

**Homily: "Inscribed in the Book of Life"**  
Sept. 28, 2008      Rev. Martha Hodges

I'm a formerly devout atheist who's considerably softened her position on God. Just to be clear, I do not believe in a supreme being, a supernatural entity, a deity that in any way resembles a human being, or one that has a master plan for the world. So how can I say I'm not really an atheist anymore?

I've discovered that a lot of Christians and Jews and other theists share my incredulity when it comes to an understanding of God as the bearded old man in the sky. Believers of a more liberal or worldly stripe share my understanding that this Sistine Chapel kind of God is a metaphor. If "God" is understood as an abstraction – as the interdependent web, for example, or that which is deserving of our ultimate devotion – well, that's a little harder to talk about or tell stories about. And so people resort to the guy in the sky. It's easier to relate to something that looks and acts sort of like us.

This is all preface to my telling you how I think this Jewish tradition of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and those intervening days, the wonderfully named "Days of Awe," have something to say to us Unitarian Universalists, wherever we might fall on the atheism-theism continuum.

I mentioned a couple of ways that the word "God" has meaning to me: as a handy way of referring to the interdependent web that creates and sustains all life, and as the thing, the ideal, the vision, the whatever, that deserves our ultimate devotion. The word "God" suggests lots of other things to me, as well. "The best within us" is one; another is what I guess I can name "life itself" or "all that is" or "ultimate, unknowable reality." Let's just call it "Life." I've found that substituting one of these naturalistic understandings of "God" has opened up all kinds of new sympathies and insights into those who use what UU ministers refer to as "God language."

And I think it works well when I try to understand and wrest some useful meaning from this idea of God writing our names, or expunging them, from the Book of Life at this time of year.

I think we are the ones who decide by our attitudes, decisions and actions, whether or not we will be inscribed in the Book of Life. I don't see the Book of Life as something like our UUCS membership book. I don't see it like a scrapbook, or a contract, a record of our decision to re-up for another year. I don't think it has anything to do with whether we live or die.

But I do see it as a useful metaphor for our choice about whether or not to commit to life, to fully engage with it, to fall in love with life. To stretch the metaphor just a little but further, it's our decision about whether we will live or die spiritually.

And, just for the fun of it, let's decide, for the moment, to call "Life" "God." Now we can understand how this ancient tradition continues to have meaning! The

devout would say, the Book of Life indicates the decision to commit to, to fully engage with, to fall in love with, God! Whether we call this “thing” that we commit to God or Life, the tradition makes sense.

First of all, it demands of us a fearless moral self-inventory. To be inscribed in the book or to simply engage with Life, we are required to present our most authentic selves to the process. If we desire a genuine relationship with God, or with our lives, as the case may be, nothing less will do. We yearn to be known, accepted and embraced for who we really are, whether we seek this relationship with a divine being or with other people or with our own psyche, soul or sense of self. We want to be known for who we really are, flaws and failings, guilts and weaknesses, bad judgment, cowardice, ingratitude and all. For the engagement, the inscription, to mean anything at all, there is no question about this.

And once we’ve taken our own moral measure, we need to do something about it – or so the Jewish tradition teaches us. We need to seek and offer forgiveness, make amends, swallow our pride, resolve to do better... atone. For those of us not given to prayer, which may well be most of us, this is not so easy. Making amends with other people is hard enough... but what about getting right with our own ideals? That’s even harder.

But here’s another thing we can learn from the Jewish tradition of atonement. The God that is prayed to, the God who writes our name in the book, is a forgiving God. He, She or It is willing to give us a fresh start, every year, over and over. To cancel our moral debts. Would that we could be so forgiving to ourselves. Would that we could be so hopeful, so willing to believe in our own moral improvement and ultimate deservingness. Because it’s hard to fall in love with Life, or God, if we believe ourselves to be covered with indelible sin, to be beyond moral repair. We need to find a way to put our deficiencies in perspective. To take the long view. The God’s eye view, if you will. We need to forgive ourselves if we are to begin again in hope – if we are to change. There is a lot of wisdom in this idea of the fresh start, the new year.

But in the Jewish tradition, as in a modern secular understanding of this process, the fresh start does not come for free. And that’s where the eight days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – the Days of Awe – come into the picture. Unfortunately for us, the ritual, the prayer, the fasting, probably won’t work for most of us. But I wonder what the effect of eight days of awe might be. Eight days of awe before the vision of ultimate goodness. Eight days of awe before the wonder and the mystery of Life. Eight days of awe before the full extent of our interdependence. Eight days of awe before whatever we can imagine as God.

I find that prospect almost unimaginable.... Unless... it were to be undertaken in the company of others. Only that kind of shared experience would make eight days of awe bearable and sustainable and ultimately life-giving. The Jews have the High Holy Days. The Christians have Lent. The Native Americans have the sweat lodge and the

ritual dance. The Buddhists have the ashram and the Master. Maybe we should think about starting a spiritual retreat for UUs.

So... once we are spiritually cleansed, filled with hope and good resolve and ready to enter our names once again in that Book of Life... What would that mean to how we lived? What might it mean to **you** to be inscribed in the Book of Life? I would guess that we would get as many answers to that question as there are people in this room, and that's as it should be in a community of free thinkers. What would it mean to you to be fully engaged with Life, fully committed to your very own life?

Another way to ask this question is: In what ways do you connect to the Divine, the sacred, to whatever it is that sustains and makes possible your life?

Many people know God, to use the traditional language, or engage with Life, inscribe their names in the Book of Life, through relationships, especially loving relationships with spouses, friends and children. For others, being fully engaged, a full participant in Life, means exercising their creativity. Or it means making a difference in the lives of others, reducing by some small part the amount of suffering in the world. It might mean intellectual engagement, the discovering of new knowledge or simply fostering a curious mind and lifelong learning. For some it's fun... pleasure, enjoyment of the gifts and blessings of life. Or spiritual exploration or deepening through following one path or practice.

What do these possibilities have in common? Well, they all both take and return energy... passion. They all take and return love; they all take and return joy. They all demand authenticity and hope. And passion, love and joy, authenticity and hope are all qualities that are associated with God and religious feeling. This isn't a coincidence, surely.

To be inscribed in the Book of Life is a religious quest, and not only in the traditional understanding of religion – the scriptural or institutional kind of religion. It is also a religious undertaking in the more liberal understanding of the word “religious” -- that which is of ultimate concern. In that latter sense, we are all “religious.” We all have ultimate concerns. And we all have passion, love, and joy to give to Life. And Life returns passion, love, and joy. Our names are inscribed in the book, etched into its pages with tears – the tears of self-knowledge and atonement. The price of true engagement with Life; the price of all the blessings that await us in this new year.

“Shana tova.” May each one of us have a good and sweet new year.