

Sermon: “The Courage to Change”

Yom Kippur, which begins Tuesday evening, is one of the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar - it's a day for making amends, attending to the ways we've hurt others, or been harmed ourselves, a day for returning to center. This process of truth-telling is often a difficult one. It requires not only the willingness to name harm, but first the courage to acknowledge mistreatment or mistakes and imagine that things could be otherwise. Why tell the painful truth if not to move forward anew?

Courage is one of my favorite concepts, and it's one very often confused with bravery. There is certainly some overlap in the courage/bravery venn diagram, but they're not entirely synonymous.

The word brave can be traced back to the Latin “barbarus” which then became “bravo” in Italian and Spanish, meaning “bold” and “untamed or savage” respectively. To my ear “brave” is a battle word - its energy explodes outwards.

Courage, is, in a way, the opposite - it's not an explosion, it's a profound centering, no matter the storm raging outside us. Because the root of the word courage comes from the Latin “cor” which means heart. As Brene Brown writes in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, “courage originally meant ‘to speak one's mind by telling all one's heart’...ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line.”

To engage in the practice of atonement, of repairing a wrong and creating forgiveness, we have to start with courage. Forgiveness requires being able to acknowledge, even if only to ourselves, when we have been violated or have violated others.

We have to start with the heart of things, because forgiveness is not applied in generalities, forgiveness is not a crop duster plane maintaining altitude. Forgiveness is lancing a boil, the release of pain so that there is no longer an epicenter of focus around which we try to move, limping along as we attempt to live.

The definition is quite literally “to cease to feel resentment.” Forgiveness is about moving through anger with empathy so that the feelings of pain and resentment can release and we can move forward unburdened. Purging the infection, cleaning the wound, it’s for our own healing, not for anyone else.

If we’re aiming for forgiveness, aiming to remove the barb of violation, we need to tune in to our anger, because anger is the feeling that alerts us to harm. And beneath that anger we’ll likely find a well of grief - grief over what was lost as a result of the violation or the reality of the ways we were let down. Humans are wired for connection and violation and abandonment are opposite edges of the same blade.

At the heart of the matter is the desire to be loved and cared for - the reality of being human. And we, as Unitarian Universalists, begin in this place - you are worthy, no matter what. No conditions. But if we really orient from that place, if we root deep in our courage, we will have to reckon with both the harm that has been done to us, and the harm we have done both to others and to ourselves.

Our anger is an invitation to tell the story of what went wrong, so we might be made new. But it’s also an emotion that’s often misunderstood and sometimes scorned.

There’s a licensed therapist named Eli Harwood who posts nuggets of psychology wisdom on Instagram and TikTok and she posted recently about the distinction between anger and violence, because we often conflate the two and avoid anger because we think it leads to violence. But in doing this, we’re ignoring some very important information.

Harwood says this:

“Anger doesn’t cause violence....we affiliate it with violence, but violence comes from two sources: first is a violent mindset, someone who has been inculcated in the ideology of dominance. They believe it is their right and their need to be in control of others and that they can use whatever means possible in order to

gain that control. The second thing that can cause violence is someone who is in a deeply disturbed mental state so they are not processing or thinking clearly.

Anger is the emotion that triggers inside of us to tell us that we feel violated. When we are in the presence of someone who can validate those feelings and help us feel heard and work with us to get our needs or our boundaries met, the anger dissipates.

If someone is angry with you but they aren't being violent, they aren't threatening you, they aren't posturing with you, it is okay to receive their anger and empathize. You, too, have felt anger. It didn't make you violent. It made you more aware of where you felt violated."

Anger is important information, if we've needed to numb our pain in order to survive - maybe because of our family of origin, the way society treats us, or something else altogether - accessing our anger can be really scary and take practice. It's also a very important skill. Because if being angry made you feel unsafe in life, it becomes very difficult to have clear boundaries and to stand up for ourselves. Boundaries require self-knowledge, they require being tuned in to ourselves and our needs and our experience of violation. All of that comes before forgiveness and it takes courage.

Forgiveness is also not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness doesn't mean going back to the dynamic that caused the harm. Forgiveness means being free of the dynamic, which might actually mean ending a relationship.

Because if we are treating ourselves with care and respect, we also have to build or restore a boundary and refuse to be hurt in the same way again. Forgiveness is not polite and it is certainly not compliant. And it takes a lot of courage. Maybe some bravery, too, some willingness to be untamed.

Why go through with the pain and the mess, why lay down our resentments and let our grief flow? Because on the other side is life, on the other side is hope and possibility and peace, on the other side is the potential for a new world born of our heart, not our reactions to long-avoided pain.

When Amanda and I did our podcast last week, we started talking about this, and she said, aptly, that “it hurts to be hopeful.”

Yom Kippur is, of course, the culmination of the High Holidays, which mark the end of the last year and the beginning of a new year.

One of the things I appreciate most about Yom Kippur is that it happens every year. The whole community gathers and all distractions are removed. The regularity of the holiday means that it’s okay if you can’t forgive this year. It’s not a once in a lifetime opportunity, it’s an annual physical so we can be aware of the places that hurt and how to tend them. Because change happens at the edge of our comfort zone, not when we’re drowning.

I wonder where your courage would lead you, if you gave it the space to speak. I wonder where the bright lines of your anger would burn - what else had happened in that place. I wonder if your grief would lead you back to yourself, back to a more honest kind of hope. I wonder if you would find the courage to change, the courage to live from the truth that you are worthy of love and care.

May it be so and amen