

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
September 19, 2010**

## **Atone? Who Me? What For?**

**By Donne Hayden**

Good morning, Friends.

First I'd like to remind you that Tuesday, September 21 is the United Nations' International Day of Peace. An ecumenical group called A Million Minutes of Peace is asking people of faith to take one minute at 12:00 noon on September 21 and pray in their own way for peace.

Noon. Tuesday. One minute. Pray for peace.

This week is the end of a cluster of Holy Days in the Jewish lunar calendar known as the "Days of Awe." Sometimes the Jewish holidays really speak to me; I'm not sure why they do more so than the Christian equivalent, but perhaps because the language is different and so it's not so loaded for me.

During the Days of Awe, a time of remembrance and self-evaluation, Jewish people consider the creation of the world, their responsibilities to the Creator, and their need to atone for any wrongdoings they committed in the past year. They understand atonement, not in the way Christianity has defined it, but as the "reconciliation of two estranged parties"; they talk about atonement in terms of a relationship between God and humans, believing that reconciliation between humans and Yahweh resulted in regeneration, in being "born anew," and atonement allowed them to start each year with a clean slate.

At the end of the Days of Awe, people are prepared for the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the community and individuals atone for the separation or alienation from God, sometimes called “sin,” that occurred during the previous year. In American secular culture and even in our 21<sup>st</sup> century Quaker culture, we don’t have much to say or do about atonement. For one thing, we don’t (in our Meeting at least) like to talk much about *sin*. It’s such a loaded word, with implications of adultery, “sex, drugs, & rock and roll,” murder, and so on. But the Jewish people take into account other things that cause estrangement with God, other “sins”—things like: cruelty (even unintentional), gossip, being phony or false, committing any act of violence, being too zealous or domineering.

It’s interesting to me that we *don’t* think or talk much about atonement, although early Friends accepted the Christian concept of Christ’s death “atoning” for humanity’s sins; for instance, George Fox wrote in his *Journal*: “For I saw that Christ died for all men and was propitiation for all, and had enlightened all men and women with his divine and saving Light and that none could be true believers but who believed in it.” And Barclay, another early Quaker, claimed that “the saving Light of Christ presupposed his atoning death.” So the earliest Friends accepted the Christian concept of atonement—but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Friends span the spectrum on the issue. In the more liberal branch of Friends (of which we at this Meeting are a part) we tend not to think of atonement in those terms. For one thing, we have a bit of difficulty with the idea that salvation was won or bought by the death of one man two thousand years ago.

How did it occur to humans to seek reconciliation with God? I wondered. How and why did a tradition like Yom Kippur begin? Imagine what might have led people several thousand

years ago to consider such an observance, in effect, a group or corporate observance of acknowledgment of wrongdoing to others, and finding a way to make up for it to please a Divinity. Let us roll back the accumulated human knowledge gathered in the past three thousand years to a time when people lived simply and tribally, close to the earth and the elements.

Let's pretend that we are all members of one of those tribes and for simplicity's sake, we all live here in Indian Hill. Most of us have never been farther from here than Mason, where another tribe lives. We've known each other all our lives, we know everything about each other, and we need each other to survive. We watch each other die as closely as we watch each other live. We see the moment the life force leaves, and the body of a loved one becomes a waxy, empty husk.

All around us is mystery. Powerful forces move the sun, moon and stars across the sky; bring rain so we can grow food, or for reasons we can't understand, withhold life-giving rains. Some force controls the life that pulses within us regulating birth, growth, sickness, health, and sometimes sooner, sometimes later—but always, eventually death. We experience the natural world in ways that modern humans can barely conceive of—without telescopes, we know the stars. After years of watching at night, we perceive patterns in the ways some of the stars seem to shift places. Some of the stars twinkle and others don't. At night, we play connect-the-dots with stars, creating figures or animals or humans, giant illustrations for our hero stories. We also know the earth, intimately. We can find water in unlikely places. We know what plants will grow in what kind of soil, what plants will sustain us, what plants will kill or heal us. We know animals as creatures necessary for our survival, not as pets. We know their blood and their flesh

because we slaughter them and use all parts of them to continue our own survival—flesh for food, skin for clothing and shoes, sinew for sewing. Perhaps most significantly, because we live so much in the middle of the natural world, a world outside our tents that we had nothing to do with creating and that we cannot control, we understand that *we* are part of it.

In a community that relies on its members for survival, we know secrets are dangerous—even personal secrets can damage the fragile web of human interaction. Without the benefit of psychology, we grasp intuitively that guilt is destructive, but guilt confessed is guilt released, and that we all get along better if periodically, we make amends for any wrongdoing. Difficult as it is, we understand the dynamics of living together must be guided by more than self-interest.

We make up stories about the forces that animate the world around us. And because we cannot talk much about a force, we talk about it as a great being—greater than we are—more powerful by far, the Creator of all. Our wise elders connect our own behavior with the wishes, behavior and response of that larger force, to teach us that, weak and vulnerable as we are, we have responsibilities to the Creator. We are accountable for what we do to each other and to the Creation. What is the most precious thing we have? Life itself. Do we create it for ourselves? No. Someone gives it to us—and that someone requires certain things of us. We create rituals and ceremonies to mark the passage of time, to try to please that Someone, to imitate the rituals of nature and the seasons. We offer life itself—first as human sacrifice, then as animal sacrifice (which is food, after all, and therefore life too), and finally, we suspect that the force that created life does not want us to destroy it. Instead, that force, which combines all good and all power, prefers that we love each other. But we fall short; we find this very difficult

to do; we are often not even very nice to each other. What shall we do? We can't get away from each other—we have to live together in this small community, year after year, year after year. So what shall we do? Perhaps, once a year, when the cycle of the seasons begins anew, we can also begin anew—clear the broken stalks from the fields of our interaction with others, plow up the earth of our hearts and plant again the seedlings of kindness, integrity, honesty, and mercy. Once a year, we acknowledge our faults and make amends to each other and to that larger Someone who give us life. So perhaps that is how it happened—it was necessary for a group's survival in the days when we lived close to the earth and close to each other.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, except for observant Jews and Muslims, Christians who believe someone else already atoned for them, and those in 12-Step programs, most of us see no need for atonement or making amends, certainly not in any sort of formal way. We rarely deny ourselves anything and are more likely to engage in self-justification for any questionable acts we commit. We rarely admit we were wrong; we're better at "getting on with our lives," better at ending relationships than reconciling with someone. And when is the last time anyone of us apologized to the creator for our thoughtless abuse of the earth and its resources?

This is a loss to humanity, I believe. The concept of atonement rests on the assumption that there is a something greater than ourselves, and a standard outside our own desires by which we should measure our lives. Atonement is based the notion that we can and should be better than we are.

To lead us into the silence, I'd like to do something very un-Quakerly and ask you to read aloud with me—in your bulletin on the “Centering Down” page is “A Litany of Atonement.” Please read with me as you are led.

**“A Litany of Atonement”**

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For falling short of the admonitions of the Spirit

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For losing sight of our unity

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle

which have fueled the illusion of separateness

*We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

*—Robert Eller-Isaacs*