

Jump Right In (By Accident)!
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My friend, Aran and I have been friends since kindergarten. So when he called me up and asked if I would officiate his wedding in Palo Alto, California a few years ago, I wasn't surprised. I mean, I was studying to be a minister, after all, and many of my friends like to take advantage of that fact when they are planning their weddings.

And so, when he asked, I said yes. I had only officiated two weddings before, but I was confident I was up to the task. Never mind that at the first wedding I officiated, I neglected to tell everyone to sit back down after the bride walked down the aisle, resulting in a wedding ceremony where the entire congregation was standing the whole time.

I said yes, because the second wedding I had done had gone remarkably well, and so, naturally, I was an expert at this wedding business. How lucky for Aran and his soon to be wife Amanda, that I was such an experienced wedding officiant. How lucky for them, that this wedding would go so smoothly.

Now, one thing that you might have noticed about me, is that I'm short. 5'2" to be exact, and both my friend Aran and his wife are roughly a foot taller than I am. I thought it might look funny to have someone so short officiating the wedding of people who were so tall, so I told them ahead of time that I would need something to stand on during the ceremony.

The day before the wedding I arrived at the rehearsal and I find out that they are getting married in front of a fountain with a little ledge on it, about a foot wide and about a foot off the ground. Just big enough for me to stand on during the ceremony.

The rehearsal went smoothly. Everyone joked that I might fall in the fountain and I assured everyone that I can hold my balance.

The next day at the ceremony, everything is going along well. The vows are great, the couple exchanges rings, I deliver a short reflection. Then we get the end where they kiss. Now I don't know how many of you have ever officiated a wedding, but there's something a little awkward about the kiss because the couple is kind of in your face when it happens. And, as it turned out, they were standing a little closer to me than they were during the rehearsal. And they start kissing. And it feels like it's kind of happening in my face, and so I instinctively lean back, just a little.

And so, you know those moments when time sort of moves slowly? I suddenly realized I was leaning back, I was losing my balance, and that I had two options: One, I could fall forward into the kissing couple. Two, I could jump back into the fountain. I figured it couldn't be THAT deep, maybe it would go up to my ankles, so I tried to subtly jump back.

And the fountain went up to my chest.

There's this great picture of this moment, I posted it on Facebook yesterday as a kind of teaser for today's service... And if you didn't see it I can show you today. I'm standing there, submerged in the fountain, with my hand over my mouth. The bride and groom and wedding party are all looking over and in at me. And then, this is the best part I think, you can see that everyone in the audience was holding their camera up, ready to grab this memorable shot.

And I remember the bride, looking down at me, laughing hysterically. "Did you do that on purpose?" She said.

I was lucky, it was the end of the wedding. I jumped out, and pronounced them married, and we all walked down the aisle and out of the wedding. Me in my dripping wet suit.

Friends... Sometimes we make mistakes. All of us. Embarrassing, public, mistakes. I'm sharing this story because I need you to know, that, as your minister, I'm going to make mistakes. I'm going to disappoint you. I'm going to embarrass you. I'm going to take the attention away from you on your special day. I'm not going to speak up for you when I should, and I'm going to speak up when I shouldn't.

And you, you're going to make mistakes, too.

Because this is what it means to be human. Who among us hasn't made a mistake like this? A mistake where you failed at your job. A public mistake. A mistake that you really should have known better than to do.

It was obvious, in hindsight, that I shouldn't have stood on the ledge. People told me not to stand on the ledge. Yet, I still stood on that ledge.

Please tell me I'm not the only one.

In the Jewish traditions, these days between Rosh Hashanah, the start of the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement are a time to ask for forgiveness.

Atonement, or at-one-ment, this day suggests that coming back into relationship with each other and through forgiveness, brings us back into our oneness with each other.

And I've been thinking about the people that I might want to ask for forgiveness from. Because our mistakes aren't always as obvious as falling in a fountain in the middle of a wedding.

And the truth of this is that when I look back at this event in my life, it's hard for me to think of it as anything other than the time I ruined my friend's wedding. Even though he and his wife found it nothing short of hilarious and memorable.

Because, often, it's forgiving ourselves can sometimes be the most challenging thing.

The “Al Chet” is a traditional prayer that is spoken at Yom Kippur. It includes a litany of sins that we must ask God for forgiveness for, and sins we must ask ourselves for forgiveness for.

The Rabbi Michael Learner wrote a modern version of such a litany that states that “On the Jewish High Holy Days, we take collective responsibility for our lives and for the activities of the community of which we are a part. Though we realize that we did not create the world into which we were born, we nevertheless have responsibility for it what it is like as long as we participate in it.”

He goes on to list the sins and mistakes that might resonate with many of us. The sins of tuning out poverty and homelessness. The sin of allowing our world to be poisoned and for allowing climate change to be a reality. The sin of living in a country that values white lives over other lives.

I recognize that the language of sin is a difficult for many people. It’s been difficult for me. So allow me to offer a different definition.

Sin is when you miss the mark. Sin is when you don’t live into your full self. Sin is when you see another as not a full human being, but as an object for consumption.

In other words, sin is something we all do. We are all sinners.

What I love about Yom Kippur is that it does not ask you to ask for forgiveness if, and only if, you have harmed someone directly that you know about. It assumes that you have. It assumes that you have made mistakes. And it gives you the opportunity to forgive others, and, I think most importantly, it gives you the opportunity to forgive yourself.

I think this assumption is important because the fear of imperfection can prevent us from doing the work we need to do, to become our best selves, to live into the vision of this church.

Every time I stand here at this pulpit, every time I am in front of a group, I remember the wedding where I fell in the fountain. It took me a while to forgive myself for it. But I needed to, because part of my job is standing in front of people. And when you are in front of people, the possibility for failure, for mistake, and for sin, is real. The risk is always there.

One area I see this at work at lot is when we talk about race and white supremacy. Sometimes we who are white are so afraid of making mistakes that we stay silent when our voice would have made a difference. And that not speaking up is also a mistake. If we can let go of our need for perfection around this, we can give ourselves the space to take risks and make mistakes. Because we will, that is what it is to be human.

This is also at work in our church, in the work we do with each other. It is impossible for all of us to get everything right 100% of the time. We will disappoint each other, miss deadlines, miscommunicate, and say the wrong thing. It will happen all the time. It does happen all the time. It is part of our blessed, imperfect, beautiful church.

But we are making an even bigger mistake if we allow that fear of imperfection to prevent us from continue to jump in with both feet. To be present. And to forgive ourselves and each other, so that we may begin again in love.

And so let us embrace the imperfect, the failures, the mistakes, and yes, the sins. Let us see them as the opportunities they are to better ourselves. To recommit to the work for love, justice, and compassion. Let us recognize that being involved, living full lives, and taking risks, comes with the chance that we might fail. And let us learn to let go of our need for perfection when we do.

Blessed be and let us say together Amen. Amen.