Reading “On Turning” by Jack Riemer, adapted

Now is the time for turning.

[In the North and the east,] the leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange.
The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South.
The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.

For leaves, birds and animals turning comes instinctively.
But for us turning does not come so easily.

It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong: and this is never easy.

It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful.
It means saying: I am sorry.

It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.
These things are hard to do.

But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.

God, help us to 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.

Turn us around, O God, and bring us back toward You.
Revive our lives, as at the beginning.
And turn us toward each other, for in isolation there is no life.

Sermon Turning, Returning, and Renewal

What is this? (holding a leaf). Of course it is. That was easy. Now, what is this? (holding another leaf).
It’s a new leaf. (hold up new leaf and then turn upside down a few times) Does anyone know what this is? It’s turning over a new leaf.

Turning over a new leaf is an old saying that means to have a new beginning, to make a change, or to start fresh. Turning over a new leaf means taking stock in one’s life, seeing the places for improvement and by God, doing them. It can be something concrete like quitting smoking, or giving
up drinking. Or it can be something more subtle, but trust me, just as difficult, such as giving up grudges, or judgement to make room for more humility and joy in one's life. Perhaps even more powerfully, turning over a new leaf could mean changing our perspective and rather than always looking at what we do wrong, choosing to nurture what gives us life and health, and adding more of it—it can be starting an exercise routine, dance classes, or a meditation practice.

I have not found evidence of this yet, but I suspect that the familiar phrase “turning over a new leaf” is related to the ancient practice and meaning of the Hebrew word, teshuvah, commonly translated to mean repentance, but deriving literally from the word “to turn.” Teshuvah, or turning, is the central practice of the High Holy Days of Judaism, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Teshuvah means to turn away from wrongdoing, to turn away from sin. It also means to turn and look back on the year, to see one’s mistakes, and to turn toward one another and seek forgiveness. And in the process, the larger meaning is evident—to turn our lives back to the center, towards God, or to a path of goodness and generosity. As Jack Riemer describes it: *Turn us around, [O God,] and bring us back toward You. Revive our lives, as at the beginning. And turn us toward each other, for in isolation there is no life.*

Yom Kippur is New Year’s Day in the Jewish calendar. It is also called the Day of Atonement. According to Jewish tradition, it is believed that on Yom Kippur, the book of Life and the book of Death are open, and all people pass before God on this day to have their names inscribed in one of these books. To have one’s name inscribed in the Book of Life is to be blessed with good fortune and health in the New Year. The process of teshuvah, of asking for forgiveness and reconciling relationships is the way to get one’s name inscribed in the Book of Life.

The month preceding Yom Kippur is call Elul. The entire month is set aside for the practice of teshuvah, turning back to look over the past year and asking and seeking forgiveness, all in preparation for Atonement Day. For, “Unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways” (Jack Riemer).

It is taught in the Talmud, the record of rabbinic discussions on Jewish law and Jewish ethics, that God can only forgive transgressions (sins) made against God, and that for transgressions against other human beings, we must seek forgiveness from the people we have wronged. "For transgressions against God the Day of Atonement atones (forgives); for transgressions against other human beings, the Day of Atonement does not atone, until one has made peace with them.

This lesson reminds me of a night when I was a little kid and I stole a piece of candy from the concession stand at our local ball field. I was there with my dad watching one of my brother’s baseball games. When he noticed the candy that he had not purchased, he asked me where I got it. I told him the truth—that I had stolen it.
I was scared wondering what my dad would do to me, I lifted my hand up, with the candy held out hoping he would take it and relieve me of the burden. Meanwhile, my eyes dropped scanning the dusty ground in shame. But my dad did not take the candy from my hand. Instead he told me I would have to take it back to the concession stand and tell them what I did.

I didn’t lift my eyes for the entire walk back to the concession stand. I was ashamed and scared. Perhaps I was afraid of what the person would do to me, but more I didn’t know how I would lift my eyes and say out loud to the stranger what I had done. As I put the candy on the counter, my chin trembled as I admitted my crime. The person behind the counter said something, I don’t remember what, probably, “Thanks for bringing it back.” It was awful, but effective. I never stole anything again.

It would have been so much easier if my dad could have offered me the forgiveness, the absolution. The more difficult work, and the learning however, comes when we must face the people we have wronged and say “I am sorry. Will you forgive me?” This month long practice of asking looking back to see where we have fallen short and doing the hard work of seeking forgiveness from others is one of the wisest ancient teachings I have found, for it promotes a real honesty with ourselves about admitting our misdeeds, and more importantly it creates a process that allows for reconciliation—the most healing form of forgiveness.

Asking and receiving forgiveness allows us to let go of the burden of guilt. While it is difficult, it is also more complete. When we go to a friend we have hurt and apologize, we allow for the friendship to be renewed and that is a great gift. When we go to a foe and admit a wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness, we create a potential for a new beginning, a new understanding in that relationship.

Yet this kind of reconciliation is not always possible. Death can cut short our time for reconciliation, and sometimes for our own good we are forced to cut off a relationship. In those cases, we must learn to forgive ourselves and let go. But it is always more difficult to let go when we cannot go to another person for amends.

Another critical piece of the practice of turning, of teshuvah, is the art of forgiving people who have hurt us. Christina Baldwin writes “Forgiveness is the act of admitting that we are like other people.” When we hold grudges, or find ourselves unable to forgive the mistakes of others, we deny our own humanity, and the ways in which we all can be thoughtless and make mistakes. When we forgive others, we acknowledge our own humanity, and the imperfections that come with it.

Now all this talk of wrong doing could lead us down a pretty dark path. However, the High Holy Days in Judaism are not meant to be times of darkness or guilt. Chaim Stern writes, "Do not look into the mirror with loathing, forgetting the good in you. There can be a perverse pride in too much self-despising, for you are not a great sinner, merely average. As you need forgiveness, so do I, lest we despair of all light. But this day is a day of light. Accept it and add to it.”
Yom Kippur is indeed a day of light, a day for letting go, for renewal, for turning toward one another and asking and receiving love—so that we may begin again in wholeness.

According to the Jewish calendar, a lunar calendar, the Jewish New Year, these High Holy Days, fall sometime in September or October. In the desert, this is a kind of New Year time for us as well. The temperatures are falling. Slowly, I have seen more neighbors emerge from their houses to inspect their yards or take a walk through the neighborhood. I am even beginning to see strollers being pushed, dogs being walked and children out on their bikes. Life is emerging as the heat of summer subsides.

The most holy month in the Muslim tradition is Ramadan. Ramadan also moves throughout our Western solar calendar. This year the month of Elul leading up to Yom Kippur, and Ramadan leading up to Eid al-Fitr coincid. Eid al-Fitr is a feast celebrated at the end of Ramadan. Families travel to visit one another, staying a couple of days, and sharing a large feast. To us looking in, it might look a great deal like our Thanksgiving celebrations.

Like the month long time of preparation in the Jewish tradition, the fast of Ramadan is a practice meant to create greater awareness in the observer and to center one’s life in God. For the entire month of Ramadan, during the day light hours, all Muslim 13 and older who are in good health are to refrain from eating, drinking and sex. A light breakfast is eaten before the sun rises and there is a meal late at night after the sun goes down.

Special alms are given at Ramadan specifically for the poor, and the hunger that one feels during the fast is meant to create compassion and understanding for those who are poor and hungry. But the spiritual purpose of the fast of Ramadan is primary. One Muslim acquaintance described it like the Tennessee Titans running game with their quarterback, Steve McNair. The long throws from the quarterback to the wide received make for exciting football, but much to Tennessee fans the Titans relied mostly on their running game. It made the games progress slowly, but play after play the running game would wear down the defense and open up an opportunity for the Titans victory in the end. The same he said is true of Ramadan. At the beginning of the month, fasting is very difficult, you think about food all the time and it is hard going. But slowly, the discipline of the fast begins to break down one’s defenses and you become less dominated by thoughts of food—and more with thoughts of the spirit. In other words, the fast breaks down a Muslim’s defenses—the ways in which our minds and bodies are distracted from spiritual concerns by carnal desires. It is thought that by the end of Ramadan, one’s defenses are down and Allah is able to reach one’s heart.

As Unitarian Universalists we have no set practice comparable to the Jewish practice of teshuvah or the Muslim fast of Ramadan. In the Christian tradition, the season of Advent, the month long preparation for Christmas, and Lent the season leading up to Easter are comparable. However, that does not mean these traditions do not hold valuable insight for us. Certainly the ritualized practice of seeking and giving forgiveness, and the intentional work to bring ourselves back to our spiritual center speaks to us today.
Every year when these holy days approach, I remember a very important teaching from Judaism. Even though Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the High Holy Days in the Jewish tradition, they are not in fact the most sacred holiday. The most sacred holiday is Sabbath, the weekly practice of looking away from work and to the spirit. The weekly practice of lighting the sabbath candles and connecting to ancient tradition. And for us, we do find this here, in our weekly worship, our weekly discipline of coming to service. A weekly ritual of leaving work behind to nurture our spirits, to remind ourselves of who we are, of where we have fallen short and to call ourselves back to the source of love and generosity. While we have no month long time of preparation, our sacred celebration happens here every week. A time for seeking rest and inspiration and a reminder of the light within us and the hope within the world.

I began my sermon with the image of the leaf. But, that image of turning over a new leaf is not a reference to trees at all. Rather it is a reference to pages in a book—remember that one of humanity’s first forms of writing paper were dried papyrus leaves. The turning of a new page in a book is an opportunity for a new beginning, a whole fresh page in which to write our lives. On Yom Kippur, it is those fresh pages of the Book of Life that are turned, that each person might pass by to have their names inscribed for a year of blessing and sweetness.

Truly, each Sunday, each day, is a new page open to us. A new opportunity for living, for loving, for creating justice, for building and rebuilding relationships, for renewing ourselves. May we come to greet each day, each moment as the gift of time that it is and renewed by that gift, go forth in hope and in peace.