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# The Heart of Atonement

BY SUSAN LAMAR, MINISTER, CHANNING MEMORIAL CHURCH, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST,  
ELLCOTT CITY, MARYLAND



Did you follow the events that unfolded in Jena, Louisiana over the last couple of years? Somehow those events are in the forefront of my mind as I reflect on this season of the Jewish High Holy Days, of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Let me go back: In September of 2006, a few black students at Jena high school sat under a tree where only white students had previously sat. The next day, there were three nooses hanging from the tree. The school superintendent handled the incident as a prank, and gave the three white students who hung the nooses a three-day suspension. Several weeks of racial tension and unrest followed, including a fire set at the school. In December, several black students beat up one of the white students, and were charged with assault and attempted murder, even though the student's injuries were not life threatening. There is still much dissent and confusion over who should have been charged with what, and whether the incident was "racial" or not. At one point, white community leaders cut down the tree, hoping that would help put an end to the tensions. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007, multitudes gathered in Jena supporting six black teenagers who were being zealously prosecuted for the assault.

Here is what echoed through my mind as I watched the events unfold. The power of symbols. I believe that a lack of understanding on the part of the white youth, the school administrators, and white townspeople in general—a lack of understanding of the explosive power of the symbol of the noose for African Americans—is what unleashed these events. One symbol, interpreted by one group as a cute prank and by another as an imminent threat to life and limb, unleashed all of that power.

A noose, when used in the context of race relations, is not a prank. Never. It is a recollection of a time of severe threat and danger—terrorism—by whites against blacks. Lynchings were not pranks. A noose is a reminder that the United States is still in the process of atoning for the legacy of slavery and of Jim Crow and of assumptions of racial superiority.

Here is level one of the problem: In the year 2006, there was still a place on public school grounds which was considered by tradition to be the sole property of whites.

Here is level two: I think that it is possible, just possible, that the kids who hung the nooses may...may...have thought it was a prank. It may have been what I call "cruel teasing"—a kind of (in their minds) way of saying goodbye to their exclusive use of the shade of that tree. A begrudging "OK, but we're not going to go quietly" kind of acquiescence. I was an adolescent once. I can remember my mind working that way. I can almost hear them saying, "We didn't mean anything by it," as an excuse, or at least an explanation. "We were just kidding." That in itself is a huge problem. They are young, studying the civil rights movement as "history." They probably don't realize that we are not even one lifetime away from the meaning of a noose being a clear and present threat of murder. Less than one lifetime from actual lynchings.

Here is level three: Even if the teenagers didn't know, the school superintendent should have known. It seems to me it is the job of educational leadership to have a deep and abiding grasp of history—not just as book-learning, dates and facts and all the stuff that you can test people on with multiple choice. Educational leadership ought to have an understanding of history as a community's and a culture's story, in all its complexity, all of its symbolism, and all of its pain.



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The beginning of  
atonement is the sense of  
its necessity.  
— Lord Byron

A monthly for religious liberals

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Here is level four: This incident tells me that our culture's, our nation's, collective stories are not being told well enough. They are not being passed on from generation to generation, across all racial and ethnic subcultures, in ways that "zing" right to the heart.

Imagine, for example, if when the nooses appeared in the tree, the entire school population had been gathered together under that tree to hear the story of Emmett Till. 1955—less than a lifetime ago—a fourteen-year-old boy in Mississippi was brutally murdered, by hanging, beating, stabbing and drowning. A young black teenager—a teenager, just like the Jena students. A real life story of the powerful meaning that "noose" has for African-Americans. Might it not be that that lesson was more important than any math, English, or abstract social studies class that day? This is why those nooses are wrong. This is why they will not be tolerated here. This is why they are not a prank. This is why you who hung them there will be expelled. This is why you who hung them must figure out how to make atonement, before you are allowed back in school. This is why.

Then, and only then, after you have taken some action within the community, after you have felt within yourselves the terror that those nooses caused in others, after you have made it right, will you be allowed to take your transgression to the temple and lay it on the head of the goat to be taken away into the desert. Not until you have changed. After. You have work to do first.

Jena is for me a reminder of just how far we have to go. It is a reminder that reconciliation—atonement—coming together as one people, one world, is not an easy thing to do. It is a reminder that actions and events and symbols are experienced and interpreted in completely different ways by different people. It is a reminder that when those differing interpretations happen—

notice that I did not say misinterpretations, but differing interpretations—when those differing interpretations happen, tremendous power is unleashed. The question becomes: is there any place for that power to go, other than into violence? Is it possible to direct that power into atonement... drawing the parties into a single community?

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### Atonement is some of the hardest work there is.

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I don't *know* that it is possible—it is impossible to know the future. But I *believe* that it is possible. I believe that unless all parties, in this and other situations, are able to recognize symbolism and its power we will not be able to come together as one world. I believe that we have to allow ourselves to see, hear, and feel what the "other" sees, hears, and feels in order to engage with one another toward peace.

Here is another example: Two religious youth groups joined together to view a movie about the Holocaust—a Jewish youth group and a Protestant youth group. The idea was to facilitate interfaith understanding. They viewed the film which depicted in graphic detail the horrors of the Holocaust. And when the movie was over, the Protestant kids said, "Omigod, that was awful, let's go for pizza." And the Jewish kids couldn't eat. For them it was not an intellectual exercise, an interesting bit of history. It was an immediate and personal living horror. I suspect that situations like that occur all the time, with people obliviously going on with their lives without realizing how others are affected.

It is incumbent upon all sides to be able to recognize the power of symbols in one another's emotional and spiritual lives. I believe that it is absolutely necessary if we as a world are ever going to be able to truly and deeply respect the particularity of culture and

community at the same time that we form a single, peaceful world. An atoned world.

Atonement is some of the hardest work there is. It happens exactly at the intersection of individual and community. The liturgical act of placing sins on the head of a goat—the scapegoat—practiced by the ancient Israelites on Yom Kippur was not itself the act of atonement. No, it just symbolized all of the work that each individual member of the community had done, as they examined their lives and hearts for their own acts that may have caused damage to others in the community over the course of the year. I am imagining the long list that Aaron probably recited, as he placed all the sins of all the community members on that goat's head. It would probably take a couple of hours just for mine!

And yet because it is a liturgical act—part of the work of all the people, collectively—it also, like all good liturgical acts, is a reminder that we are not alone in our need. We all make mistakes. We all fall down.

We all bear responsibility for creating a community, nation and world that listens and hears and looks and sees. It is an act of visioning, first, an act of seeing in our mind's eyes a promised land, a beloved community, a world made whole.

And then it is an act of the will—the will to keep trying, even when we stumble and fall, and when it seems just too hard to get back up again. It is an act of the will to see through another's eyes. It is an act of the will to open ourselves to the meaning of symbols—to even know that they are symbols, so that we are not inadvertently dismissive of an "other's" deep meaning.

Communities have to do it collectively. But the work can only really happen collectively if it first happens in the hearts of individuals. In my heart, and your heart. May it be so. ■

# Keeping Columbus Day

BY GAIL GEISENHAINER, SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, AND  
MEMBER OF THE CLF BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Think back with me for a moment. How did you learn the story of Christopher Columbus? Those of us who live in North America and learned this story before say, the 1970s, most likely learned that an Italian-born man, Christopher Columbus, convinced the reigning monarchs of Spain, the ocean-going superpower of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, to fund an ocean expedition. Columbus expected to open a massively lucrative trade route to India, Japan, and China by sailing west from Spain. He intended to circumnavigate the globe and land in the gold-and spice-laden lands known as India and The East.

Perhaps we also learned that Columbus was alone in his insistence that the round world could be navigated either east or west to reach the Indies. We were told that others of the time insisted on the erroneous view that the world was flat. Columbus alone held a vision closer to the truth.

This is the beginning of one story about Columbus. But there are other ways to tell the story.

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**Let's ... take it as a sacred day of study and reflection on the practice and forms of racism.**

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Most variations agree on Columbus's Italian origins. Most concur that the Spanish monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, were reluctant to fund Columbus's venture.

Columbus first went to ask for funding from the monarchs in May, 1486. He made presentations to the monarchs for six years before they would fund his ventures. By that time, Portugal had successfully sailed down and around

the southern tip of Africa. The eastern ocean route was opening rapidly. Columbus was eager to test his theories about the round world and about the western route to wealth in the Far East.

If you learned about Columbus from your high school text books, did the authors explain that Columbus was beside himself with anticipation to reach India to bring back gold, spices and wealth from Asia? Did they explain that Columbus expected the inhabitants of India and Japan to hand gold to him simply because he was a Christian and represented the Spanish king and queen?

In 1453, the Turkish Empire had closed off the overland trade routes from Spain to the Far East. Ottomans controlled all such trade and they made huge profits inflating prices for goods sold to the Spanish. By 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella had consolidated their power through a war on the Muslim Moorish Empire of Granada. They succeeded in capturing the city in 1492, thus freeing up considerable capital with which to fund Columbus's voyages. Also in 1492, a royal decree was signed that expelled all Jews from Spain. Fresh from the war, and without Jewish capital, Spain needed gold.

The stories told about Columbus in old American history books were largely biased and false. We were taught to say that Columbus discovered America. We heard that Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on the North American continent. And we learned that Columbus, alone, knew the world was round. All three statements are false. Columbus invaded the native

peoples of various Caribbean Islands. He did not discover them. They were already there. And he never set foot in North America. Long before Christopher Columbus, Vikings, and other Europeans sailed to the land newly named "the Americas." And the Greeks, 2000 years before Columbus, taught that the earth was a sphere.

On October 12, 1492, Columbus's expedition landed on the Caribbean Island we call San Salvador. Columbus was certain that he had landed on the continent of India. Hence the term "Indian," for the native people he encountered that day.

At first contact, the native peoples, members of Arawak, Taino and Carib nations greeted the expedition warmly. They offered food, water, and presents in exchange for the glass beads and hawk's bells offered by the Spaniards. From the very beginning, Columbus demanded gold from the native people he encountered. Failure to bring the required amounts would bring death or dismemberment. Over a short time, Columbus's crews had raped, maimed, tortured and killed entire tribes, even nations, of people on the islands of the Caribbean. These brutal genocides were largely ignored in American history textbooks of earlier generations. Recent books acknowledge the devastation.

Some people would have us respond to the barbarism and grand scale evil of Columbus's avarice and wholesale disregard for the people he encountered and harmed by having us stop completely any recognition of the day of first encounter. We are told that celebrating Columbus Day is to honor and promote the racism, the brutality, the heinous mistreatment of human beings wrought by Columbus and his crew.

I respectfully disagree.

Here's what I propose. I say let's keep Columbus Day. This is not a day for parades and carnivals. Instead let's hold it high, take it as a sacred day of

study and reflection on the practice and forms of racism.

According to the Unitarian Universalist Association's *Weaving the Fabric of Diversity* curriculum:

*The U.S. Civil Rights Commission defines racism as any attitude or institutional structure that subordinates a person or group because of color. Racial prejudice is not merely personal prejudice. It is prejudice and bigotry combined with economic, political, and social power, institutionalized throughout*

**Oppression begins when we presume that the people, the traditions, practices...with which we are familiar are normative.**

*our society. Racial prejudice plus power provides racism. It is a social phenomenon designed to isolate and/or exploit others based on the belief that one group's racial or ethnic identity, physical and cultural characteristics, lifestyle and aspirations are normative, valuable, and superior to those of another group.*

Better yet, rather than just focusing on racism, let's work in the positive. Yes, we need to understand racism: how it works, how we practice it, how we unwittingly defend and foster it. But let's also advocate for such positive steps as annual Columbus Day diversity training, and multi-cultural success stories from our local communities. Let's create centers of learning to discover ways for people to encounter one another and encourage one another with respect in the presence of deep differences of culture, ethnicity, religious practice, abilities, and ways of being in the world.

History books may teach us that Columbus was a gifted navigator and an accomplished sailor. But the coordinates of his *moral* compass have not endured over time. By his example, he taught that military power and physical strength were enough to allow one culture to exploit and decimate others. Columbus judged the native peoples of the Caribbean inferior to the white, Catholic Spaniards.

In the 20th century, the walls that continued these rudimentary racist ideologies began to crumble. Activists began the work to dismantle structures of evil that allowed subjugation of human beings based on skin color. We made great and necessary progress. But the job is not over.

Racism has taken on more subtle forms. Our 21st century task is to unmask the new forms of oppression and continue to build our visions of the Beloved Community, where *all* are equal, welcome and respected.

Oppression begins when we presume that the people, the traditions, practices, cultures, food, clothing, language, laws, dances, slang, religion, music and art with which we are familiar are normative. The people who look like me, act, eat, behave like me, the ones with whom I am familiar, those people practice the right ways to act, dress, speak, eat or love. This is what Columbus brought in his very first encounters with the Arawak people. Columbus judged the Arawak people from the moment he first saw them. They were naked. His culture relied on elaborate clothing systems that indicated gender, social standing, wealth and power. He then judged the Arawak people to be inferior to him because they were different. He made no effort to understand their culture.

But Unitarian Universalism, by its very nature, stands counter to this kind of oppression, since we hold to a religious vision that declares that there is no one normative belief system, that there are

## CLF Nominating Committee Seeks Leaders

BY LYNDA BLUESTEIN,  
CLF NOMINATING COMMITTEE CHAIR

The Church of the Larger Fellowship Nominating Committee seeks CLF/CYF members to run for positions on the Board of Directors for the year beginning June 2009:

### ? Directors

(four) for three-year terms

### ? Treasurer

for a one-year term

### ? Clerk

for a one-year term

Board members set CLF policy and approve the budget. The Board meets in Boston twice annually and periodically by conference calls.

The CLF also seeks to nominate one member for the Nominating Committee, a three-year term.

The Nominating Committee nominates new Board members for election. Most of its meetings are conducted by telephone and email.



For more information, including frequently asked questions, visit [www.clfuu.org/boardofdirectors/nominating](http://www.clfuu.org/boardofdirectors/nominating). You may nominate yourself or another CLF/CYF member for any of these positions.

**Please contact the CLF office at [nominating@clfuu.org](mailto:nominating@clfuu.org) or 617-948-6166 by January 1, 2009 with your nominations. ■**

many equally valid paths to the truth. Let us grow in knowledge and depth in our Unitarian Universalist faith, which will guide us toward our visions of justice. Let's keep Columbus Day as a day of learning and hope, a day to build our vision. ■

## Days of Awe

BY BARBARA MERRITT, SENIOR MINISTER,  
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH, WORCESTER,  
MASSACHUSETTS

For obvious reasons, my organized religion “of choice” is Unitarian Universalism. I have found a spiritual home in our Association, where my skepticism, my active mind, my instinctive distrust of dogma and ritual, and my Universalist understanding of a loving, merciful God are no obstacle to an ongoing search for truth.

And yet there are times when my heart is deeply moved by the traditions of other faiths. At Christmas and Easter, it is Christian theology that speaks to me most clearly about life and death and the resurrections that are possible after betrayal and suffering. When I want to understand my relationship with the earth and its beauty, Native American traditions are most eloquent. For instruction on non-violence, I look to Buddhism. When it comes to loving God, the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism is most expressive. For a greater appreciation of acceptance and persistence, I study the Tao. And my congregation knows how fond I am of that sarcastic saint and dramatic mystic, Rumi, a Sufi Muslim.

This time of year, I wish I were a Jew. The Jewish New Year comes to the northern hemisphere in the fall, a natural time for reflection and goal setting.

The secular Western New Years’ celebration in January doesn’t help me. I fail to see how a drunken party, or a list of almost guaranteed-to-fail unrealistic resolutions, can usher in a new spirit, or a more meaningful engagement with life.

But Jews, as they move through the high holidays, through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, have a discipline of prayer, reflection and repentance. They hold out the right questions about what we have accomplished thus far with



our lives. Questions like “Have we made the most of our opportunities to serve and to comfort?” “Have we fulfilled all of our promises and obligations?” “Have we done things that we are ashamed of?” At their religious New Year, Jews are called upon “to repay, to repair, and to ask forgiveness.”

In the book *Days of Awe*, Eric Kimmel tells the Hasidic story told by Rabbi Zusya:

*When I am called to give a final account before the Heavenly Throne, I am not afraid of being asked, “Why were you not like Abraham?” for then I will answer, “Because I am not Abraham.” And if I am asked why was I not like Moses, I can answer, “Because I am not Moses.” But if I am asked, “Why were you not like Zusya?” what will I say then?*

This is an extraordinary insight. We must take responsibility for who we are; using the unique gifts and strengths we possess, and generously sharing our wealth with those in need; honestly confronting our own failings and admitting our own weakness; and

praying, if we will, to a merciful God for atonement (at-one-ment) and peace.

In one of my favorite books, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, the authors Kurtz and Ketcham write about what is involved when we “take responsibility for our own lives.” They say:

*To truly forgive means to let go of the feeling of resentment, and of the vision that underlies that feeling, the vision of self-as-victim.... Blaming others falls away. If we have been injured, we no longer experience the injury as a barrier to relationship. (How can we expect anyone else to be perfect if we ourselves are imperfect?) Spirituality’s mutuality holds true here as everywhere; we are forgiven only if we are open to forgiving.*

You may not be hearing the *shofar* in the weeks ahead, but as we Unitarian Universalists start up our own new year as a religious community, we would do well to take in some of the spirit that is moving in neighboring synagogues. It is a good way to begin the year, to take the awesome responsibility to be who we were meant to be. I know no better way to encourage that process than with the spiritual disciplines of forgiveness and prayer, and the practice of compassion toward others. ■

### Search the *Quest* Archives

You can use the *Quest* archives to help you find UU sermons, articles, and other worship resources. Here’s how:

1. Go to the CLF website: [www.clfuu.org](http://www.clfuu.org)
2. From the left side of the home page, click on the tab labeled “Publications”
3. Click on the word “*Quest*”
4. Once on the *Quest* page, click on the word “archives”
5. On the right side of this page there is a search field. Leave the word “*Quest*” in the search field, and add your topic. For instance, if you wanted material on Yom Kippur, it would look like: “*Quest*, Yom Kippur”

Voila—material for you to read! ■



## From Your Minister

BY JANE RZEPKA,  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE LARGER  
FELLOWSHIP

Two hundred years ago, during a spirited debate in Europe, the Academy of Lyons offered a prize of 1,200 francs for the best essay on the topic: “Was the discovery of America a blessing or a curse?” A blessing or a curse for *them*, of course.

The topic, if not the contest, was popular, and scientists and philosophers came to one conclusion: Columbus’s conquest of the New World had been the greatest of all misfortunes. They noted that the reptiles and insects in the New World were very large, and the quadrupeds small, and the people cold. They told the world that the Americas were a dank and gloomy land where no birds sing and no dogs bark, a place “so ill-favored by nature that all it contains is either degenerate or monstrous.”

Centuries later, though the theory of American biological inferiority has long been relegated to the past, the cursedness, the greatest of all misfortunes, remains—now from the perspective of the indigenous peoples and their allies.

Here’s what I wish I could do: I wish I could write about the positive side of Christopher Columbus’s contribution to history, and then mention the drawbacks. Nice and balanced. But friends, there is no balancing—those days have been over for decades.

Historians now agree that Columbus was motivated simply by greed, not by the sense of adventure, or a commitment to exploration, or the desire for challenge. In advance of his trip he demanded ten percent of all the wealth that would ever be discovered for himself and his descendents in perpetuity, he demanded the titles “Viceroy” and

“Admiral of the Ocean Sea,”—a hereditary title—and he would be governor of all new territories. Then, off he went, with outdated, inaccurate navigational calculations, to sail the ocean blue. In the course of four trips he reached the Bahamas (though nobody knows quite where), the Greater Antilles, the South American land-mass, and Central America, believing to his death that he had reached Asia. It was all so confusing that at one point, flawed stargazing led him to decide that he had sailed uphill—so says Tony Horwitz in *A Voyage Long and Strange*.

We all know that Columbus showed up on the doorsteps of established homelands and ancient civilizations. As many as eighty million people lived in the Americas at the time. According to *Rethinking America*, Columbus describes one group he encounters this way: “They are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves. ...I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them....” So far so good.

But then the horror of this history begins. In *Columbus: His Enterprise*, we read, “With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

And that’s what he did. Christopher Columbus initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In 1495, on his second of the four trips, he rounded up 1,500 native people and imprisoned them in pens, guarded by men and dogs. He took the “best” 500 and loaded them aboard ship. Two hundred died, three hundred arrived at the auction block in Seville. He wrote, “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.” Though he later changed his focus from slavery to gold, reading about Colum-



bus includes pages and pages of graphic brutality.

In 1992, people around the world planned to celebrate the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee. Fireworks. Special Exhibits. Documentaries. Souvenirs. Tall ships. It would be grand. But in the face of the up-coming celebration, we all began to confront the truth about the guest of honor. Celebration gave way to repentance and reflection.

So it was, almost two decades ago, that many began to ask the religious questions in earnest. How can we combat racism in the histories we tell? How can we promote justice for indigenous people everywhere? How can we learn the rhythms of the planet and live in harmony? Where does greed get us? How will we use our power? If we are to celebrate, we can begin by celebrating the continued asking of these questions.

Back in 1991, my colleague David Rankin wrote, “I know...it is difficult to swallow. Inside, I want to resist the message. I want to refuse the changed perspective. I want to keep the heroes. A small voice pleads: ‘Why not shoot off the fireworks? Why not enjoy the party? What is wrong with pretending?’” And then he goes on to say that there is no pretending. No running away. “I must revise myself, my own mentality, in order for the cycle to end. Crushing our idols is not an easy task.”

We are what we celebrate, and genocide, brutality, elitism, and greed are not on the list.

But there is a progress in naming and facing the truth.

May we know that progress.

There is honor in telling the untold story.

May we know that honor.

There is hope in claiming a new vision.

May we know that hope. ■

October 2008

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

How do you wake up in the morning? Do you use an alarm clock? Does someone come in and wake you up? Do you just pop up wide awake all on your own? My daughter uses an alarm clock to wake up for school, but then she slithers out of bed and just lies there on the floor until the dog sits on her and licks her face until she can't breathe. That kind of jump-starts her brain and gets her up and moving for the day.

Waking up is a daily activity (or, for some people, a daily chore), but it's also a spiritual practice. One of the important teachings of many religious traditions is that being truly awake means more than just having our eyes open. We should be fully aware, alive to the present moment, awake in our spirits as well as our bodies. There is a type of Buddhist meditation in which people sit in silence, but every now and again the leader loudly whacks together two wooden blocks. The startling "whack!" in the silence is a reminder to those doing the meditation that they should wake up, that they should let go of whatever thoughts might be running around their heads and come back to being fully present, spiritually awake.

This time of year the Jewish tradition offers another way to wake up the faithful. On Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, there is a special wake up call during the religious



services. A person called the *Tokea*, which means the "blaster" in Hebrew, blows on a special

kind of trumpet called the *shofar*. The *shofar* is made out of a hollowed-out horn from a male sheep or goat. (Or, if you're getting fancy, the long, twisty horn of a kudu. But if you can't do a kudu anything you can do will do. Except a cow. No cows.)

Where was I? Oh, right, the *shofar*. On Rosh Hashana the *Tokea* blows 100 blasts of the *shofar*, in a particular series of short and long notes. (You can hear the sound of the *shofar* online by doing a Web search of "shofar audio.") Jewish tradition says that the reason the *shofar* is played at the New Year is to wake everyone up, to rouse people from their slumbers. Now, although the Rosh Hashana service

keeping us from being our best selves and by trying to fix those things. The Yom Kippur service is full of prayers asking for forgiveness, covering all the bases of what anybody in the congregation might have done to hurt or offend someone else. And then, at the very end of the Yom Kippur service, the *shofar* sounds again.

Why? Why have a wake-up call after the Book of Life is closed, after you've already finished the test and handed it in? Well, there's all the rest of the year left. It's never too early to start remembering to be awake to your best self.



Waking up is a daily activity (or, for some people, a daily chore), but it's also a spiritual practice.

can be long, the rabbis of old weren't talking about literally waking people up who fell asleep during the service. Like the wooden blocks in the Buddhist meditation, the job of the *shofar* is to remind people to pay attention, to look lively, because something important is coming.

What's coming? Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur, Jewish tradition says, is the day when God closes the Book of Life which was opened at Rosh Hashana. The ten days in between, the Days of Awe, or Days of Turning, are your chance to have an effect on what is written about you, in hope that you will have a good year to come. So those ten days are a time to apologize for things you've done wrong, make peace with friends and family and generally make sure that your life is on the right track. We "wake up" to our spirits by taking a good look at what might be

So even if you're not going to be hearing the *shofar* sound in the synagogue, why not think of this month as the time to wake up to the year? In what ways have you just been stumbling your way through, not caring about things that matter? Have you been doing your best to care for the environment? Do you really listen to your friends when they talk, or is your mind actually on what you want to say next? Do you remember to thank the people who do a lot for you (like—ahem—your parents)? Do you always follow through when you say you will do something?

The list of questions could go on and on, but the idea is the same for all of them. How do I wake up to the ways that I do or don't live up to my best self? How do I stay awake, and keep trying?

Maybe if you do wake up to an alarm clock, you can imagine that beeping of your clock is actually the blast of the *shofar*, calling you to be truly and fully awake as you open your eyes to the new day.

*L'shanah tova!* May you have a good year! ■



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## A Kol Nidrei

Let's set it all down, you and me.  
The disappointments.  
Little and large.  
The frustrations.  
Let's open our fists and drop them.  
The useless waiting.  
The obsession with what we cannot have.  
The focus on foolish things.  
The pin-wheeling worry which wears us out.  
The fretting.  
Let's throw them down.  
The comparisons of ourselves with others.  
The competition, as if Domination  
was the best name we could give to God.  
The cynical assumptions.  
The unspoken, shelved anger.  
Let's toss them.  
The inarticulate suspicions.  
The self-doubt.  
The pre-emptive self-dumping.  
The numbing bouts of self-pity.  
Let's sink them all like stones.  
Like stones in the pool of this gift of silence.  
Let's drop them like hot rocks  
into the cool silence.



And when they're gone,  
let's lay back gently, and float,  
float on the calm surface of the silence.  
Let's be supported in this still cradle  
of the world, new-born, ready for anything.

by **Mark Belletini**, senior minister, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, Ohio. From the 2008 meditation manual *Sonata for Voice and Silence*, published by Skinner House and available from the UUA bookstore ([www.uua.org/bookstore](http://www.uua.org/bookstore) or 800-215-9076) or through the CLF Library ([www.clfuu.org/library](http://www.clfuu.org/library) or 617-948-6150). ■



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