

Yom Kippur morning 2008
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In my career as a chaplain, I have had the opportunity to work in several hospitals. There I encountered many people struggling to recover from sickness and surgery. For some their condition was temporary; others were dealing with chronic and serious diseases. Many of them were facing cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. Being in the hospital often gives people time to reflect on their lives and the meaning their illness holds for them. Often I have found that people's lives are changed as a result of this experience. They may have come to truly appreciate the emotional and spiritual support that is in their lives; having faith and people who care can make all the difference in the world. Yet these same people may bear physical scars or have some diminished capacity compared to how they were before their illness. Their bodies may never be whole in quite the same way again. This can raise the issue of self-worth.

There are many reasons why people don't value themselves. Altered physical appearance or function is just one of them. Other reasons include any way in which we feel ourselves to be different or "less than" we imagine ourselves should be. Parental messages can contribute to feelings of low self-worth. Picture the parent who is constantly berating his or her child or holding on to expectations that are far too high. The fear that drives those feelings is based on family dynamics. Or look at what the advertising industry foists on us. So much of it is aimed at getting us to compare ourselves with some idealized image: a perfect figure, the whitest teeth, the coolest clothes, and we are supposed to strive to look like that. But real people are not two-dimensional images on a poster or TV screen.

We are not valuing ourselves when we lead from a place of shame and deficiency. According to family therapist Carl Whitaker, shame occurs when you haven't been able to get away with the "who" you want people to think you are. Shame involves the entire self and self-worth of a person. It is an inner sense of being diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self judging the self. Self-esteem affects how we see the world and our place in it, how others in the world see and treat us, the choices we make in our lives, our ability to take action to change things, and our ability to give and receive love. Many people go through life with a minimum of self-esteem – enough to enable their survival but not enough to enable them to live as fully and to be as happy as they might have been.

Facing shame means facing feelings, though genuine feelings are sometimes not available due to defenses, repression or denial. Getting in touch with what caused the shame in the first place can be painful in the short run, but can lead to a new-found sense of freedom in the long run. Often what we project to other people on the outside is not what we feel inside – our spirit doesn't reflect our presentation. We need to get behind the mask in order to find the person underneath. We need to get in touch with who we genuinely are rather than who we perceive ourselves to be.

Accomplishing this definitely takes work but it is certainly possible with some emotional and spiritual support. Change isn't easy and often involves a truthful self-assessment and a genuine desire for things to be different. But sometimes a change in perspective can be very helpful in tipping the balance. To illustrate this point I want to read you a story called The Water Pot.

A water bearer in India had two large pots hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of that it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said. The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its leak. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house." The moral of this story is that each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. Some of us are old, some not so smart, some fat, some bald, some physically challenged, but it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You may not realize the beauty you bring to the world, and to the lives of others.

Our tradition teaches us that we were made in the Divine image. In Genesis chapter one it says, "God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them...And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good." There were no exceptions in the creation story; God found all of us to be very good. We are supposed to value ourselves just as God values us. Every year we read from Deuteronomy in which Moses relates God's instruction to us, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you may live." What does it mean to choose life? What does it mean to truly live? I would like to suggest that when we walk around feeling ashamed and inadequate, when we don't live up to our potential, when we don't appreciate the love and caring that other people have for us, then we are not valuing ourselves. And when we are not valuing ourselves, we are not really living. Instead, part of us is dying. This is not God's injunction to us. God wants us to choose to live every moment; to treat ourselves, our children, our friends with love and respect; to value who we are with our flaws and our limitations. God doesn't ask that we be perfect; God asks that we be ourselves fully and walk in God's ways.

Just as we are enjoined to care for the poor, the orphan and the widow, so too can we care for ourselves. It means valuing the wholeness of ourselves – the physical, emotional, and relational parts of who we are. It means understanding ourselves, accepting ourselves and therefore being able to accept others. It means seeing ourselves as spiritual beings in every aspect of who we are and what we do; living according to our values so as to not separate ourselves from God. Valuing ourselves is finding and owning the hole in our soul – the shadow side, the parts of us we try to hide, the parts we are ashamed of.

This Yom Kippur, as we prepare to begin a new year having examined our shortcomings and asked for forgiveness, let us seek to find the holiness in ourselves and the holiness in each other. Let us endeavor to be genuine and risk sharing our real selves. May the flowers along our path remind us of the beauty we create in the world by being who we really are.

Shanah tovah.