

**O Source of Peace, Lead Us to Peace  
September 20, 2009**

Lately, at church committee meetings, I've begun prefacing prayers or readings with words something to the effect of, "I invite you to put down your papers and pens as you join me in the spirit of prayer and meditation." I've been doing that lately, because, for as long as I've been a Unitarian Universalist attending committee meetings, or attending worship for that matter, I've noticed that sometimes there are those among us who have the tendency to use moments such as prayer, or readings, or musical interludes, to do some last minute catching up with whatever work lays in store, or with whatever news might be waiting to be read.

To explicitly invite people to put pen and/or paper down in these moments is, I hope, a clear call to shift from the mode of business and tasks, into the state of presence and relationship. Not that business and tasks don't need to be

done. But they're better done when we are actually *present* with one another.

Similarly, at the Covenant of Right Relations workshop held two Saturdays ago, consultant Joe Sullivan had attendants participate in a simple but meaningful activity, which I invite you to do now as well. It will require you putting down your pens, papers, orders of service, hymnals, and so on. It goes something like this:

Close your eyes and rest both hands on your lap. Now slowly raise one hand up in front of you, holding your index finger out. Very slowly, begin to move your raised hand, index finger first, toward your other arm. Do not touch your other arm. Just let your finger get closer, and closer. Let it hover near your arm. And then, very gently, come to touch your finger to your arm. Feel the sensation of contact, both for your arm, and for your finger. Feel it in how you are breathing.

Keep touching. Keep noticing. Now slowly, gently, lift your finger and move it away. Move your hand to *its* resting place on your lap. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Now, as simple as that activity was, *because* of that simple activity, I wonder if you feel even a small shift in how you are here this morning? Did it slow you down, and ground you a little bit? Did it help you become more present? Maybe, if you've got the same kind of attitude in the driver's seat that I do, this exercise felt more like coming to a red light when traffic is bad and you're late to an appointment, and all you could manage was to grind your teeth and wait for it to be done with. That's all right. Because here's a confession. As I was thinking about talking you through this exercise, I remembered that while Joe Sullivan led this exercise at the Covenant of Right Relations workshop, I was sitting off to the side scribbling down notes. I totally missed it!

But, I was graced with a chance to understand its effect anyway, at least second hand, when I heard someone share with the group that doing that exercise felt to her like a reflection of how we can be in the presence of others, how we can experience relationship with others, if we pay attention. Doing this simple exercise of paying attention to our finger coming closer to our arm, to our finger touching our arm, calls us to explore how much we actually do pay attention in our all moments of contact in our daily lives.

For instance, just a little bit ago, did you hear the readings that Gary read? Did you make contact with them? Or did they kind of glide over and around you as you were reading about today's second offering, or wondering what you're going to have for lunch in about an hour? If you're leaning toward the latter, you too have a second chance! The first reading —and this time I invite you to listen as if you are

wholly present with each word, as if you are touching each word—the first reading says, “O Source of peace, lead us to peace, a peace profound and true; lead us to a healing, to mastery of all that drives us to war within ourselves and with others. May our deeds inscribe us in the Book of life and blessing, righteousness and peace! Of Source of peace, bless us with peace.”

Now, that reference to being inscribed in the Book of life is, as some of you know, a direct reference to the Jewish high holy days of Rosh Hashanah, which began this past Friday at sundown. Rosh Hashanah literally means *beginning of the year, or head of the year*. Being the Jewish New Year, it is a time of both reflection and of new beginnings; people look back on their deeds of the past year, searching honestly for where they have strayed from their highest values, and seek to begin the new year with a more careful aim toward paying attention

to the virtue of their deeds. Thus, when God inscribes them in the Book of life for the coming year, they pray it will be a good year. *La Shana Tova* (Lah sha NAH toe VAH)—“a good year”—is how people greet one another during Rosh Hashanah.

But of course, a good year isn't *guaranteed* by the *wish* for it. And honestly, a good year, especially if we mean a smooth-sailing year, can't be guaranteed by *anything*. For we just don't know what mysteries, what challenges, what twists and turns, lie ahead.

Still, knowing that to be true, we can pray, or say, “O Source of peace, lead us to peace,” and we can follow up on that prayer by remembering it is our very deeds that will largely determine our own sense of blessing and peace within our lives. *And*, thus, we can commit to *practicing* deeds that will indeed lead us, individually and collectively, toward peace.

Such is the purpose of covenant. To covenant is to promise to live with and among each other humanly, and humanely, no matter what mysteries or challenges, twists or turns might come our way.

Not that we will do it perfectly. Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams remarks that “Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promises.” Yes. *And* he notes, quoting Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, “The human being *as such...* is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature.” We will stumble.

And we will try again. Why will we try again? Because, as a religious people, as a people bound by our commitment to transform ourselves and the world around through acts of compassion, love, and... justice, I believe, in James Luther Adams’ words, that we do have “a faithfulness [that is] is

nerved by loyalty, by love,” and that the ground of that faithfulness, quoting Adams again, “is the divine or human love that will not let us go....”

Have you ever felt that love? A love that will not let you go? I’m not talking about a smothering love, or a possessive love, or a nagging love, or a codependent love (though those loves, too, can have a hard time loosening their grip). I am talking about an un-abandoning love. I am talking about an unconditional love. No matter how far astray I may go, no matter into how many pieces I might break my promise, there is something, someone, some presence, some *love*, that will say, “Come back. Come back and renew yourself here. For you are welcome here.” Have you ever experienced something like that?

It is that kind of love that can and should be the ground of our covenant together here at Wildflower Church. As

humans, I know we are a stumbling bunch. I've been known not only to scribble notes while sixty other people are practicing mindfulness meditation, but to occasionally treat other human beings like the traffic lights I fume against. I've led myself into the temptation to speak about people rather than to them when I'm struggling, and I've whined a time or two or three or a hundred when I'm feeling over-extended, rather than asking myself how I might practice self care.

But, if I have something to call myself back to, a covenant that calls me back to my humanness as a “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature,” then I need not spiral downward into despair, nor wall myself up with self-righteous pride as a consequence of my missteps. Instead, I can return to the practice of being one member in beloved community, the practice of finding trustworthiness within myself and within

those around me, and so welcome myself back into the care of the love that will not let me go.

So it is, then, that I wish for myself and for all of you, *Shana Tova*. So it is I wish us all a good year. And I wish it for you, and for myself specifically by inviting us into the practice of covenant. The workshop we held two Saturdays ago got us off to a wonderful start. Today, immediately after church, members of the Committee on Ministry, facilitators from the workshop, and I will meet for two hours to take several steps further what so many of you have created thus far. In the spirit of grassroots organizing, we will continue to collect what rises to the top through the work we have already done, and to craft what we believe will be a presentable, meaningful covenant for the entire congregation. Have no fear. You will be informed, you will have a say, and when the time comes, most

likely at the semi-annual meeting in December, if you are a voting member of the congregation, you will have a vote.

In the meantime, all I ask of you is this: that you ask yourselves from time to time, as you go through your days, am I truly present? Am I paying attention? Am I here with my beloved—whether that beloved be a person, a flower, an animal, or a piece of music? Am I here in this moment?

If you find that too often you are racing, maybe even running some red lights, literally or figuratively, then give yourself just enough time to practice this one prayer: “O Source of peace, lead me to peace,” and then say it however many times you need, until once more you find yourself coming back to that love that will not let you go.

Amen.

**The second offering recipient is the Austin People's Community Clinic.** “Founded in 1970, People's Community Clinic is a non-profit, primary health care facility whose purpose is to provide high quality medical, counseling and health education services at reasonable costs to individuals and families in the Austin area.