

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church
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We Begin Again In Love

Forgiveness was a subject probed in the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. In one, Calvin says to Hobbes, "I feel so bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it." Hobbes replied, "Maybe you should apologize to her." Calvin thinks about this for a moment and concludes, "I keep hoping that there is a less obvious solution."

We, too, know that feeling of hoping that there is a less obvious solution than seeking and receiving forgiveness. It is hard to admit when we have missed the mark, hurt another, or betrayed a trust. And it is hard to let go of resentment and grudges we hold, when another has missed the mark in relation to us, hurt us, betrayed our trust. Two recent events reminded me of the importance of the act of forgiving others and the need to forgive ourselves.

A week ago, Friday morning, I received a phone-call from Elmer Treptow's son, informing me that his mother, Pauline, was in ICU at GBMC. When I arrived, family members across three generations were gathered in the room. Pauline's daughter asked me to offer a prayer. I invited us to gather around the bedside and to speak of the things Pauline had seen and created and done for which we were grateful. I was not surprised by the portrait that emerged of a loving mother, wife, grandmother, co-worker, and friend. I was surprised by how many of the reminiscences referred back to an event when Pauline had modeled forgiveness.

Some stories were dramatic, such as when Pauline discovered her two young sons, down in the basement, crouched over a large pile of gun powder – about to conduct an experiment with a match. Others were less dramatic, but no less significant to the person remembering, such as how Pauline accepted what a granddaughter chose to wear at a time when the granddaughter's mother, did not.

The word "forgiveness" was never mentioned in the room. But the experience was palpable in the stories shared of Pauline's unconditional love. A prayer offered by Pauline's son-in-law pointed to it. He spoke of Pauline as the family member who held everyone together. She did not let anything separate her from them. Her son-in-law concluded that the gathering in the room was a testament to her legacy of love.

A few hours after leaving this family, I received a phone call from the Baltimore County Fire Department. A 22-year-old woman had hung herself in the home of a family in Timonium and a chaplain was needed. I arrived to find family members not only in shock, but also already in the grip of the gnawing question,

“What could I have done to prevent this?” Each family member had an “if only:” “If only we’d been able to make Sheppard Pratt commit her two days before;” “If only I had heard what she was doing;” “If only I hadn’t called to let her know I was running late.” Round and round went the heartfelt self-recriminations.

The word forgiveness was never mentioned. But this family was beginning to face what all survivors of suicide face, the need to forgive oneself for the reality that even our love cannot rescue another human being from despair. Or, as the father noted, to forgive oneself that one couldn’t “watch the deceased 24/7;” to forgive oneself for not having it in one’s power or control to will another person to live. One family member finally lamented, “We loved her. We really loved her. Wasn’t love enough?”

By way of response, I offered the phrase I learned many years ago from a man whose father had committed suicide when he was just a child. He said he had learned that when people asked how his father had died, the best response was, “His heart stopped.” When I shared this with family members a week ago Friday, their eyes lit up for a second in recognition. Yes, that was the reality they were confronting. The heart of the woman they’d loved, and would always love, had stopped – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In that glimmer of acknowledgment was the first tentative step toward self-forgiveness.

Forgiving ourselves and others is not something we Unitarian Universalists talk about or ritualize frequently. We left the traditional language of sin, the traditional rituals of confession and repentance, the traditional concept of hell. We speak of the divine spark within each and every person. We celebrate communions with elements of nature and beauty. We may sometimes use hell as a metaphor to describe our lives, but we do not share a belief that the times we miss the mark will be punished, eternally, in an afterlife.

However, we are not immune from being human. In the words of a minister in the novel *The Solace of Leaving Early*, “We have, none of us, lived our lives as we ought to have; and maybe that’s a good, working definition of sin. God doesn’t care, the angels don’t care, no one is mad at us for our failures. But that’s the agony; to know our better selves, the life we might have lived is there, just out of reach.” We are well acquainted with the need for self-forgiveness. We are also not immune from making mistakes, from offending and causing injury to others. And we are not immune from feeling hurt by the mistakes, offenses, and injuries others make in relationship to us.

That is why I turn to what we might learn from the Jewish High Holy Days. The last time I preached on forgiveness at this time of year, someone came up to me after the service and stated, “There are some things that can’t be forgiven. An adult who abuses a child cannot be forgiven.” At first, I thought that we did not have the same working definition of forgiveness.

I had not meant to suggest that forgiveness is letting someone off the hook for the harm they've caused in a relationship. Forgiveness does involve accountability. I had not meant to suggest that forgiveness was acceptance of a transgression in a relationship. Forgiveness does involve the acknowledgment of harm done. I had not meant to suggest that forgiveness is simply forgetting what's happened in the past. Forgiveness does involve remembering and the commitment to make amends.

But in further dialogue after the sermon on forgiveness, I realized that what this individual was telling me is that in her life experience, some transgressions in human relations are so egregious; the anger they create so profound; and the desire for retaliation and revenge so powerful that they can never be forgiven. No doubt, every one of us in this room could think of a family member, co-worker, neighbor, or even fellow-church member towards whom we harbor similar feelings of resentment. It is not easy to let go of anger towards another for a perceived slight or an outright injury. It is much easier to tell and retell again exactly what was said in a hurtful encounter – exactly how another harmed us. It is much easier to nurse the wound along not just for days but for weeks, months, and even years. It is much easier to remain a victim.

But in so doing, we discover that the person we're hurting most is ourselves. Sometimes the other person isn't even in our life anymore except in the tapes that run through our head. There is the story of a former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp who was visiting another former inmate of the concentration camp. "Have you forgiven the Nazis?" he asked. "Yes," was his friend's reply. "Well, I haven't," the man said. "I am still consumed with hatred for them." "In that case," the friend said gently, "they still hold you prisoner."

This story illustrates what forgiveness is. It is not about giving something to someone who may or may not deserve it. It is about giving away something that is poisoning one's own soul. It is not tolerating abuse or insults. It is not forgetting or ignoring injustice. It is not necessarily even about continuing a relationship. It is literally giving away – for-giving – the hurts, fears, anger, pain, judgments, frustrations, and resentments that keep us stuck in the past, unable to become the people we are meant to be.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt observed that we humans are created with the power to remember the past but left powerless to change it, and we are created with the power to imagine the future, but left powerless to control it. Forgiveness is the process through which we transcend the past while committing ourselves to a different future. Forgiveness is, in one definition, "the ability to let go of the possibility of a better yesterday." It is the ability to let go of the possibility of a better yesterday in order to pursue the possibility of a better today and tomorrow.

Twelve Step programs are grounded in this spiritual practice. They require that individuals do a searching moral inventory and seek to make amends to all they may have hurt, however unintentionally, unless doing so would cause more harm. And Twelve Step programs teach that individuals may learn to heal the hate and resentment they feel in relation to others by praying for them. Praying for them? Yes. While this may sound like a pie-in-the-sky platitude, one actual prayer may surprise you. It is, "May the SOB get exactly what he or she deserves."

Now please observe, this prayer does not presume to know what he or she deserves. It does not seek to control the outcome. But it is one way to become liberated from the prison of anger and resentment; to express – and then turn from – the feelings of retaliation and revenge. For those for whom this approach is too harsh and stark, I offer another mantra.

It comes from a story related by my colleague Patrick O'Neill. When he was six, he was bullied by some boys in his neighborhood on his way home from school. A woman saw what was happening and called to him from her porch. Once inside her kitchen, he was more angry than hurt. The kindly woman gave voice to his anger. She said, "You are angry at those boys. It is natural for you to feel that way. But now...let it go. This day has other things to give you."

"Let it go. This day has other things to give you," was the phrase Patrick never forgot. But there was something else he never forgot. During that encounter he noticed a tattoo on this woman's forearm. When he asked her about it, she did not tell the six-year-old boy that she and her husband were survivors of the concentration camps of the Holocaust. Instead, she had said, "The number represents my past, not my present. It is not going to be my future." Years later, Patrick wrote, "Imagine hearing that from a death camp survivor. Besides the hurts and indignities of an unfair universe, this day has other things to give you. Besides the anger and the hurts that you want to carry in your heart, this day has other things to give you."

Forgiveness, "this day has other things to give you," is how we move from the pain of the past and begin, again, in love. The Hebrew people recognized that no new beginning can occur without forgiveness. That is why the holiest days in Judaism are about the process of apologizing and making amends directly to people we have hurt during the past year; and forgiving others seeking to make amends and to repair relationships. It is significant that ten days, not one are given, liturgically, for this to happen. This ten day time-frame acknowledges that forgiveness is neither easy to ask for nor to receive and cannot be forced. It is a choice.

I chose to hold this ritual up for our reflection, this year, because of the pain and dissension and confusion in our congregation over the past year. It is not easy to live in community. Jack Kornfield observes, "When we get close enough

to one another to offer love and support in intimate ways, our old family patterns, our fears, our needs, our limitations show up as well.” He continues, “If we go to spiritual community in search of perfect peace, we will inevitably meet failure.” He concludes, “But if we understand community as a place to mature our practice of truth-telling, integrity, compassion, patience and justice, to become conscious together with others, then we have the fertile soil for awakening.”

At its best, in religious community we learn to work through our differences. The goal is not perfection, but growth. Like Victoria Safford we imagine turning to come round right; to make ourselves, each other, and the world more whole. Like Kaaren Anderson we seek the chance to be honest with ourselves. Like Pauline, we hold one another accountable for missing the mark or breaking our covenant. We don't tolerate setting fire to gun powder in the lower level! Like the family of the young woman who committed suicide, we hold one another with supportive arms when we stumble and fail. Like the concentration camp survivor, we help one another to learn to let go of that which keeps us stuck in a past we cannot change. Like participants in Twelve Step programs we encourage one another to make amends where possible and to “let go and let God” where mending relationships is not possible. Like Patrick O'Neill's neighbor, we keep before us the promise that “This day has other things to give us.” This year has other things to give us, if we will let it. Like the Jewish community, may we indeed forgive ourselves and one another, and begin again in love.