

COLD WATER ON THE FIRE

Michael Tino

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – September 23, 2007

© 2007 MICHAEL JAMES TINO

OPENING WORDS—ADAPTED FROM A CELTIC PRAYER

This morning, as we kindle the fire of our faith, let us pray that the flame of love may burn in our hearts, and the hearts of all whom we meet today.

Let us pray that no envy and malice, no hatred or fear, may smother the flame.

That indifference and apathy, contempt and pride, may not pour like cold water on the fire.

Instead, may the spark from this flame light the love in our hearts that it may burn brightly through the day.

And may we warm those who are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless, so that all may know the comfort of all-encompassing love.

CLOSING WORDS, FROM ELIE WIESEL

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.

The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.

And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

SERMON: COLD WATER ON THE FIRE

Each fall, the Jewish High Holidays begin with the New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah, and culminate ten days later with the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, celebrated this year between sundown this past Friday night and last night.

Over the course of the Days of Awe, as the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is known, Jewish people are asked to reflect on their year, on the relationships they have harmed, on the wrongs they have committed, and to engage in good deeds, prayer, and repentance. Throughout these days, the ultimate act of atonement is to seek reconciliation with anyone you have wronged.

The evening and day of Yom Kippur are set aside for special rituals, meant as a “last chance” of sorts to atone for one’s sins, and also as a day of reflection on the upcoming year, that those sins might not be repeated. The *Kol Nidre*, which begins the evening service on Yom Kippur, asks that all vows taken with oneself and God be declared null and void before they are even entered into. The prayer asks the forgiveness of God for breaking promises not yet made.

One aspect of the rituals of Yom Kippur that I find the most interesting is the confession of the sins of the community. In this prayer, a litany of sins, general and specific, are confessed to, and forgiveness is asked for. What I find interesting about this is that all of the confessions are done by the community, not by individuals. All of the confessions are said in the plural: we are guilty of this transgression.

It is never “I am guilty.” It is always “we.”

So, the Jewish New Year begins with the holiest of holidays, in which all people are asked to heal relationships with one another, and in which each person’s sins become the sins of the entire community, who then ask for forgiveness—to Jewish people, seeking reconciliation with God.

The United Jewish Community website describes a Jewish perspective on community and how it is related to Yom Kippur this way:

“There is a Chassidic tale regarding the importance of communal prayer based upon the story of two men who are traveling deep in the forest, each one lost. They meet while still looking for a way out of their predicament. One says to the other, ‘We each know the paths that we have thus far traversed. Let us travel together, avoiding the roads that each one of us had heretofore covered. Together, perhaps, we can find a new route that would take us out of this forest.’ On Yom Kippur, we are seeking a new route.”

This relationship-oriented theology fits well with the way I see the world.

I believe that the most fundamental thing that makes us alive is relationship. More than how we see ourselves as individuals, how we interact and exist with other beings—human and not, living and not, present and far away—defines our existence in this world of interdependent existence.

So, as we pass this holiest of days for our Jewish brothers and sisters, I would ask that we, too, take some time to reflect on relationships we have harmed.

My friend Paula Cole Jones wrote in the UU world, our Association's magazine, that the solution to broken relationships is reconciliation. She described an incident in which her relationship with her sister reached a boiling point and led to ugly words being exchanged.

"I listened to try to understand the intensity of Lori's frustration and really hear what she had to say. I felt myself shift from reacting defensively to making an effort not to judge her or justify myself. I made a commitment to work to reconcile our relationship; this was the moment to move beyond civility and hidden resentment, to restore love and trust."

In choosing to heal her relationship with her sister, to restore a relationship that was central to her life, Cole Jones sought to heal her own brokenness.

I believe that we each have power to heal that within us that is broken, but that such power is found only in community. We cannot do these things alone. Commitment to reconciliation takes the agreement of more than one person. The most famous example of reconciliation I can think of—the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of years of apartheid—was undertaken by a whole nation.

Taking some time to focus on reconciliation—be that with ourselves, with others, or with something we may call God—means ultimately, however, that we have to *care* about others.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel calls indifference a sin. Living life without caring about others hardens the heart and withers the soul.

Songwriter and musician Patty Larkin sings that "religion is a picture window and life is not a pretty picture." Our faith, our commitment to community, gives us a window on the injustices of life—on oppression, on violence and cruelty, on indifference, apathy, contempt and pride. We can see it clearly through the filter of our commitment to lead moral and ethical lives. But what comes next? Do we sit and watch these things as mere indifferent spectators, or do we take the chance to open the window and step into life? Do we care enough to do something?

And there are so many things to care about.

Next year, our country will face national and state-wide elections filled with contentious and potentially divisive issues.

In my previous job working with young adults, I remember one day listening to a program on National Public Radio where the guests were discussing why people 18 to 30—the group I worked most closely with, even if I had just aged out of it—didn't come to the polls.

Was it that politicians didn't listen, they asked, or did politicians not listen because young people didn't vote? What really got me, though, was that it seemed like the entire argument was predicated on the assumption that young people were indifferent to the political process—whether justifiably or not.

Maybe it's me—though I doubt it—but I care, and I've cared since I can remember having opinions. I volunteered for a presidential campaign when I was 12 years old—after school, I'd go to the New York headquarters and lick envelopes and copy fliers. Because I cared.

I write letters, even when I know my elected officials have already made up their minds. I've even spoken before local legislative bodies on behalf of community organizations I care about. I also vote—in primary, special and general elections, and I hope you do too, and I care about who I vote for.

But a lot of people just don't care. Reminds me of an obstinate little boy in a story I heard not too long ago...

There's an election just next year. *I don't care.*

The candidates would like our ear. *I don't care.*

They'll take away our civil rights. *I don't care.*

If we don't put up a fight. *I don't care.*

And once the Bill of Rights is toast, *I don't care.*

They'll drill for oil off our coast. *I don't care.*

They will amend the constitution— *I don't care.*

So that Jane can't marry Susan. *I don't care.*

And so the lion ate Pierre.

In Maurice Sendak's story, the boy who doesn't care gets a chance to change his mind. Having faced his own death inside the lion, he suddenly decides he will care. Of course, knowing just a little bit about how lions eat is, in this case dangerous, because in real life, of course, once the lion eats you, you don't have another chance. So we must care now.

Before it's too late.

It's not all about politics, of course. Sometimes it's about pain.

Elie Wiesel, in the speech I asked Marion to read from this morning, uses his experiences with the ultimate inhumanity of genocide to challenge us to see the pain in our neighbor's face.

In the face of the working mother whose job at Wal-Mart doesn't pay her enough to feed her kids adequately or give her benefits so she can bring them to the doctor when they're sick.

In the face of a poor child in the inner city who goes to substandard schools.

In the faces of coffee farmers throughout the developing world, who seek to build a sustainable way of supporting themselves and raising their standard of living though their consumers are rarely willing to pay them enough to do so.

In the face of the corporate executive who has made it in a culture that made him leave his values behind, and who suddenly understands what is missing in his life.

In the face of the child who never gets to eat dinner with her parents because their work doesn't let them value family time.

In the face of the infantile radio host who lives out his own insecurities through cruel and insensitive jokes, which garner him high ratings and boost his ego.

In the face of a judicial system that metes out justice based on deeply-engrained systems of racism, and not necessarily on the facts.

If you were paying attention to the news this week, you probably saw a story on the march this Thursday in Jena, Louisiana. Thousands of people flocked to this small town in the rural South to decry what they saw as rampant racism in the judicial system.

I've read several different accounts of what happened in Jena, so here is a chilling recap from this week's *New York Times*:

They called it the White Tree. Not because of the color of its leaves or tint of its bark, but because of the kind of people who typically sat beneath its shade here at Jena High School.

And when a black student tried to defy that tradition by sitting under the tree last September, it set off a series of events that have turned this town of 3,000 in central Louisiana's timber country into a flashpoint over the issue of racial bias in the criminal justice system.

Three nooses quickly appeared on the tree a day after the black student sat under it, and not long afterward, the authorities said a white student had been beaten by six black schoolmates. The white student was treated at a local hospital and released; the black students were charged, not with assault, but with attempted murder.

(Richard G. Jones, "In Louisiana, a Tree, a Fight and a Question of Justice," New York Times 9-19-07)

In Jena, six Black teenagers were arrested and charged with attempted murder for beating up a white teenager. The White students involved in the incidents were treated as troubled teenagers; the Black ones as criminals.

While I think there's a lot of room for disagreement and debate about the charges brought in this case, here's what I'd like us to think about for a second: the tree.

The White Tree.

The tree that grew in the schoolyard at Jena High School, whose shade for years was understood as "whites-only" sitting place. Fifty-three years after the Supreme Court ruled that schools could not be segregated, a community allowed the culture of the White Tree to remain unchallenged.

Because, and let me be frank, the White people of Jena, Louisiana, did not *care* enough to challenge the system.

The administration and faculty of Jena High School, the elected officials of the town, the students who presumably learned about *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, in American history classes. They all let the culture of the White Tree go unchallenged.

Until a Black teenager dared to sit there. *To sit in the shade!*

The tree is now mulch, and six young men are facing prison.

These things involve politics and pain in equal measure—but for us, they can also be opportunities for ministry, for caring about and connecting to the world around us.

While we're lobbying for living wage laws, we can feed the hungry.

While we're fighting for labor reform, we can welcome those who our society has turned into empty shells into this place of healing and nurture.

While we write letters to our elected officials asking them to support civil rights, we can raise our voice in the public square opposing prejudice and supporting sensitivity and tolerance.

We can plant a garden for day laborers *and* work to increase the sensitivity of our police and justice systems to the plight of undocumented workers.

We can and must minister to the pain in the world. We have a lot to offer. If only we would care.

It's also about how we come together as a community of faith, right here in this place.

Some of you know that the first thing I did after signing the membership book in my first Unitarian Universalist congregation was to sign up to teach children's religious education. By the time I began my studies for the ministry, I was the teen program director at a major annual conference and the chair of my congregation's Religious Education Committee.

Now that I'm a minister, I've retained my passion for religious education, for ministry to and with children. So I went to the RE committee meeting last week, only to learn that the teaching schedule for this year is barely half-filled.

I know that this isn't unusual in Unitarian Universalist congregations—every one I've been a part of has engaged in an annual ritual of begging people to teach its children. They resort to guilt trips and sad faces in order to get people to sign up to spend a few hours with the most interesting people in this fellowship.

People need to be begged to care.

I don't have to tell you that this is not the way things should be, and yet this is the way things are too often.

It is altogether too tempting, in this loving, nurturing environment, to decide that our own spiritual growth is the most important thing we can come here for. Developing our own theologies and spiritual practices without the inherent challenge to live them every day in the world is a signal that our value for the individual has gone awry. Focusing on the individual's right of conscience without asking each individual to be conscious of the suffering in the world around them is a sign of imbalance. They are indications that we have ceased to care about anyone outside of our little circles.

I don't have to tell you that this is not the way things should be, and yet this is the way things are in too many congregations.

Our opening words today identified four things as "cold water on the fire" that is the divinity within us: Indifference. Apathy. Contempt, and Pride. I've focused on the first—indifference—in the hope that caring to change the things that are wrong in our society, caring to address the pain in our neighbors' faces, caring to

change the things that are wrong inside our community, and caring to throw open our doors and practice what we preach will help us deal with the others.

Are you passing the fire of love to others? Are you taking the relationships and communities you're a part of into account when you make decisions? Are you seeking to broaden and deepen relationships as you broaden and deepen your own spiritual life? Are you seeking reconciliation with those with whom your relationship has been broken?

Indifference is cold water on the fire of our faith.

Indifference is both sin and punishment for sin.

If we seek to live a life that is in keeping with the values we espouse here in this faith community, we must care.

What will it take for you to care?