

“There is something I have to tell you. I have never told this to anyone before.

Many years ago, I was unfaithful in my marriage. The affair is long over but I can't help but to think about what a bad spouse I was. My children were young at the time. I robbed my family of so much of myself.

My kids are all grown now. We get along...but I sense we are not close. The distance reminds me every day what a terrible mistake I made.

As each year goes by, I feel more and more shame about what I have done. No one lives forever. When I die, I will die a bad person, a bad parent. And you know what happens to those who have done wrong. I am going to Hell.”

This was *not* your average committee meeting at church.

In the last gathering of our Pastoral Care Associates team, our lay leaders who offer emotional and spiritual support to others living through difficult seasons in their lives, we spent some time with a role play. One person served as the PCA, the other as someone struggling with depression, due to a number of regrets about things they have done in the past. I was grateful – and moved – to see two members of the team step into their roles of one needing care and the other providing care so beautifully in front of an audience. When the role play was complete, our “actors” shared their experience of the exchange and then we observers offered our insights and suggestions.

As the creator of this case study, I found relief in the fact that this scenario was a product of my imagination. As this story was played out and explored by actors, it was nobody's story.

Yet, it is part of human nature to fail to bring our best selves to our relationships, the ones of our intimate circle and of the broader world. It is part of human nature to make mistakes, to choose easy comfort over the hard work of integrity, to be complicit with the way the world conspires to grant power and privilege to some, to the few. While the individual expressions of our faults and mistakes – our sins - differ from one to another, in this way the story portrayed in our Pastoral Care Associates meeting was everybody's story.

[pause]

The reality of human failing is at the heart of the Jewish observance of Yom Kippur. After Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, the faithful enter into a time of contemplation and reconciliation over ten days, the Days of Awe, concluding with Yom Kippur, the most holy day in the Jewish calendar. It is believed that God determines who will be inscribed in the Book of Life for the next year on Yom Kippur so individuals seek forgiveness for their transgressions in advance of the Day of Atonement.

Yom Kippur is a day of prayer and worship and confession. It is also a day of fasting, of abstaining from food and water – even brushing your teeth – for twenty-five hours, beginning with sundown the night before.

As we gather today amid the Days of Awe, I invite us to consider this part of the observance, the willful abstinence from that which sustains our bodies. What does it mean to defy the primal impulse to satisfy our hunger and our thirst? How does relinquishing nourishment move us closer to atonement, closer to the holy?

[pause]

The practices of Yom Kippur, including the fast, are found in scripture. In Leviticus, it is written, in part, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves...For anyone who does not practice self-denial during that entire day shall be cut off from the people...You shall do no work: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements. It shall be to you a sabbath of complete rest, and you shall deny yourselves; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.”

Scripture is silent on why Moses and his people are commanded to “deny themselves.” Yet the lived experience of those who fast as a spiritual practice suggest that to grow as human beings depends on altering the status quo, beginning with our bodies. As we read together, “But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways.”

From a physiological perspective, interruption of the cycle of eating and digesting changes us. It liberates energy as we are no longer using resources to break down food we consume. And as the body turns to reserves for its fuel, there is a kind of internal housekeeping; we are cleansed of toxins.¹ Thus, through fasting, we function differently just as, in the observance of Yom Kippur, we seek to function differently in our ethical lives and in our covenantal bonds.

In preparation for this service, I read a book by Elmer Towns, “Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough.” Written by a conservative Christian, I was dubious about how Towns could illuminate the meaning of a Jewish holiday like Yom Kippur or contribute to a worship service in a Unitarian congregation.

Yet, Towns does make a wise observation. Even those of us who are not religiously observant fast. We fast when we are ill with fever. We fast when we are grieving or brokenhearted. We fast not because we have been commanded to but because our emotional pain or our disease have eclipsed our physical appetites. As heart and body so often speak in one language, there is wisdom in reaching this place of emptiness as we turn towards what is spiritually diseased or broken in our lives.

In this way, fasting serves as an embodied metaphor. Or, as written in “Gates of the Season: A Guide to the Jewish Year” by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Our fasting on Yom Kippur demonstrates our willingness to submit to discipline. How can we atone for our excesses toward others unless we can curb appetites which depend on no one but ourselves? To set boundaries for our own conduct in this very private matter is to begin the path toward controlling our public behavior.”²

You have probably heard the joke by now, the observation that if given a chance to go to Heaven or to a lecture about Heaven, Unitarian Universalists would choose the lecture. Not wanting to succumb to stereotypes, I realized that I could not preach a sermon about fasting in the abstract. I had to follow the commandment and abstain from food and drink for twenty-five hours.

¹ <https://www.doyouyoga.com/8-reasons-to-try-fasting/>

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/why-fast/>

My partner in leading today's service, Martin, advised me against fasting, finding the experience pure punishment. "The equivalent of wearing sackcloth and ashes!" in his view. However, his note came to me too late as, by the time I got his email, my fast was complete.

Of course, my one day fast was still in the abstract. I did not attend a Yom Kippur service and I fasted alone. Ironically, it was me, she who practiced "self-denial" who was "cut off from my people."

And if Yom Kippur is about confession, I must acknowledge one slip. Even though I drank a lot of water before the fast began, early in I became very thirsty so I did have another large glass before bed. But until eight o'clock the following evening, I did not eat or drink.

Martin also reminds me that my quiet day of fasting at home was another abstraction as, in his words:

the fast takes place during a day when you would be at the Shul or Temple almost the entire day--praying, genuflecting, standing, sitting... there are long prayers where the entire Congregation has to stay on its feet - and as the day wears on that take a lot out of people (When I was a kid, women routinely had smelling salts with them because they would get woozy standing for so long. A sexist thing, because men also got woozy.)

All this being said, my day of fasting helped me gain a better understanding of the importance of this practice. When we are sated, we forget how vulnerable we feel when we haven't eaten, how confused, how fragile. I could see how spending a day in worship, considering my failings, in this state, feeling nothing but the dryness of my mouth and the rumblings of my stomach, would be a raw and powerful experience.

Perhaps the most important part of my fast was remembering that this is something I chose to do. I denied my body what it regularly needs to respond to an ancient, sacred invitation to discipline.

Within Unitarian Universalism, there is no expectation of self-sacrifice, never mind an obligation that all must fulfill and pass on a practice, "forever throughout

[the] generations.” Most often, I find comfort in practicing my faith in ways of my choosing, ways that rarely make me feel uncomfortable. Yet, there is something meaningful in having something asked of me and fulfilling this promise within a community of others, also bound by obligation.

I chose to fast knowing that dehydration and hunger – and missing my morning coffee - are often triggers for debilitating headaches. In this way, in the most simplest terms, I chose to risk pain.

Perhaps this is the true metaphor at the heart of Yom Kippur. The fictional but all-too-true story of our role play, the person suffering through knowledge of their past mistakes and poor choices, reminds us how much we suffer when we bear our shame in silence and do not seek reconciliation. Yet it is painful to seek forgiveness. It is not easy to name the ways we are weak and sometimes cruel. While our shortcomings are the source of our pain; the rituals of Yom Kippur turn us towards this pain and offer us a way through it.

[long pause]

Both fasting and Yom Kippur have meaning beyond the individual plane, in the realm of community. Today’s reading from Isaiah is scripture read on Yom Kippur morning. In this passage, Isaiah defines what is true fasting. He speaks of those who fast, longing to grow closer to the divine. And, yet, they continue to exploit others, to hold tight to their selfish ways. As Isaiah proclaims, true fasting is not fasting for its own sake but making acts of “self-denial” that right the wrongs of social injustice: “Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

Martin reminds us that, in the end, the true vision of Yom Kippur is not changed individuals but a changed people, a changed society. He writes, “the specific sins that we seek forgiveness for are...not any individual's sins--but the sins of the people as a whole...For example...the very long confession of sins--the ‘Al Chet’ which, traditionally, is said ten times in the course of the Yom Kippur services - all on an empty stomach! - only deals with sins of the people against God. We are asking God's forgiveness for those, but when it comes to sins we have committed

against other people God gives no forgiveness on Yom Kippur. That we have to attend to on our own.”

[pause]

So what does it mean to defy the primal impulse to satisfy our hunger and our thirst? How does relinquishing nourishment move us closer to atonement, closer to the holy?

From my exploration, my one-day fast and my dialogue with Martin, I have come to believe that fasting was once a sacrifice we made to God, a punishment, a “Biblically commanded ‘affliction’” in Martin’s words. It was about human submission in service to exulting the divine.

Yet, in time, the meaning of fasting has grown. Yes, fasting makes us physically weak and personally uncomfortable. But perhaps we must be brought to this painful place so we may set aside our powerful human will and our often insatiable egos. Perhaps we need the vulnerability of fasting so we may “turn from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith.” In this way, through what feels like punishment, we are divorced from what we want but brought closer to what we need. In this way, fasting does not sanctify the Holy but serves us, bringing us into closer communion.

[pause]

In our Pastoral Care Associates meeting, one member of the team embodied someone in deep regret. As we discussed their conversation, it became clear that this person, like most of us in times of distress, had both emotional and spiritual struggles. “No one lives forever,” she said. “When I die, I will die a bad person, a bad parent. And you know what happens to those who have done wrong. I am going to Hell.”

Many members of the group, including myself, felt challenged. How do you support someone, convinced they are going to Hell, when you don’t believe in Hell yourself?

Then, it hit me. I said, “If I were the Pastoral Care Associate, I might say, ‘In my belief system, there is no Hell. But it sounds like you are already there right now.’”
[pause]

It is true; no one lives forever. There will come a time when our names are no longer inscribed in the Book of Life. But until that time comes, there is the opportunity for confession and forgiveness. There is the opportunity for atonement.

And the ancients of many traditions have given us paths towards this vision of spiritual evolution, this new reality between us humans. One path is the practice of fasting, inviting us to give up, in the words of one Christian website, “what we need to survive for what we need to live.”³

For the times when we are at peace with ourselves and our bodies, for the times when we are hungry before God, may we find the courage to tell the truths that must be told. May “we forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love.”

³ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/health-and-wellness/5-spiritual-benefits-of-fasting>