

Burning of Regrets
December 31, 2017
Rev. Otto O'Connor

When I was little, maybe about 8 years old, I took swimming lessons at the local pool.

Now, those who know me, know that I grew up in Canada, in the very cold city of Ottawa. And so this pool where I took these swimming lessons was a rather large indoor swimming complex that I would go to throughout the winter, on days that were often as cold as, and sometimes much colder than, this one.

(As a side note - you know how cold it's been over the past few days? This is nothing compared to where I'm from!)

In any case, I'd take lessons at the pool and there was this really cool water slide inside it. And, if we were lucky, at the end of our swimming lesson, the instructor would take us up the stairs to the top of the water slide, and we would all wait in line until we were told that we could slide down. There was always a man (probably a teenage boy, now that I think about it) who would look down to the bottom of the slide to get the go ahead from someone else to let the next kid go. You know, so that it was cleared of the first kid and safe, so that we wouldn't crash at the bottom.

One day, I was sitting on the slide getting ready to go and I went before I was given the go-ahead. I'm not sure what happened: Maybe I thought it was ok to go, maybe I slipped and sent myself down ahead of time, maybe I was testing what might happen if I did go down. All I know is that I went down ahead of time before I was supposed to go. And I got in trouble.

Or at least, the man (again, probably in reality another teenage boy) at the bottom told me that he wasn't right that I had gone ahead of my turn. And I don't remember what he said exactly, I don't remember what he looked like, but I do remember feeling this gut wrenching terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt so terrible for what I had done. And I felt that what I had done had made me a terrible person.

Now, mind you, nobody had hurt themselves. The other kid who had gone before me had gotten out of the slide before I got to the bottom.

But after that day I couldn't stop thinking about this terrible thing I'd done.

I spent years, where this incident would pop into my head, and I would feel terrible about myself. I would think about it as a fell asleep at night sometimes, wondering why I had done such a terrible thing.

While it's clear to me now that this was the beginnings of an anxiety disorder starting to emerge, I also know that everyone, to an extent, has felt this way. That we have done

something wrong and that the mere act of doing that thing means that not only is that act wrong, but the feeling that that doing that makes you a bad person.

Ultimately, in some way, that is what regret and guilt are about. And, honestly, sometimes I think, especially in our Unitarian Universalist Churches, regret and guilt get a bad rap. In some ways these emotions help us to see where we have done something wrong, how we might do something differently in the future. And it's important that we have these emotions to help us to see how we might want to change our behavior in the future.

Yet, I didn't need to hold on to this guilt and regret for as long as I did. I learned that I shouldn't go ahead on the slide, and that was that. Move on. It certainly didn't make me a bad person.

And, what's more, my regret and guilt came from the shame that that those people were mad at me. Now, of course, safety is important, but no one got hurt. And so, there was no one I needed to make amends to in this. Especially since I realized what it was that I had done wrong and how I could fix it.

What I needed to do was to be able to release and let go of the guilt and regret that were plaguing me. I needed to forgive myself for falling short. And it, honestly, took me years before I was able to do that.

The reality of being human is that we all are constantly living with these times we have fallen short, times where we have made mistakes, small or big. Not a single one of us escapes this reality. No matter how much we project a perfect exterior, every single person in this room has made mistakes, intentionally or unintentionally doing something to harm another.

As we reach the end of 2017, and everyone is looking forward to their New Year's Resolutions, perhaps this is also a moment to examine our regrets from the past year, the things that burn inside us. Because, if we allow them to sit there inside us, unexamined, we can become paralyzed by them.

Perhaps it was not reconciling with a loved one, perhaps it was a time we yelled at someone when we meant not to, or cut someone off in traffic, or maybe it was something much larger than that.

For some of these things, there are things we can do to make them right again. Perhaps apologies we are due to make. And the end of the year can be a good time to make those.

Like in the Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur around the Jewish New Year, when Jews are encouraged to repent for the wrongs they have committed in the past year, the New Year in our calendar is also a time for reflection and new beginnings. Taking the time to do so can be freeing and worthwhile. Regrets unexamined, regrets that we have not been able to let go of, to reconcile in our lives, can lead us to fear of action in the future. Letting them go, and forgiving ourselves, does not mean that we excuse our behavior; rather it

gives us the opportunity to move forward, knowing we have done all that we can and signifies our intentions to treat each other, and ourselves, with respect and compassion.

For our regrets, for our sorrows of action or inaction, the burden lies in being able to forgive ourselves and let them go. Release them so that we can move forward into the new year with a clean slate. In a moment we will have the opportunity to release those regrets into the world and clear ourselves for a new year full of new relationships and new opportunities.

As a child, I know I could have benefited from time to reflect on these things together, in community. To forgive myself. I hope that you can think of these things for yourself too.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Which means we also believe that we are each more than the worst thing we've ever done. We believe that redemption, that change, is possible.

This is the motive for New Year's Resolutions, after all, isn't it? To become better people, in whatever way we see that? It would be irresponsible for us to do so without looking back and releasing what we regret and have done.

In a moment we will participate in a ritual to release 2017 as we prepare for the new year.

Let us begin.