

I spoke with a man in his 70's. He told me with a direct frankness: "I still feel like a man in my 30's. When I look in the mirror, i don't recognize myself. I say to myself: Who is that old man?" It wasn't lost on me that he was telling this to me, a man in my 30's, and perhaps telling me what lies ahead. Perhaps he was telling me: be prepared to be unrecognizable.

It is truly remarkable the limits of what we can see in any given moment. In the Jewish calendar we have just finished with the days of awe leading to the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. It is a common practice during this time to acknowledge those we have hurt or caused harm to in the last year, whether intentional or unintentional, and seek amends. It's a time of asking for forgiveness. Forgiveness is based on the understanding of how short sighted we can be. We fail to understand the full implications of our actions, and only later, sometimes after much reflection do we gain a sense of the consequences of our thinking and behavior.

We have a wonderful saying in English that denotes our propensity to act in ways that are unrecognizable. We say: "that isn't me," meaning that behavior or action - that isn't my true character. That isn't me.

It seems a strange truth that it takes commitment and intention to remain true to ourselves. It takes intention to act in accord with our values. It takes reflection to realize when we act or speak in ways that are unrecognizable to who we most truly are. It is a particular faith that believes that atonement is possible, that we can atone or be at one with our understanding of goodness. It is not always easy to see the light or discern the whole in a life that often feels fragmented and confusing.

We have just entered Fall with the fall equinox, which denotes an equal amount of daylight and night. We are moving away from the amount of daylight we've had in summer, and we are steadily moving toward increased darkness. It is fitting in a way that the Jewish calendar begins with an equal amount of daylight and night, as we surely enter colder and shorter days. There is the request for atonement before the descent into conditions that feel sparse and inhospitable. There is hope for a faith that can see us through difficulty that lies ahead.

As seasons change and we change, it is common to see certain changes as unwelcome.

Even as we recognize the situation in front of us, the person looking at us in the mirror, there may be part of us that is unrecognizable, even threatening. Death is certainly one of these threats. Dylan Thomas sat by his father's bedside as he watched helplessly as he slipped away. His admonition to his father was simple: Rage! Rage against the dying of the light. Even though some things are inevitable, don't let it happen without a fight. I recognize in this poem, a young man's approach to life. Don't just let life happen to you - do something! It's this kind of rage and passion that has been the fuel for great social movements, great music, great poetry from the likes of Thomas, occasionally great sermons. It's an ideology based on burning the candles at both ends...letting the passion of youth burn clean and pure. As a relatively young nation, it is no surprise to me that Dylan Thomas's poem is one of our most famous poems. It's read at memorial services, and recited in just about every high school.

Valerie Dohren speaks from the perspective of a woman who has seen many seasons. She has witnessed the dying of the light and its return year after year. She has witnessed both loss and unexpected joy.

She has witnessed the highs and lows, and has discovered a noble surrender that is not complacent. She acts as a faithful witness to the changes she experiences, and she does not rage, she does not fight. She knows the truth of the wise: that sometimes dark is right. She's willing to be gentle with herself.

I think both poems are beautiful and true. Sometimes it is right to rage - to rage against the dying of the light, and sometimes it is right to be gentle, to welcome the dying of the light. It is important that we recognize both. It is important that we identify with the light - it's clarity and warmth and it's important that we recognize the night, the unknown, as also part of who we are.

I responded to the man in his 70's when he told me that he didn't recognize himself, that I would be happy if I looked like him when I was his age - fit and still full of passion. This did not comfort him or make him feel better. He told me in a knowing tone: "You'll feel differently when you get to me my age." Perhaps he's right.

In fact, I'm almost certain he's right in one respect. It is a guarantee that some aspect of our living will be unrecognizable, something we can't fully acclimate too. It may be external or something internal. It may be an action or a certain way of thinking. It will probably be some combination of both that disrupts the story of who we are. Some aspect that when we look at squarely causes us to say in all seriousness: that isn't me.

This disruption, this uncomfortable sense of being unrecognizable is the first step toward true forgiveness. Some people mistake forgiveness to be limited to our own wrongdoing. They think that God may need to forgive them personally, and that this will lead to atonement. I think this is only part of the picture. I think true forgiveness is mutual. In the same instance that we recognize our harm toward others, in the ways that we've acted in discord with our best selves, I think we are being invited to do something which is most difficult and necessary. We are being asked to forgive being unrecognizable to ourselves. We are being asked to forgive life for turning out the way it did, and for ourselves turning out the way we turned out.

Sometimes it is good to rage, to rage against that which is unrecognizable to us, to give us the resolve to stick to our passion and values. It is important at times to correct complacency and lazy morality, and offer a sense of direction toward that which we recognize to be good. And sometimes it is good to be gentle, to let go, and give ourselves fully to being unrecognizable.

We can only do the latter if we believe forgiveness is possible. We can only go gently if we have some trust that the direction that we are moving toward is atonement or becoming at one with the way things are. Many of us do not have this trust, and that is understandable, and actually fine. Here's the spoiler - Atonement does not depend solely on our active participation. We are at one with the way things are every moment of our living. The difference is, without our participation, we may never recognize this. We may live our whole life unrecognizable to ourselves.

It is natural to rage against the demands life places on us, to change in ways we never gave our consent to. It is natural to rage against being unrecognizable. But there is another way.

Valerie Dohren shows us how. "Go gentle into that good night." We can enter the night. We can enter that which is unrecognizable, the place beyond our limited sight, and trust that it is good. Our life contains a vision beyond our limited sight. As the seasons change, and the light grows dimmer, as we are atoned with or without our awareness. Trust the night. Trust that it is a good night.