

Forgiveness

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A couple of months ago, in one horrific moment, we saw the entire spectrum of human triumph and tragedy—undaunted forgiveness and piety in the face of unimaginable evil and brokenness. I watched the television in disbelief at the news of a school shooting in a Pennsylvania Amish town. I thought to myself, "How can anyone be so consumed with anger and despair that he would shoot ten young girls." What's worse is that he planned his attack at least over a period of several days. How do people become so very broken?

The most amazing part of this unthinkable tragedy was the response of the Amish community. They offered immediate forgiveness to the killer (who was a neighbor, but not Amish), embraced his family, and even attended his funeral—all while suffering beyond belief from the death of their own children and praying that those still in the hospital would live. As much as I might like to be filled with such piety, I'm sure I could not. How do we forgive those who have done the unimaginable? How do we affirm and promote their inherent worth and dignity?

Recently, the Reverend Bill Schulz, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and for many years the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, delivered a lecture about his study of torture as a human rights advocate over the years.¹ He suggested that perhaps humans don't have *inherent* worth and dignity, as the Unitarian Universalist principles declare. Rather, worth and dignity must be consciously assigned or denied, whether it is our own or that of the most violent offender. We needn't believe that this particular murderer or that particular torturer retains any inherent worth—they probably don't. But unless we continue the difficult work of affirming and assigning human worth and dignity, even in the face evil, then our own worth and dignity are at stake. Worth and dignity are, unfortunately, matters of opinion. If they aren't offered, then they don't really exist. If we stop working for the healing of the human condition, which is fallible, but which is also filled with unlimited grace, then we risk losing our own worth at the hand of another. I believe this is the ultimate expression of forgiveness—recognizing that each human soul is worthy because all human souls are worthy. Unless we offer that status to everyone, we offer it not even to ourselves.

We become broken when we find ourselves isolated from each other and from the divine—at odds with the people around us, without loving community, and therefore without the possibility of redemption or the realization of our own divinity. In dismissing someone else—whether they are an estranged family member; someone of another race, culture, or class; someone who has committed the most horrible crime; someone who we think has dismissed us; or someone who is of no consequence to our lives—we dismiss ourselves. This is where forgiveness becomes necessary.

I recently read that forgiveness was "letting go of all hope for a different yesterday." Indeed, we cannot change the past. But unless we forgive those, including ourselves, who have made and perpetuated a past other than we hoped it would be, then neither can we move forward to the future that we imagine. The secular New Year that we celebrate tonight and tomorrow is a popular time of resolution, of imagining a better future—committing ourselves to living a better life in some particular way during the next year. I've never been particularly successful at

making or keeping resolutions. And so, on this New Year's Eve, I am not going to make any, nor ask you to do so. Rather, I am going to ask you to do something much more difficult, but infinitely more rewarding. I'd like for you to consider embarking on a path of forgiveness.

During the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashanah and the ensuing high holy days which culminate in Yom Kippur, Jews observe a Day of Atonement on the day before God makes decisions regarding what will happen during the coming year. Just prior to Yom Kippur, they ask forgiveness from those they have wronged. They fast and pray for God's forgiveness for the transgressions they have made against God in the prior year. All religions recognize the need for forgiveness of sins. Sacred texts, most of them thousands of years old, are replete with passages of forgiveness. Nevertheless, I doubt most of us truly understand what it means to forgive, to ask for forgiveness, or *how* to do either. I certainly find it hard to understand the depth of character it took to forgive as the Amish did.

I've been thinking a lot over the last few months about this definition of forgiveness as letting go of all hope for a different yesterday. When I mentioned this briefly in a service in October, a few of you found it very meaningful. It has also helped me, but I believe there is more to forgiveness than is expressed in this brief sentence.

Let me add a few layers to this concept of letting go of the past. First is the idea that forgiveness is not really about others, but almost completely about ourselves. Theologian Frederick Buechner said, "At its core, forgiveness is an act of radical self-interest."² When we ask for forgiveness, it may be easier to understand this idea. We have done something that we ultimately regret, or know was wrong, and we want to make amends. However, whether or not someone else accepts our call for forgiveness and forgives us, is something we literally have no control over. We can ask for forgiveness, but it is up to them to offer it. Their acceptance certainly helps and leads us to the next step of reconciliation, but it is the act of asking that has the most potential for releasing us from the burden we face. This is because we carry our burdens inside, and so in asking for forgiveness, we must first forgive ourselves. If we don't think ourselves that we have done anything wrong, then we aren't likely to seek forgiveness. Even when we do recognize our own wrongdoing, forgiving ourselves for that transgression must come before we can accept another's forgiveness.

I think it would also be safe to guess that everyone here has at some point been hurt, wronged, or injured by someone else. It isn't widespread, but I know that there are at least a few members in this congregation who don't speak to each other because of past conflicts. There are folks who have stopped coming to church because of something I have said. Others have quit, or threatened to do so because they felt wronged by someone else. In each of these cases our own self-righteousness is the burden that holds us back and prevents us from being fully in loving community. These are only trivial examples here among you. These insignificant problems are common in all churches. We often cling to an ego-driven self-righteousness. In doing so, we hinder the community, but most of all we hurt ourselves. The same happens even more intensely within our own families and circles of friends, because more is at stake. The closer we are to each other, the more vulnerable we are to being hurt. This is one of the paradoxes of loving relationship and beloved community, whether in your spiritual or your family home. We are at our most vulnerable when we care the most about each other. The hurt we experience largely results from our own high expectations and extreme disappointment and pain when they are not met. But letting your guard down by releasing your burden is the essential element of moving forward in life.

The wrong done to you may have been something as insignificant or difficult to interpret as feeling ignored; or it may be something as devastating as having been actively abused or assaulted. None of us is without injury. Regardless of the intensity of our hurt, we often hold feelings of sorrow, contempt, anger, and even hatred for those who have offended us. We will most often feel completely justified in those feelings because an injustice was done and we want justice to prevail. But when we act out of anger or similar emotions, the only justice that will come is retributive. Retributive justice does not free us from the burden of our contempt, but simply helps us to feel more self-righteous and justified in retribution or vengeance.

Perhaps you can begin to see the core purpose and result of forgiveness. When we forgive, we release our burden by releasing other's power over us. When we harbor resentment, we injure ourselves. The lack of forgiveness is giving others power over you, regardless of what they have done. Only you have the ability to release that burden or to cling to it. Forgiveness is, at its core, an act of radical self-interest.

Let's take a moment to review some other aspects of what forgiveness is and is not. These ideas are from the International Forgiveness Institute,³ which is based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and where the bulk of scholarly research on forgiveness has been conducted. Interestingly, the in-depth psychological study of forgiveness began less than 15 years ago.

Forgiveness is *moral*: It is a response to injustice. It is turning to the "good" in the face of this wrongdoing. Forgiveness is *goodwill*: It is restraint, as difficult as that may be, from pursuing resentment or revenge. It is generosity and contributing to the betterment of the other. Forgiveness is also *paradoxical*. It is the foregoing of resentment or revenge when the wrongdoer's actions deserve it and giving the gifts of mercy, generosity and love when the wrongdoer does not deserve them. As we give the gift of forgiveness we ourselves are healed. Forgiveness is certainly going above and *beyond the call* of duty. It is a freely chosen gift, rather than a grim obligation.

Forgiveness is not *forgetting* or *denial* or acceptance of wrongdoing. It is not ignoring the effects of the wrongdoing. It is not *condoning* or excusing the injustice. It does release the perpetrator for accountability for their actions. But neither is forgiveness *condemning* or acting with a sense of moral superiority. Forgiveness does not require *justice or compensation*. It is not a quid pro-quo deal.

There is also an important distinction to be made between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is one person's moral response to another's injustice. Reconciliation is two parties coming together in mutual respect. Forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. Sometimes both are possible, sometimes not. But forgiveness, being an internal act, can always occur. You can forgive someone who is no longer in your life. Forgiveness doesn't have to be a face-to-face proposition.

We do, indeed, live in a world where people do terrible things to each other. That is an unfortunate reality. Life includes much unjust suffering. How we deal with that reality determines how we live. Each of us can ask ourselves, "Will I live out of anger or out of compassion? Will I forgive and perhaps seek reconciliation or will I continue to harbor resentment and seek conflict as a way to solve my problems?"

By forgiving, we release ourselves of the burden of our own resentment and self-righteousness. The other may or may not respond, but the responsibility of forgiveness is our own. This sheds a different light on the teaching present in most religions to love our neighbors and even our enemies as ourselves. To show forgiving love and compassion for another requires

love for oneself. If there is no love of self, then there can be none for others. If we go through life perpetually angry because of an injustice, living always in the past, we defeat ourselves.

Let me take a minute to say, if you are listening to this and thinking. “Yes! So-and-so should hear this, it would really help him or her to overcome their anger and rudeness, their pain and suffering...stop right where you are and come back to yourself...This is about you! Forgiveness is at its core an act of radical self-interest.

Let go of those shoulds and should nots. Lay down your expectations of others. Release any blame, however justified you have decided it is, that you project onto others. If you find yourself on the defensive of blame, look deeply at why that is. What must you hold onto so tightly that you must defend yourself against others?

Forgiveness starts with the self. Forgiveness is a solitary act. If we want to forgive another, we first need to seek forgiveness. But forgiveness comes first from ourselves to ourselves. Often the pain we feel, although it may have been caused by someone else, remains with us because of our own unresolved issues. We cannot change what happened, but we can change ourselves. By blaming others, we attempt to relinquish responsibility for our own lives and we give power to those who we hold in contempt. There may be a certain protective self-satisfaction in this, but to the degree we don't forgive others, we probably haven't forgiven ourselves. We don't need to blame ourselves anymore than we need to blame others. I'm not at all suggesting that we become self-deprecating victims who brought the pain onto ourselves. But we are doing active harm to ourselves in being unforgiving—physically, mentally, emotionally, and relationally. We can stop the cycle of pain by releasing that burden.

The International Forgiveness Institute also recognizes four steps to forgiveness⁴: The first is the *uncovering* phase, during which we become aware of the emotional pain resulting from injury. We may experience anger, hatred, and distress. This awareness is, in and of itself, the beginning of the healing process.

The second phase is *decision*, when we realize that focusing on the offense and the offender may cause more unnecessary suffering. We may then entertain the idea of forgiveness as a healing strategy, and we may commit to forgiving the offender. An important first step at this point is to forego our thoughts, feelings or intentions of revenge.

The third phase of forgiveness is the *working* phase, which may include new ways of thinking about the offender. This does not excuse them from responsibility for but allows us to see them as a member of the human community. Often, this new understanding may include empathy and compassion toward the offender. The work phase also includes the heart of forgiveness, which is the acceptance of the pain that resulted. This must not be confused with any sense of deserving the pain but rather a bearing of pain that has been unjustly given. As we bear the pain, we choose not to pass it on.

The final phase is the *outcome or deepening* phase when we realize that we are gaining emotional relief from the process of forgiving. We may find meaning in the suffering that we have faced. This may lead to increased compassion for ourselves and others. We may discover a new purpose in life. Here we discover the paradox of forgiveness: as we give to others the gifts of mercy, generosity, and moral love, we ourselves are healed. Ultimately, forgiveness is a gift that we give ourselves.

We can release the grip that all of this negative energy has on our lives, and can finally move forward. We need to recognize the impossibility of fully putting things right. We can't fix the past, but we can make a better future.

Whether you are angry with someone for a minor offense, or have been suffering your entire life with an unimaginable burden of pain for what seems an unforgivable injury, I'm asking you today not to make a resolution to make things better, but to embark on an intentional journey of forgiveness. You will most likely be resistant and try to hold on to your pain because without it you think that you can't be right, or you think you will be even more vulnerable. You naturally want to protect yourself from additional pain and injury.

What would your life look like free from the pain that you carry? By embarking on the journey of forgiveness, you shift your beliefs about what is possible in your life. This becomes your resolution. You have space for a new story in which new things happen.

If you need to forgive someone and want to begin that journey today, then I ask you to come forward now and silently drop a stone into the water, releasing the weight of its burden on you. It will still be visible, here I this container with the burdens of others because the pain cannot be forgotten. These are stones of forgiveness.

If you need to ask forgiveness, please come forward and silently light a candle. The flame will burn as a symbol of your own inner light and the warmth in your heart that has replaced your transgression. These are flames of forgiveness.

If you need to both light a candle and drop a stone, please do so.

¹ William F. Schulz, "What Torture's Taught Me," 2006 Berry Street Lecture delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, St. Louis, MO. June 21, 2006. [www.meadville.edu/Lectures/Torture.pdf]

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

³ International Forgiveness Institute. [http://www.forgiveness-institute.org/html/about_forgiveness.htm]

⁴ International Forgiveness Institute. [http://www.forgiveness-institute.org/html/process_model.htm]