

Atonement and Forgiveness
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Ten days ago I entered the darkness at the Laemmle Theater in Claremont, settled into the comfortable seat, and watched the concert film “Songs from the Road” featuring Leonard Cohen. Each of the 12 featured songs was chosen from a different venue of his 2008/2009 world tour. I was hoping to see Julie, Sloane, Carole, or myself when the camera panned the crowd at the Nokia Theater in downtown Los Angeles on April 11, 2009, but, alas, the film contained no footage from that particular concert.

California was represented, however. The film included Cohen singing “Hallelujah” at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival before one of the largest crowds in the festival's history on April 17, the week after we saw him. Cohen turns 76 years old this Tuesday. Not bad for a singer/songwriter who was inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008. One of the songs on the film was “That Don't Make It Junk.” It relates to the Yom Kippur theme of atonement and forgiveness, and it goes:

“I fought against the bottle, But I had to do it drunk -
 Took my diamond to the pawnshop - But that don't make it junk.
 I know that I'm forgiven, But I don't know how I know
 I don't trust my inner feelings - Inner feelings come and go.
 [Cohen addresses God:] How come you called me here tonight?

How come you bother With my heart at all? You raise me up in grace, Then you put me in a
 place, Where I must fall.

Too late to fix another drink - The lights are going out -
 I'll listen to the darkness sing - I know what that's about.
 I tried to love you my way, But I couldn't make it hold.
 So I closed the Book of Longing And I do what I am told.
 I fought against the bottle, But I had to do it drunk -
 Took my diamond to the pawnshop - But that don't make it junk.”

The moments of our lives are diamonds. Each moment is unique. Each moment is precious. Each moment provides an opportunity to support health and wellbeing or to undermine health and wellbeing. This is a time to reflect on our lives and on the number of times we have visited the pawn shop, so to speak. How often have we handed over our precious diamonds (those precious moments of our lives) in exchange for some quick and easy reward? How often have we enabled others to visit the pawn shop and hand over their precious diamonds for some quick and easy reward?

Over the past 30 to 40 years, Unitarian Universalists have at times contributed to this. In some congregations in some eras, you could not attend a Unitarian Universalist social event (or even a Board of Trustees meeting) without finding wine available for social lubrication. I'm happy to say that this has changed in recent years. This time of turning in a new direction is a perfect time to note that this is Recovery Month.¹ To be precise, this is the 21st annual Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month.

The ***Recovery Month*** observance highlights the societal benefits of substance abuse treatment, lauds the contributions of treatment providers and promotes the message that recovery from substance abuse in all its forms is possible. The observance also encourages citizens to take action to help expand and improve the availability of effective substance abuse treatment for those in need.

Recovery Month provides a platform to celebrate people in recovery and those who serve them. Each September, thousands of treatment programs around the country celebrate their successes and share them with their neighbors, friends, and colleagues in an effort to educate the public about treatment, how it works, for whom, and why. ***Recovery Month*** also serves to educate the public on substance abuse as a national health crisis, as well as educating the public that addiction is a treatable disease and that recovery is possible.

¹ See <http://www.recoverymonth.gov/About-Recovery-Month.aspx>

Not only is substance misuse a general concern of mine, it is also a personal concern. After the death of my dear elderly friend about six months ago, I used alcohol to the point of *misusing* it. I stopped using alcohol 34 days ago.

Conventional wisdom has it that someone must hit bottom to be willing to make a change. That may be true for some people, but it is not true for all people. In my case, the bottom is several miles beneath my feet, but I didn't like the feel of the descent. We don't have to wait until we hit bottom with substance misuse to turn in a new direction. Nor do we have to wait until we hit bottom in a strained relationship before we turn in a new direction and begin to mend the relationship.

What about forgiveness? Many Unitarian Universalists do not believe that there is an external personal God who has an option to forgive. Yet many Unitarian Universalists *do* believe in the interconnected web of all existence. Some Unitarian Universalists intuit something that might be called divinity residing within each of us. When we do the hard work of changing habits, we help mend the web of all existence. When we do the hard work of changing habits, we open possibilities of greater health.

Leonard Cohen says, "I know that I'm forgiven, but I don't know how I know." The good news is that we don't always have to know how we know. We human beings are capable of deluding ourselves, certainly. Yet we are also capable of coming to profound understandings of the dynamics of life.

May we support each other in reflecting our actions, today and always. May we support each other in changing our habits in the service of greater health, now and always. May it be so!