Here’s something you don’t learn every day, the Greek physician, Hippocrates who everyone knows for the phrase in the medical profession, “do no harm,” also believed that people’s personalities were governed by the amount of phlegm, blood, black bile and yellow bile that flowed through their bodies. These fluids and their amounts determined our personality from birth and permanently indicated what type of people we would be. As a result, Hippocrates believed that people could not change, because their constitution was set by blood from birth. Our fluids determined our character.

Well, I guess no one was perfect. He got the do no harm part right, but no so much on the character aspect. Lesson number 1, we don’t have to be perfect to make a lasting contribution.

Judaism has long discarded the bile notion of character. Our tradition teaches us but we can always change.

Tonight I want to speak about this ability to evolve. What makes up who we are? Why do we believe what we do? Why do we see the world the way we do? Psychologists speak of the tension between nature and nurture. Hippocrates was clearly in the nature camp. But that is only half of the story, as we all know. Our level of optimism, our perspective on life can be set from early childhood. Conversely, our political views may have developed over years. There are some things that are written in the very essence of our being and others that are learned over time.

But maybe we can will ourselves to be different. Think about it. We say, but do we believe it? I do.

Let me tell you about a remarkable woman who quite simply, willed herself to be different. Her name is Dr. Catherine Steffens. When the pandemic lockdowns began, she
noticed that her daily routine before, after and during Covid didn’t change very much. It unsettled her that her regular life so closely resembled her quarantine life. Then, in January, her 29-year-old husband died from an aggressive form of cancer. Her husband loved to sail and fly, but Dr. Steffel had always been more cautious and work-oriented. In honor of his memory, she decided to change, and embrace his zeal for living. She created a bucket list of new activities that her husband embraced and to try doing them when it was safe. So this past May and June, as Covid numbers fell, she tried dog-sledding, glassblowing and visited an alpaca farm. In short, she got out of her comfort zone and began to change. Social interactions had always made her tired and anxious, so she forced herself to become more extroverted. Happier at home, she took classes full of strangers. She pushed herself to be more open to new experiences. She coped with her newfound anxiety by writing in a journal and doing yoga. She’s also started to see a therapist. With help she wrote, “I yearn to identify where I want to go and who I would like to be in the future. I WILL not be the same person when I come out of Covid quarantine.”

So here is a woman who is willing to change who she is. My friends, that is one of the core teachings of Kol Nidre; we can change. The prayers we chant encourage us to be better, wiser, more loving. Imagine for a moment using this Yom Kippur coupled with Covid isolation to be like a caterpillar that goes into its cocoon for the sole purpose of emerging reborn into a butterfly?

For many of us, no one has seen us for almost two years. Many may have forgotten what we even looked like. With all the filtering going on out there with Zoom, I’m not even sure what I look like. It might be possible that some don’t remember what we acted like. Now is the time to shed our negative behaviors and our contrary tendencies, the way our zoom filter gets rid of the wrinkles.

This evening, I want to focus on five ways that we can reinvent and reemerge. If we are shy, we can be more extroverted. If we are timid and apprehensive, we can learn how to be open to new experiences. If we are emotional mercurial, we can work on our stability and dependability. If we are, how you say, a tad difficult, we can work on being more agreeable. Lastly, this is our time to raise our moral sensitivity and to courageously confront the racial, gender, environmental, economic and political injustice in the world.
Our faith teaches us that we can change not by thinking about a new way of living, but acting in a new way that will ultimately impact our thinking. Naaseh ve Nishmah, our torah teaches. Do and then believe. Act to change your character.

If we want to be more extroverted, we might sign up to speak in front of people (after Covid,) go to a bar or make the effort to talk to strangers. And after a few weeks many people will begin to think of us as outgoing. And then we will transform the way we see ourselves. Try taking on a new role or behavior style that represents the personality trait that we seek. If we act as if we are this new person, overtime we will convince ourselves that these roles are our real selves. If we fear that other people will reject us socially, imagine for a moment what it would feel like if we were the life of the party and other people sought to be with us. We should behave as if, we are Glinda in Wicked, the popular one. Going into a social interaction expecting the worst as many socially anxious people do, tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we are essentially shy, try being friendly. Force yourself to strike up a conversation with someone you do not know. When you go shopping in the future, try chatting with someone in the check-out line. The more we force ourselves to be extroverted, the more we will become extroverted. Fake it till you make it.

If we feel closed off to new experiences either because we are afraid or set in our ways, try compelling yourself to explore a new experience. For as long as I can remember, Laurie refused to go on a cruise with me. I, as you may know, love the sea, being raised in Miami Beach. Laurie on the other hand, was raised in Minnesota. She is a land-lover and has always been frightened by the idea of a huge ship made of steel floating on the water. As much as I tried to assure her of cruising’s safety and explain the physics of water displacement, she still was petrified…. until she bravely forced herself to go. And not just on any cruise. You may remember, for my sabbatical three years ago, we sailed around Cape Horn, which is the southernmost steep, rocky headland of the Tierra del Fuego Archipelago in the southern part of Chile. It was about 700 miles north of Antarctica. And let me tell you the seas were at times rough, but she had a great time, except for the day of terrible high seas. And now…. she wants to go again. We all get stuck in our ways and get too comfortable with what we are used to. We eat the same foods, hang out with our old friends, and go to the
same vacation spots. Maybe we can try something new? I am going to try a new experience as well. I am going ....camping. Maybe.

As you may know, my step father, Byron passed away in early June. My mother, 94 years old has come to live with us until we can find a more suitable, less vertically challenging home for her. It has been trying at times for all of us. I am reminded of the story of Uncle Ezra coming to live with a couple for 40 years. Being cantankerous and difficult, he posed quite a challenge to the young couple. When the old man finally died, the husband returning from the funeral said to his wife, “If I didn’t love you so much, I couldn’t have taken your Uncle Ezra all these years. What an ordeal it was.” His wife looked up with surprise and said, “”What? My Uncle Ezra? I though he was your Uncle Ezra.”

Doreen is my mother. I adore her and am grateful for being able to care for her during her loss. And I have changed as a result of her coming. Rather than seeing it as a loss of privacy, having her live in a room next to Laurie and mine, I have come to see it as a blessing. It is an opportunity to give back to her and my own family. I have worked on being more patient. I usually walk at a quick pace. By escorting my mother, I have learned to slow down. Doreen frequently stops to admire the clouds or the sunset. I have started to savor those moments with her. And I am fortunate enough to teach my children that this is what we do for each other in a family. We can change our emotional make up and behavior.

And we can start working on being more agreeable. Are you one to look at the dark side even when there is a brighter perspective? Are you one who sees the negative before you see the positive? Do you look to for reasons to despair and lose hope, either because of the political climate or climate change? Well, we can change that tendency. Try looking for the good. We can start giving people the benefit of the doubt. In Chapter one of Pirke Avot, we learn the following; 'Yehoshua the son of Perahya would say, establish for yourself a Rabbi, acquire a good friend, and give others the benefit of the doubt.' Unlike some other faiths, Judaism never tells us not to judge other people. We don't have the line, “let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.” We say, rather, if you are going to judge give others the benefit of the doubt. The Talmud (Shavuot 30a) based on the verse 'in righteousness you shall judge your neighbor' (Vayikra 19) understands it to be a biblical command. Elsewhere our
Rabbis explain that those who give others the benefit of the doubt will receive the same from heaven (Talmud Shabbat 127).

Maimonides in his code the Mishnah Torah explains that 'A Torah scholar' should always look for the good in others. One should speak favorably about others and not say anything negative about them. We should be the one who loves and pursues peace. (Deut 5:7).

The late Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev took this principle one step further. He explained that if our tradition requires us to give even one individual the benefit of the doubt, then how much more so are we required to judge an entire community in the same way. A story is told that one year as the Jews gathered in the synagogue just before the beginning of 'Kol Nidre' on 'Yom Kippur', Rabbi Levi Yitzhak took a candle and began to search under the benches of the synagogue. The people were in shock sensing that perhaps the Rabbi had confused the holiday of 'Yom Kippur' with Passover. They asked the Rabbi what he was looking for to which he responded 'a drunken Jew'. He then turned to the congregation and said, 'I am looking for a drunken Jew and I am unable to find him'. At that moment he looked up to heaven and offered the following words to G-d, moments before the sacred Day of Atonement was about to begin, 'Dear G-d you have commanded your holy people to eat and drink excessively before Yom Kippur. Had you given this command to the enemy of the Jewish people there is no doubt that they would have used the opportunity to eat like gluttons and drink to their hearts desire. Had you given them that command the streets would have been filled with drunks. And now dear G-d look at your holy nation. You have commanded them to eat and drink and yet I have searched everywhere and I have not found even one drunken Jew. Instead, they are all dressed in white and have gathered in the synagogue to ask you forgiveness. Master of the universe please forgive their transgression immediately and inscribe them to a year of health and blessing'. Indeed, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak lived by his words. He found merit in the entire community.

Finally, I ask that we think about raising our moral awareness. A few years before his passing, I went to hear Eli Wiesel speak. He asked us to define morality. He asked, “Was Abraham moral?” He, after all almost sacrificed his son. He exiled his wife Hager and her child, Ishmael. What’s more he subjected his wife, Sara to Pharaoh in order to protect himself. Was
he moral? Then Wiesel asked us if we consider ourselves to be moral. In truth, he asked more questions than gave answers but I walked away thinking that the essence of morality is not to turn away when others are suffering. Indifference to evil empowered the continuation of malevolence. We cannot turn a blind eye to those 1 billion people on this planet who go hungry every day. We cannot be unconcerned about evil raising its head. We cannot turn away and be silent.

And, if we are committed to fighting hunger in the world, remember that there are many different kinds of starvation. People can be hungry for food, for freedom, for equality, for happiness, or love. Not caring about that is immoral. You may have heard him say this before, but it bears repeating. All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for the good people of the world not to care.

God brought us out of Egypt. Indeed, according to our sages, that’s why God had us go through the whole Egyptian experience. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “Our bondage in Egypt - the Galut experience - was meant to sharpen and refine the Jews ethical sensitivity and moral awareness.” Thirty-six times in the Torah we are told to be just and fair and moral and sensitive, “ki gerim heyitim b’eretz mitzrayim - because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We, who experienced oppression and discrimination and injustice and being taken advantage of, are expected to know how it feels, and are expected to make sure that we don’t act in that very same way. God took us out of Egypt because more was expected of us.

Hillel, one of our greatest teachers wrote, “In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human.” Even if we are surrounded by immorality, even if everyone else is failing to live up to even the lowest ethical standards, even if honesty is scarce in the corporate board rooms of America, even if civility is disappearing from America, that is no excuse to lower our standards. The Jewish people have a calling to do the right thing. The essence of Torah is to behave like a mensch. We don’t have to be perfect. But we do have to hold your head up high and do the right thing.

Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah said, “Don’t be afraid to dream, and when you do, dream big, and one day translate it into deeds to match the dream.” Kol Nidre is night to dream. The night is a time to dream anyway.
Tonight let us dream of who we want to be. Remembrance is critical, but more so is our vision of where we yearn to be. Our bile, blood or phlegm are needed but they are not determinate of our thinking or our behavior. We can chart our own path. We can change. We can rediscover and recreate ourselves.

The controlling factor in any person’s future is not where we stand, not even from where we have come, but in what direction we are headed. May we, tonight, create a vision for how we want to change. May we think about what we need to change and then may we start acting in a new way so that over time, how we behave becomes who we are. We are today where yesterday’s thoughts and actions have brought us, and we shall be tomorrow where today’s commitments and deeds take us.

It is for this reason that I love today. It is not a somber day to fret and worry. It is day of hope and find new beginnings. Tonight, we are made anew.