

Gather At The Table:
Reconciliation, Amends, and Healing from the Personal to the Global
A Yom Kippur Sermon offered At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
On October 9, 2016
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

At Yom Kippur it's powerful to hear the Avinu Malkeinu, though sin isn't a word that Unitarian Universalists have, historically, been comfortable with. Sin sounds so permanent – so like a stain that can't be washed out. Our faith that has always held out hope for each person and neither Universalists nor Unitarians have put any store in that God who was said to send his only child to earth to wash away our sins with his blood – we're more likely to hold that it was the goodness of the life of Jesus that shows humanity even today how we can be better people.

We hold faith in the possibility that that every one of us, though it may not be easy, can choose the good, the just, the loving. Before the nightmares of the twentieth century, our Unitarian Universalist forbearers did hold a rather too rosy view of humanity – that our history would be onward and upward forever and ever. You might remember that the 19th century minister, the Reverend Thomas Starr King famously said that the difference between Unitarianism and Universalism was that the Universalists believed that G-d was too good to damn people and the Unitarians believed that people were too good to be damned. A passionate abolitionist, Starr King seemed to speak those words with humor bred of seeing humanity's evils.

Over the years we've become more sober about our goodness. In the mid twentieth century Unitarian theologian the Rev. William Wallace Fenn of Harvard Divinity School, wrote a critique of this too-rosy view of human nature: "faith in inherent goodness appears ghastly mockery when confronted by the facts of life...? It may be conceded that traditional theology made too much of sin, but surely that was better than to make light of it. To a serious thinker, Modern Liberalism [meaning religious liberalism] often seems too jocund for life as it actually is. . . We would not have Modern Liberalism return to a belief in the devil — but it must deal more justly with the crushing tragedies of life..."

Reflecting on Fenn's words, another Unitarian, James Luther Adams, wrote in the limited language of his own time: The "orthodox" theory of "original sin" ... has been rightly abandoned by religious liberals... But, whether the liberal uses the word "sin" or not, he cannot correct his "too jocund" view of life until he recognizes that there is in human nature a deep-seated ... universal tendency for both individuals and groups to ignore the demands of mutuality and thus to waste freedom or abuse it ... religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in man. We may call these tendencies by any name we wish, but we do not escape their destructive influence by a con-spiracy of silence concerning them."

So wrote Adams. I still tend to think that the word sin comes with too much baggage – and I watch so many people struggle with shame and a sense of that stain or original sin. So I do not think that we can achieve virtue by shaming and blaming. In Hebrew the word that has been most translated as sin is chait – which means to miss the mark, fall short, or make a mistake. It's not evil, willful, stained, or ingrained in human nature – except that – every single one of us makes mistakes, misses the mark, comes short in both large and small ways. Sometimes the ways we miss are relatively harmless -- hurting, largely, ourselves. It still stings when I remember a conversation about a course on world mythology during my first year of college, when I tried to explain to the professor that the course was a little beyond me – I'd never thought in such symbolic terms before. He replied – and I am sure that he was thinking of the world of great global stories – Middle Eastern, Asian, African, South American, Indigenous... (none of which I'd yet encountered) he said to me – "that's because you're a westerner." I had never heard the word westerner in any other context than American. "Oh no," I replied, "I come from Pennsylvania." Later I realized that he had meant Western as in White, European descent, North American and I felt the embarrassment that comes when you put your foot in it. But, I just knew the world as it had been shown to me up to that time, I knew the world from my own experience. Looking back, I know that I had so much

to learn. I feel appreciation for that younger me who simply fell short in that moment and then went on to major in philosophy and study a world of stories – both East and West.

Sometimes we hurt others unintentionally. Last Spring I shared with you the story of when I really learned this lesson – the hard way. It was in second grade. I had a good friend, Debbie and I had been invited to her house for dinner. Part way through the meal, Debbie's brother, might have been a couple of years older or younger, I can't recall, reached across me to get something. I was an only child in a quiet, formal house – no one reached in my house. I tried to be playful to feel more comfortable, and said "hey – keep your cotton-pickin' hands off my corn!" Silence descended hard over the table, blocking all communication. You see, I was one of only two Jewish kids in my elementary school and Debbie was the only African American.

On the way back to her bedroom, she said "my grandmother's mother died picking cotton in the fields." I felt awful. I said "Oh no! I can go say I'm sorry." "I think not right now" she said. "I have to go and talk with them."

My parents were called and came to pick me up. I went to her house one time after that to apologize. I said I really didn't think he was going to take my corn, I'd been joking, I didn't even think about what the words meant. I said I was sorry. They gently accepted my apology, such as it was. But Debbie and I never played together again and some months later, she called me to say that her family was moving. I never saw her again. Her great grandmother, her great grandmother's mother and father, and their mothers and fathers had all been slaves. They made it carefully clear that they honored those ancestors and that those lives mattered. After that, those lives mattered to me, too. They were real people, not simply a chapter in a history book.

That experience changed me. I learned that you must know the impact of the words you use – because even words used unconsciously can wound. I already knew the power of words used consciously to wound. The year before I had gone over to a friend's house to play. I rang the doorbell and her brother answered. "Julie – it's that little kike!" I had no idea what that meant but it sounded bad. When Julie came downstairs I asked her and she said "Don't take it seriously." But I went home and asked my mother. When she explained that it meant "Christ-Killer" I felt shocked, wounded, and even a little angry that I was getting blamed for something that had happened (or so her brother thought) thousands of years before. I knew about the holocaust – it had just happened around 15 years before. Both things collided in the mind and heart of this little peacenik girl.

I suspect that the boy was just using language he'd heard at home. I suspect that he had no idea of biblical realities and nuance. I am sure he was acting arrogant and intentionally bigoted, thought he probably didn't know just how crushing such words would be to me. But his words also raised my consciousness so that, by the time I hurt my friend Debbie, I knew just how deeply words can cut. Sticks and stones can break your bones but words and even attitudes – can wear away at your heart.

Our words have power. And with our words and our attitudes, people – we -- regularly, both intentionally and unintentionally do harm

I was at a well-known shipping company on Friday morning sending off a package. A sign on the door and another at the cash register proclaimed that ID would be required to mail a package. The nice white woman behind the counter explained what to do and a few minutes later –paid up – I was headed out the door when I realized that she hadn't asked for my identification. There was a time in my life when I would have taken that for granted. But I found myself wondering what would have happened if I'd been a person of color. Even an older woman of color. I felt certain that if I were a man in a turban – even though they are Sikhs and not Muslims – I would have been – at the very least – asked for ID. If I were a man with a bushy beard... or a black man ... or – well – anything but a clearly white, middle class mom with a package addressed to an apparent daughter – it really was a package to my daughter – I'm sure my experience would be different. These things routinely happen to me – a friendly smile, gestures of trust, the benefit of the doubt.

My friend, Christine Hillman, had three bi-racial children – and an African American husband and she once shared with me that all of them – though particularly her son and husband – had, more than

once, been stopped by police for no particular reason. They all had a certain fear of the police and that was why Christine found herself – a 60 year old white woman in suburban Detroit - chasing the police as they were chasing a young black man through her neighborhood. She wanted to be sure that the police knew they were being watched.

I grew up with stories of the holocaust. It haunted me that people could behave with such evil and that children like me had suffered. As a girl, I was afraid of Germany and Germans. I was also raised with stories of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, of poverty, struggle, the back of the bus, facing firehoses, police dogs. They aren't my stories – but they happened here, not long ago, and they really aren't over yet. I'm keenly, yet only partially, aware of the pain of the experience of African Americans.

But I do know that for every time someone doesn't ask me for ID, let's me walk around a store unsupervised, remains friendly when I have to run out to get the wallet I left in the car, prepares the very peculiar salad I ordered, or any one of countless things I can't even think of – there are aggressions and microaggressions that people of color – particularly African Americans experience every day. I have my own challenges – but the history and experience of African Americans combines to create a sense of danger, diminishment, vulnerability that is unique.

At General Assembly this year I met Sharon Morgan who told me about her new book –Gather at the Table. It was co-written with Thomas DeWolf. Sharon is a student of the long era of slavery – her ancestors were slaves. Thomas DeWolf comes from a family infamously involved in the slave trade and now well known for working on reconciliation and amends. They decided to travel together to visit key landmarks in their own histories with slavery and talk together to grow in understanding and to, perhaps, effect some healing.

In the book they quote Alice Walker who wrote: “The world cannot be healed in the abstract. . . . Healing begins where the wound was made.” In the book Sharon wrote, “This is our work: to repair unhealed wounds from the past, challenge systems that remain unjust, and either dismantle them or work to make them just and repair the damage they continue to cause. We would love to say of our experiment, ‘Boy, this is it! This is the lightning bolt! We’ve found the answer!’ But it isn’t that simple or tidy. We began as two disconnected people. We learned. We argued. We struggled. We grew. We laughed. We cried. We changed. Along the way, we became friends.”

Out of my awareness of the power of language and not any particular party affiliation – the news about the past filth that came out of the mouth of a candidate for the office of president was only the most recent revelation of dirty and hateful things that he has said. It sharply highlighted the very thin line between the violence of hateful language and of physical assault. Sticks and stones can break your bones but words and even attitudes – can break your heart.

The recent presidential campaigns have gone far beyond party politics – to matters of human dignity and human rights. And let me be clear that I am not going to tell you what you should do in the ballot box. However, as I preach about the power of words, I cannot be silent.

As a woman I'm pretty concerned that, no matter who is in the White House, we'll roll even further back toward the degradation and objectification of women. But I probably can't imagine how scary it would be to be a person of color, a Muslim, or an immigrant during this election season. If America is willing to even entertain the thought that we might tolerate brutal, racist, xenophobic, arrogant language from someone who might wield more power than any other person on earth—what does that say about our culture? The sentiments spoken aloud for months – before this nation and the world – have already begun to strengthen the culture of fear, terror, hatred, blame, disdain, and power over.

So I'm more grateful than ever that, next weekend, a group of 12 Countrysiders along with Eileen Wiviott and myself, are joining with around 70 people from Unitarian Universalist congregations in the greater Chicago area – to begin the curriculum “Beloved Conversations.” It gives me hope.

I nearly always, at the end of worship, speak of the Beloved Community. It was Dr. King who used those words so effectively to talk about a world in which we recognize our kinship with one another and because of that kinship have established the just, healing, and loving community. The beloved community is the world made whole. The purpose of Beloved Conversations arises out of the desire for

Gather at the Table: 10/9/16 Sermon by Rev. Hilary Krivchenia

that world – a world that can only come about through our labors in love. Beloved Conversations are an opportunity to do some hard work – to learn about the ways that racism has crept into our minds, to explore in ourselves the ways in which we unconsciously for the most part, hold back – delay the establishment of that world – the ways in which we unconsciously, for the most part, hurt our brothers and sisters of color. It is an opportunity to learn how to listen to the pain of racism and by doing that become allies and agents of broad healing. This is powerful healing – the sort of healing that I spoke about last week. Rather than speaking of sin and shame, Buddhists often speak of being skillful or unskillful. While it can be hard to discover that you've been unskillful – it allows room for growth, for learning, for behaving in new ways. I think we all have a way to go to become more skillful – in all our relationships – but particularly in addressing this toxic racism that has been poisoning our history over long time.

In Beloved Conversations we will Gather At The Table. We'll explore ways in which we can, by becoming more conscious, also become less clumsy, better allies for justice and compassion, agents for change, and the creation of the Beloved Community so that we may all, one day, live there. It is said that beginning at Rosh Ha Shanah, G-d opens the book of life and the book of death and then waits to see where we will choose to have our names inscribed. These Beloved Conversations are a way to word by word, act by act from now into the future write ourselves and our larger world into the book of life. At Rosh Hashanah it is said that the world is born anew – and this is one powerful way -- without crushing shame but with liberating awareness -- to help the new world come into being.