

You Are So Much More

READING – *A story about Loving Kindness and Shame.*

Once, not long ago and not so far away, a Meditation Master was teaching a beginner's meditation class. There were several students in the class, all of them enthusiastic novices.

The first day, students learned to sit properly and to breathe properly – focusing on their breath and finding the still point within for many long minutes.

Then, there was a new task - to learn the Metta Meditation – the Loving Kindness Meditation.

So, the teacher laid out the meditation to work systematically - beginning with kindness toward oneself and then gradually moving through someone we care about to someone about whom we are indifferent to someone who we do not much like to, finally, someone who is a very difficult person, even, perhaps, an enemy.

And so the students settled onto their meditation cushions, quieted their bodies and minds, focused on their breathing – in and out, in and out, in and out.

The teacher's voice was strong and reassuring as they repeated these words.

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.

Several times they repeated the words along with the teacher and kept a focus on breathing and intention.

Then the teacher moved the students to repeating the words of the meditation for others.

May you be filled with lovingkindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind.

May you be at ease and happy.

And so the class went. The teacher reminding the students that the point in loving kindness practice is to open your heart.

The teacher noticed that one student was not repeating the words with the others. He simply sat on his cushion. His breathing was shallow and his posture had slumped. The teacher understood that sometimes a person has difficulty and that it is often best to allow the student to work out the obstacle or difficulty in their own way. So, the teacher went on leading the meditation.

Still, the one student was silent and sullen at the end of the session. When the class was dismissed, he didn't leave with the others. The teacher went to speak quietly with the student. The teacher noticed that the student was crying. There were tears overflowing his still half-closed eyes and falling down his cheeks.

The teacher asked the student to talk about what he was experiencing at that moment. Here is what he said:

"Teacher, I cannot do the Metta Meditation. I am sorry. I have failed in this."

"You have not failed. You simply have not yet mastered the practice. It takes time."

"No, I have failed. I cannot do the meditation." Then the student began to really sob. The teacher sat with him, saying nothing. When the student was all cried out and became quiet with softer breathing, the teacher gently inquired if he wanted to say anything more.

The student told the teacher that he could not begin the loving kindness meditation because he did not deserve love and happiness.

"And why is that?"

"You have no idea what I have done. I am undeserving and I can never be forgiven."

"Ah, perhaps you have done something rather terrible, then?"

"Yes."

"And have you stopped doing this terrible thing?"

"Yes. Long ago. But I am so ashamed and I am not worthy of forgiveness or the loving kindness of which you speak."

"And so, now this terrible thing is staying with you and you cannot open your heart to yourself or to others?"

"Yes."

"I do not know what this terrible thing is. I do not know if you have been able to make amends. What I do know is that each of us is complicated and we all make mistakes for which we are sorry. Sometimes we make terrible mistakes. Even so, there is more to a person than the terrible things he has done."

The student was still downcast and shaking his head. "You don't understand how bad it is. I can't do the mediation."

The teacher tried once again. "It is not good that you have done a terrible thing. After a terrible thing, there must be acceptance of the fact of that terrible thing. There must be acknowledgement and restitution and accountability. Perhaps then, there can be forgiveness.

And, this much I also know. You are so much more than the worst thing you have ever done. You have done good things too, many times. There is love inside of you wanting and needing to get out. This shame you feel is a lesson, perhaps an important lesson, but it does not make it impossible for you to receive loving kindness; it does not make it impossible for you to give loving kindness. It does not make it impossible for to love or be loved."

READING - Contemporary Wisdom. A Prayer by Chaim Stern

For the times when I could have made peace
with my neighbor but picked a quarrel, forgive me;
and forgive me, too,
for the time when I could have accepted with grace
an offering of friendship or reconciliation
but did not choose to listen.
At times, in my willfulness,
I may have closed my heart to
the possibility of a healing word:
Today – and tomorrow –
let my heart be open.

SERMON

In the Jewish tradition and religion, we are in the middle of High Holy Days, also called The Days of Awe. This is a sacred period of ten days that begins with Rosh Hashanah (The Jewish New Year) and ends on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). It is a time when Jews, and others as they wish, undertake a process of moral self-assessment; making amends; seeking forgiveness; and resolving to do better.

During this stretch of time, the tradition encourages us to think about who we may have harmed over the course of the last year, whether intentionally or by accident, and whether by word or by deed. We're invited to take time to reach out to people personally and take responsibility for our mistakes. The idea is to talk privately with

family members, friends or anyone else we feel we may have wronged. We do our best to admit our mistakes, seek forgiveness from those we have hurt, and offer to make amends.

Once we have gone through the process of evaluation, acknowledgement, reparation, seeking forgiveness, and resolving to do better, then, and only then, are we cleansed and prepared for the process of reconciliation with each other and with God.

The rituals and the worship and the community being together make this a rich and meaningful time for Jews. People take quite seriously the instruction to make amends and seek forgiveness.

For some, this sort of annual exercise may seem hollow or superficial. But, it doesn't need to be. It's not as if any one of us gets through a whole year without doing things in thought, word, or deed that are wrong or hurtful. The ritual of seeking forgiveness and making amends is powerful when taken seriously as a way of restoring shalom. Shalom here is full of meaning – it goes way beyond our causal translation as peace. Shalom is not simply an absence of war or conflict; it includes the health and balance of the totality of our experience. It is about being whole in ourselves with a strong spiritual and moral core. It is about being at peace with creation and all the beings of our planet.

It is good for us to pause on a regular basis to be reminded that we mess up and that we do better when we can set things right, again.

Therefore, let us each take a deep breath and consider our own life during the past twelve months, or indeed for all of days thus far. Are there things – past deeds or words or intentions – that remain unresolved? Are there things which we have allowed to compromise or even prevent inner peace – spiritual shalom or peace within our family, or our neighborhood, or our nation, or our world, or our planet?

Now is a good time to take stock and consider engaging in the Jewish practice of repair and restore – wherever necessary. Such is the invitation and the requirement within the celebration of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

And yet, in reviewing the moral and ethical content of our lives, we can get stuck on the extremes of our having good and our having done evil. We can overlook the vast middle ground, where we make the most of this gift of life.

I want to acknowledge that as human beings, we are both spectacular and broken. If we allow only the highest points of our actions and character to become the way we see ourselves, we are deceived and the truth is not in us. Can I get an Amen on that?

By the same token, and even more common I suspect, is the person like our student in the Loving Kindness Meditation class, who cannot accept love, particularly self-love, because of his inability to release the negative feelings and energy around his past misdeeds. This is a person who is stuck in suffering. Their whole sense of self and identity is tied up in this terrible thing that they have done – even long ago. The teacher will say to the student, “Dearest One, perhaps you have done a terrible thing or even many terrible things, but you are a whole person and you are not **just** the terrible thing you have done. You are creation’s beloved and you are so much more than the worst thing you have ever done.”

UUA Ware Lecturer, author, and attorney for death row inmates, Bryan Stevenson has known the brokenness of humanity in a personal intimate way. He counsels inmates who are faced with execution for crimes they have been convicted of committing (sometimes wrongly).

But simply punishing the broken—walking away from them or hiding them from sight—only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity. I frequently had difficult conversations with clients who were struggling and despairing over their situations—over the things they’d done, or had been done to them, that had led them to painful moments. Whenever things got really bad, and they were questioning the value of their lives, I would remind them that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I told them that if someone tells a lie, that person is not *just* a liar. If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, you are not *just* a thief. Even if you kill someone, you’re not *just* a killer.¹

Sometimes, each of us may find that we dwell on some past misdeed that continues to stay with us. I have been in this place. Perhaps you have too. It is not too late to repair the breach and restore shalom, even if there are times when we acknowledge that the person we harmed cannot accept our apology or grant our request for forgiveness. That person may now be beyond our reach or may not be living. Still, we can go through the process of accountability, seeking forgiveness, and restoring balance within our own spirit.

You are so much more than the worst thing you have ever done. This is a message of hope and salvation from the Love that permeates and energizes life.

¹ Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (pp. 290-291). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What we can know is that we are free, and not only free, but qualified and capable, to make right past wrongs and to repent – literally, to turn around – and go in a different direction; a direction of healing and wholeness and hope for ourselves and this world. This is a message that we can, and probably must, hear year after year. You are so much more than the worst thing you have ever done.

Let me tell you about Sherri Mitchell's talk at the Common Ground Fair yesterday. Did anyone else hear her keynote address? Do you know who she is? Briefly, Sherri Mitchell (Penobscot) is an Indigenous rights attorney, activist and teacher who melds traditional life-way teachings into spirit-based movements.²

Well, what she says is always worth hearing. I was struck by how much of what she was saying yesterday connected with me about what I had planned to say this morning about repentance and forgiveness and beginning again. I suppose that is normal – everything connects to that which commands my own attention – as if, you know, 'it's all about me.'

She was speaking about how we create our future. Not just human beings, but all of creation, because we share the future and what any of us does impacts all of us. What struck me yesterday was her litany of rights and responsibilities. If we demand a right – such as the right to clean water and clean air - then we have a responsibility to work for that and to cease doing things that make it less possible to achieve that right for ourselves and all others. If we claim a right to a livable wage, then we must take responsibility for doing what will lead to that outcome and cease doing things that prevent it. If we claim a right to life liberty and happiness, then we must do things that promote life liberty and happiness. Here is the essential piece of this truth – what is the right of one is the right for all and we are called upon to seriously look at what we are doing – and not doing – to promote rights and liberty for all (not even limited to all human beings).

Sherri Mitchell is included in Robert Shetterly's collection of Americans Who Tell the Truth and he has, I think, had her portrait here in the Meeting House. This is the quote that he has selected for her portrait:

"Rights and responsibilities cannot be separated. Every right that we stand upon must be balanced by a set of corresponding responsibilities. We cannot legitimately make a demand unless we are willing to take responsibility for creating a world where that demand can be met. "

² Sherri Mitchell - Lawyer, Indigenous and Human Rights Activist: b. 1969.



Sherri Mitchell

Lawyer, Indigenous and Human Rights Activist: b. 1969

"Rights and responsibilities cannot be separated. Every right that we stand upon must be balanced by a set of corresponding responsibilities. We cannot legitimately make a demand unless we are willing to take responsibility for creating a world where that demand can be met."

c Robert Shetterly/Americans Who Tell The Truth

As I sat there in the noontime sun on the grass at the Common Ground Fair, I was deeply moved by Sherri’s talk and I began to understand that it is quite possible that the worst thing I have ever done is nothing. I have done nothing, or at least not enough, to take responsibility for creating a world where all beings will have the rights that I claim for myself. If that is the end of story, I am lost. Redemption or forgiveness are impossible. I will sit like the meditation student and weep for the brokenness of my spirit and the impossibility of sharing loving kindness for me or anyone else.

BUT, this is not the end of the story. During this time – the Days of Awe – we are reminded that there is always a way to begin again.

I am so much more than the worst thing I’ve ever done – even if that thing is failing to take responsibility for my rights and failing to show up for those who need my support and failing to work for a world where demands for justice and rights will be met – for all. You too, each and every one of you, is so much more than the worst thing you’ve ever done. You are so much more than the things you have failed to do when you might have done something.

What must I do, teacher, to achieve shalom? You must do three things.

- ⊕ You must take responsibility for all that you have done and not done and acknowledge your part in being broken.
- ⊕ You must seek forgiveness from those you have harmed – yourself, your family, your neighbor, your species, your non-human relations, your planet.

⊕ And, you must repent – turn away from harmful actions and directions and face a new direction that leads toward wholeness – and begin again in Love.

My dear Spiritual Companions, let us take into our hearts, truly and without shame or pride, the truth that we are always so much more than we think we are. The goal of the Loving Kindness meditation is an open heart. May our hearts be opened, again and again, to healing the brokenness in ourselves and our world.

As Sherri Mitchell ended her talk, she asked that we all stand and take the hand of those beside us and form the unbroken circle of enabling love. We were asked to look into the face of our neighbor and say to that person, “You are amazing. You are important. I love you.” And so may it be with us as we look into the faces of those we encounter.

You are amazing. You are important. I Love You.
Amen.