood **reality between persons**.

Judaism knows that sin, "missing the mark," is always communal. The confessional liturgy of the Jewish people, the prayers that will be spoken tonight and tomorrow,

suggest that each person in the community is responsible for every sin that is committed. At one point in the process of repair, one grapples with personal responsibility. "I am the one who with great intentionality ignored a child's invitation to beauty. I am the one who misses the world's invitation to beauty, again and again."

Anna, my community, held me accountable that day on the beach and again on the telephone. That's what a community does. A mature community, as distinct from a gang or a mob, holds every member accountable to some agreed upon standard. A mature member of a community knows that he or she is the environment for all other member of the community.

At my mature best, I know that I am the environment for Miles, for our children, for all the people I meet. At Anna's mature best, she knows that she is the environment for Miles and for me. In a sense, we are each other's world.

When people intentionally commit to being a particular sort of environment for each other, they become a community, able to name itself with a common "we." This is the communal "we" that will be spoken by our Jewish neighbors tonight and tomorrow. They will confess to bribery and theft and murder, because they know in some sense they are connected to and implicated in that suffering as part of the interdependent web of all being.

When we shed the behaviors of shame and blame and instead hold ourselves accountable for our contribution to the suffering in the world, reality becomes our partner, not our punishment. We must engage the real world from where we really are; trusting in our original nature and surrendering to the flow of the river of time, as we celebrate with our companions -- even as we are just keeping our heads above water.

I finish with a poem by Rabbi Harold Schulweis:

*We have seen Yitzhak Perlman  
Who walks the stage with braces on both legs,  
On two crutches.  
He takes his seat, unhinges the clasps of his legs,  
Tucking one leg back, extending the other,  
Laying down his crutches, placing the violin under his chin.  
On one occasion one of his violin strings broke.  
The audience grew silent but the violinist didn't leave the stage.  
He signaled the maestro, and the orchestra began its part.  
The violinist played with power and intensity on only three strings.  
With three strings, he modulated, changed, and  
recomposed the piece in his head.  
He retuned the strings to get different sounds,  
turned them upward and downward.  
The audience screamed delight,  
applauded their appreciation.*

*Asked later how he had accomplished this feat,  
the violinist answered  
It is my task to make music with what remains.*

This is the environment we can be for each other: not making excuses or blaming others for what is broken, but making music with what remains -- recomposing our lives, in concert with each other.

And knowing: "We are the ones we have been waiting for."