

Who Redeems Fallen Tears or What I Know So Far

For Pete

One of my formative memories is of the old Morrison Planetarium at the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park. I remember standing as a child with my cheeks pressed against the cool brass railing that encircled Foucault's Pendulum. I held my brother's hand as through the rails we watched, hypnotized, as the enormous brass orb like a grandfather clock swept silently past, back and forth, back and forth. As it did, I caught fleeting glances of my reflection in its polished face.

Foucault's Pendulum demonstrates that the Earth rotates on its axis. An electromagnet pulling on the cable above and the force of gravity on the orb below keeps it swinging back and forth, back and forth, while our ever-spinning planet earth exerts a tiny force to shift the pendulum's path a little bit with every swing. To our naked eye, the changing path of Foucault's Pendulum is imperceptible. But the earth keeps on turning. The pendulum's path keeps on changing. We never see its changing path, only its effect on the precisely sixty, two-inch aluminum pins evenly spaced apart on the ground around the pendulum to form a perfect 360-degree circle.

When I was a child, life was about the anticipation of the giant brass orb of Foucault's Pendulum as it drew ever closer to the next pin. Life was about every thirty-third minute, when the orb finally swept over another aluminum pin that meekly fell with a "tink!" Life was about being with my brother, children pressed against the railing who erupted with delight, overjoyed by the achievement, enthusiastically waiting as the next pin entered the pendulum's inevitable path and passage of time. We had no reason to look back at all the other pins left fallen in the pendulum's wake or to speculate on how many pins we would be around to see fall.

But we are adults now. Rosh Hashanah is our Foucault's Pendulum. Back and forth. 5775. Back and forth. 5776. Back and forth, with the world every day exerting a tiny but constant force that we never notice until we come together for the High Holy Days to recognize that another year has been swept aside and a New Year now stands in the inexorable path of time. 5777. We are not the majestic, brass orb of Foucault's Pendulum. We are the aluminum pins who will be swept aside, with one more year lived and one less year left to live.

One of the great gifts we receive as your clergy is we get to spend time with you in every stage in the cycle of life. We are there with you in joy when your children and grandchildren enter the Covenant of Abraham, with you as they become *b'nei mitzvah*, and when they marry. In the predominant order of life, we are there with you in sadness when you are ill, and then we are with your spouses, children, grandchildren, and friends as we grieve your death and our loss. Because our days are often spent moving with you from one life cycle to the next, we become

accustomed to and accepting of the cycle of life and death. We each have our ways of self-preservation, of reconciling and rationalizing the inevitable suffering and loss. Until eleven days ago, I had mine.

I believed that I had to prove the worth of my existence. This is why I have always loved the urgent themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we reconcile each other and with God and pray we might again be written and sealed in the Book of Life. Until eleven days ago I was prepared to stand on this pulpit and tell you that there was a way to demonstrate the worth of our existence, that there was an antidote that would transform the tears we shed over failure, regret and loss. Until eleven days ago I believed that we could justify our existence and redeem our fallen tears through the Jewish values of *tzedek*: justice and righteousness; *brachah*: blessing and wellbeing; and *shalom*: wholeness and integrity.

But eleven days ago, I was unmasked. Eleven days ago, I began to realize these beliefs were a delusion. Eleven days ago Pete died. Our beloved maintenance man and my friend Pete Clark died suddenly. I began to question this need to earn my right to exist. I exist. Why do I need to justify it? I am no more deserving of being alive when I pursue *tzedek*: a just society and a world perfected. My existence is not validated every time I offer a blessing saying, "*Baruch Atah*," praising God as the source of bounty and abundance. And I do not embrace the essential brokenness that is a part of the hidden wholeness of *shalom* to explain why I am alive. I do it because I am alive.

And why do I need to redeem my tears? Tears have intrinsic value. Judaism values crying. The *mitzvah* during the High Holy Days is to listen to the sound of the shofar and to the *Shevarim*, the three medium-length wails whose sounds echo the sobbing cries of the Jewish heart, and to let its cries crack us open to free our own tears. "The one who does not shed tears on Rosh Hashanah bears witness to the deadness of his soul," wrote the Sages.

So, cry. Cry about failures. Cry over regrets. Cry for losses. Not one single tear needs to be redeemed. And if you cannot cry, our Rabbis taught that when a person needs to cry, and wants to cry, but cannot – this is the most heart-rending cry of all.

We do not need to demonstrate the worth of our existence. We do not need to redeem our fallen tears.

Somehow, that same man who as a child stood hand-in-hand with his brother at Foucault's Pendulum forgot what Rosey Grier taught him in "Free to Be, You and Me." Rosey Grier was 6'5" and weighed 284 pounds. He was a three-time All-Pro defensive lineman for the New York Football Giants and the Los Angeles Rams. But I knew him as the giant man with the tiny guitar

who sang to me, "It's alright to cry, crying gets the sad out of you. It's all right to cry. It might make you feel better."

Somehow, on my way to becoming a man paying more attention to proving I deserved to exist than experiencing my existence. On my way to becoming a man, I started paying more attention to the fallen pins marking passages and trying to live up to however much life I had left. I forgot the very end of Rosey's song, when he stops singing, looks right into the camera and says, "It's all right to cry, little boy. I know some big boys that cry, too." A cry is a cry. Tears do not need to be redeemed. Tears have intrinsic worth all on their own.

A story. Rabbi Yochanan traveled to visit his student, Rabbi Eleazar, who lay dying. He arrived at last in the heat of day at Eleazar's one-room home of black basalt in the green hills of the Galilee. Yochanan knocked. He entered his student's home. Because of the contrast between the brightness of day and the darkened room, at first Yochanan saw nothing. But on his bed in the dark with his eyes accustomed to the dim light, Eleazar the student beheld his beloved teacher and he burst into tears. Still unable to see but recognizing his student's voice by the sound of his sobbing, Rabbi Yochanan called out: "Eleazar, why do you cry? Are you crying because you regret not learning enough Torah? You learned to the best of your ability. Are you crying because you will never attain great prosperity? Few eat from both the tables of wisdom and wealth." Yochanan fingered the bone of his own dead son that he kept in his pocket as a reminder and said, "My dear student, are you crying because your life has been so full of suffering and loss? This is a fact of being alive."

At last, Yochanan's vision adjusted to the dark and he saw Eleazar was looking him dead in the eye. "Master, I cry for what I did not learn. I cry for what I did not earn. I cry for the suffering I endured. I even cry because no matter what we do, all of this and all of us will one day return to the earth. There is no need to turn my tears into something else. Let me cry."

With Eleazar's words, Yochanan stopped. He reached out to his student. "Give me your hand," Yochanan said as he sat down beside Eleazar. The two men took one another's hands and they cried together. Fallen tears do not need to be transformed into a higher purpose. All we can take each other's hands and cry in the darkness together.

As we go forward from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, I invite you to let go of your awareness of the inevitable march of time. I invite you to release the need to demonstrate the value of your existence. I invite you to welcome your tears for no other purpose than to feel them.

Twelve days ago my beliefs held that a life of justice, wholeness and blessing justified our existence and redeemed our fallen tears of failure, regret and loss. But eleven days ago a tragedy

befell us and I began to realize my beliefs were no more than a long daydream that protected me from my own vulnerability.

As we go forth into the Days of Awe, may each of us use this sacred time to explore the beliefs we hold and the realities we construct. I bless us with the courage to bring every aspect of our lives into the light of day, and with the honesty that allows us to live lives of integrity, gentleness and truth.

Y'hiyu l'ratzon Imrei fi v'hegyon li-bi l'fanecha, A-do-nai tzu-ri v'go-a-li.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, my Rock and My Redeemer.

Amen.