

Tiny Dancing Spiders ~ Lessons in Attentiveness
Sermon given at the Palomar UU Fellowship September 19, 2004
Rev. Beth A. Johnson

Just a little while ago as I was making the bed, I noticed that Lil', my cat, was staring intently at something in vicinity of the baseboard near the sliding screen door. Not sure if she was just meditating, which she frequently does, or if she had her eye on something interesting, which she frequently does, I lowered myself to the floor next to her and began to scan the portion of wall and floor and door at which she was staring, trying to locate the object of her rapt attention.

Just as I was beginning to think she was in her meditative trance state - in which case she was seeing things beyond my capacity to see - I saw what held her so still, so fascinated. In the very corner of the wall, where the molding meets the edge of the strip where the screen door begins - there they were - two tiny dancing spiders...

The two spiders were engaged in a lively dance in which one spider seemed to chase the other and stop right next to it. They would sit still for a few moments and then, as quick as could be, the spider that was chased became the chaser. They zipped around and turned and chased with the most amazing speed. I watched along with Lil' for about ten minutes, and then, because she has a much longer attention span than I do, and her *job* is noticing these types of things, I left Lil' to witness these two tiny dancing spiders - dancing some ancient spiral spider dance...

And this is one of the biggest things that Lil' reminds me of - to stop and pay careful attention to what is going on around me - to pay attention to the details, to see the delicate beauty in smallest of things, to pay attention to the subtle things around me.

And as I turned my thoughts to those tiny dancing spiders, I reflected on the further lessons that *they* teach me. Spiders teach us to trust the subtle perceptions that we experience, showing that there is more depth and more activity beneath the surface. Although I'm not at all sure that these were web-weaving spiders, spiders always tell me to pay attention to the web of life. From spiders I get a deep awareness of the interdependent web of life - and they remind me of my place in the web.

Like an imperceptible, barely visible,
thin, shimmering, strands of web that stretch between two trees;
blowing ever so slightly in a gentle breeze -
the sunlight pulses, like light waves...and a delicate interconnectedness is revealed.

A microcosm of the whole, pulsing, vibrating interdependent web.

The web is all around, in and through us all...

And so I am called to pay attention to each thread to in the web and in the spiraling of the spiders.

For as they spin, spiders return again and again in a spiral pattern - like the cycles and rhythms of life - and we are brought into that sacred spiral of life - and reminded to pay attention to our place in the web and the endless cycle of turning and return.

I couldn't help but think of this attentiveness in terms of the time that we are entering right now - the time of the autumnal equinox. In the earth-centered tradition autumn is the time of release. As the light fades, our sign that the season is changing, we experience a moment of perfect balance - a pause - and then we enter a time of turning inward to reflect on our inner lives, a time of introspection and letting go....In this season, as the days become longer, we spiral in, paying attention to our inner life and intentionally release that which blocks us from fully living into our best possibilities.

And this is where I had headed when I thought of speaking today about attentiveness - the lessons of the tiny dancing spiders and paying attention to our place in the web of life, so that

we might not miss a moment of the break-your-heart wonder of this amazing world, nor miss the lessons that it holds.

Within the past two weeks a few things happened that helped me think further into this notion of paying attention to our inner life – Two people made comments that I found significant – one person asked if I was going to talk about the Jewish High Holy days and another person commented that no one last week mentioned forgiveness when we talked about 9/11.

On top of that I've been here for the last few days as B'nai Tikvah, the Jewish congregation that shares our space with us, began their celebrations of those High Holy days.

I don't have to have tiny dancing spiders dancing on my head in order to pay attention to the lessons of this autumn season!

And so I saw that one of the ways of turning our attention to the inner life can be found right here, in our midst – at this time of the Jewish High Holy Days – Rosh Hashanah, the New Year - it is the year 5716 on the Jewish calendar. 10 Days of Awe follow Rosh Hashanah, which we are in right now. It is, indeed, a pause – a time out of time. The time ends with Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – when Jews reflect on the past year and forgive those who have wronged them, and ask forgiveness for the ways in which they have sinned or missed the mark – the actual meaning of sin in the Jewish tradition. It is, indeed, a pause – a time out of time – for the practice of inner attentiveness.

The Jewish tradition has a word for this practice of inner attentiveness. This is the idea of *teshuva*, which literally means, "return." If we were to "do *teshuva*," we would examine our actions, be attentive to those areas where we are losing ground, and "return" to a state of becoming wholly aware and, thus, return to a Holy Awareness.

I was called to this Holy Awareness over the past three days hearing the Shofar, the ram's horn, linking me with an ancient tradition, foreign to me yet hauntingly and strangely familiar... announcing the importance of the time...

So this is a time of turning - of turning aside from wrongs that have been committed. It is a time of turning toward a deeper relationship with the all in the web of life – with family and friends and neighbors – nearby and a world away - with ourselves and the earth, and with the spirit of Life that some call God or the Sacred, some call the Divine, and some call Love or the Greater Good; whatever it is called...however it is experienced, this turning is ultimately a process that leads towards restoration...to wholeness...it is a turning toward a new life...it is a turning toward love.

This turning and returning is a relational act. We recognize where we have missed the mark, have hurt others, committed wrong acts and we ask forgiveness. We acknowledge that others have hurt us and we can make a choice to forgive.

Forgiveness has private and communal aspects – it recognizes that we all, in our individual lives are less than we would aspire to be and, hence, it asks us to maintain openness to the possibilities for healing and wholeness that forgiveness holds out for us and for the communities in which we live.

Forgiveness as a spiritual stance and a political, communal act has been embodied in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created by the government of Nelson Mandela and chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in the wake of the violation of all that was good or beautiful or true that was apartheid. In response to confessions of truth and repentance for wrongs done, amnesty or pardon was granted. This is a remarkable example of a commitment to hope. Tutu attested to this hope when he said, "We witness by being a community of reconciliation, a forgiving community of the forgiven."

But I think it is important to say that forgiving is not the same as forgetting. There are betrayals and acts of violence that are best not forgotten, and which make the process of forgiving one that may never fully occur, but toward which one works for the sake of oneself and the health of the community. Martin Luther King once said that, “forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.”

So forgiveness is in some ways a change of heart that is both a choice and an act of grace.

UU minister Fred Muir identified four components to forgiveness – remorse, resolution, restitution and restoration. These four components further point to forgiveness as a process rather than a once for all, single act.

In asking for forgiveness we turn to the other with remorse, we come to the other in humility and with the capacity to be honest, and are sincere in expressing our sorrow for the wrong that has been done. Some of you may remember the movie, *Love Story*, from the 70’s I think. A famous line from that film was, “love means never having to say you’re sorry.” I don’t think so...I think love means saying I’m sorry for any fractures we’ve caused in the web of relationship.

Forgiveness is not an explanation. It is a plain-spoken confession, if you will, of a wrong.

In turning to the other we resolve to hold sacred the relationship, to change the behavior that was hurtful and to not repeat it. Forgiveness is not simply about feeling good – it is about struggling to turn toward mutuality and love.

In turning to forgiveness we make restitution and begin to rebuild the relationship. In the language of the 12-step programs, we make amends. We turn toward the other with sincere openness to repairing the damage done. Sometimes that can be one of the hardest things for the one asking forgiveness and for the one forgiving.

For the one asking forgiveness we are agreeing to have the hard conversations about what happened...to hear how another felt...we make the space for the articulation of the feelings and damage done...not to be beat up with it, for that is not in the service of healing, but to say, “yes, I will hear your pain.”

For the one forgiving, it is the letting go of resentments in the spirit of right relations, to move on and get on with life – to build communities of mutuality and solidarity. Fred Muir, quotes a man whose son was brutalized by a local police officer. Lewis Smedes said forgiveness “means surrendering the right to get even because forgiving is always a decision to put up with an uneven score.” “Forgiveness is the capacity to will the well-being of another,” is the way theologian, Jay McDaniel, puts it.

We do not wish to shut the door on the past, but we do wish to break its power to form, or deform, the future of us as individuals and the Beloved Community.

For the process of forgiveness leads, then, to restoration – a turning toward the reintegration into the life of the community.

We see these concepts in the restorative justice programs in which an offender meets with his or her victim, hears how the crime has affected them, the family, the community – the offender experiences the communal consequences of their offense and is made accountable to the community as well as the criminal justice system. The offender is turned toward the community which he or she is embedded in whether that is recognized or not.

This final phase speaks to the web of life as being restored and greater possibilities for well-being in the web are then woven into its fabric.

Now I want to tell you that I don’t think forgiveness is easy – I think it’s hard...I think it especially hard to forgive heinous acts of horror – but the wisdom of those who suffer from these

acts says that forgiveness leads to freedom from being defined by the act. A story told in the book, *Heart of Enlightenment* lifts up an amazing choice.

A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared to experience with him. “Have you forgiven the Nazi’s?” he asked his friend. “Yes.” “Well, I haven’t. I’m still consumed with hatred for them.” “In that case,” said his friend, “they still have you in prison.”

In forgiveness we recognize that within ourselves that is shaped by ongoing hatred or resentment – and recognize too our own capacity for evil – we recognize our own frailties, character defects, and vulnerabilities.

Can you think of someone who has hurt you or whom you have hurt?

Can you recall the painful actions?

Can you feel the feelings that you have toward that person, or persons?

Can you imagine now turning toward that person or persons?

Can you imagine letting go of hurts or resentments?

Can you imagine giving or receiving forgiveness?

Can you imagine how that feels?

Can you imagine how your life would be different?

This is the meaning that I take from this time – this time of release, of turning, these Days of Awe, bracketed between the blowing of the Shofar, announcing the presence of the Spirit in which our attention turns to our inner life and its impact on a community of faith, and the turning toward the Spirit of Life pulsing through all.

A daily calendar that I have, you know the kind that covers each day of every year, not just the year we’re in, has words from Marjorie Suchocki, one of my professors. Yesterday, September 18, it reminds us that, “the deepest form of human existence is the responsibility of relationality oriented toward love.”

And this is what attentiveness asks of us – to take responsibility for our relationality – our interconnectedness – and to orient that to love...