

# Thirty Thousand Days

A JOURNAL FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING

## A Real Day of Atonement

by Barbara Sarah

It was past the halfway point of the Naikan Retreat in Virginia. I was sitting in an open closet. The poignant story of my life that I had expected to project on the wall – a black and white, '50s foreign-style movie, had not appeared. Rather, for four days I had been struggling to remember those still photo images from my past that would assist me in recalling the many gifts that had supported me throughout my life. I had finally learned to report my reflections in some kind of proper form, answering the three Naikan questions without going off into long explanatory narratives that were originally meant to accompany the aforementioned film, possibly a personal “La Dolce Vita.”

Then came the day when we were asked to consider our history of *lying and stealing*. By the time I had reached the period of reflecting on my adolescence, I realized that for the first time in my life I was actually facing myself and the numerous transgressions that I had committed in my life. It dawned on me that for over forty years I had attended services on the Jewish High Holidays and when it was time on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to confess my sins with the rest of the community, I always thought that those words in the prayer book were for someone else's wrongdoings. Me -- arrogant, bigoted, cynical? Me -- deceitful, egotistical, greedy, jealous? It must be others who were obstinate, possessive, rancorous, selfish. They must be the ones who yielded to temptation, were lustful or malicious. And in that closet I saw myself for who I had been, for what I had done, for the many I had hurt and disrespected, for a litany of wrongdoings, for years of stealing, lying and cheating. And so I requested that I not be brought food. In the tradition of my religion I fasted to purify myself and become clean. Until that day, my life had been a *Grand Illusion* and it was time to look into the corners of my memory and acknowledge my misdeeds and transgressions.

That afternoon I went into the bathroom and when I looked at myself in the mirror, I found the following words on an index card:

*“We have seen the hard, argumentative, selfish mind which prefers to condemn and judge others rather than open itself to truth. The ego mind which will stop at nothing to see itself as “right” and “victimized.” The mind of high self-image which justifies and rationalizes any behavior. But there are moments when this ego self gives way to something else. What shall we call it?”*

I was certain that card had been left there for me, although I was sharing that bathroom with five others. (At last, one moment of self-focus that was useful!) By the time I had gone through my day of fasting and atonement, truly a “day of awe,” I knew that “the jig was up”. A light had gone on in my mind that could not and has not been extinguished. I realized that not only must I replace my past orientation with a “new” mind, but that the realistic view that I had of myself and my behavior had stimulated a healthy and necessary guilt that would guide my future actions.

For many years following that retreat I have gone to High Holiday services and taken my rightful place along side the other transgressors in the community. In fact, I don’t have to wait for that once a year opportunity – I can examine myself at any time. My new mind and new behaviors guide my daily life, keeping things in perspective and helping me to live the gratitude that I experience every day for having received these lessons.

---

*Barbara Sarah, LCSW, is an oncology social worker who founded the Oncology Support Program at Benedictine Hospital in Kingston, New York in 1994. She has been practicing and teaching Morita and Naikan therapies since 1988 and is the Director of Third Opinion, a cancer survivor consultation service.*

Originally published in ***Thirty Thousand Days: A Journal for Purposeful Living***.  
 Copyright 1998, 2009 by the ToDo Institute  
[www.todoinstitute.org](http://www.todoinstitute.org)

