



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Birthday of the World

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One of the most delightful memes to make its way across my Facebook feed these past weeks has been “describe yourself in three fictional characters.” Have you done this?

Think on it for a second. Three fictional characters who reveal some essential part of yourself. Scroll back through the books, the television shows, the movies. Who might you choose?

This exercise was a fun distraction for me. After agonizing about what decade and genre to focus on, I’ve settled on three female characters worthy of representing me. What do you think of these?

The first, Lisa Simpson – I grew up of a Simpsons generation—with a brother who at times was very Bart-like and a much younger sister. Lisa’s an intellectual with a strong liberal politic and moral compass which sometimes sets her apart from her family, and can sometimes be a little preachy. You get the drift.

Second, Katniss—she’s a reluctant warrior, forced to compete as a tribute from her district in the brutal Hunger Games. She’s fierce, brave and resilient and always trusts her instincts.

And third, Rabbi Raquel on Transparent. Transparent tells the story of the complicated, flawed Pfefferman family, on a journey of transition: emotional, spiritual and physical. The family’s Judaism is featured prominently, exploring a haunting history of fleeing the Holocaust and their struggle to make Judaism relevant to their lives. Rabbi Raquel is a single woman leader of a Los Angeles temple who becomes deeply involved with the Pfefferman family. Rabbi Raquel is compassionate yet direct, serious about her spirituality, with one foot in tradition and one foot in the modern world. She’s my third and favorite fictional character.

I wonder which three you picked if you played this internet game, and which you might pick if you did. Whichever three you choose, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung might say that we would choose characters that represent the universal, mythic characters within each of us. The characters we relate to illuminate some essential quality of our humanity we are drawn to exploring, uniquely interpreted through the arc of the character’s development. Some, like Katniss fit the bill of Jung’s hero. Some simply reflect the truth of an ordinary reality, amplifying untold stories our culture needs to help us become more human. In the case of Rabbi Raquel, I’ve never seen a story like hers told: a progressive female clergy member following her heart and her faith, imperfectly navigating her way through life, love and leadership. The show never shies away from religious themes, vividly depicting the family history of fleeing the Holocaust and probing the idea of epigenetics and transmitted generational trauma. It is no surprise that the Jewish holidays feature prominently and the show’s release before the High Holidays seems no mistake.

In the first scene of the new season, we see Rabbi Raquel in her gym clothes practicing her Passover sermon alone on the bima, then out on a run going over the details again. In a riveting monologue, she's telling the story of the Israelites journey from slavery to freedom, zooming in on one particular moment when the enslaved Israelites are delivered the message that they are in fact free, no longer beholden to their Egyptian captors.

"Thoughts on Passover. You wake up, with two words emblazoned on your chest. It's time. You're gonna make a break for freedom. You will not be a slave anymore. You get out of bed, you grab your things, you run outside, and then, there you are, free.

First light of day
behind you is your past
everything you came from
everything you thought you knew
you start running
as you run, you listen for the voice of the divine
but you hear nothing
so you stop
you listen closer
what, what is that
is it nothing?
No, it is stillness."

The Jewish High Holidays are known as the days of awe. The great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel one taught: *Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality. Awe enables us to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to feel in the rush of the temporal the stillness of the eternal.*

The Days of Awe proclaim that we are all always in transition, somewhere between what we have been and what we wish to become. In the Hebrew bible, Psalm 90 says "teach us to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom." Tonight, as Rosh Hashanah begins, the Jewish holidays usher us into a different kind of time, to ponder the significance of time itself, and to humbly find our place within.

The Jewish holidays give us an opportunity to locate ourselves within the expansiveness of time, to bring us new insights and chasten our days ahead. There is no greater way to feel humbled than to feel ourselves a part of the history of the universe, a tiny speck on the vast timeline of history. Rosh Hashanah, or the head of the year, held on the first day of the Hebrew month of Tishri, is known as the "birthday of the world." Contemporary Judaism gives us permission to consider both God's creation of the world, the "in the beginning" the account in the book of Genesis, and the big bang theory of a suddenly and exponentially expanding universe. There is room for both Einstein and for Adam and Eve.

While the universe evolves, it is this finite planet that appears far more imperiled. The last news from Aleppo shows no sign of an expanding universe, only a haunting shell of a city once

alive and thriving. The frequency and insidiousness of global terror seems like a cancer metastasizing in every cell of the globe. And then, the planet's rising tides and temperatures. And yet, every day, children are born, bringing new hope to the world. Every day there is ever evolving beauty, creativity and human achievement. Every day is a chance to start again. The planet expands and contracts, as do our lives.

Czeslaw Milosz was a Polish poet writing in the time of World War II, a witness to the rise of authoritarianism and the destruction of the Holocaust. His poem "Song at the End of the World" paints a picture of a bucolic picture of a day seemingly like every other, with one exception. It is the last day, and no one believes it. All signs show that the world is ending in some other place, and yet our days are relatively unmarred until tragedy and crisis tear at our fabric. As the world is created and destroyed each day, we do not know how and when it will end. But we can decide how we will work towards its repair.

Rosh Hashanah invites us to imagine the role we play in the creation of the world and also its destruction. The poet Marge Piercy asks these questions of herself in her piece "Birthday of the World." How much have I put on the line for freedom? For mine and others? As these freedoms are pared, sliced and diced, where have I spoken out?

This season of awe invites us to pause, to listen into the silence and reflect on our own beginnings and endings. How did we begin our life's journey, and what might we wish to leave behind as a legacy at the completion of our lives? How might we live in the next year as if it were our last? Czeslaw Milosz writes, "There will be no other end of the world." Nor will there be no other beginning but today.

Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, is celebrated each year as the wars rage on and election cycles churn. Freedom isn't simply given, but something you will into being only by taking full account for your own life. There is no messiah waiting in the wings to set you free, no prophet to deliver you to safer ground. Only your own worthy life to embrace and savor. Only these precious lives of your beloveds you can help set free. Only you know what you want to change, and what you resist.

So what will you create, and what will you let go of in this year to come?

How will you work to set yourself and others free?

Who are you waiting for to give you permission to change?

The book of life is open, but you will write the story.

I come back to the Rabbi, practicing her sermon, still seeking its resolution.

“You’re waiting for a miracle. You’re waiting for the sea to part. Well, that’s an old miracle. So what about this? What if the miracle was you? What if you had to be your own messiah? Then what?”

Shana Tova, to a sweet new year.
Amen and blessed be