

Reflections & Touchstones

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Message from Sept 13, 2020 Service

You might be wondering why it is that we're referring to this month as a new beginning. It used to be the case that a lot of Unitarian Universalist congregations didn't hold services in the summer. People would go on vacations, or they would be otherwise occupied by summer activities. In farm areas, people would be busy with the crops during the summer, or supporting the tourist season in their town. Many of the church buildings didn't have air conditioning, making it uncomfortable to hold services in the summer. It's not so much the case anymore, but when I first started in UU, *my* congregation took the summer off. So September would be when the congregation would start its new church year. It was an especially joyous time when we'd all get together again. And for most congregations -- including ours -- September is the beginning of the church year from a financial perspective. Our new members of the Board of Trustees start their roles now, and all our staff starts their contract for the coming year.

September is also the beginning of the year for the Jewish religion. The holiday of Rosh Hashanah -- which literally means "head of the year" -- will be celebrated this coming Friday (actually, starting this Thursday evening at sunset). And then that's followed 10 days later by Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement". These holidays are much more than our secular New Year's day on January 1st. Rather these are the "high holy days" for the year.

I grew up Jewish, so I'm pretty familiar with the holidays. Every year my brother, sister, and I would miss school during these holidays. We would dress up and go to the synagogue. Let me tell you about these *holy .. days*.



The story goes that on Yom Kippur -- the 2nd of the two holidays -- God assesses how well you had lived your life during the previous year and how well you've atoned for your sins and transgressions. And based on that, he decides whether to write you into the "Book of Life" for the coming year. The seal gets stamped on the book, and your fate has now been decided.

There are things I like, and things I don't like about this outlook. Personally, I like the concept that our assessment as a human being gets linked to our actions – kind of like karma. To me, this seems very Unitarian Universalist. But it seems like it's over the top to say that whether you're going to live or die gets decided that particular day and that your fate is then destined to occur, no matter what you do after that.

I don't think that many people believe anymore that people's upcoming fate is pre-determined. However, if you think about it, it's quite nice to have a specific time every year when it's your job to take time out to think about how you're living your life, think about whether you could have done some things better, truly repent for transgressions against others, and even try to make things right with those people you transgressed against. It's nice to have a time dedicated to thinking about what we're going to do *better* in the future, and then resolve to make that better reality happen.

When this congregation created the Luminescence holiday, we decided to include 2 candles for these same ideas. One is the candle of "Reflection," which talks about the importance of deeply contemplating who we are and how we're living our lives. Another is the candle of "Renewal," which talks about recommitting ourselves to living the best life we can live and to renew our spirituality.

The Jewish high holy days are a spiritual journey. Here's how it goes: Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world. You hear the sounding of the shofar – a trumpet made from a ram's horn. Personally, it always grossed me out that shofars are actually real ram's horns, from the heads of real rams. But nowadays there's a small movement among the more enlightened to start using plastic horns, and even PVC pipe as a shofar.



Then, after Rosh Hashanah, there's a 10-day period of repentance and introspection. At the end of that is Yom Kippur, where you not only pray all day, you fast all day, too – from sunset of the previous day until sunset of that day. I remember that being pretty tough for us kids, but my folks always said there was an exception for a slice of bread. It was nice when you could break your fast together as a family with a nice dinner that evening.

One of the customs of the high holy days is to eat apple slices dipped in honey. Apples are a good, natural food with healing properties, and the honey signifies the hope for a year that will be sweet. Another traditional food is a round challah -- a special kind of bread -- which is round in order to symbolize the circle of life.

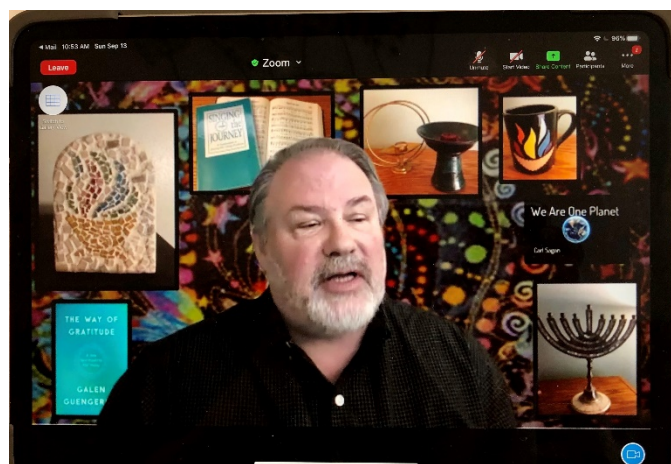
The short greeting when you see people during the high holy days is "L'shana tovah" which means "for a good year." And the longer greeting is "L'shana tovah tikatev v-tai-hatem." That means "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year."

I want to tie together last week's service about "Renewing our Vows" with next week's service of "Renewing our Spiritual Practices." I think we all suspect that we're going to be spending more time at home than used to be the case in the past. We also know that we tend to surround ourselves -- in our homes -- with objects that reflect who are.

So my question is: What do we have in our homes? Of course, we've got all the supplies, furniture, food, kitchen and bath supplies, and other equipment that we use in our everyday lives.

We have objects that remind us of those we love -- pictures of beloved relatives and friends. We've got items that remind us of fun times in our lives -- maybe photos or relics from vacations we took. We have gifts we've received. Artwork we enjoy. Plants to enliven our space. Books that we've enjoyed reading. We might have pets and their supplies. These are all the things we've got surrounding us. And each time we see one of these things, we know why it's there what it's for.

I'd like each of us to ask ourselves what each of us has around us in our house that reminds us of our *spirituality* ... of our theology ... of our morals and ethics. Or what do we have surrounding us that relates to our Unitarian Universalist principles?



It might be that you've got a chalice that you light during our Sunday services. If you sometimes help plan a service, you might have a hymnal. Or if you came from a different faith, you might have objects from that faith, like a menorah for candles. Or if you like some other traditions from around the world, you might have prayer flags.



Does anyone remember the stones we used to place by the coffee pot at our services? They have words etched into them like Love, Peace, Courage, Strength, Gratitude, and Inspiration.

The word “touchstone” is often used to refer to a “standard” that you can go back to and measure yourself against. In a spiritual sense, anything around you -- something you can touch or see or otherwise experience -- can be a “spiritual touchstone.”

Sometimes we’re so busy with our day-to-day activities and routines that we might forget that it’s also important to have spiritual touchstones.

I thought it would be fun to think about what we all have around the house that might be considered as our spiritual touchstones. With all the “stuff” we surround ourselves with, what are our touchstones from a spiritual, ethical, or moral sense? While you think about how this relates to you, let me bring up some other possibilities; give you some ideas of less directly religious items.

Maybe there are things that reinforce our principles. In support of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, you might have a Black Lives Matter banner. You might have an artifact that you find to be meaningful from a different culture than your own. Or you show support for LGBTQ persons with a Pride flag. In pursuit of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, you may have philosophy books. Or in alignment with our 7th Principle of the interconnectedness of all beings, you might have videos of the Our Planet nature series. In supporting the 5th principle of democratic process, you might have political signs in your yard supporting candidates who back our principles. This is a way to show our morality and try to bring others on-board.

In a minute we’re going to break into small groups to discuss. The two questions are: 1) What do you have around your home that will help remind you about your spirituality in the coming year? Or, 2) Are there things you might want to change for the coming year?

And don’t worry if you don’t have any of these touchstones. Just like with the high holy days holidays, there’s time to think about it and decide that you might want to add some. So in that case, are there some that you think you might want to get? Or, do YOU think they’re not important for you -- which is a perfectly valid outlook, too.

When we break into small groups, you will each have 1 or 2 minutes to unmute your microphone and share. Here are some guidelines: Each person should only speak one time. No one *has* to share -- after all, this is by invitation, not demand. When you're done, please call on the next person who has not spoken yet. If there is silence, that's OK. Children and youth should be invited to share early on. We will have 8 or 9 minutes in our conversations. We will let you know when you have about a minute left, and then we will rejoin all together in the large group to finish the service.

Here again are the questions:

1) What do you have around your home that will help remind you about your spirituality in the coming year?

Or, 2) Are there things you might want to change for the coming year?

Let's go!

Break for small-group discussions:

Upon return:

Welcome back. I hope that the discussions gave you ideas about things that can keep us grounded on the spiritual side. And now for the assignment: I would like to encourage all of us, over the next week, to think about reflection and renewal. Reflection about the past year, and renewal of our spiritual selves to continue to work to become our best possible selves. These times are asking us to be especially present to ourselves, and to each other, to be mindful of our need for connection. There are great gifts to be found there if we can become grounded enough and move from a place of calm, presence and love.

And now for a very short prayer:

We are blessed,
we are blessed by being here,
we are blessed by being here together.