

First Unitarian Church

October 2, 2016

Once there was a philosopher who had a bone to pick with the legendary Sufi wiseman, Mulla Nasrudin. With the intention of disagreeing with him to his face, the philosopher made an appointment with the mulla, but when he showed up for it, he found that Nasrudin was away from home. Infuriated that he had been stood up, the philosopher picked up a piece of chalk and wrote "Stupid Oaf" on Nasrudin's gate.

When he arrived home and saw this, the Mulla rushed straightaway to the philosopher's house. "I had forgotten that you were to call," he said. "I apologize for having not been at home. Of course, I remembered the appointment as soon as I saw that you had left your name on my door."

I like this story for the way Mulla Nasrudin immediately makes amends, and for the way it suggests that when we offend another person, our actions reflect more about us than they do the offended party.

And who among us has not occasionally behaved like an oaf? Sometimes in small ways, sometimes in big ones. Sometimes against someone we barely know, sometimes against someone as intimate as our own selves, or our God. To oaf is human.

One thing I love about the Jewish High Holy days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, is how radically they embrace that.

It is said that Rosh Hashana is the time when God decides who to inscribe in the Book of Life, who will live and who will die, who will have a good life and who will not for the coming year. An intimidating prospect. But according to tradition, although The Book of Life is written on Rosh Hashanah, it is not finalized until Yom Kippur. Through prayer, good deeds and repentance, our fate can still be changed. That's what the song Avinu Malkeinu is about, and that's why Yom Kippur is called the Day of Atonement.<sup>1</sup>

Atonement is when you make amends after doing something that hurt your relationship with another person, with your God (if you believe in God), or with your own deepest self.

In some ancient cultures, atonement with God was a dramatic practice. The ancient Greeks sacrificed animals. The Aztecs sacrificed humans, and before you start thinking that sounds really out there, remember that in the Christian tradition Jesus's crucifixion is an act of atonement—when people say Jesus died for our sins, they are saying, essentially, that he was sacrificed to atone, to reconcile people's relationship with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Spare Parts, the church band, performed this version of Avinu Malkeinu:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUw4TY9H4-g>

Like the Greeks, the Israelites, or ancient Jews, also sacrificed animals, but only in a very specific place, the temple in Jerusalem that was designated by God for that purpose. When the Romans destroyed that temple in the year 70 AD, animal sacrifice ended.

You'll be relieved to know that the kind of atonement your ministers encourage you to take up is more like the modern Jewish tradition. It happens in steps: first, you acknowledge the way in which you have fallen short (or oafed). You ask for forgiveness if possible, and take some action to set things right. Then, the offense is pardoned, either by the other person or within your own self, and the relationship-- or at least peace and wellbeing-- is restored.

I want to talk for a moment about something I've breezed by a couple of times already this morning, and that's the idea of an offense against God, often described in theological terms as "sin." We don't use that word much around here, and not all of us find God to be a useful or meaningful spiritual concept. So what can we make of that?

The Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian William Murry is an atheist, and he acknowledges "sin is not a popular concept among religious liberals..."<sup>2</sup> But, he says

...Properly understood it is very important. [To] Sin means to engage in actions and attitudes that alienate a person from his or her true self and from others. Sin is thus a relational concept. It is that which interferes with or prevents authentic relationships.

So for atheists, just as for the rest of us, sin is relational. It is not about breaking a rule, but about missing the mark. Falling short of kindness, of love, of empathy. Falling short of courage, of clear-thinking, of wisdom.

Murry goes on to describe three attitudes that are often the source of destructive actions: pride, greed, and apathy.

The kind of **pride** he's talking about is almost an old-fashioned sense of the word. It isn't the kind of pride that is the opposite of shame. That's a good kind of pride. I hope each of us can overcome shame and have a healthy sense of pride about who we are, how we look, who we love, where we've come from, and so on. The kind of pride Murry is talking about is different. It may help to think of it as the opposite not of shame but of humility. This bad kind of pride is the opposite of humility.

When we have humility, we can be proud of who we are, while still acknowledging that we are not perfect. That we don't know everything. That we can't walk in another person's shoes. When we have humility, we know to be on guard for those tendencies in ourselves that can lead us to fall short, like overestimating ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Murry, William R. Reason and Reverence: religious humanism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Skinner House: Boston, 2006.

When we are proud in the harmful sense, it's an exaggerated kind of pride. It is hubris: pride before the fall! We are overly confident in our selves and in our opinions. It leads us to have blind spots in our self perception. We develop an air of superiority, which is really embarrassing, because other people can tell when you have it. Right?

We know it when we see it. What's hard is to see it in yourself. So we have to maintain humility.

**Greed** is the second attitude that leads to destructive behavior. One kind of greed comes from a sense of entitlement. When we think we are more entitled than others, we take more than our fair share. A sense of entitlement can be related to that bad kind of pride, too—maybe we think we are entitled because we think we are better than everyone else. Or greed can come from feeling resentful. Sometimes we nurture a little festering resentment against others, and it can lead us to feeling entitled, and behaving greedily when given the chance. We have to be on the watch for resentment.

Another kind of greed comes from a scarcity mentality, a fear that we won't have enough, so we grab as much as we can. It is rarely true that we need to take more than our share of something, leaving someone else in the lurch, so that we can have just enough. More often, even when we are truly struggling to get by, sharing and caring with people in similar situations is a better path to getting by than greedily gobbling up limited resources at the expense of others.

Other times, a feeling of scarcity is just an anxiety we are having, and if we reflect about what we really need, or if we shift our thinking into one of flow, of trust, of abundance, and patience, things will come out okay.

Yet another kind of greed comes not from not having enough, but from a fear that *we are not* enough, and we go about using material things or power to prove our worth to others, or maybe we're really trying to prove it to our selves.

Greed of all kinds leads us to use other people or creatures or the earth as a means to an end. Instead of seeing them as beings worthy of respect, we see them as opportunities to get more of what we want. In this way it is harmful to relationships.

**Apathy** is the third attitude Murry mentions. Apathy comes from self-centeredness, he says. This apathy is a form of no-empathy. When we are apathetic, we remain silent in the face of others' suffering. It is when you just don't care.

But I know another kind of apathy, and that's the kind of apathy that comes from hopelessness. When we lose hope, we turn ourselves off to the people around us or to the world around us, out of self-protection. We withdraw, thinking we can't make a difference anyway. In my experience, a congregation like this one is a good place to go to fend off hopelessness. We shore each other up in that way.

Murry goes on to list one more destructive attitude, and that's idolatry. Idolatry sounds like a real Old Testament concept, right? Worshipping a false god. But to

worship something means to ascribe ultimate worth to it. Value. So a deeper way of understanding idolatry is as ascribing ultimate worth to something that is *not* worthy. You know what it looks like when someone lives their life as though they are worshipping power, money, or material things. Ascribing ultimate value and worth to those things, when they are not worthy. Idolatry.

So many ways we can go awry. That's not even the half of it, right? Humans are very inventive in that way.

But we have this other side too, almost all of us, a side that wants a meaningful, authentic life, and right relationships. That's all we have in the end anyway, right? The love we've given and the rippling effects in relationships that we leave in our wake. When we transgress, when we fall short, that part of us cringes. The pain of it stays with us until we set things right.

And you know, even just privately acknowledging what we have done is not always easy. Confess is a word often used in teachings on atonement. As in, we must "confess our sins." It carries a connotation of reluctance, as in,

I confess, I ate the last of the ice cream.

And it was not just one serving. But it's gone now.

All the servings are gone.

But only by stepping up to our failures can we become free of them, and even learn from them. We have to allow ourselves to notice the weight we carry, so we can lay it down.

So that, if we have offended a person, we can confess to them that we were wrong, and apologize, and ask for forgiveness. We may have to ask more than once, if the offense was really grievous or they are really mad. And sometimes we will not be forgiven. In the end that part is not under our control.

It is okay, then, to be at peace with it within yourself.

If the person we have wronged is unavailable or has died, the process of atonement is more internal. It may help to write a letter to the person. And finding a way to be of service to others, perhaps people in similar situations to the person you wronged, can be healing.

To atone with yourself or with your God is also an internal process. A shift within. A process of reflection, of meditation, prayer, journaling, and of healing actions.

It is human to mess up sometimes. It's one thing to say that, to know it superficially, and another thing to live it. To find yourself alienated from a loved one because of your own misjudgment, greed, pride, or hopelessness.

Sometimes, we fail spectacularly at our relationships with ourselves, each other, or with God. It's one thing to say, we all make mistakes, and another one to watch the bottom fall out of your life because your own behavior. And I know that, jokes about oafs and ice cream aside, there is surely more than one person listening who is in need of atonement and deeply distressed.

[video begins]<sup>3</sup>

Ready to lay some of that weight down, and repair... repair... and turn in a new direction...

the old traditions teach us that it is never too late, and there is no sin too big, to atone.

Big and small, we lay down the stones we have taken up in our souls.

None of us gets through life with just one stone. One stone upon another.

So that over time, when we do our best to practice humility, reflection, confession, and grace,

Maybe our old failures become like guides, signposts, wayfinders we look back on, and remember where we came from... who we've become.

And going forward, we walk in a greater wisdom, and are set free.

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<sup>3</sup> Copy and paste this address in your browser to see the silent video used here:  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0\\_jkCl52wSWNEpRd0Y2d0VGUjg/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0_jkCl52wSWNEpRd0Y2d0VGUjg/view)