

# Beginnings

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The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Oregon  
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*(Editor's note for UUCE website sermons: not all service elements are listed each Sunday. Some weeks, just the sermon will appear on the website. Most weeks, a few elements particularly relevant to the sermon or reflection will be included).*

## CALL TO WORSHIP

We begin with the words of Elizabeth Tarbox, a much-beloved Unitarian Universalist New England minister who died eight years ago...

*Whatever September means to you, bring it here and let it find its place in your belonging. Those of you who dressed your child for the first day of school this week, welcome to September...You who tidied your desk, brought in the hanging plants off the porch, resealed the driveway, met a whole new class of children, welcome to September.*

*Those of you whose memories of summer will be smoothed onto the pages of a photograph album; those whose memories will line your forehead, or tear your heart, welcome to September. Those who carried a school bag for the first time, loved someone, said good-bye, cried some, cried a lot, welcome to September.*

*September has marked the best and the worst of times for me; there were new beginnings: my sister's birthday, my wedding day. But September makes me nostalgic, it's the smell of school and shyness, and the memory of a friend who died, and the way my clothes don't fit. And worry about the year ahead.*

*Thank you, September, for bringing us all together, to smile at each other, hug maybe, touch hands, join voices once again. Hang around awhile, give us warm autumn afternoons before we have to shake our sweaters out of their summer hiding, or mend the broken zipper on the windproof jacket.*

*Spirit of love and reunion, bless our house and our hours together; help us to feel the possibility of joy in this place, and friendship, and beginnings.<sup>1</sup>*

Come, let us worship together!

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<sup>1</sup> Tarbox, Elizabeth. *Evening Tide* (Skinner House, Boston: 1998). Page 34.

## OPENING HYMN

*Come, Come, Whoever You Are, #188*  
*(all hymns from Singing the Living Tradition*  
*of the Unitarian Universalist Association unless otherwise noted)*

*with additional words from the original text of Rumi:*  
*Though you've broken your vows a thousand times...*

## DEDICATION OF CLASSROOM VOLUNTEERS

### FIRST REFLECTION

#### **Beginnings: Giving Thanks**

Shana Tovah!

That's Hebrew for "Happy New Year!" I know this phrase well as I spoke it when answering the phone dozens of times a day during the Jewish High Holydays, also called the Days of Awe, when I worked as a full-time receptionist and newsletter editor for Congregation Beth-Israel Judea in San Francisco. I said it so many times the phrase years later slipped out of my mouth when answering the telephone at a UU church I served as minister!

The rest of the year I said, "Shalom! Beth-Israel Judea, this is Steve, how may I help you?" But during the High Holydays I said, "Shana Tovah!" and sang in the High Holyday choir. During a Rosh Hashanah service, the rabbi embarrassed me by inviting me to stand and be introduced to the six hundred people gathered as the temple's receptionist and, as he said, "honorary Jew." This moment inspired me to similarly embarrass our staff in front of you this morning. On the Sunday closest to Rosh Hashanah.

I am delighted that the Jewish High Holydays fall early this year, with Rosh Hashanah beginning this past Thursday and Yom Kippur next weekend. Rosh Hashanah I remember as a joyful celebration, a time for expressing gratitude for the blessings of life. This seems a proper way to begin a new year: with thanks.

Rosh Hashanah is a time to offer thanks for the blessings of life as it is now and as it has been. As Jews begin their new year, they are invited to look back as well. When I consider the spiritual wisdom of the Days of Awe, my mind returns to the book *Transitions* by William Bridges – fine name for the author of such a book. Bridges reminds us that transitions don't begin at the beginning. Transitions begin with an ending, followed by a time of uncertainty he and others call "The Neutral Zone" – in interim period – and after all of this finally comes the beginning. Sound familiar? Among Bridges' dozens of excellent literary quotations is one by T.S. Eliot, also found in our hymnal:

*What we call a beginning is often the end*  
*and to make an end is to make a beginning.*  
*The end is where we start from.*

"What we call a beginning is often the end" – as the season of autumn begins, we let go of the season of summer. It is fitting to recognize this change and give thanks, as earth-based

religious traditions teach us. The beginning of your new job, school year, or relationship, or retirement of other life changes – each beginning is an end; each end is a beginning. As you and I begin a ministry together, we end more fully the ministries that have come before. It is fitting to recognize this change and give thanks for what has been.

Last winter, as I announced my departure from my previous church, I did so with preparation and care, as the quality of an ending is perhaps the greatest single determinant of the quality of the next beginning. I wanted to reduce the emotional baggage each party would carry in to its next ministerial relationship. I wanted to celebrate what had been, and to give thanks. The way one conducts oneself at the end of one relationship will have significant bearing on one's readiness for the next relationship. I am grateful to Reverend Carolyn Colbert for ending so well with you, and to you for ending so well with her, as a congregation. It seems to me that you and I are reaping the harvest of the seeds we planted for this ministerial relationship when we ended our previous ones with care.

There may be no time in life in which mindfulness and care are not valuable. Yet during transitions the quality of our conduct is especially important. I strongly believe that transitioning well in any area of your life helps you transition in other areas, including the last transition, death. Transitioning well applies to all three stages: ending, neutral zone, beginning.

The second best decision I made this year, after accepting your offer to be your next minister, was to drive across the country for my move. I acknowledge my good fortune in having this choice available to me, but I am no less proud for taking it. I traveled seventeen days and 4,500 miles to visit family and old friends, and to go camping in the Grand Tetons, allowing my heart and soul to keep up with my body in this move. I said good-bye to my former home in Rhode Island, good-bye New York City, good-bye Pennsylvania, Appalachian Mountains... hello Mississippi River, Great Plains, Rocky Mountains. This process enabled me not just to experience the *change* of moving here, but as Bridges says, experience it as a *transition* as well: it helped me arrive more fully, ready for the next chapter in my life.

The most emotional part of my journey caught me by surprise; as I drove away from my childhood hometown, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, turning a bend in the two-thousand foot hills where I could no longer see the Susquehanna River valley, I cried, but I was smiling, too. I felt tremendously grateful for that place, and blessed by it. Far from a major airport and with none of my blood relatives living there anymore, it will probably be many years before I return.

Nearly two weeks later, as I crossed the border into Oregon from Idaho, and again as I drove south along Route 5 through the Willamette River valley, I felt a deeper sense of home. Undoubtedly, the similarities in topography between Pennsylvania and this part of Oregon played a role in this sense of homecoming, but I feel that more important was my having said good-bye, and thank you, to the soil on which my childhood was built.

And so here I am, feeling at home here, and here you are, and here we are. As today we mark several beginnings, let us together offer thanks. August and Olga [Worship Associate August Sabini and President Olga Turner] will now join me in leading a litany of thanks. After each of us recites a list of things for which we may be grateful at this time and place, I will gesture with my hand, inviting you to join in saying, "Let us give thanks."

Please rise in body or in spirit....

LITANY OF THANKS  
by Rev. Stephen A. Landale with help from August Sabini

AUGUST (worship associate)

For summer in its passing  
For growth and rest  
For ancients and progeny

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

OLGA (president)

For this community,  
For our children, youth, and adults, young and old,  
For summer Wizardry school, for women's groups and men's groups,  
For laughter and learning,  
For music-makers, budget-planners,  
and people who clean up the mess.  
For newcomers, bringing their yearning for something real,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

STEVE (newly settled minister)

For past ministers,  
Margaret, Cecilia, and Jean,  
For Carolyn, for her inspiration, humor, and persistence,  
For these ministers and those who came before,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

AUGUST

For life and knowing we live  
For sunshine and sweet rain  
For earth, for animals wild and tame  
For forests and gardens  
For this building, this land...

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

OLGA

For our staff,  
Preparing the space for us,  
Guiding our young ones,  
Lifting our voices in song,  
Greeting guests and callers,  
Doing the un-sung work behind the scenes,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

STEVE

For our volunteer leaders,  
Shepherding this church through transition,  
Sharing their time, talents, and growing as we grow,  
Giving shape and substance to our dreams,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

AUGUST

For communities beyond these walls,  
For schools that truly care,

For religious bodies that honor love in many faces and forms,  
For people who care for those cast aside or shut out,  
For scientists, engineers, and builders of platforms we take for granted,  
For activists, artists, and people who stretch our minds,  
For all who contribute to the fabric of community,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

STEVE

For our religious ancestors,  
For Channing, Ballou, Barton, Eliot, Davies, and Fahs,  
For Goddess worshippers, Unitarian Christians, Universalists, Humanists,  
For heretics in every age who challenged life-thwarting orthodoxy,  
For all who have refused to allow belief to stand between  
    them and the flesh-and-blood person in their midst,

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

OLGA

For this moment,  
to which so much has contributed  
from which so much will grow,  
For the privilege of Life,  
For the opportunity to honor its blessings

RESPONSE: LET US GIVE THANKS

## SECOND REFLECTION

### **Beginnings: Making Amends**

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is a time not only for welcoming the new year but also for giving thanks for the last. Yom Kippur, which begins Friday evening, is called the Day of Atonement, a day of uniting that which has been broken due to the hurts we have caused one another, ourselves, and our relationship with the sacred. Atonement means At-One-Ment: being one, or whole, again.

During the Days of Awe, religious Jews are called to fast and to conduct an audit of their conscience. “Where have I disrespected, or deceived another, or myself? Where have I stopped walking in the ways of Justice – or even been a hindrance?” And this is the part I love: Jews are called during the Days of Awe not to confess their sins to God but to seek out the people they have wronged, and apologize. They are called to conduct this thorough internal and external work prior to Yom Kippur, when, collectively, the people acknowledges their failings, the ways all human beings fall short, at least from time to time. Having been raised Roman Catholic, I came to prefer this approach to atonement. The Catholic God says, “Tell me your sins.” The Jewish God says, “What are you telling ME your sins for, machugina? Your mother is the one you hurt – go tell her, go tell her you’re sorry! Then come talk to me!”

I know that certain brands of religion put such emphasis on the depravity of human beings, our inherent sinfulness, original sin, and so forth, that for many of us the subject of atonement is challenging at best, as we may carry these associations within us. Indeed, Unitarianism and Universalism arose in America largely in response to Calvinism’s portrayals of an angry-but-maybe-forgiving God and hopelessly depraved humanity. Unitarianism preached the promise of humanity while Universalism preached the love of God. Yet our historically sunny views of human nature and life haven’t proven to be entirely

accurate either. Don't most of us know from experience that each of us does things we regret, and that acknowledging our lapses might help us to be better people?

One of the most important rituals in the UU church in which you might say I was schooled was the atonement litany, written by the Reverend Robert Eller Isaacs. This litany, a public confession of harmful behaviors known to us all, is a spiritual practice for the real thing: apologizing to, and forgiving as appropriate, those with whom we've experienced a breach.

Atonement may be the final form of spiritual house-cleaning. As we begin this new year together, and as you may be embarking on a new stage in your life, I invite you to pause a moment and reflect on anything that might be darkening your conscience. This is not an invitation to berate yourself in any way, but to think of words or actions that might call for repair. Or perhaps a time you did not speak up, even on your own behalf: maybe the person in greatest need of your apology is yourself. Are you willing to forgive yourself?

In a moment, Tom Sears will sing Hashiveinu, #216 from our hymnal. The Hebrew text translates, "Turn us toward You, and we will return. Renew our days as of old." It is the song of people yearning to return to the ways of Justice, of Truth, of Love. As with all prayers, its expression is its answer.

After Tom sings through this song, he'll sing it two more times, and you are invited to sing along, while seated.

After the song, I'll invite you to rise for a Litany of Atonement from our hymnal. As always, you may remain seated and participate in a way that suits you.

\* \* \*

*Hashiveinu, hashiveinu,  
Adonai eilecha vena shuva. Vena shuva.  
Chadeish, chadeish yameinu kekedem.*

\* \* \*

Jeff Wright / Bonnie Romaine of the Committee on Congregational Ministry and Safety will now join me in leading the Litany of Atonement. You don't need your hymnal for this, as the response is simply "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love."

Those of you who would like to participate, please rise in body or in spirit. The response is "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love." (The Litany may be found in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #637).

### **BLESSING ON OUR BEGINNINGS**

May we enter this year together with a clean conscience –  
and if waters remain muddy, may we take the steps to clear them.

May we enter this year with a sense of gratitude  
for the gifts of those who came before,  
for the blessings of life, right now –

moments of beauty and compassion, if nothing else.

May we honor the little, everyday endings and beginnings and confusing times in-between.

Learning from our mistakes,  
Deepened by our losses,  
Filled with gratitude for the abundance of gifts in life  
we did nothing to earn,

May we now step forward,  
as individuals and as a loving, truth-seeking community,  
resolved to give our very best to whatever the year may bring.

Please rise as you are willing and able and join in singing hymn #298, Wake, Now, My Senses

### **BENEDICTION**

Shana Tovah!  
Blessings of the New Year to you.  
May gratitude and forgiveness  
be for us spiritual practices.  
May we walk gently, laugh heartily,  
celebrate joyfully!

Blessed Be and Amen.