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### **Starting Over, . . . and Over, . . . and Over, . . .**

2008! The beginning of a new year! A new year brings us an opportunity for reflection. It is a time when we can stop to take stock, to think about where we have been, and where we want to be heading. Not only that, but it's an opportunity to reinvent ourselves, a chance to "start over" in some aspect of our lives. And we can apply this reassessment to more than just our individual lives. Each new year invites us to think about where we are going as a fellowship; as part of a local community; as Californians, as Americans, as citizens of the world.

2008 promises to be a very interesting year. Fortunately, we live in what is still a democracy, and 2008 will afford opportunities to participate in the political process. Of course, as a Fellowship we don't endorse particular candidates or political parties, and that's appropriate. However, my hope is that each of us will engage actively in the political process this year, in whatever ways we can – by contributing money, by helping with local organizing, participating in phone banks, and so on. Our active participation this year is especially important. Can we at last end the brutal occupation of Iraq and our bellicose posture in the world? Can we begin to articulate a new view of the world that sees all people as our brothers and sisters – to be treated with compassion and dialogue rather than with violence and force? Can we begin to come together to protect our precious planet home, and to moderate our reckless abuse of the world's limited resources? Can we begin to act on a vision of compassion for the least fortunate among us, working to reduce the massive inequality that exists between rich and poor? All these things are very much in play this year, and it is up to us to make our voices heard.

And of course, New Years is also a time for personal reflection and, perhaps, for changes we want to make in our lives. Are there people from whom we are estranged? A new year is a great opportunity to try to reconcile. Can we find ways to be more open, more compassionate, toward the people in our lives? Can we take some small step toward becoming the person we would like to be? A new year is an ideal time to think about – and to act on – ways in which we want to transform our lives. In what ways do we want to "start over?"

#### **[Pause]**

The Jewish tradition has a wonderful way of undertaking this process of reflection and change, and we can learn a lot from it. The Jewish high holy days, in what is September by the Western calendar, mark the Jewish New Year. For the 10 days from the beginning of *Rosh Hashanah* through *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, Jews are encouraged to participate in an individual and collective reassessment of their lives. This tradition contains a deep psychological wisdom, and it is one that can, and should, be reclaimed. (For this discussion of the High Holy Days, I rely on the words of Rabbi Michael Lerner, from his book, *Jewish Renewal*).

If we were to follow this practice, it would look something like this:  
The first step is remembering – looking at what we have done and what we have become during the past year. Thus, the beginning of *Rosh Hashanah* is called the "Day of Remembrance."

The second step is to measure what we have done and what we have become against our highest vision of who we could and should be. Part of this step involves the congregation together, through worship and prayer, in reaffirming its vision of the possibilities and our highest aspirations, for ourselves, and for our community.

The third step is called *teshuvah*, which is often translated as atonement or repentance, but it is not really about inducing sorrow or guilt. *Teshuvah* means deciding in considerable detail what we are going to do differently in our lives. It means taking into account all those things that are likely to distract us or to undermine our resolve. *Teshuvah* is more than just a series of New Years resolutions – it is a plan of action based on deep and intense soul-searching.

Carrying out these three steps requires spending the ten days until *Yom Kippur* in intense and serious thought. Michael Lerner's strategy for making this a serious time is to ask congregants to engage with a "*teshuvah* buddy," or a small group, to meet every day to work through these three steps of remembering, assessing, and developing a plan of action. The purpose of this process is to help the participants – as individuals and as a community – to consolidate and reinvigorate the moral, psychological, and political gains they have made in the past, and to deepen their commitment to ongoing change.

This ten-day process helps the participants to see, once again, that the world is filled with energy – that human beings are filled with energy -- that makes possible the transformation of what is to what ought to be. And we can engage in this same sort of process as we enter a new year. We might realize – once again – that we can be attuned to energy in the universe that enables us to transform our lives and the lives of those around us. We can allow ourselves to experience most fully an integration of spirituality and transformative energy. We can allow ourselves to be open to the mystery and the power of the universe.

The Jewish tradition insists on the unity between individual and collective change. From this standpoint, humans are fundamentally social beings – we are part of one another's realities, we are part of networks of human relationships. We are responsible for one another. And the level of our individual development always depends on the degree to which we, as a community, can actualize our common humanity, on our capacity to embody transformative energy in the world.

The overriding theme of the High Holy Days is compassion. Speaking of repentance and atonement often brings up thoughts of "sin" and guilt, but the emphasis is on developing compassion – for ourselves, and for others. According to Jewish tradition, sin is not about humans being flawed, or essentially evil. Nor is it based on fears about human sexuality. The Hebrew word for sin is *chyet*, which literally means, "missing the mark." Our imperfections are not solely our own fault, but are rooted in an imperfect world. Thus, compassion, not guilt and blame, is the correct response to those imperfections. Humans are like arrows that have flown off course, but we can help each other to get back on course.

Imagine how powerful it would be if an entire culture, an entire society, were to undertake these rituals. Suppose we were to dedicate a ten-day period each year to self-examination, and to individual and collective transformation? Imagine how much power we could bring to transforming the world!

**[PAUSE]**

Each of us at one time or another has had the experience of “starting over,” whether at New Years or some other time. I like to see this opportunity of starting over as what is really meant by theological concepts like “redemption” and “resurrection.” We reinvent ourselves, in this life; we experience resurrection over and over again as we give ourselves permission to make a fresh start.

But, it is also clear that “starting over” can be very scary, just as it can be liberating. A personal story -- **[Pause]** During the Great Depression, in the 1930s, my maternal grandparents – my mother’s parents -- lost everything. My grandfather owned a shoe store in the small town of Belvedere, Illinois, and the store went bankrupt in the depths of the depression. My grandmother had never really worked. It was a very scary time. But, my grandfather and grandmother decided to start – of all things – an insurance business. Can you imagine? Trying to sell insurance to people in the middle of a depression? People were scuffling just to stay fed, to stay alive. Amazingly, and against all odds, their insurance business began to show a profit. My grandfather died just as the depression was coming to an end. But my grandmother – Hortense Catlin, an Illinois farm-girl -- went on to build a very successful insurance business. She continued to run it until she was almost 80! It turned out that she had remarkable people skills. She connected with her customers, continued to follow up with them, and entered into their lives. Now, I’m not saying that the depression was a good thing, of course. Far from it! But it provided my grandmother with an opportunity to start over, and to develop skills she didn’t know she had.

My parents, who were just entering adult-hood when the depression hit, were also deeply affected by that experience, but in a different way. For them, the depression created economic fears that would last their lifetimes. And I’m sure this is true for many people, including many of us here, who experienced the depression. My parents had terrible fears of financial collapse, despite my grandmother’s experience. They had a deep, deep fear of what they called “starting over.” They saw changing careers, or relocating, anything that would upset the status quo, as potential disasters.

Now I was born after the depression, and I look at “starting over” very differently. Sure, it’s scary when you’re out a job, or you’re going through a divorce, or some financial catastrophe has hit, and you don’t know what comes next. When you come right down to it, any sort of change is scary and we tend to resist it. But each and every time I have undergone a process of “starting over,” of reinventing myself in some way, it has turned out to be an opportunity to grow. Human beings tend to look for security and to want to hang onto things as they are. But when we have an opportunity to reassess who we are and where we have been, and to redirect our lives, we have the chance to come closer to actualizing our potential. To people who came of age during the depression, changing careers in one’s later years is unthinkable. Yet for me, entering into UU ministry in my sixties has been a transformative experience – it connects me with a part of myself that was longing to be expressed. It was an opportunity to “start over.”

**[Pause]**

So as we enter a new year, I encourage us to think about the practice of the Jewish New Year, and to use this as a time to reflect on the recent past and to think about the future. To be able to move forward into the New Year, we need to let go of those things that hold us back, those things to which we continue to cling. We nurse old

grievances and sadness, old attachments and anger. We hold on to people and to ideas. Reflecting on our old patterns is the first step in enabling ourselves to let go of them.

And then perhaps, having reflected on the past year, having assessed our plusses and the ways we “missed the mark, we can look ahead. What do we want our lives to look like in the year ahead? What changes do we want to make? Having freed our minds and hearts of some our own baggage, where do we go from here?

Moving into the future takes a considerable leap of faith. I am always amazed at the strength of the human spirit, at the way that we can suffer reverses, be hurt in so many ways, suffer catastrophes, and yet somehow regroup, pick ourselves up, and carry on into a future we don't control.

In closing, I'd like to share with you part of a poem by Mary Oliver:

I came to the edge of the pond:  
black and empty except for a spindle  
of bleached reeds at the far shore  
which, as I looked,  
wrinkled suddenly into three egrets –  
a shower of white fire!  
Even half-asleep they had  
such faith in the world  
that had made them –  
Tilting through the water  
unruffled, sure, by the laws  
of their faith, not logic,  
They opened their wings  
softly and stepped over  
every dark thing.

- May we find the powers within ourselves to leap into the new year like those egrets.
- May we gently and compassionately remember and reflect on the past.
- May we empower ourselves to plan for development, growth, and transformation over the coming year.
- May we open our wings softly and step over every dark thing.

**May it be so! Blessed be! Amen!**