

A Semi-Colon is No Place to Stay

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Beacon UU Congregation

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Her name is Greta. I imagine you've heard of her. "Just 16, GretaThunberg is already one of our planet's greatest advocates," President Obama tweeted after his meeting with Thunberg. "Recognizing that her generation will bear the brunt of climate change, she's unafraid to push for real action." Thunberg established herself as a bona fide climate action figure after writing an award winning essay about the climate crisis and then staging weekly solitary sit-ins outside the Swedish Parliament.

With clarity and courage, she spawned a burgeoning movement of youth climate activists to hold their own protests in more than 100 cities worldwide. These climate strikes took place, including here in Flagstaff on September 20.

Greta arrived in New York last month after sailing across the Atlantic to speak at the United Nations Climate Action Summit on September 23rd. Thunberg traveled on a zero-emissions sailboat to reduce the environmental impact of her journey. Pleading that leaders unite behind the science, she told them, ""You say you love your children above all else and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes."

She faced a semi-colon moment – one where she might have placed a period, but her story (and what it might represent) was not finished and so she stepped into her moment of high resolve. She chose risk and truth and life. On Friday, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Ahmed is a young migrant from Syria, who was trapped on the Turkish border last year with little or no food, only the filthy clothing on his back, no money and a multitude of hope. He had been separated from his family, who embarked on a different boat from Turkey and he is still unsure of their fate.

He has heard the horror stories of unscrupulous smugglers and capsized rafts, but knows firsthand that in the words of poet Warsan Shire, in her poem entitled, Home” - “no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than land. “

Likewise, Ahmed has left his home only because in the poet's words, “home is now the mouth of a shark, home chases him fire under feet.” Ahmed and millions like him have faced a semi-colon moment (one we can only imagine

in a terrifying nightmare) and he as left home because home won't let him stay. Even so, his story is not over. He will not be vanquished. He has chosen life.

Craig Miller is a young suicide survivor and motivational speaker. His poetry appears on the website for projectsemicolon.com, the support and inspiration movement that has adopted the quirky punctuation mark as a symbol for hope and endurance, especially for suicide survivors. Like many of his compatriots, Craig sports a semi-colon tattoo on his inner calf. In a poem entitled *Timeline*, Miller mines his pain and his resolve, writing:

Tomorrow tells me,
 "I'm moving on without you.
 I'm taking your dreams
 I can't keep waiting for you.
 You'll always find me
 in the nights that haunt you
 I'll be the life that
 lives the way you want to."
 Today reminds me,
 "You'll never make it past me.
 Tomorrows moved on
 and left you alone here with me.
 Its over for you.
 Just make yourself at home here
 and forget the future.
 Your dreams have no place here."
 Yesterday whispers,
 "Don't believe what today tells you.
 It's tomorrow
 doing its best to fool you,
 disguising your dreams
 while you think they left you.
 But I'm right behind you
 to prove this all to you.
 Today is tomorrow
 and your dreams never leave you."

Greta, Ahmed, and Craig (along with the Youth behind the climate strike, last year's march for our lives against gun violence, and the many recent survivors of natural disasters and mass shootings) - they show us, tell us, reveal to us in memorable and inspiring ways that a semi-colon is no place to stay; no

place to linger once you've decided that your story is still being told; that today is tomorrow and that your dreams never leave you.

Each epitomizes the sage query of the Rabbi Hillel, who asks: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? One might imagine Hillel himself with a symbolic semi-colon tattoo of his own, perhaps hidden artfully under the drapes of a robe, if it were not for the Jewish prohibition against tattoos of any kind as they are considered a mutilation of God's creation.

One of my very first High Holidays sermons, written way back in 2000, also featured tattoos...those of two men - a young one who had left Judaism and his community, fell into addiction, and then returned to the tribe, all tatted up from head to toe and the other, an elderly man with the numerical brand of the Holocaust on his forearm. It is a tale of atonement, forgiveness and redemption.

Although tattoos are deemed un-kosher, the two men ultimately step together into the healing waters of a mikvah, a pure ritual Jewish bath, over the objections of a rigid and judgmental community leader. Both faced semi-colon moments and chose life.

I've always resisted the idea of a tattoo for myself – until I saw a blog about the semi-colon project and the gallery of amazing, inspiring iterations on the semi-colon tattoo (you can see one example in today's order of service).

I began drawing one on my inner wrist in black ink, as a reminder that life is full of blessings and possibilities and that even when things are bleak and feel desperate (in a first world problems kind of way) I will choose life and continue writing new stanzas and chapters to my story. Will you choose life at the threshold of your semi-colon moments?

I ultimately converted this ink splotch to a real tattoo during a visit to Portland OR a couple summers ago, and I have no regrets for adopting this permanent mark of hope and optimism. Of course, with even this small tattoo on my wrist, I would not be invited into a mikvah, but that isn't on my bucket list anyway.

Orthodoxy may consider body art an abomination, but I'd argue that the semi-colon tattoo is a holy mark and that it is a greater abomination to give up, to lose faith, to convince yourself that your story is not worth telling or continuing, that it is folly to lean into endurance when despair envelopes you. Be for yourself and be for the world; write the second half of those sentences; choose life!

The Days of Awe (this ten day period between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year which falls on September 30 and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, on October 8) offer us a valuable framework for thinking about these semi-colon moments in our lives (regardless of whether we are Jewish or not).

Although it can be mighty challenging to our hearts and our egos, when it comes to atonement or forgiveness, a semi-colon is truly no place to stay. The story can only continue when we reflect, confess, ask for forgiveness from others, and offer it ourselves.

The Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, explains that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, God opens up three books: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in-between.

The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death. The average, or "in-between person," (a description that likely fits most of us here today) are kept in suspension until Yom Kippur.

They (we) have ten days, known as the Days of Awe, to make amends, to experience *teshuva*, or turning (to step over the semi-colon into renewal) . A key passage from "The Gates of Repentance," the Yom Kippur liturgy book explains: "The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange," it reads. "

"The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to store in their food for the winter. For leaves, birds, and animals, turning comes instinctively."

"But, for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying *I am sorry*. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do."

Who can argue that self-reflection is not easy, forgiving our imperfection is not easy, forgiving trespasses against us is not easy, renewal and rebirth are not easy. *Teshuva* does not come so easily for us. But the alternative is no cakewalk, either -- not forgiving begets hard feelings, hard hearts, a hard and heavy burden to bear, a life story punctuated, not by semi-colons, but by hard cold, vitality sapping periods.

Ask: With whom must I make amends? Who needs to hear "I'm sorry." From whom do I yearn to hear the same?

To step into the moments of our high resolve, to be inscribed in the Book of Life, to follow in the path of Hillel or Greta, Ahmed or Craig (or the brave man on the Munich bus who saves the Jewish woman by pretending she is his wife in the story we heard by Lawrence Kushner), we must make the decision to choose life, to reinvest in hope, to open ourselves to community, to be brave, to allow ourselves to feel, to love, to repent and forgive, to become tender to our own pain

and the pain of those around us in the pews and across the world on barbed wire borders.

We must embrace a decision to take action in the face of injustice and despair. To recite the 11th commandment (“Thou shalt be kind.”) and compose a 12th – “Thou shalt endure.” For surely, fearful gremlins reside in some of our semi- colon moments –depression, job and financial worries, torn relationships, a sense of brokenness.

My colleague Teresa Schwartz reminds us, “During the Days of Awe (and beyond), we can remind ourselves that there is a wisdom in admitting that our brokenness is the way out of the wilderness.”

I wonder: Do you know what happened to the first carved tablets of the Commandments that Moses smashed on the rocks when he came down from Mt. Sinai and saw the Israelites dancing around a golden calf?

In the Jewish wisdom text, the Talmud, it says the broken pieces remained precious. They were placed in the most sacred place, the Ark of the Covenant, alongside the intact commandments. And what does the Ark of the Covenant symbolize in mystical Judaism? The heart. “And here, in our hearts, brokenness and wholeness live side by side; we carry them wherever we go, like a blood red tattoo.

We carry them here to Beacon, and one could say our church is poised at a semi-colon moment, too, after some shifts and changes and hard decisions. But, our story is far from over. Take some time to ponder how you can help this beloved congregation write the rest of its story through your time, talent, and treasury. And look around at the many people here who will help you hold and steady your pen as you endeavor to keep writing your own unfolding story in the Book of Life.

I agree with a colleague [Rev. Galen Gungerich] ,who has wisely preached that “as flesh and blood humans, we reside between that wilderness of brokenness and the promised land of healing.”

He writes: “Whatever comes, no matter how terrible, we need to understand the difference between fate and freedom. We need to commit ourselves to taking responsibility for our own lives and our own actions. Today as always, we stand at the intersection of prologue and possibility.” (just like Greta and Craig and Ahmed).

“Our challenge in religious terms is to open ourselves to the experience of the sacred—of being connected to everything: all that is present in our world (the ugly and the beautiful) as well as all that is past and all that is possible. Then one day, after walking through the fire, we can look back and marvel that we

were not consumed by it. We faced our challenges, and we found a way to be free.”

“Open the Book of Life and inscribe us therein amongst the righteous,” asks the sinners and the saints on Yom Kippur. I would add “Inscribe us therein, with a semi-colon next to our names, for our stories are far from over; we reside between prologue and possibility; whole-heartedly broken.

Next year, when the Book is opened again, we hold faith that we will be here and that we will have endured to savor apples and honey, yet again.

Here, to proclaim: Thank you for this life. Thank you for the chapters yet to be written.

Shalom, Shanti, Salaam, semi-colon;

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