

The Echo of the Last Thing Said  
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October 9, 2005

I am sure that the earth must be trembling—not only from the slipping of its tectonic plates but from the overwhelming human emotion of loss that is washing over it. From the quake site near Islamabad in Pakistan, to the floods of New Orleans, to the bombings in Bali and daily bombings in Iraq, so many human lives have been extinguished without warning.

I find myself imagining a multitude of souls, both those of the living and those of the dead, crying out for each other from the two sides of the impenetrable barrier of death, unable to communicate, unable to hear the thoughts of their loved ones. All they will have is the echo of the last exchange, the last communication they shared with their beloved, their parent, their child, their sibling or friend, before the cataclysm hit, before the breach opened and swallowed all those lives.

In months following the attacks of 9/11, a documentary was produced by Nightline called "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." The filmmakers interviewed family members of victims, people who managed to get out of the towers before they collapsed, firemen who had lost dozens of friends, and clergy who were providing spiritual care to the grieving, in their congregations and at the ground zero site itself as emergency workers searched the smoking rubble for survivors and remains. The experience of such cataclysmic horror raised ultimate questions for everyone, irrevocably changing or shattering many people's faith and belief in God and humanity.

As I watched this film, one of the most poignant moments for me was during an interview with the Rabbi Irwin Kula. He had acquired transcripts of final cell phone calls and recorded messages made by people in the towers and planes to their loved ones shortly before their deaths. He put these texts to a simple melody in the style of Hebrew prayer, and sang them in the film. He tells the interviewer that he chants these songs every morning as part of his prayers, because he considers these profoundly simple and real communications to be as sacred texts.

Hey, Jules, it's Brian.  
I'm on the plane and it's hijacked and it doesn't look good.  
I just wanted to let you know  
that I love you, and I hope to see you again.

Mommy, the building is on fire.  
There's smoke coming through the walls. I can't breathe.  
I love you Mommy...goodbye.

Ronny, something terrible is happening.  
I don't think I'm going to make it.  
I love you. Take care of the children.

Martin Buber, the 20th century Jewish philosopher, is best known for his idea of the I-Thou relationship. As opposed to the I-It relationship, which is conditional, in which the other being is seen as a means to some end, the I-Thou relationship is total naked of preconceptions, conditions, or expectations.

Buber writes:

The relationship of I-Thou is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and Thou, no prior knowledge and no fantasy; memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularities into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and Thou, no greed or anticipation, and longing itself is changed as it plunges from dream into revelation. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated can real encounter occur. Before the immediacy of relationship everything mediate becomes negligible.

It seems to me that "I-Thou" is what we hear in these last words of love: They express the absolute immediacy of relationship, a pure recognition of the other person's being and significance.

These last words, all last words, leave an echo that will quiver through the remaining years of the lives of those who received them. After 9/11 we all recognized this with sudden urgency, and made renewed efforts to connect with those we love.

On the cover of our leaflet today is a cartoon. We see what seems to be a married couple driving in their car. The woman says angrily, "Did too!" The caption below reads "THE LAST SECOND OF THE UNIVERSE." Caught in her "tempest in a teacup," she doesn't realize that all life is about to be extinguished and that her self-righteous determination to be right and make her husband wrong over some petty issue will be the last echo of her life.

I use this device to set myself straight when I'm caught up in some trip, when I'm having trouble getting to openheartedness. Whether I'm tangled in negativity, or clinging to anger, or frozen by guilt, or when I've had some kind of heated disagreement with someone and I'm self-righteously attached to being right. And now I'm in even more pain, because I'm alienated from myself and from someone I love.

So when this happens, the most effective thing I have found to enable me to let go of that alienation and turn back to the relationship is to ask myself where I would want to be with that person, and with myself, if one or the other of us were about to die. What last thing would need to be said or done?

This may seem like a rather morbid way to think, but, believe me, it's a very potent way of distinguishing between what is real and what is false, between what is surface and what is deep, between what must be saved and what must be released. It clears away the debris and brings into focus what is really needed.

Sometimes this process can reveal to us that a hard truth must be spoken or confronted before reconciliation can begin. We aren't always led immediately to "I love you! I forgive you!"

Or sometimes it tells us that a relationship does not merit the energy we have given it. We must value our own life and integrity more fully, and not spend it pointlessly on another person with whom we cannot ever be reconciled or fulfilled.

Some of us have been so wounded by another, have been treated so grossly as an "it" by another as a means to their own end, that there seems to be no possibility of ever approaching I-Thou. So what needs to be saved is our own wholeness, and what needs to be released is any sense of responsibility to that relationship. Perhaps all we can do is give that one over into the hands of the Universal Spirit. But this is a matter of deepest personal conscience.

All of these motions of the heart are forms of teshuva, a Hebrew term that means turning or re-turning to the real. This is the central spiritual work that our brothers and sisters in Jewish communities are doing during their High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are taking place right now between Oct 3 and Oct 12.

Teshuvah, which is often translated as "repentance," actually means turning back towards a relationship—whether with God or with another person or even with one's own true self—particularly after that relationship has been damaged or broken. By reorienting our lives to love and to truth, by bringing ourselves back into right relationship, our own lives and the life of the community are renewed for the next year.

To use the metaphor from the Hasidic story we heard earlier, any gesture of teshuva helps us to realign "the stick with the current," realigning our souls with the flow and vitality of the Source of Life. To be "with the current" of life is to "be current" with our relationships, without issues dangling, business unfinished, words unsaid, or hurts unhealed. When we do not have unresolved business weighing us down, there is a sense of ease in the heart.

I think the little girl in the story may be right in a way: I think we can see when someone has done teshuva or not. There often is some lightness of carriage, some openness of countenance, some vitality in the one who is current with his or her relationships. Have we recently said, "I love you" to those we love, and really meant it?

In teshuva, turning includes both "repentance" and "forgiveness." Both are equally important. In the story, the people of the synagogue both express their remorse and seek forgiveness. Their gesture of the apology and the baker's willingness to forgive together make relationships whole, renew their hearts, and release them all from the past so that they can begin anew.

And so with this understanding—that turning means both recognizing error and forgiving it—we will now join together in a sung prayer. This is a prayer of releasing—releasing ourselves and each other from the stones which obstruct us and keep us from flowing with life. Based on a responsive reading by UU minister Rob Eller-Isaacs, it has been adapted to our service today. Mary Ann Millsap will read the spoken lines, and together we will sing in response, "We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love."

For remaining silent when a single word could have made a difference ... for the important things that we have left unsaid ... for the truths unnamed ...

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For the things we should not have said that weigh upon our memory... the times we have struck out in anger without just cause...

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For the times when our fear made us rigid and inaccessible ... for the things we are not yet willing to feel ... for the places in our hearts that we are not yet able to open...

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For the times when our own wants and needs have blinded us to the needs of others ...

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For the times we have not heeded the promptings of the Spirit ... or have lost sight of what we most deeply value ... For the times we have abandoned our own truth and integrity ...

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For these and other acts, both evident and subtle, which separate us from ourselves and others,

We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

That we may be strong and whole and undivided,  
That joy may enliven us,  
That peace, healing, and truth  
may follow us through our days ...

Let us find forgiveness for our human shortcomings,  
and those of others,  
and turn again toward life  
with love.

May it be so. Amen.