

The Turning

A sermon by the Rev. David M. Horst
Unitarian Universalist Church of Norwich
October 4, 2020

Till by turning, turning, we come 'round right.
Shaker hymn



My favorite season draws me into a melancholy mood this year. Leaves fall steadily, going to ground, letting go of life in a blaze of color. I breathe in their sweet, musty scent as they decompose. New England's autumn nights grow longer and chillier. Green turns to gold. I sleep deeply, needfully. The morning sun rises with portent rather than hope.

I am turning. Turning from illusion to truth, from wishes to reality, from high ideals to dark ground.

Try as I may, I cannot separate the personal from the political. There is no "me" and "them," only us. I inhabit my community, nation, and the world and they inhabit me. I am not merely *in* the world because in every way I am *of* the world too.

The heaviness of the world is too much with me right now: The killing pandemic, failing economy, divisive politics, hate and violence, and a changing climate. Yet the daily routine of housework, meals and cooking, yard work, dog walking, playing music, reading, watching movies, Friday night pizza, gathering around the dinner table, and family Zoom calls sustain me. My service and advocacy work in the homeless community give me purpose. Daily conversations with my spouse and a good-night hug deepen my love. My early morning writing, reflection, feeding the birds, and coffee ground me in spiritual practice.

I'd like to ask, *Where do we go from here?* But I'm not sure where *here* is. So much is changing, uncertain, and fearful. Do I still believe in human potential and perfectibility? *Or have I been wrong all this time?* Do I still believe we humans are created in blessing and evolving toward pure love and compassion? *Or am I foolish and naive?* Does the God I believe in continue to work through us in creative and life-sustaining ways? *Or am I missing something?*

I am a person of faith. I am equally a person of doubt. Each has its place in the life of the spirit. Each must be honored. Each turns toward the other.

I turn with the changing seasons, I turn with the troubles of the world, I turn with the quiet song of my soul, "Till by turning, turning, we come 'round right," in the words of the old Shaker tune. And, for me, that is faith enough.

My melancholy mood this autumn coincides with Yom Kippur, the holiest of Jewish holy days, when Jews around the world fast, pray, and repent. As written in Leviticus, "For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before God" (Leviticus 16:30).

During the services of Yom Kippur, which began last Sunday evening and concluded on Monday evening, Jews seek again to get right with each other and with God so that their names may be inscribed in the Book of Life.

What is the Book of Life? Jewish tradition tells how God opens the Book of Life and studies the words, actions, and thoughts of every person whose name God has written there. If a person's good deeds outweigh or outnumber their sinful acts, her or his name remains inscribed in the book for another year.

"May you be inscribed in the Book of Life" is the blessing given.

Yom Kippur is a turning time in Jewish faith and life. The Hebrew term *teshuvah* is often heard in prayers during Yom Kippur. *Teshuvah* means "return" or "repentance" and is used to describe the process of *atonement* in Judaism. Only by atoning for the wrongs committed can Jews restore their relationships to one another and to the greater good to which they aspire — the God that orients lives and all life.

Teshuvah requires several steps. The wrong-doer — the sinner, if you will — must recognize her or his wrongs, feel sincere remorse and ask forgiveness, do everything possible to undo any damage that has been done and make amends or even restitution, and resolve never to commit such an offense again.

In the Jewish tradition, if a specific person has been wronged, the offender must ask that person for forgiveness three times. By the third request, the person who was wronged is required to grant forgiveness if the offender is sincerely remorseful and is taking steps to prevent similar wrongs from happening again.

American scholar, author, and Orthodox rabbi Irving Greenberg calls Yom Kippur "liberation day." By the act of atonement Jews are freed from guilt and shame, freed from the tyranny of the ego, freed from painful isolation. Those who atone can live lives of *wholeness* rather than *fragmentation*, lives of *connection* rather than *estrangement*, lives of honest *humility* rather than egotistical *pride*.

Now might non-Jews — we Unitarian Universalists in particular — seek liberation as well? Don't we all wish to live whole lives, connected lives, lives of humility? Yes. Remember the 1960s ad campaign? "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread." We don't have to be Jewish to confess, repent, atone, and ask forgiveness. We don't have to be Jewish to restore wholeness, to repair a relationship, and reclaim our humility. Anyone of honest religious conviction can turn and *return* to a faith of connection, groundedness, and humility.

Our second Unitarian Universalist principle, affirming and promoting “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” is our *teshuvah*, our repentance of sin, our atonement for our wrongs, and call to right relationships with each other, with all creation, and with the God of our understanding.

Judaism is one of the sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith from which we are informed and deepened in our beliefs and practices. Our purpose is not to appropriate the Jewish faith or only to eat a tasty piece of rye bread but to become better Unitarian Universalists, to hold dear our life-affirming beliefs, to deepen and broaden our faith, to turn and turn again, to live each day as if it’s our first and our last.

We are always and ever turning from our lofty ego-self and returning to the ground of our being, season after season, holy day after holy day.

We here and in our nation and the world are in a turning time, a turning time of uncertainty and fear: Turning from illusion to truth, from wishes to reality, from high ideals to dark ground. It all may be for the good or not — who is to say?

But I will say this: With connection to our souls and the soul of the world; with deep groundedness in the sacred world of nature and in our ancient religious traditions; and with a humility born of repentance for our wrongs, we will survive and our names will be inscribed in the Book of Life and Creation.

Because of our faith and in spite of our doubts, we will survive.

When fear threatens to overtake us and hope seems dim, we will survive.

In times of melancholy and in times of joyfulness, we will survive.

Turning, turning, we will come round right.

Amen. Keep the faith.

Rev. David M. Horst served Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Boston area, Nantucket, and New Jersey for 20 years and now serves as a community minister at the New London Homeless Hospitality Center. He is the founder of The Open Circle, a spiritual direction practice for individuals and groups based in Norwich. Rev. Horst leads a monthly online group spiritual direction program called "The Topic," now in its second year. He blogs regularly at the-open-circle.com. He holds an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School and a Certificate in Spiritual Guidance from the Unitarian Universalist Rowe Center.