

Healing Our Wholeness, Healing the World  
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Once upon a time, back at the very beginning of time, the Ein Sof, or the Ground of Being, or God, filled the entire universe with its presence. And when the Ein Sof decided to create the world, in order to make room for it, God, the Ein Sof, needed to contract itself to make room for all the wonders that would soon fill the universe. And so God found a way to squeeze its presence, in the form of light, into 10 vessels. When that happened, darkness fell. In creating the universe God sent the 10 vessels to create light, but something went wrong. The vessels were too fragile to hold the powerful light, and so they shattered. The light scattered, like grains of sand, like tiny sparks, and found their way into everything and everyone. We all contain these sparks of the holy.

The story of the shattered vessels was created in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the renowned rabbi Isaac Luria; truly the last great cosmological myth of Judaism. It arose out of the sense of the Jewish people being scattered, driven from Israel and finding new homelands throughout the world. The story has been handed down for hundreds of years, and over time, has given importance to a Jewish theological belief: that of Tikkun Olam, the restoration of the world.

According to the story, Jewish people are called to collect the divine sparks. And when enough of the sparks have been recovered, the vessels can be restored, and the repair of our broken world will be complete. Tikkun Olam: the healing of the world, the returning of the world to holiness.

In modern times, Jewish people have come to understand the concept of Tikkun Olam as a call to justice work, and to environmental work: protecting our planet and its people. They are called to perform mitzvot: good deeds, or commandments, to symbolically take action to heal the world, to do their part to collect the sparks needed to restore the creation. (Source: <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>)

Our theme this month is Healing. And we begin, in honor of the Jewish New Year, or Rosh Hashanah, by looking at what is needed from us in order to be a part of this healing: healing the world. And the question before us is, since we are part of the world, since the divine sparks reside in each one of us, shall we consider the importance of healing ourselves in order to help heal the world?

Rosh Hashanah is not just the beginning of the Jewish year. It is also the beginning of the 10-day period known as the Days of Awe. When this begins, at sunset tonight, observant Jews believe that the Book of Life is open, and their names are inscribed as either righteous or, well, not. The Book is sealed on Yom Kippur, the Day of

Atonement. For the 10 days that the Book of Life is open, Jews are expected to make amends for wrong-doing. They are expected to reach out to people they have wronged over the course of the last year, to repent, and to ask for forgiveness. The goal is not to make yourself feel better, but rather, to be accountable. To own your mistakes, and to think about how to not make such mistakes going forward. To practice teshuvah, or repentance, or turning back toward God.

Think back for a moment to our responsive reading: “Unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.”

Think of the healing that can take place during this time: healing of relationships, healing of the guilt and shame that can undermine us, that can drag us into a cycle of seeing ourselves as broken, or unworthy.

Rachel Naomi Remen, the author of our reading this morning, wrote, “Those who don’t love themselves as they are rarely love life as it is either. Most people have come to prefer certain of life’s experiences and deny and reject others, unaware of the value of the hidden things that may come wrapped in plain or even ugly paper. In avoiding all pain and seeking comfort at all cost, we may be left without intimacy or compassion; in rejecting change and risk we often cheat ourselves of the quest; in denying our suffering we may never know our strength or our greatness... It is natural, even instinctive, to prefer comfort to pain, the familiar to the unknown.” (Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1994, p. 75)

It’s a tall order, to help heal the world. It’s a lot to ask to try to heal ourselves! This practice I have just described might not feel like what you need to become whole. And so, we must ask ourselves what would heal us. The answer will be different for each of us.

Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk and mystic, wrote, “There is in all things...a hidden wholeness.” This morning we are hearing that word - ‘wholeness’ - and ‘integrity.’ When I use these words I am referring to our deepest selves, the deep truth of our souls. It is more profound than a sense of right and wrong: it is self-knowledge, self-understanding at its deepest level. We can forget about our sense of wholeness, forget our integrity. It can happen when we don’t listen to the still, small voice within us. It can happen when we try to hide our deep longing, our yearning, that voice calling us to be who we truly need to be. We can forget our wholeness when we are overcome by greed or ambition, or when we lie, or cheat, or hurt someone. Or we can forget it when we hide from ourselves, reject the voice of our soul, try to pretend to be someone we are not. I think of the politicians or the television clergy who trumpet family values, and then get caught having affairs. They have become divided, unable to hear the calling of their souls. They are not living lives of integrity, of wholeness.

Rachel Naomi Remen says that we do not lose our wholeness. It is there all the time, but it can get hidden or forgotten. In order to heal, we don't need to add more to ourselves, we actually need to strip layers away in order to get down to our natural essence; to who we truly are. These layers can build up over the course of a lifetime, added by circumstances, relationships, trying to please important people, trying to succeed, feeling forced into covering up our whole souls. We begin to hide as children in order to get along, to not be teased or bullied, to feel safe. We hide our sexuality, our learning disabilities, our religious beliefs, our political affiliations. In Junior High, I remember trying to hide my intelligence. At some point, it became extremely uncool to be smart. I was slow to pick that up, which cost me socially, - let's face it, I was not cool - but eventually I learned to try to hide it, to talk differently, to not raise my hand in class when I knew the answer. It wasn't safe, and so I hid. I could never really be myself, until I made it to college.

In the words of our responsive reading, "it takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits."

This can be terribly hard work, to turn ourselves, to look deep within ourselves, to listen for the voice telling us what is the right life for us.

And yet, rejecting the voice, turning away from it, is also hard. Turning away forces us to live lives that are not whole, lives that will not allow us to heal.

In talking about wholeness, I am not talking about perfection. I am talking about accepting ourselves as we are, recognizing the broken places, learning to have compassion for ourselves, so that we can heal. We can be caught up in the belief that if we are broken, we need to be fixed, as though we are clocks, or cars. Healing is not fixing. It is learning to come back to our truest selves, to feel compassion for ourselves, to be honest and accepting.

If we are to help heal the world, to perform good deeds, to collect the divine sparks, we must begin with ourselves. If we are harsh and unforgiving toward ourselves, if we are unable to regard ourselves with compassion, then we will be unable to extend compassion to others. Buddhist practitioners know this. When they practice lovingkindness meditation, or metta, they begin by extending good wishes and feelings toward themselves, in recognition that feelings of compassion toward others can then arise more easily.

"People have been healing each other since the beginning," writes Remen. "The healing ... may lie in recognizing and reclaiming the capacity we all have to heal each other, the enormous power in the simplest of human relationships: the strength of a touch, the blessing of forgiveness, the grace of someone else taking you just as you are and finding in you an unsuspected goodness." (Kitchen Table Wisdom, p. 217)

We have much to offer one another. We can offer understanding, and compassion. We can offer the simple gift of listening to one another without judgment, and the

gift of acceptance. And we here, this congregation, can offer one another community. A place to gather, to be known for who we are, to learn to be ourselves, and to heal.

As we said in our opening words this morning:

“Even in our sorrows, we feel our lives  
cradled in holiness we cannot comprehend,  
and though we each walk within a vast loneliness,  
the promise we offer here is that we do not walk alone.” (Kathleen McTigue, *Shine and Shadow: Meditations*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011, p. 48.)

My dear ones, may you know that you do not walk alone. We all carry within us bits of the divine light; stardust. We all have wounds; broken places. We share this fundamental, common humanity, in common but in so many different ways. May we hear each other, see each other, and support each other on our journey toward wholeness.

Spirit of Life and Love,  
Guide us in our turning,  
Help us to turn toward one another,  
And toward our hurting world,  
that we may be sources of healing,  
strength, and compassion,  
for ourselves,  
for one another,  
and for the world. Amen.