

# The Courage to Face Our Mistakes

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In the Jewish religious calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins tonight at sunset. For Jews it is the holiest day of the year. Its roots are in the story of Moses. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. He came down the mountain and discovered the children of Israel, tired of waiting for Moses, were worshipping a golden calf. When Moses arrived, his anger burned hot and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

Moses said: "You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." God forgave the Jews, made new tablets and Moses brought them down the mountain again.

The High Holy Days are an annual re-enactment of this story. They are a time when Jews come to grips with their mistakes. Of course first, we must recognize that we have made a mistake. This can be very hard to do. It takes, wisdom, of course, but it also takes courage.

In my own life I remember a mistake that I made when I was seventeen years old. I have talked about this experience in this church before. However, it was a very important lesson for me. It

was so important a lesson that, if I had not learned it, I would not be here today.

I had gotten my driver's license a year before and in August, just before school started, a friend and I borrowed my father's gray Dodge pickup truck and drove from Phoenix, where I lived, up to the rim of the Grand Canyon. We drove the 250 miles in about six hours. When I was seventeen, the last 60 miles were on a dusty dirt road. We headed for a camp ground in Havasu Canyon. The camp ground is two miles north of an Indian village.

Supai, Arizona is the most remote village in the United States, the last community in our country to receive mail delivery by pack mule. The four hundred people in the village call themselves "Havasupai" which means "people of the blue-green waters." The tribe has lived in the Grand Canyon for at least seven hundred years. The camp ground two miles north of the village is near three waterfalls. It is one of the most beautiful and most remote areas of the Grand Canyon.

Mid afternoon we started the eleven-mile hike into the canyon. The temperature was 100 degrees. About 4 p.m. it started raining heavily. The dry stream bed we had been following filled with water and we climbed up the side of the canyon wall to wait. After a few minutes the rain stopped and the river of water slowed to a trickle. We walked on, heavy packs on our backs. The sun had set by the time we walked through the village and it was dark by the time we camped.

We stayed for five days. Havasu Falls is 120 feet high. Mooney Falls is 190 feet high. We swam in the cold blue green pool of water below each of the falls. Cottonwood trees provided shade and greenery. Red sandstone cliffs rose above us to the blue sky.

Although today in the summer you will find several hundred people camping, that summer in 1968, only a few other campers were in the canyon. We talked with a man who said he was a photographer for *National Geographic Magazine*. He planned to spend six weeks photographing the waterfalls and the canyon, and the Havasupai people. The *National Geographic* published the article two years later.

On the sixth day of our trip, to avoid as much as possible the heat of the day, we decided to hike out as soon as it was light. Our packs were much lighter because we had eaten the food. We walked through the village of Supai early in the morning passing the chickens, the dogs and the early morning cooking fires.

We were well rested and we made good time hiking up the canyon. We felt good about ourselves. On our own at the age of seventeen we had bought our own food, packed it, driven 250 miles, hiked into the canyon 11 miles, fed ourselves for five days and survived.

As we hiked toward the rim, gaining altitude, Havasu Creek disappeared into the earth. The water of the creek comes from aquifers and the water only appears above ground deep in the canyon. So we hiked along a dry stream bed making good time.

The trail was faint along the ground, but because of the heavy rain on the day that we walked in, we did not expect much of a trail. Because of the steep walls of the canyon we could not see far ahead of us, but that had also been the case when we walked in. We were confident that we would reach the car park with plenty of time to drive the six hours back to Phoenix. We were feeling strong and we were making good time. It was a bright sunny day.

I discovered that day that after I have invested a great deal of time and energy in something, considering the possibility that I have made a mistake is difficult, very difficult.

At some point after hours of hiking, we began to talk aloud about the fact that we still had not reached the car park. The hike must have been longer than we realized. We were not making as good time as we expected. It was difficult to consider the possibility that we may have made a mistake.

We were beginning to worry about our water supply. We had full canteens when we started, but it was getting hotter and hotter. We had been drinking water on the assumption that we would soon reach the road and the truck. Still, deciding that we had made a mistake was difficult. We had put much time and energy into hiking up this canyon.

Making a mistake is embarrassing, humiliating. When we discover that we have made a mistake we feel stupid, we feel like fools. Our human nature drives us to gain a sense of personal worth. In my imagination I could see myself going back home and saying to my father: "Look what I have done. I have done something that you, Dad, have never done. I have hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, camped out for five days and hiked back out. You have never accomplished anything like that!" It would be embarrassing to go home and say "Dad on the way out of the canyon we got lost." I did not want to face my mistake, because it would be embarrassing.

So, we hiked the trail and small doubts began to seep in that we were going in the wrong direction. Today I do not remember exactly what I thought back then, but it might have been something like this. I might have thought "only weaklings cut and run." I might have thought "We need to stay the course."

However, if we were wrong and we did not turn around we would die. A trail did head southeast from the Supai village and connected with a road on the rim of the Grand Canyon. This seldom used dirt road goes 34 miles to the Grand Canyon Village

and the National Park Headquarters. But we would run out of water and die long before we reached the National Park Headquarters. We were on this trail. We had to find the courage to face our mistake, turn around and go back. We had to decide. Two seventeen year old boys. Alone. No adults to offer us advice. We had to find the courage to admit our mistake and turn around.

It was not easy. But we finally decided to turn around. If Moses had been with us, in religious language Moses might have said: “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

Our atonement was to retrace our steps, hiking back three hours to the place where two the canyons met. Perhaps the rain of a few days before had washed away a sign showing the turn to the right. You could say that we were victims of bad intelligence. We walked back to where the creek came out of the ground and started to flow. We filled our canteens and we hiked up the right trail. Exhausted, we reached my father’s gray dodge pick-up truck as the sun was setting. I drove the sixty miles to Route 66 at a truck stop called Peach Springs. We ate dinner at the one restaurant, loading up on fluids and apple pie and ice cream. We slept in the truck and drove back home early the next morning. Later I looked carefully at a topographical map and discovered that the name of the trail we had been following was the “Rattlesnake Canyon Trail.”

It was a sincere mistake. In taking the wrong trail, we did not have an evil motivation. We did not take the wrong trail because we were hungry for power, or because we were greedy, or because we were masochists who received pleasure from walking the wrong way in the hot sun. We sincerely believed that we were going in the right direction. We believed that we were doing the best that we could do for ourselves, and for the people who knew and loved us and wanted us to come home safely. We were doing the best that we could do.

Still sincerity and good intentions were not enough. Taking in new information was necessary for us to survive. We had to be open to the possibility that we had made a mistake—that we were going the wrong way.

Now I have been talking about myself here but perhaps you have had a similar experience in your own life. Perhaps you have invested your time and energy into something, and you have had a great deal of difficulty admitting that you have made a mistake. We must have the courage, to let in new information. We must have the courage to be embarrassed, the courage to face humiliation, and that is very hard to do.

As I hear and read the daily news about Iraq I have been remembering how hard it was for me to turn around on that trail all those years ago.

- This week a “National Intelligence Estimate” on terrorism said the invasion and occupation of Iraq is an underlying factor fueling the spread of the Islamic radicalism.
- This week a federal inspector told Congress that thirteen major projects built by an American contractor were substandard, including a seventy-two million-dollar police college in Baghdad, where plumbing work was so poor that the pipes burst, dumping urine and waste matter throughout the college’s buildings.
- This week Bob Woodward claims President Bush and the Pentagon are concealing key intelligence that predicts the violence in Iraq will only get worse in the coming year. In an interview tonight on *60 Minutes* Woodward will say “it is getting to the point now where there are eight, nine hundred attacks a week. That is more than 100 a day. That is four an hour attacking our forces. The Bush

administration classified this information to keep it secret from the American people.”

- This week according to a poll conducted by a group from the University of Maryland, three-quarters of Iraqis believe that American forces are provoking more conflict than they are preventing in Iraq and that they should be withdrawn within a year. Seventy-five percent of the people of Iraq want us to go home.

Hearing these reports, and thinking about our President, I remember how hard it was for me in that canyon to face our mistake and turn back, I remember how important it was for me to show my father that I could make good decisions.

Last May I visited the Naval Hospital, just a mile from where we are right now. It is a busy place. Young men and women, with terrible injuries crowded the hospital. I said hello to a boy my son's age who was missing one of his feet. I do not want to say that their sacrifice is for a mistake. I look at the photos in the newspaper of the American soldiers who have died and it is very hard to say that the war they have died in is a mistake.

The President and his advisors are just as sincere as I was years ago when I took the wrong path in the canyon. In the same way that years ago I believed I was on the right trail, today they believe they are doing what is right for our nation. But, good intentions are not enough. Just as I was wrong, they are wrong. In the language of Moses, “We have sinned a great sin.”

When I hear or read the leaders of our country aggressively defend the war, I remember how hard it was for me to face the fact that I had made a mistake, that we were walking down the wrong path, and that if we did not turn around we were headed for disaster. I see in the faces and here in the voices of the president, the vice

president, the secretary of state and the Secretary of Defense, the intense desire to be right. They have given the lives of our young people in this crusade and they do not want to consider the possibility that they may have made a mistake.

All of us make mistakes. I admire the Jews for celebrating Yom Kipper, the Day of Atonement. On the eve of Yom Kipper I examine my life, and I try to find the courage and the wisdom to recognize my mistakes, to change my behavior, to tell those I have hurt that I am sorry, I ask for God's forgiveness, and I resist temptation in the future.

I invite you also to engage in such self examination. And when we see the errors of our leaders, let us do all in our power to help them find the courage to face their mistakes, so that soon they might return to the right path.

Moses said to the Jewish people: “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” In the ancient story God forgave the Jews for their mistake.

This is what America needs—to make atonement and to be forgiven. For in spite of our good intentions our nation has sinned a great sin:

I pray that our leaders will soon have the courage to face this great sin and start the process of making amends.