I tell myself that I have never had an easy relationship with the ocean, or really any body of water. I like to be near water, to watch water, to listen to water. But to be in water – be it a river, a lake, or the ocean – causes me unease. When I am in water it is an adversary, something I need to protect myself from… protect myself from getting salt water in my eyes, from getting pulled farther out, from whatever might be lingering beneath the surface, from going under.

So, it might seem a little odd that this summer I decided that I wanted to learn to surf. This, of course, meant getting into the water.

I’m lying on my stomach on a long surf board. The salty spray of the ocean is whipping in my face as the waves roll under me. My instructor’s hand is steadying my board. I wait. My body is surging with nervous energy, waiting for his command. Paddle, paddle, paddle, paddle… “Now!” he shouts.

I push up with my arms, I tense my core. I try to pull my legs through my arms, forward, in order to stand. One foot comes through. Then a knee. A feeling of defeat and disappointment washes over me. I’m kneeling, not standing.

But hold on. I am on my knees. I’m balanced. I’m on the wave – I am doing this.

Carefully and proudly I lift my arms off the board, kneeling but upright. I triumphantly glide into the shore. Feeling accomplished, proud, I turn around to make sure my instructor saw this glorious moment
“What happened there?” he says in the nicest yet slightly disapproving tone possible? “Why’d you stop?”

Stop!??!!? I think to myself. What does he mean? I didn’t stop, I rode the wave **all - the - way** to the shore.

Before I can speak, he says, “Do you want to get to the shore or do you want to learn how to surf?”

Suddenly, I get it. I understand, I haven’t been trying to learn how to surf, I’ve been trying to look like I know how to surf.

I’ve been performative surfing.

I am a recovering perfectionist (anyone else here?), I am someone who was very good at performatively excelling her way through school, so good, in fact, that I excelled my way, many years ago, right into this fine university as an undergraduate student. So this performative feeling – and the desire to protect myself at all costs from falling, and in my head failing – it was very familiar.

If I was going to learn how to surf, to stand on my two feet, I was going to need to be willing to get **in**, not merely **on**, the water. In fact, I was going to need to be willing to fall into the water over and over and over again.

We were about halfway through my lesson and I had some choices to make:
Do I choose to accept that falling isn’t failing, but rather an essential and necessary part of the learning process?

Do I choose to feel the fear of falling into the unknown, maybe even going under the water’s surface?

Could I choose not to perform?

Could I let go of the idea that by the end of the lesson I would have that perfect instagrammable shot of me gliding to the shore flashing a hang 10 sign?

Could I accept that I might not learn how to stand up on the surfboard this lesson?

Could I choose to start living fully instead of living performatively?

This day on the Jewish calendar we are asked to become laser focused on the choices we make – every day – as to how we live our lives. We count 10 days from today, the first day of Rosh Hashanah, through Yom Kippur. This block of time is called the Aseret Yamei Teshuvah, most commonly translated as the 10 days of Repentance. However, A more accurate definition would be the 10 days of turning or re-turning to the self, 10 days of us moving closer to who we are and who we want to become.

During these 10 days, our job is to examine the choices we have made this past year and ask ourselves how we feel about them.

Do they align with who we want to be?

Were they informed by our values?

Were there bigger feelings we were trying to protect ourselves from when we made those choices?
As the late Rabbi Alan Lew teaches:

Intense feelings such as - anger, boredom, fear, guilt, impatience, disappointment, anxiety, are the great markers for our Teshuvah. By their very intensity, they call us to transformation. These feelings are so familiar to us we usually believe them to be part of our intrinsic being.

They are not.

And in this sacred time of transformation, while the gates of heaven are open and we are finally awake, we can see that they are not. We can see that they are just impulses, arising for a moment…. They are not us. They only become us by our own choice…. We can make another choice if we wish to.

As we enter into this new Jewish year, and this new school year, what are the feelings that are informing your choices? How do your feelings effect your choices to live authentically or performatively?

For me, in the ocean up until that moment of choice, I was holding tightly to the feeling of fear. I held on to it because it was actually offering me protection. The story I had told myself of, oh me, I’m just not a water person, (just like some you may say, oh I’m not a math person, or a writer or a science person) it served me. It was safe. It gave me comfort. It allowed me to avoid failure.
But If I could open myself up to the potential of feeling failure, then I could open myself up to beginning to learn.

A few days ago, at convocation in this very amphitheater, Senior Associate Vice Provost and Dean of Students Dr. Mona Hicks said, “Stanford talks a lot about striving for excellence. Excellent this. Excellent that. Hell, even the weather is excellent! But the only thing that you need to be excellent at is learning. And in learning you will fail. Let me repeat that – in learning you will fail.”

And just in case you didn’t hear it the second time she said it, Let me repeat that last part that she said one more time

You will fail, not you might, but you will.

If you decide to learn rather than perform, you will encounter failure. We can’t protect ourselves from failing. We will fail. We need to fail. That is how we learn.

And when we fail, when we make the choice to steer clear of familiarity and safety – when we stop trying to perform but let go, let go of stories we have told about ourselves in order to protect ourselves from trying, when we step into insecurity, and thereby open up ourselves to learning – we arrive at another choice: how will we respond?

This is what teshuvah is. Teshuvah allows us to fail, to learn about how we failed, why we failed. Teshuvah permits us to accept our weaknesses, to
admit that we aren’t perfect, that we aren’t always going to succeed. Teshuvah is informed by who you are and who you want to be and become.

But learning to accept failure will not be the only choice you are confronted with this year. In fact for those of you who are students, I hope for you that this school year – and all the years you spend here at Stanford – will be filled with big hard choices that elicit strong feelings. I hope that you can embrace them as opportunities. Because while they might not always feel good in the moment, the big feelings that arise – be they discomfort, anxiety, anger, fear – can be our teachers.

As philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes, [SLOW] “Trying to make moral choices without emotional information is futile.” She argues that “without this emotional cue we simply operate out of habit. When we do feel anxiety, it is a way of saying to ourselves, ‘Hey! Pay Attention.’” These choices are our opportunities for teshuva, for deciding who we are and want to become, not who we think we ought to become or should become.

I’d like you to think for a moment about a choice you already made this morning: The choice to show up here. As we all know, this morning is Rosh Hashanah, and it is also the first day of classes of the 2022-2023 school year. The students, staff and faculty among us had to make a choice between Rosh Hashanah services and classes.

What were the feelings you had when you heard about this conflict? Shock, anger, fear, indifference, sadness? Did you feel alone, ignored?
What can each one of these feelings teach you about what you value?
How did you come to make the choice to be here this morning?
Did it feel like an either/or choice or were you able to imagine a multiplicity of possibilities embracing both options?

I’m not asking you to judge your choice.
I’m asking you to explore your choice, to interrogate it, to learn from it.
How can your choice

– whether it was to take the whole day off from class or to come for the first hour of the service and then head to class or to pop into the service just for the shofar blast and then continue on with your school day –
how can your choice be a teacher for who you are choosing to become?

We might not be able to choose our initial reaction to situations like this. We certainly aren’t able to choose the situations that befall us. The only thing we can choose is our response. How can our initial reaction be a teacher to us but not necessarily the end of the choosing process.

When we make these choices, we are building our identities. We are deciding who we are at the moment and who we will become in the next moment. But, no one choice is determinative because teshuvah is cyclical. It is constant. We are ever-evolving. We are always choosing, again and again. We are always potentially changing.
Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches that before doing teshuva, one does not really exist. It is as if one still has not become in the world...and when one comes... to do teshuva, then one is in the aspect of *ehyeh* (I will be), that is to say that one is ready to exist in the world...

As we start this new year May we each – courageously – step into our existence in the world. May we make choices that are not performative but are instead authentic, helping us come closer to who we are. May we not try to look like we know how to surf, by staying on our knees, but instead may we fall, head first, off the surfboard, into the ocean again and again and again. Because one day, we may just find ourselves standing on our feet.

*Shana Tova*