

REPENT !

A sermon for Yom Kippur
by F. Jay Deacon
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of North Easton
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You will have noticed the title, *Repent!*. Which brings up a related concept, *guilt*. So here we go. You come to a Unitarian Universalist service to hear about repentance and guilt? *Really*.

But I do feel obligated to make clear what I'm *not* talking about. Guilt seems to be a major theme in religions. Catholicism specializes in it. Protestant churches are set up like courtrooms and, for the orthodox, the evangelical, the thing that matters most is whether or not you've been justified before God by the sacrificial death of Christ who paid the fine for your sin to a wrathful righteous God, so that you come out okay in the judgment.

I looked through my collection of hymnals and found gobs of guilt. But try finding hymns in *our* hymnal about guilt!

While other religions seem far more interested in guilt, seem to wallow in guilt, Unitarian Universalists aren't supposed to talk about it.



Many forms of specious guilt trips are endured by humans, which we feel for lack of any

READINGS

Robert Granat, "The Gift of Lack," in the journal Parabola.

(viii.1, January 1983, 57-59)

Beneath all the highs and lows, the pluses and minuses and neutrals, we can all find a foothold on the bedrock knowledge that the power that divides the cells and fires the stars and twirls the planets is the same power that fuels the life in us. . . . What other life-form is engineered to balance such a vivid sense of potential perfection against an even keener sense of actual imperfection? What species besides ours has been invited to play a role in the process of its own evolution, in the evolution of the whole enterprise? . . . It's the key that unlocks the enigma of our condition, the internal warfare that must inevitably occur in a mammal who's been fitted out with a supermammalian consciousness. . . . This is a note sent out on a wavelength that sounds only to us, and every human being has heard that call, muffled or clear . . . and has responded with the peculiar restlessness only our species can know. A needing, a lacking, a yearning for something. This need is our gift, this lack is our gain. It's the light on our path. For we lack what we have, as a seed lacks a tree. It isn't just the problem that's born into us. The resolution is too. The urge is the urge to come into our own, our own as this uniquely-endowed lifeform on this uniquely-endowed pellet of cosmic dust. We've been invited to transcendence. And what other short convention of cells, what other brief candle of sentience [*subs.* consciousness?], has received such an invitation?

We're not obliged to accept it. We're free to say no, another great privilege extended to us. And to refuse to evolve is merely to choose to devolve, the way an infertile seed rots back into earth.

Jane Hirshfield: The Door

A note waterfalls steadily
through us,
just below hearing.
Or this early light
streaming through dusty glass:
what enters, enters like that,
unstoppable gift.
And yet there is also the other,
the breath-space held between any call
and its answer —
....

A little sabbath,
minnow whose brightness silvers past time.
The rest-note,
unwritten,
hinged between worlds,
that precedes change and allows it.

real moral vision. Take sex. In some forms of religion, sin and sex are the same thing. See this? It isn't a pocket New Testament, just looks like one. Gold edges, leather cover. It's called

THE CATHOLIC GIRL'S GUIDE
published in 1906. Want guilt? Read this.



Two years after this came out, in 1908, something called *The Directorium Asceticum* was published under the imprimatur of the Archbishop of Baltimore. It tells the inspiring story of a 12-year-old girl who, to avoid temptation and in particular the amorous glances of a young admirer, hid herself in a cave for the next 12 years, "receiving through a small hole the food necessary to support life." Elsewhere it offers some dubious advice:

Modesty must be practised by custody of the eyes, which should usually be kept downcast, to avoid the inconveniences to which we have alluded . . . It will be enough to keep the eyes generally cast down, . . . and especially in the public streets, where we are made a spectacle to every one, and where dangerous objects are more frequently to be met with . . . Above all, in conversing with persons of the opposite sex, we should avoid looking them full in the face, but rather fix our eyes somewhat lower. [103]

There's neurotic guilt for you. We know about that. So. We've done away with guilt. Congratulations.



Of course, in our passion for justice, we always hope that *others* who perpetrate the kinds of things *we* regard as sins — environmental polluters, bigots, warmongers, you know — we always hope *they* will feel guilt about what *they* are doing.

One of my greatest inspirations in ministry, Howard Moody in New York, recounted a story about a friend he met in college after the second World War. This friend fought, as Howard did, in the war. It's a war story — his

friend told him about a terrible day out there lying on an open field in France. And there were German soldiers all over on one side of the field pinned down by the mortar fire and he had a rifle with telescopic site. And he picked off 14 Germans that day, looked through the telescopic sight right into their magnified faces and shot them. After it was over he couldn't sleep for days. There were nightmares and cold sweat. So he went to the chaplain. Who said, patting him on the head,

"There, there, son, you've done nothing wrong, this is war!"

He said after that he gave up on religion. Howard calls that chaplain a "hired absolver" paid by the government to absolve the guilt about war so it wouldn't constitute a morale problem.

But you see? This human being didn't want to be told he shouldn't feel guilty. There is an inner wisdom in people that won't accept so easy and false an answer. There *are* things worth lying awake over and having cold sweats over.



The High Holy Days, and specifically Yom Kippur, this past Friday evening and Saturday, are an invitation to us *to turn*. There is a Hebrew word for this turning, and it is *t'shuvah*. That's it at the top of your order of service. *T'shuv*. Turn back, turn back, forswear thy foolish ways.

From the time I accompanied Jason and first experienced the High Holy Days a few years ago, — these days speak to me with a kind of force that, frankly, I cannot claim for the religious holidays I grew up with. Christmas, in particular, it seems to me, has ceased to be a religious holy day in any really meaningful sense as Christians have allowed it to become an orgy of commerce. Every year I work to make Christmas Eve something significantly religious, and it seems to surprise people that anyone would try! But Judaism has managed, mostly, to retain these ten days as

something profoundly religious, even as Islam has retained these days of Ramadan for a month of fasting, a turning from greed and materialism.



Now — *guilt*. Guilt is a universal pain.

Guilt belongs to the family of affects known as *shame*. There are many kinds of shame, most of them symptoms of the fundamental conviction in our hearts that *we are not adequate; that we are failures, or no good*.

But guilt — guilt is that special kind of shame that arises not out of what and who we are — but *what we have done or failed to do*.



When the experience of guilt strikes, we can usually benefit by imagining a courtroom and looking to see who is the judge and who is the accuser.

Is it a nagging, moralistic parent who has become a part of you and whose judgments are as irrelevant to any real offense as the actual parent's were? Is it a fire and brimstone preacher out of the past who was only bellowing out of his own neurosis and unresolved conflicts? Or was it a distorted and oppressive society that accuses you? Is it some false expectation of someone who expects of you things that are simply not yours to give?

Or is it — some voice within you that represents some dimension of your life that's been shortchanged, neglected — or contradicted by what you are doing? Could it be — your most human and divine striving and aspiration — is it your destiny that's accusing you?

If I'm being accused by a Self larger than the self that has so far evolved, then I think I wanna listen. *That* guilt reveals the chasm between what potentially we are and what actually we dare to be in our living.

The ancient words from the Jewish High Holy Days, and so much more wisdom from Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Platonist, and Islamic, all express an enduring realization of

something we cannot see. There is something that calls us home. *There is something that accuses us when we betray our truest identity*. There is a yearning that knows, simultaneously, that we're missing the mark, and a pervasive sense of the magnitude of what we are — we are capable of more.



Missing the mark. That is really what the biblical word for sin means. In Hebrew, it's *chyet*. In Greek, it's *hamartia*.

I grew up in a Christian home, and attended an fundamentalist Christian college, and four Christian graduate seminaries, where sin was something else. There, sin meant that human beings are fundamentally flawed, essentially evil — the Calvinist Christian doctrine, so beloved by Jonathan Edwards, of the total depravity of human beings, capable of no good. One Sunday morning in 1741, Jonathan Edwards, the Congregational minister in Northampton, went to Connecticut and told the congregation at Enfield:

Yes, God is a great deal more angry with many that are now in this congregation than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.

Unconverted people walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are a thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

Ever feel like that? We are told that in spite of Jonathan Edwards's monotone preaching and the two-hour length of the sermon, by the

end, you could hardly hear Edwards over the moaning and weeping.

So, there you are. And there was I in my former life in that fundamentalist church in Toms River, New Jersey, quaking before an angry God. You're a complete mess. You are such a deplorable mess that God's son, who is also God, had to die in order to appease the wrath of an angry Father-God. And he's still angry. Oh my.



It was no small thing for those first New England Unitarians to take Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin on — head-on — declare they had it all wrong, that human beings are not born so corrupt at heart that they are incapable of any good. New England Unitarianism, led by William Ellery Channing, was a revolt against the doctrine of human depravity, original sin.

They said humanity is the crown of all creation, at least all the creation we know of. Yeh, sometimes we crash and burn. Yeh, sometimes we lose our way. Yeh, sometimes we let ourselves be led by our most primitive instincts rather than our highest capacities — but those highest capacities *are the fruit of the amazing journey of the evolution of life, and the emergence and growth of human consciousness.*

And on this, Jewish theology is at one with Unitarian Universalists.



And when we maintain the moral sensitivity and humility to experience *healthy* guilt, we can turn, we can be more than we have been. That is true of individuals, and of nations.



Can we have a world without guilt?

No more than we can have a world without pain.

Some pain is growing pain.

If we can advance as humans beyond our **false** guiltiness we can finally be sensitive to that painful grace of guilt that comes as a profound inner way of knowing:

that

I am living as though I were less than I am.



I have this edge that HAS to evolve, ow, and I hurt until I evolve. My destiny, the seed of my larger self, is crying out in this pain to be released from small ways of living.



So then, what about the man on the French battlefield? What is our message for *him*? What was *his* sin? *He* didn't declare a war. He was just *there*.

But life in this universe is not just about a bunch of separate, individual selves.

It isn't just me and my guilt or purity, me and my personal salvation, me and my personal growth.

We are part of a culture and a human commonwealth. We cannot live in isolation from our culture, or from the whole of the human community. We share a responsibility for peace, for justice, for the world that is and is to come. That, at least, is a truth that the old doctrine of original sin was reaching for. I say it missed, but the truth is that there is a guilt that we share *and*,

(though often they forget this part)

there is a responsibility that we share.

Sometimes we are tempted to think, You shouldn't talk about things like war and poverty and discrimination and the poisoning of the air and water and earth and the corporate sins of society. People come in here hurting needing to hear something comforting and you talk about something they aren't responsible for and over which they don't have any control and they're only going to go home and lay awake all night feeling guilty.

But at the core of our being we know that we share responsibility for the state of the world, for the degradation of the earth itself, and for the quality of our public life. If not us, who? Some god up there, some devil down *there*? And who must create the world that will be if not us? And the only hope lies with a

changed consciousness on the part of us all.

What if someone DID go home and lay awake all night feeling *that* guilt? They'd have lots of time to write letters to some Senators, letters to some members of the Congress, to the President, to the Editor. They might be tired for work the next day, but they would know they were putting whatever personal power they have to the effort to halt the mad-dened processes by which humanity might make itself extinct, they might feel pretty good, partially relieved, feeling an enhanced self-respect, knowing they'd shared the work of creating a brilliant future.

Herman Hesse called human life an experiment. Some would say it's an experiment that failed, like the dinosaurs. At least the dinosaurs lasted for a few million years. There's no doubt that some of our actions are making us an endangered species. We have *partly* developed our godlike capacities, enough to be a very serious menace to all planetary life. Those capacities must be further developed through struggle, and the pain we feel when we face our own failures.

Today we know, unless we refuse to know, that we have about ten years to reduce our carbon footprint by about — if we're honest with the science — reduce it by about 90 percent or it's really all over. We will have to turn. We will have to change. Some of the damage we have done cannot be reversed. But we can still save this world of life if we will turn. We have the power to do that. In these times, it's what our lives are about. We don't have much time before the subways flood, and then the streets, and the crops fail, and the wars over food and water and land begin. And that will be what we leave to our children and grandchildren and that will be what we'll have made of the magnificent possibilities of our humanity. But it doesn't have to happen.

We know and we feel the widening chasm between rich and poor in America, the greed

that governs so much of our public life, where healthcare has become the luxury of a dwindling part of our population. But it doesn't have to be that way. What splendid, what magnificent human community is possible on this planet?

We know the ways we have missed the mark in our *private* lives. These days remind us that we don't have forever. One of these days, our lives will be offered up, complete. We will die. And the question is, *Will my life have been worth dying for?*

We can examine the quality of our choices. But we can only share such things in loving struggle, as Karl Jaspers put it, with someone who maintains solidarity with us. We need a community for that, one that believes in us, one where forgiveness is spoken and where there is faith that human beings are capable or great magnificence.

Anyone who has attempted to make a serious change in her or his life knows a few things about this. There will always be those low-quality expectation people around us who refuse to believe in the possibility of change and seem to drag you down, reminding you of past shortcomings and attempting to freeze-dry your identity in the past. A period like the Days of Awe sets up another expectation in which everyone is participating. Something in the very air changes.

And that is why we need a community that invites us to turn, gives us space to turn, supports us in our turning, and shares the work of calling people all over this threatened world to turn.

And a place that encourages and supports our *turning* is also a place of *forgiveness* — not vengeance, not indifference, but forgiveness. It will believe in the highest potential of every one of its members. And so it will be a place of the profoundest and deepest joy. We face ourselves and each other with a hopeful expectation of our own evolution.



But it all has to begin with an inward experience of awakening. There is something that we know, in the deepest sense; that commands us.



Today: let us clear away the junk that customarily distorts our sensitivity to it, and distorts our humanity. Let us clear the space in our

living to hear it and live close to it, because it is as vital and necessary as the air is to our lungs. Let us clear away the clutter and noise that deafens us.

Today let us hear the subtler, truer music that is sounding within, and welcome it. Let us feel the finer influences from somewhere deeper, from the core of us. Let us turn.