

**A New Year of Compassionate Communication**  
**Rev. Diane Rollert**  
**The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 28 September 2014**

Each month, as we explore a different theme together, I'm sending you a list of questions to wrestle with. As I look at this past month's questions about what it means to seek a life of engagement, there was one particular question that had a real 'ouch' factor:

**“Has engagement for you been more about changing others or allowing yourself to be changed?** Okay, let's admit it; we rarely think of engagement as a two-way street. When we engage with people we disagree with, our goal is to change *them*. After all, what could they possibly have to teach us! Or how about the many times we talk about what “those politicians need to do,” without ever mentioning a word about how long it's been since we pursued old-fashioned grassroots political engagement! We want political change to happen; we just don't want to change our schedules or lifestyles too much to make it happen. There are ways to keep engagement 'safe.' There are also ways to allow engagement to take you on an adventure. Which route do you usually prefer?”

What a perfect question for this time of year. Today falls right in the middle of the Jewish High Holidays, the period of ten days that begins with the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish New Year, and ends with the observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Many of you know -- but not everyone does -- that my roots are Jewish and this time of year has always been important to me. Joining a Unitarian congregation for the first time, and signing its membership book during the Jewish High Holidays, had great meaning for me. That I could hold onto my Jewish roots and have the wider freedom that Unitarian Universalism offers is what attracted me in the beginning and has kept me here all these years.

This coming Friday night at sundown, observant Jews will begin a day of fasting and atonement. It is a time when Jews ask forgiveness from God and, most importantly, ask forgiveness of those they have wronged in the past year. It is a time to wipe the slate clean in order to be written in the Book of Life for the New Year.

So I confess to being guilty of sometimes wanting others to change rather than to change myself. I'm also someone who prefers keeping my engagement safe. I like to believe that I am listening to others; that I don't get triggered emotionally, but then I guess I wouldn't be human if that were the case. I have learned a lot over the years about being less invested in the outcomes I want to see, reserving judgment until I've heard other people's perspectives. Sometimes I'm good at that. Other times, I can get impatient. On the home front, well, truth can get pretty petty. Lately, I seem to have gotten caught up in debates about whether or not I told my family about an appointment or an event. I am so sure I told them something, and they are so sure I didn't. In those moments I can get very invested in my truth – and I'm probably wrong.

The hard part is figuring out when to insist on your own truth – in other words show compassion for yourself – and when to let yourself be the empty cup that the Zen master requires. What do we do when another person’s perspective is totally counter to the way we see the world? Imagine a holiday meal when you butt heads with that very conservative or ultra-radical family member over politics. Do you shut down? Do you find yourself wanting to leap across the table to strangle your opponent?

I find myself about to go down what may be a very dangerous road, but I feel I have to address the elephant in the room. In this time of the Jewish High Holy Days, how can we avoid talking about the pain and anguish we have seen in Israel/Palestine this year? This past spring we Unitarians, as a religious movement in Canada, faced a painful challenge during our national meeting. There was a proposal to set up a study group to explore a way to respond as a religious community to the situation in Israel/Palestine. There was confusion around the intentions of the proposed resolution and passions were running high on both sides of the fence. In the end, the gathering voted to take the proposal off the table indefinitely. In other words, we avoided a divisive vote, sending the deeply disappointed authors of the resolution back to the drawing board.

There’s a lot more to the story, but I don’t think that it makes sense to go through a blow-by-blow detailing of my perspective on what happened that day. I think our guest, Guillaume Lanctôt-Bédard, who is an Authentic Dialogue coach, would say that insisting on our own version of the story is where we can get caught. We spend so much time rehashing what we think is the truth because we feel hurt, misunderstood, or so dismissed that we shut down completely and then we can’t work together to find solutions to our conflict or our concerns.

I will say that we seemed ill equipped at the national meeting that day to deal with conflict in our own movement. There seemed to be little space on either side of the debate for people to truly hear each other. We were all caught up in our emotions – emotions that were and are very understandable given the context.

Spring passed, summer came and the Gaza War, the 50-day War, began. Every day I read accounts from Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Arabs, and Christians living in the Middle East, or writing with the privilege and pain of their secure North American or European armchairs. Every day I cried. How can you live with the needless loss of any human life? How can you forgive the deaths of innocent children or adults? I sought out the most compassionate voices I could find and posted those on Facebook. I wanted to reach my Jewish friends in particular. I joined Tikkun’s Network of Spiritual Progressives. It was one of the few places where I felt reasonable pro-Israel and pro-Palestine voices were in conversation with each other. I was surprised to be contacted directly by its founder, Rabbi Michael Lerner, who wondered if I might do some French translations for the Tikkun website. I’m still looking for someone to help me with that. (*Rabbi Michael Lerner is not to be confused with Rabbi Leigh Lerner, former senior Rabbi of the Reform Temple here in Montreal.*)

In Hebrew, the word *tikkun* means to heal, repair and transform the world. Rabbi Lerner and many others who contribute to Tikkun’s website, maintain a great love for Israel but

are heartbroken by the Israeli government's actions. They make a distinction between the government, the people and Judaism. Rabbi Lerner says, "My heart is broken as I witness the suffering of the Palestinian people and the seeming indifference of Israelis." He goes on to say, "One of the primary victims of the war between Israel and Hamas is the compassionate and love-oriented Judaism that has held together for several thousand years." He argues that both Israelis and Palestinians are victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The danger, he writes to his fellow Jews, is when we turn Israel into an idol to be worshipped "rather than a political entity like any other political entity, with strengths and deep flaws, a political entity which should be held to account for its systematic violations of human rights."

Tikkun's call to Jews is to remember that the High Holidays are about each person focusing on their own sins and not the sins of others. Rabbi Lerner has called for Jews to have courage during Yom Kippur services to speak out and name the wrongs of their own support for the Israeli government's actions in the Gaza war. This is easier said than done, and, even as I speak these words here, I know that I am causing discomfort for people I love. As a Jewish friend here in Montreal recently wrote:

*"This is a fraught, fractured and critical moment within the Jewish community. In the aftermath of the recent Gaza War, difficult questions are being asked - questions that were continuously swept under the carpet or locked in a closet in the past."*

In August, thanks to Tikkun, I got to participate in a teleconference with Sami Awad, executive director of the Holy Land Trust. Sami is a Palestinian Christian living on the West Bank who founded the Holy Land Trust "to work with the Palestinian community at the grassroots and leadership levels in developing nonviolent approaches that aim to end the Israeli occupation and build a future founded on the principles of nonviolence, equality, justice, and peaceful coexistence."

Speaking from the West Bank, Sami Awad told us that, this summer, the fear and hatred on both sides reached epic levels, beyond anything he had ever seen before – so much so that the majority of Palestinian and Israeli peace activists have abandoned ship, even though they had been working together for years. He later wrote:

*"It is far easier to motivate people by fear and hatred than by peace, compassion, and love. We have history (selective or not), that we can refer to that proves that the other is to be feared, mistrusted, hated, and even retaliated against—but when it comes to peace, respect, equality, etc., we have very little to show regarding the intentions and actions of the other. Worse, we have lots of rhetoric that has not only abused, but has even deformed these words and their meaning. Palestinians and Israelis, for the most part, have now fallen into an uncontrolled downward spiral of hatred towards the other."*

Today, Sami Awad has continued to meet with a small core of Palestinian and Israeli peace activists. In the past, he told us, "the efforts of many activists were grounded in the wrong motives, often out of fear of the other (unless we can tame them, they will hurt us) rather than a genuine deep commitment and care for the well being of all."

Now he feels he has more hope because there is a clearer recognition of the imbalance of power that has to be named before a nonviolent movement can move forward. He says that there have to be prophetic voices that call for an end to violence, aggression, and hatred on all sides; prophetic voices that can call for a new vision for what peace, justice and equality can mean socially, economically, environmentally and spiritually.

There's something else that Sami Awad said that resonates deeply with me. He said that *"peace work is not what happens between two as much as what happens within one."* In other words, there has to be change within each person, within each community, before there can be true peace.

Is engagement more about changing others or allowing yourself to be changed? We won't solve the world's greatest conflicts today – but we can try to develop some tools for facing those moments when we find ourselves so overwhelmed by our passion or discomfort that we can't hear the other. Maybe we begin with the situations in our everyday lives, in our families, or in our relationships with each other. Maybe we can let our engagement in life be a little less safe and a lot more productive. This is one place where I hope that we can forgive ourselves, and each other, and begin again in love.

Amen, blessed be, Namaste.