

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 28 September, 2014

Blessing of the Animals: We Begin Again, In Love

Last Sunday, a huge march wound its way through New York City during the United Nations Summit on Climate Change. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, began on Wednesday evening. Hard on its heels is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, beginning this coming Thursday. On Saturday, our Catholic friends will be celebrating the feast day of Saint Francis. This is one of those rich confluences of holidays that Unitarian Universalists love; Alexander Pope wrote, “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread!”¹

Here goes!

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is followed by ten days of reflection, remorse, confession, and repentance. My favorite word associated with these so-called Days of Awe is *teshuvah*, a Hebrew word meaning *turning*. It comes from the idea that to sin is to turn away from G*d, and to atone is to turn back. The manual entitled *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days* says, “*T’shuvah* means turning from who we were into someone different, someone who behaves differently. It means envisioning ourselves returning to an earlier situation, but making another choice this time, doing it differently.”² *Teshuvah* means to right old wrongs and move forward in joy. The holiest of holy days concludes the Day of Awe: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Etch-a-Sketch of life gets a good shake, and the screen is cleaned. We begin again. Artist and poet Judy Chicago writes, “And then everywhere shall be called Eden once again.”

¹ Alexander Pope, from *An Essay on Criticism* (1709)

² Kerry M. Olitzky and Rachel T. Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days*, p. 20

So we have this wonderful opportunity, now, to consider deeply the meanings of *teshuvah* and atonement in our lives, and to think about the power of forgiveness – including forgiving ourselves – and starting over.

In honor of the Feast Day of Saint Francis, here is a new, true story about *teshuvah*, told by author Diane Dunaway Kramer about her grandfather.

On his 88th birthday, Papa had “blown out the forest of candles, and we were sitting around the family dinner table eating his favorite cake [chocolate!]. . . . Diane said in a playful tone, ‘Well, Papa, so tell us what you’ve learned in the past eighty-eight years.’

“Papa looked up and seemed to consider the answer before saying seriously, ‘Well, I’ll tell you. I’ve missed out on a lot that I could have had. And ... [I have] nobody to blame but myself.’

[The room grew very quiet.]

“When I was a ... kid growing up in St. Louis, I had a lot of trouble. I was small for my age, and at twelve, [I] was working after school. On payday, the rough kids in the neighborhood would always try to chase me down so they could beat me up and take my money. As time went on, and they got older and meaner, I thought that one day they would kill me, and I was always scared, everywhere I went.

“But then everything changed.

“I’ll never forget it. One dark day in November, a big black dog – mostly Labrador – wandered into our house through an open back door. The poor [guy] seemed to be starving. I fed him and got my mom to let him stay. The next day, Shadow (that’s the name I gave him) followed me to school, and waited outside until I got out. Then after school he followed me to my job at the biscuit factory, and he waited there, too. When those guys showed up, boy, they had a *big* surprise. You should have seen their eyes when they started chasing me, and then saw Shadow. That dog turned around and bit the biggest [one] ... and they all ran away. After that, they never bothered me if Shadow was along, and believe me, Shadow went everywhere I did.

“On Sundays, we’d swim together [in] a creek outside town. I’d spend hours throwing sticks into the [water], and Shadow wouldn’t rest until he’d found the exact one I’d thrown, and brought it back, proud as he could be. Then we’d fall asleep on the bank of the creek under the willow trees, my head on his chest.’

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“That’s a wonderful story,’ [Papa’s daughter, Audrey,] said, before adding with a note of bewilderment, “but in all these years, you’ve never mentioned having a dog, and you always told us you didn’t want one.’

“Papa nodded, cocking a bushy gray eyebrow. ‘Well, I guess that’s because of what happened next. Shadow was with me fifteen years, until I was in my twenties, and we were in the [Great] Depression. I was working long hours at three jobs. It was winter, but I still left a window in the hallway open to let Shadow in and out when he wanted. All I can figure is that he must have jumped out and he was just too old or too cold to jump back in.... [And] I was always so tired at night, I just didn’t wake up.... [He stayed out all night, and died the next day.]

“I was so angry at myself. My best friend who’d saved me and given so much to my life was gone. It just tore me up.’

“Papa spoke slowly. ‘Never got over him. I felt so bad, I made a promise to myself that I’d never get another dog as long as I lived. And I never did.’”

[Everyone was silent. Finally,] “Audrey said, ‘That’s heartbreaking....’

“Papa slapped a hand on the table.... ‘But that’s just it! It *did* break my heart. I never told it or even wanted to think about it because my heart was broken. That’s just what I’m trying to tell you. Life goes on, and that promise that I ... kept ... was just plain foolish. I’ve missed out on ... loving another dog all these years, because I was afraid to love and lose again. So I lost out.... Dumbest mistake I ever made.’”³

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Tesuhvah: turning, and the power of forgiveness and starting over.

³ “Papa’s Biggest Mistake,” in Jonathan Kramer, Ph.D., and Diane Dunaway Kramer, *Losing the Weight of the World*, pp. 263-265

Papa's children and grandchildren reflected on his eighty-eighth birthday confession, and didn't take long to decide he'd punished himself enough. Not long afterwards, they surprised him with a late birthday present: a wriggling black Lab puppy. Papa received the gift of forgiveness with great joy, as his smiling face was licked again and again. He pronounced it "love at first sight," and said he felt as if Shadow had been "resurrected."⁴

Beloved spiritual companions,

Who among us does not have a Shadow in our past?

The days of awe invite us to *teshuvah*,
making a spiritual practice of righting wrongs,
and moving forward in joy.

Let's remember Papa and Shadow and the puppy:
Let's not wait 'til our eighty-eighth birthdays
to turn, atone, and forgive ourselves and others.

Let us begin again, in love.

In closing, here is Susa Silvermarie's poem, *A Thousand Years of Healing*.

From whence my hope, I cannot say,
except it grows in the cells of my skin,
in my envelope of mysteries it hums.
In this sheath so akin to the surface of the earth
it whispers. Beneath
the wail and dissonance in the world,
hope's song grows. Until I know
that with this turning
we put to rest a broken age.⁵
We who are alive at such a cusp
now usher in
one thousand years of healing!

⁴ Kramer and Kramer, *op cit*, p. 271

⁵ Susa Silvermarie wrote, "we put a broken age to rest."

Winged ones and four-leggeds,
grasses and mountains and each tree,
all the swimming creatures,
even we, wary two-leggeds
hum, and call, and create
the Changing Song. We remake
all our relations. We convert
our minds to the earth. In this turning time
we finally learn to chime and blend,
attune our voices; sing the vision
of the Great Magic we move within.
We begin
the new habit, getting up glad
for a thousand years of healing.