

“Of Every Person: Dignity, Reconciliation and Yom Kippur”

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It was a joyous occasion, the ordination of a colleague in the beautiful sanctuary of All Souls Church in Washington D.C. I was one of the witnessing clergy, sitting close to the chancel, in a pew reserved for members of the processional. As I sometimes call myself an “unrepentant church geek,” it will not surprise you that I found this ceremony a delightful way to spend a sunny afternoon in late autumn.

Though I may be a “church geek,” my attention began to drift during the service. I, too, can find ordination services a little long sometimes.

My wandering mind inspired me to admire elements of the sanctuary – the grand windows, the intricate columns, the pulpit rising high above the gathered community.

My focus then turned to the chancel table, an ornate piece made of dark wood, with an abundant bouquet of flowers and an inscription carved on its front. Because the person sitting in the pew ahead of me blocked my view, I could not read the whole inscription. I could only see the first three words: “all souls are.”

“All souls are’...what?” I thought. It was like a theological version of the game Mad Libs, those partially-written stories from childhood, completed through asking friends for random nouns, verbs and adjectives, often to hilarious effect. In my distraction, I became curious about how this sentence might end. “All souls are’...welcome?” “All souls are’...holy?”

Eventually, the person in front of me shifted and I could see the whole table, read the whole sentence. And, once I read the words, I was, in an instant, surprised and uncomfortable. I then realized that I was looking at what was once the church’s communion table, a table inscribed with the statement “All Souls Are...Mine.”

All Souls are Mine. I am not a possessed object. No one, no thing, not even G-d owns me, I thought. Somehow this reaction jolted me back to the present moment and to the ceremony unfolding before me.

But later, at the reception after the service, I engaged a member of the congregation about the table. “What is its history?” I asked. “What can you tell me about the inscription?” As soon as I asked my question, her face lit up with a warm smile. I got the sense that the affirmation brought her joy, not discomfort. She replied, “I don’t know the history of the table but I do know that it is an important part of who we are. It’s a reminder that no one is unworthy of G-d’s love; we all belong.”

This experience comes to mind in this time, as we gather amid the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the High Holy Days of Judaism. As I am not from a Jewish family nor was I raised in any tradition, I come to the Jewish New Year observances as an outsider but also as someone with deep respect for the practices of these holidays.

In this time, the faithful are called to search their hearts and atone for acts of neglect and offense against others. But the obligation does not end with personal awareness. One must reach out to those they have hurt and seek to make peace. One must attempt reconciliation. Victoria Safford affirms that, “The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. I did this. I said this to you, and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly. I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not. This is the truth in which both of us are living.”¹

After one seeks forgiveness from those they have hurt, at Yom Kippur they seek forgiveness from G-d. And, in so doing, the connection between how we live our lives between birth and death and our bond with the sacred is explicit. Healing human wounds is the first step to healing spiritual ones. In this way, we are reminded that no matter how a relationship has suffered through mutual bad behavior, just as we owe the sacred our devotion, we owe our fellow human beings a sincere attempt at reconciliation. We owe each other this effort as everyone is worthy of love.

¹ <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=2256>

At Yom Kippur, reconciling with people in our lives and with the holy are different obligations but so entwined with one another they cannot be separated. No matter how awkward, no matter how painful, we are asked to chart a path of reconciliation as a spiritual practice. We are asked to seek forgiveness for ourselves and for those who have caused us pain because “all belong” to G-d. Because, turning our hearts and minds to the sacred, we remember that “all souls are thine.”

In 2004, Paula Cole Jones, a life-long member of All Souls in D.C. wrote an essay for the denomination’s magazine, *UU World*, “Reconciliation as a Spiritual Discipline.” She begins by telling a story of growing estrangement with her sister, Lori, which culminates in Lori screaming at Paula in a phone call. In her reflection, Cole Jones recalls the email she then sent to her sister after she worked through her initial feelings of defensiveness and anger. She writes to Lori:

Maybe trust is beyond our grasp right now...I think that trust is one of the paradoxes in life. We measure it by our failings, which will shape our present moments if we haven't succeeded at trusting in the past. At some point, if trust is to stand a chance, we have to create it and try again and again, until we get it right or until we choose to give up.

Cole Jones continues, “Most important, I expressed my respect and appreciation—whatever the outcome—for saying what she felt and for going out on a limb with me.”²

Thankfully, Lori received Paula’s message and vulnerability in a positive way and responded in kind, granting forgiveness while also seeking forgiveness for the harsh way she spoke to Paula. The two sisters then pledged to work through the tension in their relationship through honesty and careful listening. Cole Jones remembers, “We had broken through the barrier of ‘safety by avoidance’ and opened the door to the feelings and concerns that were keeping us apart. Sharing a history and feeling heard, we each let go of pieces of the past and emerged vulnerable and safe in each other's keeping.”³

² <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/reconciliation-as-spiritual-discipline>

³ Ibid.

The story of Paula Cole Jones and her sister Lori inspires me. But I am not inspired because the two siblings transitioned from estrangement back to a harmonious relationship. I am inspired because Paula Cole Jones found a way to see past the hurt of her sister's words to a more distant vision of what their relationship could be. She saw that Lori was still worthy of love, their relationship still worthy of risk and investment. I am inspired because Cole Jones made her overture to Lori without expectation and without judgment.

This reconciliation is inspiring...for who has not been on the receiving end of an angry outburst and felt the pain of such a verbal attack? Who has not experienced a close relationship – with a family member, a friend, with a lover, a spouse – slip into estrangement, perhaps through too much “safety by avoidance?” And who does not carry hurt from these shattered intimacies, sometimes for many years after the rupture? Who does not know the hurt of shame? Of our dignity violated by behavior that tells us we do not matter?

My reference to dignity is intentional. As I prepared for this service, I turned to others who are knowledgeable about the spiritual discipline of reconciliation. Thankfully, there are many among us with this wisdom.

Our Congregational Administrator, Alison Streit Baron, not only works magic in the office but comes to us with an extensive background with Essential Partners, an organization facilitating dialogues across difference. When I asked her to recommend resources, she lent me the book *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays In Resolving Conflict* by Donna Hicks. Dr. Hicks invites those seeking to bring conflicting parties together – seeking to build and cross a bridge in relationships – to focus on ways in which dignity – defined as “an internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things⁴ - has suffered among all parties. By acknowledging and healing how dignity has been breached, connection and trust are created and a new relationship is born.

While Hicks writes from the secular knowledge of psychology and her experience facilitating conversations between warring factions all over the world, what she calls “the dignity model” of restoring relationships is grounded in theology. In the

⁴ Hicks, Donna. *Dignity: The Essential Role it Plays in Resolving Conflict*. The Maple Press: York, Pennsylvania. 2011, 1.

words of the First Principle, Unitarian Universalists “affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Such an affirmation proclaims that no one is unworthy of love, that “all souls” are within the circle of the divine.

Similarly, Hicks affirms that dignity is an intrinsic, birthright gift. It is an element of humanity different than respect as one’s behavior may or may not inspire respect in others but their personhood warrants respectful treatment.⁵ Intrinsic, too, is the potential for all of us to violate another’s dignity.⁶ Hicks proclaims, “we all deserve [to be treated with dignity] no matter what we do. Treating people badly because they have done something wrong only perpetuates the cycle of indignity...We violate our own dignity in return.”⁷

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I learned from exploring Donna Hicks’ work is the understanding that healing shame, the wounds of violated dignity, transcends the human practice of forgiveness. Forgiveness is founded on judgment, requiring a victim and perpetrator, a clear understanding of right and wrong. When we open ourselves to a process that “affirms and promotes” the dignity of all, wrongdoing is irrelevant, especially as wrongdoing is often shared in relationships.⁸

Lest we believe that we are the innocent ones, Hicks recalls an exercise she witnessed between two communities with a long history of hatred and violence between them. As both groups were ossified in their identities as victims, a member of Hicks’ team asked each group to develop among themselves a list of different ways they could prove to the other they were worthy of trust. Through naming how they could each act to honor the other’s dignity, everyone demonstrated their capacity to hear how they have done harm, to empathize with the other and to illustrate a vision of a different relationship than the one they struggled through in the moment.⁹ They set aside their identities as victims and claimed new ones as equals.

What could we each do to demonstrate to those around us - from neighbors to co-workers, from family members to friends, from service workers to strangers,

⁵ Ibid, 4-5.

⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸ Ibid, 191.

⁹ Ibid, 146-147.

from the like-minded to our cultural and political opposites...to perhaps even those sitting in this sanctuary today – what could we do to demonstrate that we are worthy of trust? How could we best “affirm and promote” the “dignity of every person” amid the complexities of human relationships that render us vulnerable to our own shame and the risk of violating another?

If time had no limit, I could respond by exploring the profound wisdom of “the dignity model” in depth. For now, I share Donna Hicks’ “ten essential elements of dignity:” We affirm the worth and dignity of another when we accept them as an equal, with all their identities and the freedom to be their true selves. We prove ourselves worthy of trust when we practice authentic inclusion and accountability. We foster dignity when we provide safety, acknowledgement, recognition, fairness, understanding, independence and the benefit of the doubt.¹⁰

To reach out to someone we have harmed is not for the faint of heart. I appreciate how Paula Cole Jones describes the protective environments we create - “the safety of avoidance.” For when we seek to repair insulted dignity, we render ourselves and the other vulnerable to raw and primal feelings. Any path towards renewed trust is uncertain and unpredictable. There is no guarantee that the parties will reach the other side. And, yet, avoiding going through the turbulence of humiliation and regret together is avoiding the primary path to healing. For Hicks reminds us, “unacknowledged feelings of shame...are at the heart of all human conflict.”¹¹

To reach out to someone we have harmed is to challenge what is called “emotional cutoff.”¹² When people create distance from one another, there is the optical illusion of quiet disengagement. But the degree of our “safety by avoidance” reflects the intensity of our stifled feelings. In this month of welcome, the collective practice of reconciliation amid the Days of Awe – with one another and with G-d – invites us to welcome these storms and to affirm human dignity by responding without judgment, without defense, grounded in the understanding that every person is worthy of love.

¹⁰ Ibid, 25-26.

¹¹ Ibid, 11.

¹² <https://thebowencenter.org/theory/eight-concepts/>

Lest anyone think I always possess the courage to welcome what comes through the discipline of reconciliation, this is one of those times that “the preacher preaches what they most need to hear.” I imagine I am not alone in easily naming those whom I have harmed, those with whom I am estranged. I am not alone in wanting a different relationship with people in my life than the status quo. But I do not always take that step of seeking to recreate trust, “trying and trying again until we get it right or until we choose to give up.”

However we receive the invitation of this time, this collective practice of atonement and reconciliation, may we carry with us the truth that by the nature of being human, we receive the blessing of dignity, a dignity that may suffer throughout our lives but no one may tear asunder. Whenever we honor that gift by protecting and healing the dignity of others, refusing to respond to humiliation with shame in return, we praise the giver of this gift, the greater love to which we all belong. May it be so.