



## **James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

### **Rosh Hashanah: Getting Right with Your Neighbor Sermon by the Rev. Darrel L. Richey September 28, 2008**

*L'Shanah Tovah*

I wish you a good year.

This is the typical greeting in Hebrew for Rosh Hashanah. This New Year's celebration is dedicated to reviewing past mistakes and making right with family, friends and neighbors. I think this year Rosh Hashanah is particularly important for me. We have been living in a divided land for some time, but this division is particularly acute during an election year.

On the one side we have the religious right, the neoconservatives, and this year the republicans, and on the other side we have the liberal left, the community organizers, and the democrats. Both sides have a battery of words, names and slogans that vilify the other side. Both sides sometimes act in ways that I believe run contrary to our Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles.

The problem I'm having with honoring my principles, especially during the Jewish Days of Awe (which encourage us to get right with those around us), is that at least our tradition bids us toward tolerance and acceptance. Some others hold to traditions which bid them to turn their backs on their enemies or even destroy them. These traditions certainly don't promote and affirm diversity in theology or opinion.

There are many similarities between what is going on today in the U.S. and Nazi Germany before and during WWII. Both saw a political rise to power based on ideology and acting out of fear, both began eroding the rights of individuals and both experienced massive dehumanizing of certain groups seen as "the other."

And so, I'm reminded of the words of a young girl, who lived and died during the Nazi reign of terror.

ON Thursday May 25, 1944, Anne Frank wrote these words:

“The world's been turned upside down. The most decent people are being sent to concentration camps, prisons and lonely cells, while the lowest of the low rules over the young and old, rich and poor. One gets caught for black marketeering, another for hiding Jews or other unfortunate souls. Unless you're a Nazi, you don't know what going to happen to you from one day to the other.”

I am keenly aware of my own coping mechanism during this time of uncertainty and fear. I'm particularly aware of the damage that fear can cause within our bodies whether it is real or merely perceived.

There was a young boy once, who began screaming and crying in the night. His parents ran into the room to see him out of bed standing in the corner staring wide-eyed and fearfully at his pillow lying in the floor. His parents asked him, “What's wrong? Did you have a bad dream?”

The boy wouldn't come towards his parents in the doorway, but pointed to the pillow lying on the floor and said, “That pillow bit me!” His mother chuckled a little said, “That pillow didn't bite you. You were just having a bad dream.” The boy turned resolute, insisting that the pillow had indeed bitten him!” His parents calmed him down, and got him back in bed. His father brought the pillow over, shook it, and checked to see if there was anything sharp in the pillow, just in case. Then he tried to get the boy to examine it as well.

The boy refused until his mother made him touch the pillow and then squeeze it to see that there were no teeth in the pillow. The boy remained resolute. His mom went and got another pillow to put on the bed for the rest of the night.

On and off, the boy's mom would try to put his pillow back on his bed, but the boy always knew when the "offending pillow" was exchanged for the other one. He refused to have that bad pillow anywhere but in the very bottom of the big quilt box.

Year's later, after the boy grew into manhood, he and his mom were laughing about the "pillow incident" and the mother said, "You know, I don't remember what happened to that pillow."

Well, I know....

One day, I carefully took my father's heavy coat and, placing it on backwards to protect my front and arms, carefully pulled that nasty pillow out of the quilt box, took it outside, and proceeded to stomp on it until I was satisfied that it was at least stunned. Afterwards I took it and buried it deep in the bottom of the garbage can out in the alley!

Well, I've just outed myself as a survivor of pillow abuse!

My point is that fear is powerful and has very real effects. And today we are living under a heavy cloak of fear from without and from within our country. Our own leadership has used fear as a tool to achieve their goals.

This is what makes me angry. The negative effects of living a fear-based life happen whether the fear is real or perceived. Today we have real things to worry about as well as this constructed fear. There's enough uncertainty in the world without our own government fostering a culture of fear.

All of this makes this season of the Jewish New Year difficult for me. I'm compelled by our Unitarian Universalist principles to claim love over fear and to see the inherent worth and dignity of every person, rather than respond to attacks that are intended to disempower or dehumanize me with my own counterattacks.

I'm left searching for hope in times of hopelessness. I'm left looking for beauty with so much ugliness around me. And again, I find hope in the words of a thirteen-year-old girl who died long ago, across the ocean.....

Just days before the Frank family was discovered and sent to concentration camps she wrote this in her diary:

“It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness. I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too will end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I’ll be able to realize them!”

Though the Frank family was aware of Allied advances, they were also keenly aware that they might not make it. During the beginnings of liberation, word came to the Franks that Jews were being discovered and sent off to prisons throughout the city. I don’t think it was in ignorance or childish idealism that Anne wrote these words. I think that she, in her time of distress, held onto the values and principles from which she chose to live her life. Her words and courage give me hope.

And as for empowerment in these times, I find hope and promise in a poem by one of my favorite poets, Sonia Sanchez. She wrote a poem entitled “Poem” for July 4, 1999, for President Vaclav Havel. Some of you know the story of Havel, who was an outspoken activist against the abuses of the Russian government. Havel was imprisoned numerous times for his outspokenness, which eventually led to a revolution in Czechoslovakia. Havel became president, first of Czechoslovakia then the Czech Republic. I find strength and promise in Sanchez’s words, and though it’s a little long, I want to share them with you:

“It is essential that summer be grafted to  
Bones marrow earth clouds blood the eye of our ancestors.  
It is essential to smell the beginning words where Washington, Madison, Hamilton,  
Adams, Jefferson assembled amid the cries of:

“The People lack of information”

“We grow more and more skeptical”

“This Constitution is a triple-headed monster”

“Blacks are property”

It is essential to remember how cold the sun

How warm the snow snapping around the ragged feet of soldiers and slaves.

It is essential to string the sky with the saliva of Slavs And Germans and Anglos and French and Italians and Scandinavians, and Spaniards And Mexicans and Poles and Africans and Native Americans.

It is essential that we always repeat:

We the people

We the people

We the people

“Let us go into the fields” one brother told the other brother.

And the sound of exact death raising tombs across the centuries.

Across the oceans. Across the land.

It is essential that we finally understand:

This is the time for the creative human being the human being who decides to walk upright in a human fashion in order to save this earth from extinction.

This is the time for the creative man, woman, who must decide that she, he, can live in peace, racial and sexual justice on this earth.

This is the time for you and me

African Americans, Whites, Latinos, Gays, Asians, Jews, Native Americans,

Lesbians, Muslims---All of us must finally bury

The elitism of race superiority

The elitism of sexual superiority

The elitism of economic superiority

The elitism of religious superiority

So we welcome you on the celebration of 218 years Philadelphia America

So we salute you and say:

Come, come, come move out into this world

Nourish your lives with a spirituality that allows us to respect each other's birth.

Come, come, come nourish the world

Where every 3 days 120,000 children die

Of starvation or the effect of starvation;

Come, come, come nourish the world

Where we will no longer hear the screams and cries

Of women, girls and children in Bosnia, El Salvador

Rwanda.....AhAhAhAhAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

Ma-ma. Dada. Mamacita. Baba. Mama. Papa. Momma. Poppi.

The soldiers are marching in the streets near the hospital

But the nurses say we are safe and the soldiers are laughing and marching firing calling out to us....I don't want to die....I am only 9 years old, I am only 10 years old,

I am only 11 years old and I cannot get out of the bed

Because they have cut off one of my legs and I hear the soldiers coming toward our room

I can't get out of bed I don't want to die

Don't let me die Rwanda. America. United Nations.

Don't let me die.....

And if we nourish ourselves our communities our countries and say

No more Hiroshima

No more Auschwitz

No more Wounded Knee

No more middle passage

No more slavery

No more Bosnia

No more Rwanda

No more intoxicating ideas of racial superiority as we walk toward abundance

We will never forget

The earth

The sea

The children

The people

For *We The People* will always be arriving a ceremony of thunder waking up the earth

Opening our eyes to human monuments

If *We The People* work, organize, resist, come together for peace, racial, social and sexual justice

It'll get better

It'll get better

May it be so.

I am urged to uncover the lies that divide us, and claim the common bonds of humanity. May we have the courage to radically embrace "We the People."

*L'Shana Tova*

May you have a happy New Year.