

Readings for 9/16/07

from Blessed Unrest

Paul Hawken

To salve the world's wounds demands a response from the heart. There is a world of hurt out there, and to heal the past requires apologies, reconciliation, reparation and forgiveness. A viable future isn't possible until the past is faced objectively and communion is made with our errant history. I suspect that just about everyone owes an apology and merits one, but there are races, cultures, and people that are particularly deserving. The idea that we cannot apologize to former enslaved and first peoples for past iniquities because we are not the ones who perpetuated the evil misses the point. By receiving sorrow, hearing admissions, allowing reparation, and participating in reconciliation, people and tribes whose ancestors were abused give new life to all of us in the world we share. Making amends is the beginning of the healing of the world. These spiritual deeds and acts of moral imagination lay the groundwork for the great work ahead.

Genesis 22:1-13

The time came when God put Abraham to the test.

*Abraham.*

*Here I am.*

*Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the hills which I will show you.*

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass, and he took with him two of his men and his son, Isaac; and he split the firewood for the sacrifice, and he set out for the place of which God had spoken. On the third day God looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his men,

You stay here with the ass while the boy and I go over there; and when we have worshipped we will come back to you.

So Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and he laid it on his son's shoulder; and he, himself carried the fire and the knife, and the two of them went on together.

Father.

*What is it my son?*

*Here are the fire and the wood but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?*

*God will provide for the sacrifice my son, God will provide.*

And the two of them went on together and came to the place.

There Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and picked up the knife to kill his son; but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven.

Abraham, Abraham.

*Here I am.*

*Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you fear God for you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*

Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He went and took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice instead of his beloved son. So he named the place Jehova-jireh. To this day people still say:

*On the mountain, God will provide.*

Obstinate Are The Shackles

Rabindranath Tagore

Obstinate are the shackles, and my heart aches when I try to break them.

Freedom is all I want;

but to hope for it I feel ashamed.

I am certain that priceless wealth is in You and that You are my best friend,

but I have not the heart to sweep away the tinsel that fills my room.

The shroud that covers me is a shroud of dust and death;

I hate it, yet hug it in love.

My debts are large, my failures great, my shame secret and heavy;

yet when I come to ask for my good,

I quake in fear lest my prayer be granted.

## Faith Above All Fear

High Holy Days  
September 16, 2007  
Rob Eller-Isaacs

The year is always turning. But most of the time we don't notice. Much of the time we resist. We know that the only true constant is change. And still we try to hold on to the past, we guard old wounds as if to heal them would be to deny the legitimacy of our pain. That's why there are certain times of year when every great religious tradition invites us to pay special attention. For Jews and Muslims these present days are such a time. For Jews these are the "Days of Awe" ten days from Rosh Hashanah through to Yom Kippur, ten days which are set aside for healing, for apologies, reconciliation, reparations and forgiveness. Our Muslim neighbors have begun the month of Ramadan. They are fasting from dawn until dusk remembering, "there is no God but God," setting aside routine to pay close attention to the aspects of their lives that matter most.

Today we bow to both our Jewish and our Muslim neighbors. We gratefully acknowledge the many ways these two traditions have nourished and informed our lives. In our own way we join their solemn observances. In our own way we too seek to turn with the turning of the year.

Both Judaism and Islam trace their beginnings back to Abraham. Both traditions tell the old, strong story of a man whose faith demanded first that he leave home and then horror of horrors, that he prove his abject devotion by taking the life of the son that he loved. For Jews that child's name is Isaac. His mother's name is Sarah. Muslims say his name was Ishmael. His mother's name was Hagar. She was a slave in Sarah's household.

As it's told in Genesis God said, "*Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice...*" We know that Isaac was not the only son of Abraham.

One might assume that then, as now, the child of a slave would not be counted. But I interpret the passage quite differently. “Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love...” may well be a seminal story about the beginning of prejudice. Isaac, the “legitimate” child (as if any child could ever be illegitimate) of Abraham and Sarah is lovable, worthwhile, standing to inherit, a worthy descendant of the patriarch. Ishmael, on the other hand is an embarrassment; both he and his mother are worthy only to be cast out into the desert as carrion for crows.

This is not ancient history, friends. It goes on every day. How can we be responsible, we say, for children far away? In Iraq or Afghanistan, in Israel and even here at home we sacrifice our children every day. If you question my logic just follow the money. Budgets always imply values. I won’t indulge my righteous indignation by decrying the costs of the war in Iraq, condemning the spiraling increase in funding for the military/industrial complex, or pointing out the thousand ways the social safety net so many of you have spent your lives weaving, has been unraveled. I care about these things. I know you care as well. But I want to bring the implications of the old, strong story close to home. I want the story to break our hearts wide open.

I can’t even count how many times I’ve sacrificed my children to my complicated, self-important list of things to do. I don’t mean to make you feel guilty but we have a hard time every season finding volunteers to guide and teach the children of the church who are, after all, our best hope that the values we care about most will survive our own brief span of days and years. This year we need teachers at the 11:00 service to be with our children at that all-important threshold time called junior high. At 4:30 we also still need guides and teachers. Too many of us still fall short of our duty to our children, to our church and to the future. So please don’t say the story doesn’t matter anymore. We still need to be reminded even more than once a year of how we sacrifice our children not for the sake of faith but out of fear.

I’m not thinking here of overwhelming fear. That kind of fear leaves no room for conscious choice. The kind of fear I’m thinking

of is far more subtle. This kind of fear begins with that gnawing sense of scarcity. We fear that there will never be enough. We suffer from a deep soul-hunger, an aching emptiness, which causes us to hoard what we have just as misers hoard and guard their gold. It's the hunger itself that breeds the fear. Somewhere along the line we've fallen into the belief that there can never be enough, we've fallen into the delusion that even love is limited. It's not. It isn't true. Anyone who knows anything about love knows love knows no limits. Love is irrepressibly contagious. Love grows of its own accord. Just when we think we've given all the love we possibly can give (or harder still just when we think we've accepted all the love we possibly can take) we somehow reach down and tap into an infinite reserve. In spite of all evidence to the contrary we tell ourselves we have to hold on to what little we have or else risk running out of love.

There is only one cure for this cruel form of fear and it is called faith. Faith begins the moment one first taps into that infinite reserve, that boundless reservoir of love. Life offers us turning points, moments when we realize we simply can't make it alone. It's in those break-through, threshold moments when we're not sure we have the strength to take another step when we realize that only faith can see us through. Call it God, or Spirit of Life, call it Mystery, call it Mother it answers to ten thousand names. Suffice to say there is a strength beyond our own, a power which makes all things possible, including that leap of moral imagination which will "lay the groundwork for the great work ahead."

The story of Abraham and his two sons serves us today as an analogy for unjust divisions in our neighborhood and in our nation. Racism remains our original wound. Disparities of wealth and power plague us yet. Even our best efforts feel like a bare beginning. And we fear we'll settle back into the well-worn ruts of privilege and denial. And so we ask ourselves, what sacrifice does faith demand of us today? What matters as much to us as Isaac must have meant to Abraham? My child? Your child? Our neighbor's children?

I wish that I could lay it out for you. I wish that I could draw a map from here to there. I wish I knew the way so I could lead you to

the Promised Land. I don't. I want to believe we stand together at this threshold moment. I want to believe and I want you to believe as well, that our beloved church and we ourselves are ready to become a place and a people where faith casts out all fear. I know how frightening it is to know the church we love is going to change. The challenge is to hold fast to the values, which under-gird our faith. If we stay true to the best that is in us, if we say true to the best we know, new life will come to us. And it will be abundant.

*“My debts are large, my failures great, my shame secret and heavy;  
yet when I come to ask for my good,  
I quake in fear lest my prayer be granted.”*

Despite our fears our prayers may yet be answered. Despite the many times and ways we slip back into privilege and denial the Dream may yet come true. As Baldwin reminds us so powerfully at the end of “The Fire Next Time,” “If we...do not fail in our duty now we may yet change the world and realize our nation.” Our duty begins when we find the inner strength to allow our hearts to break open in compassion. And then it continues as compassion bids us do the work of justice.

May it be so and Amen.