

## **Called Back**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

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When James and I got married and joined our names together in the book of life, we promised in our vows that we would always continue to challenge one another and accept challenges from one another. It was an expression of our hope that we would continue to call out the best from one another -- the tired but true sentiment "You make me want to be a better person."

But it didn't take long for us each to figure out what a powerful promise we had extracted from one another.

"I challenge you to climb this mountain with me," one spouse would say to the other spouse, who is mildly afraid of heights and less physically fit (though I shall not name names!)

"I challenge you to sing karaoke with me," one spouse would say to the other, slightly tone-deaf spouse.

"I challenge you to clean the bathroom," one spouse would say to the other, more slovenly spouse (though I'm actually not sure which of us that would be).

It didn't take me long to break my vow. It was a cold, grey morning on our honeymoon in the Pacific Northwest. We were in a beautiful seaside town on the Oregon coast, and James was excited about taking a surfing lesson in the cold, cold northern Pacific.

We had surfed together once before, in warm island waters, and I didn't love it, even then. I couldn't get the hang of it, while James was hanging ten like a pro, whatever that means.

At that first lesson in Puerto Rico, our instructor tried to get me to relax, but still use a hundred different muscles to spring up at exactly the right time. First I was too tense, then I was too loose. And always I gripped the board too hard with my fingers.

She kept saying "Don't try so hard, man." To which I replied, "Story of my life, dude"

And so I proceeded to try really hard not to try so hard. To no avail. I knew there was a spiritual lesson there about striving and failing. But really, it was just frustrating.

And so, on this particular morning in Oregon, when James asked me to surf with him, I politely declined.

So he pulled out his big guns, straight from our five day-old vows. "I challenge you," he said.

And I said "Nope." It was cold, and, as I think I have adequately described, I am really bad at surfing.

So James surfed, and I sat in the sand and watched.

And I regretted it. I regretted failing to meet a challenge so soon. I regretted missing out on fun and adventure because of my fears of my own shortcomings.

James had a blast surfing that day, and he forgave me immediately for rejecting his challenge. It was a small thing; not even close to a make or break moment for either of us; but my own regret was a more complicated thing, and harder to let go of. I clutched it too hard with my fingers, like the surfboard years before, and in a way, that day of our honeymoon was lost to me.

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We are each born with innate promise – a vow to the universe enters the world with each of us - a vow of love and conscience and possibility that is written into our very being.

And it doesn't take long for us to break that promise. Acting with hate or fear, compromising our values. We fail to live up to who we could be every single day. And "have we all not wounded ourselves and battered those we love?"

Of course we all have. The furies are there.

Yom Kippur comes along with the Jewish New Year, every year, with a call to atonement, because along with death and taxes in the ranks of the inevitable is the fact that we will always stray down paths that take us away from our promises and away from ourselves. As Jewish theologian Martin Buber has put it, we are "promise-making, promise-breaking animals"

But he reminds us, and atonement practices during the Jewish High Holidays remind us as well, that we are also "promise-renewing animals." Almost always we find our way back again. Or perhaps better stated, we are called back – called by conscience, by God or the Universe, by one another. As many times as we have failed, have we "not also surprised [ourselves] with sudden motions of goodness?" The angels are there too.

As May Sarton says: "While we dance, we dance, trying to keep a balance, to be

perfectly human. Able to bless and forgive Ourselves. This is what is asked of us.”

During the high holidays Jews are asked to reflect upon the dark side of their year - every slight and wrong, every fury, every regret. Then they are able to make reparation, ask for forgiveness, and in the end, ritually, to let it all go and step into the light of a new year.

With every failing and every regret, we may bathe in a river of compassion and tears, only to emerge cleansed – called back to the promise at our core. Year after year, we are blessed and forgiven.

For me, this balance of forgiveness and blessing is where the ideas of vocation and grace can meet. We have vocation as the calling to our best selves - the calling forth of all the blessings we have to give and all the good we can embody. At the same time, we have grace as the compassionate voice saying that we are enough, just as we are.

The sweet spot – the place where we can find our balance and ride the wave – is the spot where aspiration meets contentment, and comfort meets challenge.

It’s a paradox on the scale of trying hard not to try so hard. But there it is.

We are enough, yet still compelled to strive. We try like hell to keep the balance and stay upright *and* we hold faith that we will be caught when we fall.

This tension is not limited to *our* faith, but it’s interesting how it has played out in our history. The old joke goes “Universalists believed God was too good to damn people, while Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned.” And therein lies both sides of the tension. Our Unitarian forbears spoke of the moral perfectibility of humankind – that humans are gifted and full of promise. At the same time, our Universalist ancestors spoke of the universal, inclusive, and forgiving love of God – that grace prevails and we are loved, even in our failings.

And so it is that we strive to become all we can be... by learning ourselves to be enough as we are. It’s so confusing! Like trying to surf, relaxed and powerful, all at once.

And I guess that’s the point. That life is nothing if not full and confusing and complex.

But however each of us is called, we are all called into the fullness of life.

And in the face of life’s complexity and our own limits, the trick will not be simply to try harder and persevere. The trick will be staying with the tension. In doing so, we answer our first and deepest calling – to take life whole: the joys and the sorrows, the successes and the regrets, the angels and the furies - and to know that we are written in the book of life, no matter what.

Rabbi Hammer reminds us, “The Book of Life, which is the web of life, is our birthright

and our destiny [and] we only need to know we are written in its pages.” “No one can erase us from the Book.”

There is never an end to growth and peril, but there is grace.

Most often, it is that reality to which we need be called back - the belief that we can try and fail, hurt and heal - and that still there is grace.

Too often we fear that our trials, failures, and regrets will remove us from life and its meaning. And so we avoid getting in the water, preferring to sit in the sand and watch. We are unwilling to take the chance that we will fail and fall, unwilling to test out that net of compassion and love in which we profess to believe.

But we cannot shut ourselves off from the dark days of life without shading out much of the light as well.

Social Work research professor Brené Brown has written and spoken about this fact at length. (incidentally, if you are a TED talk fan, I recommend hers to you highly.)

She has said: “You cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say, here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these. I'm going to have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. I don't want to feel these.

You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. So when we numb those [hard feelings], we [also] numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle.”

We must each break that cycle. We cannot answer the call to our promise without opening our arms wide to life's fullness. We each have a unique and unrepeatable gift at our core that will simply be lost if we will not open ourselves to let it out and let life in.

“No one else can feel it for you, only you can let it in. No one else, no one else can speak the words on your lips. Drench yourself in words unspoken, live your life with arms wide open. Today is where your book begins. The rest is still unwritten.”

This week, the Jewish liturgical year moved from the solemn, dark and deep of Yom Kippur toward the more carefree celebration of Sukkot, the fall harvest festival, reminding us that when we do the hard work of opening ourselves to dark and light in equal measure, we can move forward at last into abundant blessing.

“When we know we are written in [the] book of, we [begin to] act [...with] humility and love. We know that while we cannot control all that happens to us, our lives and their

meaning will not be lost.”

And therein lies the faith claim. That we can let life move over us and through us like a wave, and still our lives and their meaning will not be lost, will never be lost. This is the promise that will not be broken.

There will be growth and peril, and there will be grace. Always there will be the book of life, ready to open to us and show us our names, calling us back to the vow of compassion written upon our hearts – calling us forward into the fullness of life – angelic and furious and gloriously whole.

Will we follow its call? Let’s do. We can walk together. I challenge you.