

September 15, 2018

This is Shabbat Shuvah – the Sabbath of Return, and, as Hank Levine said to me on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, this sabbath is one of the big ones. This is when we're asked to make the commitment to change our lives for the better. This is when we're supposed to be answering for the questions the rabbis ask us every year. Two of those questions are normally along the lines of: Who are you? And - Are you who you want to be?

I'd like to suggest some additional questions, but not quite yet. First I'd like to tell you three very short stories.

The first story is about my best friend Bonnie, whom I had known since grade school. Bonnie – may she rest in peace – was the single most brilliant person I've ever known. She was the top student in every class in school, and she got perfect scores on the SATs. She became an accountant and sailed through the CPA test the first time she took it. Ultimately, she became the controller of a major savings and loan, a top woman in her field. She was also about 200 pounds overweight, and she never had a love relationship in all the time I knew her, which was most of our lives.

In November of 1996, Bonnie and I had a serious conversation about what was going on with us, about our plans and our hopes. And at the end of that conversation she startled me by saying unexpectedly, "You know, I don't much like my life, but I'm used to it." The more I thought about that, the sadder it made me because once I was just like her, but I had met Keith and had learned how to be outrageously happy – and I wanted her to be happy, too, but I thought she was saying that she didn't want to take the risk of trying to be other than she was.

The second story is about someone many of you probably know, and so I would imagine you may also know the story. It's about the person who used to be Barbara Boothby, but never felt right about the "Barbara" part of that. (She has, by the way, given me permission to speak about this tonight, and if I get anything fouled up, I'm sure she'll correct it later.) When I asked the woman formerly known as Barbara what made her decide to change her name to Cora, she told me that she was not the person who was supposed to have that name. Her mother had lost a girl baby whom she had intended to name Barbara, so that name was floating there in the air when the next girl was born – and that next girl grew up to be our Cora.

Cora did not tell me what the tipping point was for her making a decision to finally discard a name that didn't fit and put on one that did, but I'm guessing it was quieter than we might expect. I'm guessing that the gentle inevitability of having to do it was one day irresistible. I imagine that Cora had been either consciously or subconsciously reflecting on Rabbi Zusya, who gets trotted out and quoted a lot at this time of year. You may recall that Zusya said that when we die, God will not ask us why we were not Moses, but why we were not ourselves, and I imagine Cora wanted to be able to say in a clear, firm voice: "I am myself, but I wasn't until I decided to be!"

One more story, a very short one, and then I'll get to the additional questions. This story is about me. Remember how I said that Keith and I were outrageously happy? It's true. It's also true that I discovered by becoming happy that I had never really been happy before I met him. It felt like I had never been the person I wanted to be. Indeed, I got real proof of the feeling's validity when we were moving into our house here in Bellingham.

I was unpacking a box of books and discovered in it a journal I'd kept the year before I met Keith. Finding the journal gave me a great excuse to procrastinate about unpacking the books, so I sat down on the floor and started reading. I was stunned. The woman who wrote that journal was bitter, sarcastic, mean, and angry. It wasn't just that I didn't remember being that woman – I didn't even know her. I recognized nothing about her except her handwriting. I never wanted to be like that again, and I knew that as long as I had Keith, I was safe. Eight years after that, five years ago now, Keith died.

That brings me to the additional questions I've been chewing on since Elul began. The first question, on this Sabbath of Return, is the one that I thought of when I remembered Bonnie: How can someone return to a place that they've never been before? It's not like turning around on a path you know well and finding your way to something that's familiar. Rather, it's like stepping off a cliff and not being sure there's any kind of safety line attached to your belt. Bonnie never found out if she could do it—five months after our conversation, she died.

Cora did it, so the next questions are those that her story brought to mind. How does someone know when a new identity will be right? What makes someone say, "This is the time to become someone I haven't been before"?

I wanted to use those questions instead of the two questions the rabbis have asked just about every year – Who are you? Are you who you want to be? – because the rabbis' questions didn't work for me. *Who am I?* I know who I used to be, but that isn't the person I can be now. *Am I who I want to be?* No. I want to be the person I was with Keith, but I don't have Keith any longer. So the question I added this year and am sharing with you now is one that's very close to me: Who am I supposed to be? In my spiritual lexicon, I phrase it as: Who does God want me to be?

I don't think Bonnie ever found out who she might have been. Cora seems not only to know, but has alighted upon a satisfying way of making it real for herself.

I tell my writing students that they could all write exactly the same story, but they would each write it differently. In the High Holy Days, we Jews go through the same self-reflection, but we are each doing it in our own way. Sometimes we ask ourselves the rabbis' questions, sometimes the questions are our own, and sometimes they can be gifted to us by other people.

So while I'd like to suggest that my final question is something we can all ask ourselves at this time of year, I don't expect anyone else to ask with the words I use. I ask who God wants me to be, but I know that many Jews don't feel comfortable with God talk. So I wondered how I might ask the question in a way that could resonate with other people.

While I was wondering, my friend Susan sent me a question for a completely different reason, and it was like a gift coming out of nowhere. She asked the question: "What's your why?" I immediately stole it for my own purposes.

Why am I on earth? Why am I still alive on a path I have never walked before? I am not who I have ever been. The why of my life is a hard question for me, but this is the time of year I have to try to answer it. And since in Judaism sharing in community is a strong, fundamental value, "What's your why?" is a question I can suggest to anyone who resonates to it and wants to tackle it.

When the rabbis ask us, for Elul, or the Days of Awe, or Shabbat Shuvah, to consider who we are and who we want to be, we might also ask ourselves not just who we are, not just who we want to be, but who we are meant to be – not just how we're living, but why.

I hope that those of you who choose to ask find that you already are who you are supposed to be – but if you aren't, like Bonnie, then I hope you find a rewarding way to become that new person, like Cora.

L'Shana Tovah.