

The Wonder of Not Knowing

Rabbi Toba Spitzer

I wanted to share with you a piece that appeared in the Boston Globe a few years ago, by Joan Wickersham. It's called "Too Much Information":

AT A recent dinner with friends, someone was telling a story about taking her teenage kids to New York, where they'd stumbled into a store so cool that she hadn't been able to figure out the name of it. "Uniqlo? Uniglo? It had one of those beautiful, unreadable logos. Anyway —" she said; but we never got to hear the rest of the story, because someone at the table had whipped out an iPhone and was making a big production of looking up the name of the store. "Uniglo," the looker-upper announced triumphantly (and erroneously). "Ah," we all murmured. The conversation died. Why couldn't the poor woman have been allowed to simply tell her story? Why this reluctance to let even the smallest, most whimsical question remain unanswered?

Our culture is increasingly obsessed with having all information available, all the time. We want what we want as soon as we want it. Even the language is getting more entitled and insistent and irritable. We have "on-demand movies," "instant messaging," "one-click ordering." *Now*, damn it! But as the gap shrinks between wondering and knowing, between desiring and possessing, we may be losing something important: the tantalizing ache of the unattainable.

To want something and not be able to get it sounds, on the surface, like deprivation. But wanting can actually be preferable to getting. It certainly makes for more interesting art: "Great Expectations," "Don Quixote," "Madame Bovary," and "The Age of Innocence" are all fueled by unfulfilled yearning, as are Shakespeare's sonnets, most operas, and a lot of Rolling Stones songs. "How much do I love you?" wrote Irving Berlin. "How deep is the ocean? How high is the sky?" I suppose today someone drunk on love and Google might do a quick search on exactly how deep the ocean is and write a song that goes "My love for you is as deep as the Marianas Trench (36,200 feet)" but it's hard to imagine dancing to it.

It's not just abstract information that's available to us on demand. It's access to our own past, updates we might later wish we'd never gotten. Finding out that the sexy old boyfriend now writes a blog with a title like "The Pot-Bellied Pontificator." Learning that the mean girl from the freshman dorm is now a hugely successful TV producer. Ordering the long-lost favorite childhood LP from eBay and finding that it's awful.

A sense of mystery, of unattainable knowledge, of places and memories and people remaining lost, is part of being human. Google is useful and fun, but there's a lot to be said for unsatisfied curiosity and unfulfilled desire.

Thirty years ago, the summer before my husband and I got married, we drove across the country in an old green Toyota. The car was tiny, wheezing, and so rusted that there was a hole in the floor on the passenger side; I could watch the highway speeding along beneath us. We ate cheap hamburgers and stayed in what the guidebook jauntily called “budget luxury” motels: under \$20 a night, in desolate or downright creepy neighborhoods.

We loved it.

One afternoon, somewhere in the South — Tennessee? Georgia? — we passed a series of signs along the highway beckoning us to the next exit, for something called “The Lost Sea.” We debated for about five seconds, but it was hot, we were tired, and whatever The Lost Sea was, it sounded like a piece of tourist schlock. We kept on driving. We didn’t visit The Lost Sea, and we never found out what it was. A gift shop? An inland salt lake or a habitat for some rare species? Its name and its mystery have stayed with us ever since.

“We should have gone to The Lost Sea instead,” one of us will say to the other, after a dud expedition somewhere. Every now and then I am tempted to Google it. Within seconds, I could find out a lot of facts about it: where it is, what it is. I could probably even find pictures. But the point of The Lost Sea, and the charm of it, all these years later, is that it’s a paradox. Finding it would be the true loss.

(boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2011/01/07/too_much_information)

One of the Hebrew names for what we call the High Holydays is the *Yamim Noraim*, the “Days of Awe”—or more literally, the “awe-ful days.” The word for awe, “*yira*,” connotes a sense of standing before something so much grander than ourselves; acknowledging our relative small-ness in the cosmos. It invites a bit of humility, in Wickersham’s words, “a sense of mystery, of unattainable knowledge.”

Like Wickersham’s meditation on the power of not knowing, the *Yamim Noraim* are an invitation into a place where we can let go of the illusion of control. Because while we can Google the name of that actor we just saw on TV to find out what else we’ve seen him in, or can have our smartphone tell us which restaurants are in the neighborhood we’re driving through—there are some things we actually can’t know—like, what exactly will happen next.

This is the wonderful and frightening--the awe-ful--unknowing on whose doorstep we stand tonight. This is the sense of opportunity that lies before us, the image of the book with still blank pages, upon which we get to write the next chapter of our lives.

I love Wickersham’s story of going on a road trip 30 years ago, a time before all the electronic devices that tell us exactly where to go, how to get there, and what everything is that we’ll see along the way. I like to imagine our journey into this new year as a similarly old-school kind of trip—one without Mapquest or a GPS device or an app for finding restaurants and hotels.

As we set off on this journey, we don't entirely lack a map. We know where we've been, and hopefully have some sense of where we'd like to get to. But the road itself lies open before us, and who knows what mysterious road signs might appear along the way? The challenge is to relish, not fear, that sense of openness, of not-knowing, remaining open to whatever might come.

Twenty-two years ago I set off on a road trip a bit like the one Wickersham describes, the first step in a bigger journey into the next phase of my life. I was 28 years old, and had begun thinking about applying to rabbinical school. I had been working in a variety of left-wing nonprofits in Washington, D.C., and I'd come to the realization that I wanted to do my work in the world in a very different context. But I wasn't quite ready to dive into rabbinical training, so I decided to head off to California for a year. Fearing that my beloved Toyota Tercel might not make it across the country and back, I headed off in my mother's Corolla instead, with all of the belongings I would have for the year packed into the trunk. I took a distinctly non-direct route across the continent, stopping along the way to see friends, and to go camping with my brother out west. The only theme of my trip was that I had decided to bowl in every state that I went through.

There was so much I didn't know as I set off: what my life in California would look like, beyond reconnecting with some dear friends; whether I'd be accepted into rabbinical school, and if so, whether I'd definitely decide to go—I didn't even allow myself to think about what might happen if that was the case. And yet, with all that uncertainty, there was a beautiful sense of security that I had on that 6-week trip across the country. I knew that everything I needed was somewhere in my car, that I had friends scattered across the continent that I could stay with, and that friendly faces would greet me when I arrived on the other coast.

There was a certain faith I needed to have to make that trip. A number of people back in DC told me that they couldn't imagine doing what I was doing, just setting off like that; they said it sort of wistfully, as if they wished they too could go. And of course they could have, but for whatever reason had convinced themselves they couldn't. I wasn't actually doing anything all that radical, of course; I had a car and no one else to take care of and parents back home in case anything went catastrophically awry. But still, there was an element of faith, of being open to whatever would come next.

As we stand on the threshold of a new year, I hope we can each see ourselves as similarly on a journey, one that can take us to unexpected places. There is a certain faith that will help us on that journey: a faith that we have what we need, the internal resources to navigate the way. A faith that we are not doing this alone, that we have a community of support around us as we head out into unfamiliar territory, and that the Godly flow of Possibility in the universe is also on our side. And most importantly, a faith that it's a worthwhile and important endeavor.

The journey we make over these Days of Awe is an internal one; an investigation of our inner landscape. The overarching theme of this journey comes from another name for this

time of year - *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*--the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, stretching from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. The word "*teshuvah*" is often translated as "repentance," but it carries a much richer set of meanings than that word suggests. Most literally it means "turning," implying that we are on a path, and that we always need to be making course corrections, "turning" towards wholeness, towards the good. *Teshuvah* also has the meaning of "return," implying that while we may be moving into the unknown, on some level we're also coming back—to our truest selves, to that aspect of our natures that is *b'tzelem Elohim*, created in the image of Godliness.

"*Teshuvah*" also translates as "response." Part of our journey is developing our capacity for wise discernment, for responding in this moment to whatever it is that is asked of me. This kind of wisdom is not predicated on knowing beforehand what is going to happen, or on having all the "right" answers at our fingertips. Often we can't actually know, until we're in a situation, what will be asked of us, and which response will be the most helpful. All that we can do, in preparation for those moments along our journey, is to cultivate an openness to receiving the wisdom that we'll need, and having faith that it will be accessible to us.

Spiritual practices like meditation and prayer can help us in this work of discernment, helping us develop and sustain a steadiness of mind and an openness of heart that is essential to wise response. We are so used to relying on our accumulated knowledge, on our innate skills and talents, yet in the work of discernment often what is more important is a willingness to not know, to trust that when the time comes we will be able to make the wise choice, to say "yes" to that which calls for "yes," and "no" to that which calls for "no."

As we embark on these 10 days of journeying, our tradition gives us so much to help us on the way. We're given time, first of all--the entire 10 days, and more specifically the times that we've carved out for our services--some time away from our everyday lives to attend to the task of *teshuvah*.

We are given, in the liturgy, poetic phrases and evocative—sometimes difficult—ideas to grapple with, to challenge us, to invite us to contemplate the bigger questions in our lives. One of the recurring themes of the High Holydays liturgy is the relative small-ness and inadequacy of being human. We are called upon, over and over, to recognize and admit our limitations. Our minds are limited, our bodies are limited, we are by nature imperfect and impermanent beings. But we confront this reality not to cause ourselves pain—quite the opposite! If we can acknowledge our human frailty, if we can accept the complicated nature of our lives, we can stop expecting that everything should be perfect—and that if it isn't, we've messed it up somehow. We are held accountable for our actions but always in the context of compassion. The liturgy says to us—it asks us to say to ourselves, over and over—I am limited, I am not all-powerful or all-knowing, and that's okay. I am forgiven my inadequacies, even as I resolve to do what I can to reach my human potential.

In addition to the liturgy, we are also given times of silence, where we can reflect on whatever it is that asks our attention in that moment.

We are given community—so even while we may be wrestling with profoundly private and personal matters, we are not alone, because we know that others around us are doing the same. The energy that all of you bring to these services is so important, it really supports and sustains those around you.

We are also given, if we're lucky, some moments of boredom along the way. I was reading another Globe article from a few years ago that talks about the importance of boredom, of having times when we can't distract ourselves with all of our devices ("The Joy of Boredom," Boston Sunday Globe, 3/9/08). The author, Carolyn Johnson, writes:

"To be bored is to stop reacting to the external world, and to explore the internal one. It is in these times of reflection that people often discover something new, whether it is an epiphany about a relationship or a new theory about the way the universe works."

She goes on to describe boredom as an essential human emotion, as "the prelude to creativity." So I invite you to seize those moments during these services when you're bored! Be glad that we ask you to turn off your phone, that you can't open the fridge or flee to the TV. As Johnson teaches in her article: "It may take a little bit of tolerance of an initial feeling of boredom to discover a comfort level with not being linked in and engaged and stimulated every second...There's a level of knowing yourself, of coming back to baseline, and knowing who you truly are." If that is not a description of the process of *teshuvah*, I don't know what is!

Perhaps best of all, we are given the promise of a successful trip. Our tradition teaches that--even as we seek to forgive ourselves and others for all the ways we've fallen short and missed the mark--we are already forgiven. So while the road before us lies open, we can take some comfort in knowing that acceptance and compassion lie at the other end. If harsh judgment accompanies us, then we need to know that it's of our own making. What we are journeying toward is the knowledge of ourselves as whole and complete and loved, however broken and incomplete and un-loveable we might feel in any given moment.

So, as we take these first steps into the year 5774, may we all be blessed with the comfort of not knowing, with the wisdom that can arise from uncertainty, and the creativity that can blossom from boredom. May we be open to the road signs along the way that will help us along our path, and may we embrace the sense of wonder and mystery that give rise to true feelings of awe. May this be a year of blessing and abundance for all of us - *l'shanah tovah tikateivu!*

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5774