

“Filling Your Well and Sharing the Water”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull with Donna Byrne
Small Group Ministry Sunday
Amid the Jewish Days of Awe
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“Now is the time for turning.”

Now is the time for transformation.

Change is the stuff of life. With the first breath we take, we are beings who change, adapt, transform. Close your eyes for a moment. Hold your hands. Yes, hold those hands that have always been yours, but whose cell population is wholly different than it was at the moment of your birth. Open your eyes. Behold your hands. They are still your hands, and they have changed however minimally in the moment it took to close your eyes and hold them. In the blink of an eye, we change. Change is a given. Transformation is not.

Turning is a nuanced form of transformation. We turn. We see life at a different angle, through a different lens. Colors appear that we have never witnessed. Sounds come to the fore that we have never heard. Scents rise up that we have never inhaled. Textures are offered that we have never touched. Flavors are served up that we have never tasted. We are called to notice. There is no guarantee that we will do so.

Transformation is sensory and spiritual. The two are compatible. Turning is sensory and spiritual. We turn and our hearts receive differently. We turn and our minds filter differently. That which is truth arrives in a form more raw. We summon the courage to turn and say, “Yes” to truth that we could not previously acknowledge. We are new beings. We are transformed in the bones of our soul.

Imagine a leaf vibrant, dancing in the gentle winds of summer, greenest of greens, clear veins, a defined shape, confident in its identity. Life happens. Seasons visit. Green morphs into tints of yellow morphs into tints of orange, amber, and the deepest of purples. Sharply defined contours are redrawn by cool temperatures, crisp air, blustery winds.

“For leaves, bird, and animals turning comes instinctively,” observes Rabbi Jack Riemer. “But for us turning does not come so easily.”

How is it that we whose lives depend on change are so resistant to it? It’s as if we thirst but shun the water that would sate our thirst.

A rabbi’s words echo in the cavern of our bewilderment: “It takes an act of will for us to make a turn.” In Hebrew the word is *teshuvah*. Traditionally translated as turning, one Jewish commentator suggests that a more accurate rendition is “return,” a return to one’s original state.

We are amid the ten holiest days of the Jewish calendar, the Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*. Nissan Dovid Dubov refers to this time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the “the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*.” *Reflection, prayer, and atonement* mark this time for all Jews and are instructive for us as Unitarian Universalists, whose theological sources include the teachings of Judaism.

Reflection we can relate to. It is intentional and inspired. It is individual and profoundly communal.

Prayer some of us relate to, though for many meditation is the chosen practice. Our individual lenses invite distinctions. Yet one need not pray “to” to pray, and one may meditate with intentional focus.

Atonement we commonly consider to be repentance. “I repent of whatever. I screwed up. I know that. Mea culpa!” Yet atonement is more holistic. Atonement may be rendered as atonement. Back to the notion of return, as in “return to one’s original state, at-oneness with life.”

In the poetry of Rabbi Jack Riemer:

“Turn us around, O God, and bring us
back toward You. Revive our lives,
as at the beginning.”

Why not call it wholeness or “right relationship” with what that iconic Unitarian William Ellery Channing spoke of as “inward springs?”

Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, is the culmination of a sacred time in which Jews are called into right relationship intimately and ultimately.

As the rabbi concludes:

“...turn us toward each other, God,
for in isolation there is no life.”

Moving toward wholeness is not “a free lunch.” It is sometimes spurred by the act of a broken heart or a heart willing to break, to open, and to receive.

While there is no life in isolation, there is life abundant in caring community, in covenanted relationship grounded in love. One of the most profound ways we can realize this is through the ministry of small groups structured in ways that invite intimacy and ultimacy, while deepening our connectedness with that expanded group recognized by Channing as “the great family of all souls.”

There is a paradox in the dynamics of small group ministry. Through a formality of structure, with a consistent sequence for every gathering, and through an agreed upon behavioral covenant of deep listening and full presence, trust builds, and a freedom to be who we are commonly emerges. Small Group Ministry is the intentional gathering of groups of eight to ten individuals led by trained facilitators with the purpose of fostering friendship and caring, enhancing spiritual growth, strengthening the fabric of faith community, and providing avenues for service. Many find it transformative.

Donna, as participant as facilitator of Small Group Ministry over these past few years, how has this worked for you?

[Donna responds.]

How do you find it transformative?

[Donna responds.]

The lyrics of our first song of the morning resonate in what happens:

*“When we tell our story from deep inside, and we listen with a loving mind,
and we hear our voices in each other’s words,
then our heart is in a holy place.”*

We tell our stories from deep inside. We listen intentionally. We agree to abide by guidelines that we covenant together. How is this unlike group therapy?

In Small Group Ministry we focus on the present. We seek not to fix, but to find wholeness through mutual presence. We refrain from advice giving or even counseling. For scars of soul and psyche that run deep, Small Group Ministry is not the path. Nor is it a vehicle for casual conversation. Presence is the great gift of this ministry, presence given and received.

How do you find this to be so, Donna?

[Donna responds.]

Stories of who we are, why we are, how we are; responding to common topics from our own experience; and planning and carrying out service ventures lest we become ingrown all constitute Small Group Ministry. In this time of turning we hold an opportunity for turning and returning in the intimacy of a small group over time. The lyrics of Shlomo Carlebach resonate:

*Return again, Return again.
Return to the home of your soul.
Return to who you are, Return to what you are,
Return to where you are born and reborn again.*

We stand on the threshold of possibility. We stand amid a season of turning. We are thirsty, each and every one of us, however that thirst is known. We are empty wells. In this season of *teshuvah* we too can fill our wells, but that is not enough. We fill our wells and share the water. Therein we discover a newfound wholeness, a newfound at-oneness with ourselves and one another and that which we deem sacred.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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Jack Riemer, "On Turning"

"When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place," Words and music, Joyce Poley, in *Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2005, 1008.