

## Still Shall I Know You, My Beloved

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*Daona Nayeesh.* I'm glad we sang this hymn. I'm glad we chose not to avoid singing it, simply because it might be new to us—strange sounds, different rhythms than we may be used to. To sing a new hymn is to go against the grain of our comfort zones; it can bring us to a kind of trembling—yes, perhaps a trembling of some discomfort or embarrassment, but deeper than that, beyond that, a trembling that leads to greater connection, compassion. To sing in a language not our own, in a melody unfamiliar, “Let us live in peace, let us live in inner peace,” is to be vulnerable enough and yet disciplined enough to allow ourselves to be transformed.

And that is what I hope we experience in *all* aspects of our worship on Sunday mornings. The word *worship* meaning essentially “to hold as worthy,” this time together is an opportunity to ask ourselves what it is we truly want to hold as worthy in our lives, to ask how we want to help our children to discover what they hold as worthy, and so be transformed.

But if briefly singing one new song, or spending one hour of worship together can be transformative, think about the kind of transformation the Jewish high holy days of Yamim Nora'im can bring. Beginning with the “head of the year,” or new year, Rosh Hashanah, and ending with the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, these ten days include deep reflection, a day of fasting, and finally they include asking for forgiveness for any wrongdoings of the past year.

Or think about the entire Muslim month of Ramadan and its potential for transformation. In his essay, “Ramadan, Counterculture, and Soul,” the American Muslim writer Ibrahim Abusharif says of Ramadan fasting, “In contemporary terms, [it] is a countercultural movement that confronts an ethos that tries to cancel the interior of religion and discount the importance of rituals in human life.”

Both Yamim Nora'im and Ramadan call people to step out from their busy lives for a time, and to slow down, to reflect, to *pray*, essentially, “sovereign of all mercies, inscribe us on the pages of life...” “Let us live in peace, let us live in inner peace.”

Unitarian Universalists, admittedly, don't formally have such extended holy days reserved for prayer, meditation, and reflection. Some of us may feel pretty good if we just manage to get to church more than, say, three Sundays in a row. But whatever form it may take, however often it occurs, we need significant ritual, significant times out from the canceling, discounting ethos our society too often offers us, in order that

we might transform both ourselves and that very society. For me, some of the most valuable such times I've experienced have been journeys of witness—journeys to people and places in need, so that I can listen, see, serve, then return to my own home carrying and sharing their story.

And so it is that later this week, I will journey to a small town in Louisiana. In the town of Jena, among many, many others, I will stand witness to a miscarriage of justice, in hopes that our presence will help lead to a *redemption* of justice. Perhaps you've heard of the story, as it still continues to unfold. Perhaps too you've heard of a group of young men now known as the "Jena Six."

Let me fill you in on some of the details, if you haven't heard them already: Jena is a town of about 3,000 people. Eighty-five percent of that population is white, with African Americans making up about 12% of the population. Now, tradition has it that at the one high school in Jena, all the white kids gather under a big shade tree, while the black kids congregate elsewhere. Witnessing this phenomenon at the beginning of the new, 06-07 school year, an African American student new to the school asked the principal if black students were actually even allowed to gather under the tree. The principal said he could go wherever he wanted, and so the youth and some friends later proceeded to make their way to the tree. The next morning, there were three nooses hanging from the tree.

While the principal advocated that the three white students guilty of this act be expelled, the school board overturned his ruling, labeling the gesture a harmless, schoolyard "prank," and gave the students a three-day in-school suspension. The *suspension* was brief, but the tension in the community began to build. First there was a silent protest by black students under the tree, which got the school administrators nervous enough to call a school assembly. There, District Attorney Reed Walters showed up and, according to several reports, "warned the students he could be their friend or their worst enemy." "With one stroke of my pen," he said, "I can make your life disappear."

Though most white people in the community brushed the D.A.'s comments off as simply a quieting tactic for chattering students in the assembly, black students felt he had been talking straight to them as he spoke those words. Black people in the Jena community in general felt that the nooses, and the lack of concern about them by the majority of the white community, said to black people, in the words of African American Jena resident Cleveland Riser, "We want you to remember, we're in control and you're not." It was as if this country's past but centuries' long history of racially, and *racistly* fuelled lynchings of African American people was still being held as a trump card. It was as if District Attorney Walters was taking, or mistaking, himself and his authority to be the authority of the God of the Hebrew people. If Yahweh can inscribe people in the book of life, why wouldn't he also have the power to simply scratch them out of it?

Not surprisingly, rather than calm and reconciliation, what developed was fear and intimidation. In the fall, arson struck the high school, with no answers to who did it. When some black students tried to attend a mostly white party later toward winter, one black student was beaten and threatened with a gun. When a white student bragged about the incident the next day at school, six black students, according to witnesses, cornered him and beat him up. He was taken to the hospital for outpatient treatment, released three hours later, and headed off to a church party that night. His own pastor stated in a later interview that the young man looked that night like he'd been in a "school fight," but not much more.

While I don't condone the six black students' alleged physical attack on this one young white man, or anyone physically attacking anyone, I certainly do not condone, either, the fact that that same District Attorney who had claimed he could make people's lives disappear, upgraded the initial charges against the six black students from aggravated assault to attempted murder. Nor do I condone the court-appointed defense attorney of Mychal Bell, the first student to go on trial, making no case for the defense and calling no witnesses in front of an all-white jury. Though charges against Bell have since been lowered back down to battery and as recently as yesterday were actually dropped by an appellate judge, I still plan to join others in Jena this Thursday, when Bell, being tried as an adult, had been scheduled for sentencing of up to fifteen years in prison.

Why go when it looks like justice is indeed on the way to being redeemed? On a practical level, the fact is that District Attorney Walters still has the option of refiling the charges against the Jena Six, in a juvenile court. On a religious level, Ibrahim Abusharif states that religion has "always sought to help us remember, not something new, but what we all know intuitively. In each of us there is this soul." But, Abusharif says, "in the tumble of a crowded life, we are prone to silence or ignore" it. As I've learned about the Jena Six, I've felt my soul wanting to uphold the Unitarian Universalist principle of "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." To show up in Jena with people of all faiths is to refuse to be lost in the "tumble of a crowded life." It is to show our support for justice, and to say, we are all here to inscribe *each other* on the pages of life. For now are the days of Yamim Nora'im, a new year; a time for prayer and atonement.

Now, I've been warned by a colleague that it may be a long, hot day that day. The rally begins at about 7:00 am with prayers and ends in the late afternoon. We may get a little sun-baked, we may get thirsty. Maybe some of you who've been attending the Austin City Limits Festival can relate. But Ramadan literally means, *dryness; to be scorched*. While I'll only stand out in the Louisiana sun for one day, Muslim people spend an entire month, refraining from food or water, from sunrise to sunset, in order to answer with integrity the question Ibrahim Abusharif frames as, "what aspect of our

humanity do we devote ourselves to?"

I'm guessing that spending one day in Jena, Louisiana, won't be enough to show my humanity's devotion to the Unitarian Universalist principle of "equity, justice, and compassion in human relations." In fact, knowing the history of racism in this country, no matter how far we've come since the days when our own Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb, among many others, was murdered for his anti-racism work, I'm guessing that even if I devoted the rest of my life to this work, we'd still have a long, long way to go. But I think of the words of the poet, Hafiz: "Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you, my Beloved. Veil yourself with every enchantment and yet I shall feel you, presence most dear, close and intimate." This Beloved presence is, I believe, the soul within each of us—that which I sometimes think of as our internal flaming chalice. This chalice reminds me that I have the religious calling to listen, to see, to serve, and to carry the stories back home. For as Saadi said, "To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.... If fate brings suffering to one member, the others cannot stay at rest."

So, though both Yamim Nora'im and Ramadan call for rest, it is the rest of reflection—reflection that, when called for, leads to atonement, and ultimately, to reconciliation. Though we have a long, long way to go, may we, together, work and walk toward reconciliation. May ours be no caravan of despair, but instead a shared journey of equity, justice, and compassion. Let us live in peace, let us live in inner peace.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.