

Forgiveness is a tough subject, and it is a particular tough subject for UUs. Sometimes it is tough for us because like any other human being when I say the word forgiveness some of us have an internal reaction that sounds something like “I didn’t do anything wrong”.

So I first want to set out what I am not going to talk about

I am not going to talk about forced contrition (remember as a child when someone forced you to say I am sorry)

I am not going to talk about what I call a worm theology - Dear God I am a worm and it is only through you that I can be forgiven and made whole. If I had to point to only one thing that led me to Unitarian Universalism it is that we lack a worm theology – I would like to believe that our theologies are more nuanced than that.

I am not going to tell you that you must forgive your transgressor and recreate the relationship with them.

That we as UUs struggle with forgiveness and what it means to each of us and to our movement is not a bad thing I think that it points to the fact forgiveness is something that is a deeply spiritual act and a deeply emotional act.

When I was working as a therapist I worked with a lot of people who were survivors of violence – horrible, horrible violence unspeakable really except that these folks had to talk about it had to give it voice so that they could find some kind of healing. And it was my job and honor to witness their process of shedding that armor of anger and defense in order to find something more livable more life affirming.

When to forgive is a very personal decision and I cannot tell you what is the right time for you. And I do not believe anyone can tell you when is the right time for you. So I

want to be very clear that I speak of forgiveness here this morning not to coerce you into forgiving but rather to talk more deeply than we often do about forgiving.

So first I think that often people conflate forgiveness with a repair of the relationship. It was not uncommon for me to hear from a client - I can never ever forgive my abusive mother, father, uncle ... It is not safe for me to be in the same room with them and if I forgive them then they will want to talk to me and see me and then it will be the abusive thing all over again. There are different steps in the process of forgiveness. I want to actually outline two different processes one where the transgressor is part of the forgiveness process and one where they are not.

First the hurt needs to be heard. Sometimes you can do that process with the person who has hurt you. One year I was at Lifespan Faith Development conference on Star Island and was in a small group where we were to talk about our spirituality and how the conference was having an impact on that. I had an older stately gentleman in my group who as it turned out was a pretty vocal anti-theist. He stated at the beginning of our group that he was glad to be a UU because he could talk about the conference without talking about all that God foo-ey. I went away from our first session mildly hurt and wondering how I was going to spend all week with this man - It is a small Island and there are not too many places to hide after all. At our second meeting I said to him, "I appreciate that you do not believe in all that God foo-ey, but I do and yesterday your words simply dismissed my experience of my spirituality and my beliefs and so I ask respectfully that you not refer to it as foo-ey." He was genuinely surprised that there was a Unitarian Universalist who believed in all that God foo-ey but he did apologize and in our conversations after that he respected my beliefs. That was a simple interaction with a person who had the capability to hear my hurt and a capability to change his behaviors. In that instance the forgiveness process could lead to reconciliation. But that is not always the case

If you are able to confront your transgressor with their misdeed not only do they need to listen but they also need to say I am sorry that I hurt you. Here are words that are pseudo-apologies

I am sorry that you feel that way

I am sorry that you are so sensitive

I am sorry that you see it that way

I am sorry that you misunderstood me

These all just deflect the responsibility back on the one who has been hurt

Here is one that simply does not accept that there is person who has been hurt but instead keeps all the attention on the transgressor

I am sorry that I am such a horrible person that I hurt you and I cannot believe that I did that it must be because I had a horrible childhood and I just don't know any better and

...

This last one is usually accompanied by much self-loathing and tears. For the one who has been hurt this - for the moment might feel good, because truth be told sometimes we humans really like to see the ones who hurt us to suffer - as if there is something redemptive in that. But there is not.

Again this last one simply does not really listen to the story of the one who has been hurt but instead keeps all the focus on the transgressor and does not allow any room for the one who has been hurt. Sometimes it morphs into this kind of twisted situation where the one who has been hurt actually ends up taking care of the transgressor.

But if the one who has been hurt is actually heard then the transgressor needs to make it right. In our romantic mythology sometimes this is where the flowers or the box of chocolates comes in. And although those can be lovely gifts are not be enough.

In that little incident that happened to me on Star Island the transgressor was able to say that he was sorry and he made it right by changing his behavior. Had he bought me a cup of coffee but continued to ridicule my religious beliefs it would not have been a true repair of the relationship.

And what is done to make it right needs to be on par with the wrongdoing. If I call you a name and hurt you if true reconciliation is to happen I need to apologize and stop calling you names. If I steal something I need to apologize and return the thing and not do it again.

This is where I see this forgiveness process break down. Sometimes the transgressor simply cannot hear the hurt and simply cannot offer to make it right. Sometimes that is because they really and truly just are not sorry. But sometimes it is because they too broken and in their brokenness they cannot risk the vulnerability of setting someone else's needs ahead of their own.

One of my children once lied to me, on an ongoing basis, that they had been doing their homework. Actually each of my children has done this at one time or another so you can stop trying to guess which one it was. And my response as a parent each time was pretty much the same. You have broken my trust and in that I am truly hurt. One way you can repair this relationship is to regain my trust and so you will be doing your homework in front of me each day and I will be signing off on it until such time as I feel certain that you have learned to change your ways. This doing what needs to be done to make the relationship right is not about inflicting suffering on someone else - although when you are hurt it sure can feel like that would make it right. - It is about rebuilding the trust.

And only when the wrong has been heard, and the relationship has been healed only then can the transgressor ask for forgiveness. The deeper the hurt, the larger the tear in the relationship and the more risk there is in this whole process and it makes it hard.

So really why do it?

Why not just wrap yourself in the self-righteous anger of knowing that you were hurt and the transgressor is worth less than dirt and go on. You can achieve a lot fueled by anger.

But what you can't do is love. And we Universalists we know that love is what redeems all of human kind. We say Love the Hell out of this world - its a cute play on words but it carries a deep deep truth - only love will move the hell out of this world. We do not say Hate the Hell out of this world, we do not say shout the hell out of this world.

I can wrap myself in anger but it will not save me or redeem me or even keep me safe. It might keep me from being hurt in that way again. But anger used as a shield will also keep me from being loved into wholeness. Adulthood is just hard there is not way around it. Sometimes we can pull it off and sometimes we have to wait for another chance.

But what happens if the person who wronged you is not available for some kind of process of forgiveness.

There might be times when the person who wronged you cannot be the one who hears your hurt. If your parent was abusive, emotionally, physically or sexually and is still abusive in some way it may not be safe for you to confront them. There are times when a relationship is still so toxic that stepping back into it in order to find healing or resolve is simply too dangerous. I'm all for a Buddhist like letting go but if the person who wronged me is a physical threat I will not enter into physical proximity with them. Or it may be that the person has died and is no longer present to hear your hurt. Perhaps then it is better to find a therapist, a pastor, a spiritual director, a prayer practice that will allow you the voice to honor the hurt that has been done to you.

And so the process is about listening to your self honoring the part of you that was hurt - affirming that it was real and that you are not making it up, it is about affirming that you are worth more than simply being angry all the time. It is about recognizing that there is love and grace waiting for you is you can unclench your fist and put down the shield.

The story still needs to be honored. And the goal of the process is not reconciliation but rather to let go of the hurt and the anger that surrounds it so that you can lighten your load, and like the people in our story straighten your back, learn to breathe again, have time and the ability to look around and know that there is still beauty in the world even though something unspeakable happened to you. It is about learning that you have the ability to be open to grace and know that it is there for you just waiting.

Here I think is the secret I have learned over the years, even as I struggle to practice it myself - forgiveness benefits the one who was hurt way more than the one who did the hurting. When I am able to forgive for the best reasons it is because I want to move on. I want to be liberated from my hurt, from my sadness, from my anger. I want to let the love and grace of this world shape me, not the fear and anger. I want to be the larger me not the smaller me, I want to be able to be connected with myself and with others and not stuck behind my anger. I want to have the hell loved out of me and to return the favor.

In a world with out end may it be so.