

Forgiveness, Hope, and the Sacred

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 25, 2022

As a young person I yearned for belonging. I knew what I felt in my heart – loneliness, a lack of confidence, insecurity, anxiety and even, perhaps, a sense of shame. And yet in my search to belong, I was chasing that which was false – fitting in. I bought the clothes, I went to the parties, I spoke the slang, I told the jokes. And yet, even when surrounded by people, I was utterly alone. I thought belonging meant acceptance and thus strayed further from my true self with each successive attempt to be accepted. In retrospect I see this urge to fit in as a catalyst to so much pain in many of those who surrounded me then and continue to surround me – leading to addictions and eating disorders and proclamations of a false self. These attempts at fitting in are not simply found in teenage angst but as a profound cultural phenomenon. It was not until my later years when I found faith and purpose and a growing accumulation of self-worth that I realized that what I was chasing was entirely superficial and that what I truly needed to belong was to belong to myself. I needed to love myself – each piece of me – anxieties and insecurities and all. Through a budding faith in Unitarian Universalism that ultimately changed the trajectory of my life I found belonging to the earth and to all of its inhabitants, as well as a belonging to that which I held sacred – just as we have been exploring all month – which ultimately allowed me to belong to my one, true self. This month we have marked our place in the web of life, celebrated our own inherent worth, found strength and

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healing in the sacred, asked ourselves “what does it mean to belong?” and “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”¹

Doing the work to belong to ourselves is truly a spiritual practice. It is knowing who we are at our core and sharing this with pride to the world around us. It is not changing who we are but being who we are.² It was not the clothes I wore nor the jokes I told, it was that deep sense of knowing who I was and treasuring what I held in my heart. Belonging to self – this is accepting each piece of us. It is to know our worthiness, even when we make mistakes and hurt one another, even when we lose our way.³

Our faith and the principles we covenant to live by pull from many sources, including our Jewish roots. In the coming weeks those of the Jewish faith celebrate the High Holy Days and in commemorating this we can draw wisdom from that profound act of asking for divine forgiveness – the sacred practice of the High Holy Days. Today, not only will we draw wisdom from these holidays, but also of Jewish history. In studying the Jewish faith, we learn of the power of hope found in the Exodus story – that of an oppressed people leaving the bondage of slavery to journey into the harsh unknown. What do hope and forgiveness mean in the cultivation of belonging to oneself? They are pivotal – the first allowing us to trust something greater than ourselves that life is inherently good, and that love will prevail, the later in stripping us of the bondage of resentment to return to a core that is fundamentally good and

¹ *The Summer Day* Mary Oliver

² From quote of Brené Brown

³ From quote of adrienne maree brown

worthy. We replace despair with hope and bitterness and indignation with forgiveness. In doing so, we connect to our true selves.

One of the most sacred, important, and holy acts of the Jewish faith is the yearly cycle of asking for and receiving divine forgiveness as enacted during Yom Kippur. It is a time of reflection and repentance and the bringing of these wrongdoings to the sacred. It is a rest, a pause, a restart on how to be in the world. It is a repentance to God in a faith that sees the timeless divine and the humble, mortal beings in relationship with one another. Those of the Jewish faith find this ritual act of asking for and receiving divine forgiveness so critical to spiritual wholeness that they participate in this sacred act each year. In relieving ourselves of our transgressions we return to our true core and find belonging.

How can we draw wisdom from these acts as Unitarian Universalists? We can release our transgressions into nature or to our own divine through an act of prayer. Traditionally our Universalist God is a God of forgiveness, relieving us of our most profound mistakes, which inspires me to do the same. Living in a state where we cannot forgive ourselves is to be trapped. Grasping to the misdeeds of another keeps us in bondage. Releasing transgressions of others and of our own actions returns us to ourselves – to our core. Our divine can guide us. This idea of divine forgiveness – whether through nature or a deity or multiple deities – this is not an invitation to run rampant with a knowledge that we will be forgiven, but a reminder of our own goodness and the goodness of others – we are not defined by what we have done

wrong. We are reminded of the power of love in this realm because we find love in that which is greater. These are tools for a life well lived.

Some of the most profound and formative experiences in my life have come through acts of forgiveness – of myself and of others. They were profound in the freedom that resulted from this relinquishment and formative in that they taught me what it means to forgive – a concept I had misunderstood for years. Forgiveness does not mean that what happened is ok.

Forgiveness means understanding another person’s experiences, it means knowing that no one is perfect, but that nearly everyone is trying, it means letting go of the hold that resentment has upon us. We face adversities in life – addictions, mistreatment, arguments, jealousy, revenge. And yet if these adversities are what we hold within, what kind of life are we living?

And so I ask, what about hope? Hope connects us to our core and to our sense of belonging by holding on to the knowledge that good will ultimately prevail – even if not in each life. Hope helped carry me through a difficult time as I grasped the idea that – if I dedicated myself to self-care and healing– life could get better. Hope spurred me into action. I think of cultivating hope through creating heaven on earth in this realm we are inhabiting today – crafting hope from justice and healing the wounds of others – making the world a more beautiful place. Theologian John Polkinghorne writes, “I believe that this intuition of hope is a significant and essential aspect of what it is to be human... it is an encounter with the reality within which we live.”⁴ I believe hope keeps human beings from slipping into despair by encouraging and

⁴ *The God of Hope and the End of the World* by John Polkinghorne pg. 31

grasping on to the goodness of life – to the beauty of nature or laughter or love. Hope is neither certainty nor fantasy⁵ – which is to say proclaiming hope is not proclaiming truth nor is it a foolish desire of something entirely unachievable and unattainable. Hope helps us to belong to goodness and eternal love, and thus to belong to ourselves.

The story of Exodus is one of profound hope and can guide us as Unitarian Universalists towards living spiritually fulfilling lives. Exodus is the story of an oppressed peoples fleeing the bondage of slavery through the aid of their divine; a story interspersed with a people who had hope in a better life and trust in what they held sacred. In each successive step of this story, I see an offering of guidance and meaning. For example, Moses received divine instruction when he experienced his God in a burning bush. Where can we find our sacred? When in need of the aid of something holy beyond ourselves, can we encounter God in the blowing wind, or the first flower of spring? Moses was assured deliverance through his Jewish theology in which mortals and the being of God could interact. God offered God's instructions for Moses to follow. Can we listen to our own sacred? Can we learn the message that nature provides of beauty and perseverance, or the message of divine love that says we are never alone? God spoke to Moses and promised Moses' people freedom. So the Jewish people left their captors – embraced in that hope for something better – relinquishing the bondage of slavery. What bondage can we relinquish? Addiction, untreated mental illness, wounding family systems. Entering the unknown is often scarier than staying within the hardships we are familiar with – and yet overcoming this fear is necessary. Let us turn this fear into hope. And in following their God

⁵ *The God of Hope and the End of the World* by John Polkinghorne pg. 30

the Jewish people were offered miracles – a parting of the Red Sea to safely free them from their pursuers, sweet water appearing from unexpected places. I wonder of the miracles we face when we allow our divine to guide us – miracles of love, of beauty, of art and compassion. The Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years – driven by hope even through loss of loved ones – hope to be ultimately saved, even if not every person survived. Even when facing hardships beyond what was expected when they left their enslavement they persevered. The Jewish people did not belong in slavery – and so they fled, to find a land where they could belong as free people. They held themselves apart by belonging to each other, and not their captors, and distinguished themselves in belonging to their God.

I want to mention another understanding I have about what it means to belong to ourselves – a reflection that is interlaced with hope and forgiveness. I want to explore ideas of what happens after death. To theologian John Polkinghorne, theorizing about what comes next runs parallel in believing in a God of hope. This connects me to hope as well, to the idea that there is no ultimate end, no final moment. When I crafted my own understanding of existence after death, I felt such calm and peace and security that I was able to connect deeply to my true self in powerful ways. I work to know that, when this life ends, I am at a place of peace. To some, a piece of us lives beyond our bodily death, to others we simply return to the earth, part of a never-ending cycle of birth and death. Polkinghorne writes, “Spiritual formation can fit us for what that final destiny is hoped to be.”⁶ We cannot know the ultimate, but we can prepare our spirits. Practices of forgiveness and hope transform our spirits – connecting us to our true

⁶ *The God of Hope and the End of the World* by John Polkinghorne pg. 30

selves – and prepare us for life’s ultimate truth – death. We continue to reside within God, or in nature, or in another being, or perhaps in another realm. Reincarnation, resurrection, returning to the earth or an entry into a spirit world – each an act of hope. None proven, but all theorized – all providing inspiration for how we aim to belong to ourselves and live each of our days. We can settle in this life because we have an understanding of what comes next. I know my beloved stepfather hoped for bodily resurrection and that my husband hopes to be reincarnated and live life again. In crafting these ideas and understandings, we find a way to belong to our lives even after we have perished. We belong to ourselves – not just in the 1 or 4 or 7 or 10 decades where we traverse life in this realm, but beyond that – whether through the elements of our body returning to the earth or our spirits continuing on in another body or another realm. We continue to belong. We are not simply this fleeting life, but a part of something more. This returns to our traditional Universalist idea of a forgiving God – none of us shall be damned. This returns to our need for a theology of forgiveness so that we find inner peace to carry with us wherever we ultimately reside. This is hope – hope that our ceasing heart and ceasing breaths will not destroy us but transform us. We belong to the web of life and this web continues after we perish. We belong to ourselves, and we will for perpetuity.

Belonging is not fitting in – it is much greater than that. It is knowing our core and presenting our true selves to the world. It is realized through acts of forgiveness that strip us of bondage. It is actualized through hope – hope in love, hope in goodness, hope in something greater than ourselves. It carries us beyond this tangible life into something more; something

expansive. Belonging gives us meaning in each moment in each day. So treasure it. Nurture it. Embody it. Never stop asking, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

May it be so, and Amen