

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION



“At-one-ment”



A WORSHIP SERVICE OFFERED BY THE REVEREND NATHAN C. WALKER
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Introduction

There are six single candles on the chancel. The three red candles each represent one of the three million people who died last year from AIDS (Annan 2005). The three orange candles symbolize the three million people who are currently suffering from the diseases and deformities that were caused when America used chemical warfare during Vietnam known as Agent Orange (Young 2002; Griffiths 2003).

Let us dedicate the following song to those suffering from AIDS and Agent Orange by singing it throughout the service (*a cappella*).

We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
For we're people with a vision
Who fall down and get up ¹

Atonement

Atonement. Although the term was only recently added to versions of the New Testament², the Hebrew Scriptures have historically used the word *Atonement*. In the Jewish context, Yom Kippur serves as the day where one atones for sins between man and G-d. “To atone for sins against another person, you must first seek reconciliation with that person, righting the wrongs you committed against them if possible” (Rich 2005). That must all be done before Yom Kippur. In traditional Christian theology atonement occurs on that fateful moment when Christ Jesus, the son of God, is sacrificed on the cross to atone for the sins of humanity. Both of these theologies rest upon the belief in a Biblical God who chooses a group of people, a God who uses disease as a form of punishment, and a God who considers human sacrifice and suffering as redemptive.

Today we will look closely at this theology of atonement in the context of two contemporary catastrophes: the red ribbon on my right breast brings our attention to the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the orange ribbon on my left breast is in memory of the three generations who continue to suffer as a result of America's use of Agent Orange. These cases will help us examine a simple question: does a traditional theology of atonement truly bring reconciliation?

¹ Adapted from the lyrics and music of Kyle Matthews made popular by Donnie McClurkin.

² See Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary: “The word [atonement] does not occur in the Authorized Version of the New Testament except in Rom. 5.11, where the Revised Version the word “reconciliation” is used.

The Red Ribbon

To answer this question, let us reflect on the words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict the sixteenth. "In his letter on *the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, he states that the practice of homosexuality is the cause and the vehicle for spreading AIDS to large numbers of people. The entire community is put at risk because of the moral depravity of gay men" (Goss 1993).

The Rev. Dr. Jerry Falwell agrees. "AIDS," he says, "is a lethal judgment of God on America for endorsing this vulgar... perverted lifestyle... God also says those engaged in such homosexual acts will receive '...due penalty of their error.' God... is bringing the judgment against this wicked practice through AIDS" (Falwell 1987).

These are conservative theologies of atonement, one that is *not* held by all Christians or Jews. It is a theology that affirms a God of Wrath who uses disease to punish; a God who uses disease to teach homosexuals of their errors; a God who uses suffering to atone for human transgression.

Is this the theology we want to use as we care for those who lost over 3 million people last year to AIDS? Is this the theology that will truly reconcile those who are currently suffering from this pandemic? The United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan tells us "about three quarters of the world's AIDS deaths every year occur in Africa, with women the most affected" (Annan 2005). In New York City, African American and Latina women are the highest at-risk population. Are we going to tell these women that their disease is God's will? What will we say to the 4.9 million people, who last year, were newly infected with HIV (UNAIDS and WHO 2005)? In the United States, how do we tell African American women aged 25-34 that the leading cause of death for them is HIV infection (CDC 2006). How do we convey that African American and Hispanic women together represented about 25% of all US women [6], yet, in 2004, they accounted for 81% of the estimated total of AIDS diagnoses for women?

Do we tell these women of color, do we tell the heterosexuals that they are innocent victims; and to the homosexuals, do we tell them they are guilty? Do we tell the gay that their sins will be atoned through suffering with AIDS? Do we tell the sinner that we love him but not his sin?

Or do we have the courage, like many liberal theologians, to stand and say that this theology of atonement becomes what it sets out against. Rather than creating a reunion of those who suffer, it divides; rather than heal it scars. Do we have the strength to say, "No this narrow theology of atonement does not reconcile"? It uses human constructs of hate and discrimination to dualistically pit one people against another.

Could it be that the theists in our movement, in the world, crave a truly redemptive theology: a theology of love, a universal theology of hope, a theology of at-one-ment?

For a theology of at-one-ment rejects a God of Wrath and reclaims a Universalist Love, reliving a Universal salvation... a love uncaged by any human ability to hate and to discriminate. For this transcendent mystery moves beyond all human projections and manifests as an egoless presence.

This essence is not bound by human desire and want; this egoless lower-case g-o-d does not have the capacity to choose you and not me. A theology of at-one-ment

views disease not as a punishment but as a biological malady which calls us to prevent it from taking yet another life.

This means that redemption comes when we commit ourselves to be at-one with all who suffer. This means we are called to teach one another how

- to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases;
- to teach our children that responsible intimacy is necessary to the preservation of life;
- to recognize the intersectionality of oppressions between people of color and homosexuals;
- to teach the world that everyone, everyone is worthy of love, health, and happiness.

And this is why on my right breast i³ wear the red ribbon. And in solidarity with all those suffering with HIV and AIDS we sing as one:

We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
For we're people with a vision
Who fall down and get up

Maybe i am too quick to dismiss this traditional theology. Am i too reactionary? Maybe as an openly gay man i am taking this too personally and failing to see the legitimacy of atonement. Am i becoming what i set out against? Maybe i am turning into a raging liberal fundamentalist.

Many of my dearest friends and family members are Christians and believe in the atonement i described. My seminarian colleagues speak sincerely about redemption through suffering and they are sometimes moved to tears when recounting the moment on the cross when humanity's sins were atoned. When hearing them, tears roll from my face because i'm scared by the consequences of this dominant theology... and yet at the same time i am humbled by their faith.

My concern lies not in this specific belief but how this theology can be used to dehumanize and marginalizing the oppressed. We know that it is possible because *people we know* apply the theology of atonement to present day suffering. We heard it in the words of various religious leaders who believe that suffering is God's will. Let's look at another case and ask ourselves if God may be using diseases to atone for human sin.

³ In all my professional writing i use the “*equalized personal pronoun*” – a formal conjecture that questions why English is the only language in the world that capitalizes the self. As a result, i use a lower case pronoun to reposition myself in my sentences and to reflect upon customs that teach me to put myself in dominance.

The Orange Ribbon

Let's look at Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer, soft-tissue sarcoma, spinal bifida, and type-2 diabetes. What do these and numerous birth defects and various respiratory cancers of the lung have in common? They all can result from being exposed to Agent Orange: a code name for a colorless herbicide used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to defoliate the environment, to eliminate all sources of food, and to force the Vietnamese into captivity.

Three years ago, the National Academy of Sciences funded a report that concluded over 3,000 villages were sprayed directly with these herbicides; that means up to 4.8 million people would have been present during the spraying of Agent Orange, which was contaminated with TCDD Dioxin – the most toxic chemical known to science⁴.

Last November i attended an Agent Orange lecture at Community Church in Manhattan, a Unitarian Universalists congregation. There, i met Ho Sy Hai, an army truck driver from Tai Binh who suffers from chronic hepatitis, ulcers, prostate cancer, and diabetes. He is now sixty-one years old and he explained that his wife gave birth to four children: two of whom are severely deformed and the other two were stillborns⁵. Did America know the affect that dioxin would have on three generations?

“Dr. James Clary, a former senior scientist at the Chemical Weapons Branch⁶ of the U.S. Air Force writes: ‘When we initiated the herbicide program in the 1960s, we were aware of the potential for damage due to dioxin contamination in the herbicide. We were even aware that the military formulation had a higher dioxin concentration than the civilian version due to the lower cost and speed of manufacture. However, because the material was to be used on the ‘enemy’, none of us were overly concerned” (Clary 1988; Zumwalt 1990).

This brings new meaning to a speech delivered by the U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powel. Do you remember on February 5, 2002 he told the United Nations Security Council that, “No country in the history of chemical warfare has had more battlefield experience with chemical weapons since the First World War than Sadam Hussein's Iraq.” If this is true, then i wonder if the United States of America would be the runner up.

The Vietnam Association of Agent Orange filed a class action lawsuit against several U.S. companies who developed and produced dioxin. In March of last year the judge dismissed the suit because Agent Orange was not considered a poison under international law at the time. This is ironic, considering he was the same judge for the

⁴ The Kofi Annan reminds us that “during the Vietnam War, millions of tons of Agent Orange were spread over that country's jungles, stripping vast areas of vegetation, some of them still unsuitable, event today, for agricultural use” Annan, K. (2004). Message on the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflicts, United Nations.

⁵ To learn more about the affects of Agent Orange please read Griffiths, P. J. (2003). Agent Orange : "collateral damage" in Viet Nam. London, Trolley.

⁶ Air Force Armament Development Lab in Florida

1984 case where chemical companies that manufactured Agent Orange paid \$180 million dollars into a fund for U.S. veterans.

You see, the Vietnamese were not the only victims of this chemical warfare. “For any veteran who served in Vietnam between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975, and has one of the [said] diseases, the Department of Veterans Affairs must presume that they were exposed to herbicides and their disease is service connected” (Young 2002).

Guilty v. Innocent

How would Pope and Rev. Fallwell respond to diseases that are service connected? Would they say that God willed it? If so, is God punishing the veterans for their sins? Or maybe they are like the heterosexuals with AIDS who are innocent victims. That would make guilty the Vietnamese because they were the “enemy,” right? Who is guilty in the case of Agent Orange?

We are. We are the American educators who taught our scientists how to invent chemical warfare; we are the American chemists who knew our inventions would be used in war; we are the American business leaders who profited from the sale of dioxin; we are the elected politicians who justified an unjustifiable war; we are the U.S. military leaders who would do anything to exterminate the enemy.

We are the ones who played God.

We once believed in a God of Wrath who inflicts diseases on the sinner; we once believed we were justified to do God’s work and, at any cost, to exterminate our enemy. We once believed suffering was redemptive. And we are the ones who became what we set out against.

And this is why we sing with deep remorse:

We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
We fall down but we get up
For we’re people with a vision
Who fall down and get up

Are we people with a vision? If so, what is the essence of our vision? My hope is that the theists in our movement will construct a theology of *at-one-ment*, drawing upon our Universalist ancestors who call us to imagine an ever present and transcendent egoless god of love.

My hope is that the humanists in our movement will construct a philosophy of *at-one-ment*, calling us to use the principles of love in our interactions, our policies, our inventions; guiding us to heal the wounds of war.

My hope is that as anti-oppression leaders we will defend the rights of gays and racial minorities; of the Vietnamese and the Veterans.

I believe in this vision. I believe that we are a community of hope, a community of resistance, and a community of healing. I know this vision is possible! Why? Because i saw first hand how this practice of at-one-ment can be redemptive:

At-one-ment

Last year at Community Church i saw two people make a simple exchange: a Vietnam veteran and a Vietnamese civilian turned to one another, shook hands and said, "How do you do?" In that pedestrian exchange i saw two people, once at war, now in solidarity around their common suffering. They came together to tell their stories; they came to speak the truth and to reconcile the past.

As i stood leaning against a pillar of the church, i could not help but cry. I was merely a fly on the wall, observing a simple exchange of compassion. I did not know either of them and i am not certain they knew one another before that moment. And yet i sensed they were at-one, just as i was with them.

In their memory i wear the orange ribbon on my left breast. On my right breast i wear the red ribbon to remember those who suffer from HIV and AIDS. The space between these two ribbons holds my deepest aspiration: to be at-one.

1. To be at-one is to witness how we fall down so that we may help others get up;
2. To be at-one is to ensure that no other human being will ever suffer like Ho Sy Hai and his family;
3. To be at-one is to ask the AIDS victim: "How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful?"
4. To be at-one is to teach the world's scientists, inventors, and business leaders to never profit from the death of a living being;
5. To be at-one is to reform this nation from a once unilateral global power into a country whose commitment to freedom is not simply a political slogan but a way of life;
6. To be at-one is to acknowledge that redemption comes when we recognized another's suffering as our own;
7. To be at-one is to rise and to sing and to imagine how we are responsible for creating a wonderful world.

Closing Hymn

"What a Wonderful World"

"I see trees of green, red roses too. I see them bloom for me and you, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world. I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world. The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky are also on the faces of people going by. I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do, they're really saying I love you. I hear babies crying, I watch them grow, they'll learn much more than I'll ever know, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world. Yes, I think to myself, what a wonderful world" (G. D. Weiss and B. Thiele).

For Additional Study

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Visit Tracey R. Rich's www.JewFAQ.org for more on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

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