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Listen and turn.

Allowing Room

Weeks after the on-line course ended, one of the students wrote out to the whole class. Over the course of several months, having worked together intensely every Monday night from 6-10 p.m., they had come to know each other well. The others had apparently moved on with their lives, another course requirement behind them. But this student—his Monday evenings wide open now—found himself carrying a burden. Uneasy, he reflected on the class experience and felt remorse about it. In this time now available to him, he realized he had to address it, and he wrote a long email to the group.

For each classmate, he had warm, detailed words of appreciation, words he'd not voiced before. He apologized, too, both to individuals and to the group, for things he had said during their time together. He owned up to being disruptive and negative during class discussions, repeatedly unloading his emotions in an unhealthy way. He said he was sorry that, while his unbridled self-expression had felt cathartic at the time, he had crossed a boundary and abused his classmates' good will. He asked for their forgiveness.

How often do *we* take the time to consider the effect we have on the people around us? How often do we do something about it? That takes living our life on purpose. And it takes courage.

This story brings to mind the 12-step approach to addiction. Many of us know people—or *are* people—for whom a 12-step program like AA or Al-Anon has been hugely helpful, if not life-saving. That student's listing out of all the things he regretted doing sounded like 12-step work on relationships. Whether you're someone with an addiction or a friend or family member of an addict, early in the program you make a written list of all persons you have harmed. Over time, this becomes a primary focus. Contacting those persons and making amends is part of the process. Each time you spiral up and through "moral inventory" concept, the work deepens.

The goal is to be able to address your actions swiftly and skillfully so that you are free of a lifetime of resentments, no longer harboring remorse over what you've done and what's been done to you by others.

We all mess up. All day long. And even though we believe in the worth and dignity of every person (our first principle), even though we think not in terms of original sin but *original blessing*, we mess up with stunning regularity.

Have you ever noticed that, when time opens up and we can take a breath, we see our familiar bad habits with terrible clarity? We can catch ourselves in the act of overdoing it on the Internet or watching too much stuff. Or we see how we crave food and drink in ways we don't like. Most troubling, over and over again we watch ourselves miss the mark with each other. How easily we slip into judging or ignoring or picking on each other. How dismayed we feel afterward.

But when we can catch ourselves not at our very best and feel into our remorse, we have a choice. We can continue on the same path, now with an added burden of regret, or we can choose freedom from that burden. We can turn in a different direction, toward taking better care of ourselves, taking better care of each other, taking better care with this finite time we've been given.

Most world religions set aside a time during the year for formal repentance and atonement. This time calls for deep reflection and, more often than not, a turning toward a higher power for forgiveness. For Jews, that time of year is in the fall at Yom Kippur, which means "Day of Atonement." For Christians, repenting and turning toward a new direction is the essence of Lent, the forty days that lead to Easter.

Now it may be my Episcopal upbringing or my enjoyment of the *New Yorker*, but the word "repentance" brings up a cartoon of a man in rags carrying a sign that says, "Repent Now or Else!" If you go on line, such signs aren't all cartoons. "It's Not Too Late," says one, followed by "REPENTANCE!" Or "Repent: Allah Loves Those Who Turn to Him." There's also "Repent Now and Avoid the Judgment Day Rush!"

Despite our baggage around sin, remorse and forgiveness, repenting is not a bad thing for us UU's. When any of us looks back at things we've said or thought or done and considers what *could* have been, it's clear there's always work to be done when it comes to bringing our best selves to the table.

We need to remember, before saying, "No, thanks" to repentance, that repenting is about hope. Hope for change. Dover's Episcopal Rev. Gail Avery writes in her spring newsletter, "The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*—literally meaning 'a turning around, a change in direction....' I happen to love Lent for this very reason [, she says]. It calls us to change directions—refocusing our lives on what matters in ways that...transform us...."¹

My spouse, a devoted Episcopalian, observes Lent and takes seriously the ritual of giving up something every year. Last year he knocked it out of the park in my opinion, giving up not one but two things. One was Facebook—hours of flipping through the stories, pictures and meals from other peoples' lives. (I know, a lot of it is wonderful and binding. I gather that a fair amount of it can also be repetitive, opinionated, political and not reliably soul-nurturing. It's a mix, right?

But giving up Facebook made sense for John—it would open up his time, and it turns out he didn't miss it. But he also gave up something rather edgy—he gave up sarcasm. That came as a surprise, as this mild-mannered man doesn't impress our friends, or me, as a snarky fellow. But *he* chose to work on sarcasm, which I respect. If you could take on one squirrely aspect of how you relate to people—and work on it for six weeks—what might *you* choose?

¹ Gail Avery, St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, "The Bridge" newsletter, Spring 2017, Dover, NH at http://stdover.org/uploads/3/4/4/8/34488317/mar_2017-may_2017__1_.pdf

My favorite take on Lent comes from a theology professor at Andover Newton, Mary Luti. She poked fun at the American way of doing things—how we like to be doing, want to be productive and rarely stop. Luti observed that even at Lent, when you're supposed to give something up, many Americans choose instead to do more! They volunteer at the nursing home. Tutor. Serve meals at the local soup kitchen.

“No!” the professor said. When you take something away—remove it from your life—a hole remains where was. A hole of time that you once filled with something you rather liked. It's no longer there, and in its place remains an emptiness...or an openness!

Don't rush to fill it, she said. To the contrary, open yourself to that space. Open yourself to possibility. A minister of the United Church of Christ, Luti saw “giving something up for Lent” as a way of making room—allowing room for what she understands as the Holy Spirit.

I want to make room for those of us here who experience the divine in this way, who listen for God. At the same time, a humanist or an atheist here might agree that, by removing something we enjoy for a while, we make room for possibility. For mystery. We make room to listen.

That's what happened to the student in the on-line course. When it ended, he was given a slice of time Monday nights—room in his schedule and in his mind, that led him to reflect and listen. We can't know what brought about his change of heart and inspired him to turn toward his classmates the way he did. Call it grace.

We struggle when remorse weighs us down, when we can't shake our regret about something we've gotten wrong. We can't see our way forward, and we can't force the answer to come. We wait for clarity, living in the uncomfortable present.

We might call this a time of listening. Of alertness. Until there comes a turning, an impulse to move again. “Where” may not be clear, but can we trust the unfolding? Can we trust the whisper of something that we hadn't heard before?

None other than the great Unitarian Pete Seeger took the third chapter of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes and, word-for-word, turned it into a beloved song. “There is a season,” he sang, to turn, turn, turn....

Let us open to turning. We owe ourselves and each other a periodic review of our words, thoughts and deeds. Whether we call it repentance or growth, let us give ourselves the gift of carving out time for listening. Of heeding our 4th principle that affirms a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It doesn't mandate when or how. That's up to us.

May we look at ourselves honestly and with compassion. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Every human interaction offers you the chance to make things better or to make things worse.” When we have made things worse—and we're so good at that!—we feel the burden at once. We wish we had done better. We want to do better. We want to feel better.

Listen! What habit, what discretionary activity might you take out of your days for a while to make room for listening?

We close with these words from UU Rev. Leslie Takahashi:

We return again and again to the season of forgiveness
and each time we come, we come bearing gifts—
a grudge to relinquish, a hatred to extinguish,
a [distorted] hope...a glancing word that has wounded.

Each time we walk the road towards forgiveness, we mutter that we have been here before.

When will we remember that forgiveness is not so much an act as an attitude, not so much a duty as a love we give ourselves as part of the every-unfolding new beginning?²

Please sing with me:

To every thing turn, turn, turn.
There is a season turn, turn, turn,
And a time to every purpose, under heaven
A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep....³

So may it be.

² Leslie Takahashi, from the “Grace” chapter of *Lifting Our Voices*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2015.

³ Pete Seeger, “Turn! Turn! Turn!”, late 1950s.