

Forgiveness Sermon

I thought that since I spoke about Jesus' compassion two weeks ago, I ought to continue on into forgiveness. There is personal relevance for me in the study of forgiveness. My mother's uncle used to spend his summers going from relative to relative, spending a week or two at each, and promising at each house to bequeath his considerable—for that time and place—fortune of \$750 to his host. Soon after he died, in 1938, it was discovered that he did not have any money, no \$750, not even \$7.50. My mother gave the Baptist minister \$10 to bury him. My mother's brother, however, decided that their uncle had left it all to her and she was unwilling to share. Sadly, for my mother, her brother became very distant. Another example: A husband and wife had been dissatisfied with each other for years, and fighting for nearly a year in therapy, when one of them changed in an effort to please the other. After several weeks, the still-aggrieved spouse (while acknowledging a change) becomes angry and shouts: "Why should I forgive? It has been a year of hell, I'm still hurt, and I should forgive just because these are the changes I wanted?"

Forgiveness is a process. It takes time and requires hard work. This is but an introduction to how we might forgive because forgiveness retreats ahead of us as we approach it, like a concept that disappears and reappears in different forms the more we try to grasp it. Forgiveness is a choice, a process, and a struggle so varied and individual that nobody can grasp it entirely. I congratulate you on just listening and trying to understand forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a familiar term for most of us here. Not all religious traditions emphasize forgiveness per se, but many emphasize a close associate such as compassion. Some have focused on the interpersonal perspective, such as Enright and Fitzgibbons.

Enright and Fitzgibbons definition:

People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right). (Ekstein and Wallerstein, FORGIVENESS IN CLINICAL PRACTICE, p. 24)

I'll unpack the Enright and Fitzgibbons definition a little. "Rationally determining" refers to a considered decision by a forgiver free of mental distortions who understands the other's moral wrongness. "Willfully abandon" resentment refers to a forgiver who actively struggles with inner ambivalences that can last months and years. "Responses" to the wrongdoer refers to everything from feeling annoyance to hatred, judgments ranging from inadequacy to evil incarnate, and behaviors ranging from ignoring to assault. The principle of "Beneficence" refers to a genuine sense of goodness in which people aid others without thought of what they have done or can do for them. There are two paradoxes in this definition: 1) The forgiver gives up what one has a right to, such as resentment, judgment, and revenge, and 2) Gives to another that which is not necessarily deserved.

So far, this is pretty dry stuff. Autonomy from ancient hurts can free us to inhabit a future of creativity, no longer trapped in the past. But I cannot promise personal fireworks or waves of warm pleasure surging through your body. Unleashed from the agony of sabotage, ambush, and betrayal, the fragile soufflé of a sublime summer afternoon can expand and continue.

By contrast, Luskin takes forgiveness as primarily inside of us and present-day focused:

Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness in the present moment. Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present. Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded you choose to hurt and suffer less. (Luskin, FORGIVE FOR GOOD, p. 68-9)

Luskin recommends cognitively focusing on what is good in our lives, giving thanks, and sustaining a positive focus in our lives—even in the face of negative experiences. He wants us to focus on accepting that a lot of what we want is an unenforceable rule, such as "My Partner Has to Be Faithful" or "People Must Not Lie to Me." If those expectations are unrealistic, then change your expectation or empower yourself to change your situation. He asks, after a devastating loss, "How do I tell a story that that helps me move on from the past and meet my goals?" (pg. 148). He suggests that we simply slow down, breathe slowly, and notice (for example) the beauty around us or the gratitude we feel. These exercises can provide a respite.

I would compare Luskin's strategies for seeing an injustice from a more optimistic or objective perspective to the fire department you call when your car bursts into flame vs. the deeper, more profound work of taking your car into the shop for regular maintenance. Guided exercises that use meditative breathing are fine during a crisis, but regular, sustained meditation changes us. Both are useful in different ways and times. Sustained conversations with a therapist or some very good friends, people you can trust to keep a confidence and to be empathetic, are central to the disclosure of pain, anger, and hope. Guided exercises, regular meditation, and sustained conversations are the gold standard for getting to forgiveness. This cannot be a handbook for how to forgive, but a re-orientation to both a sometimes vague goal of forgiveness and a sometimes blissful present tense. This is centrally important to the religious quest to live a more-fulfilling life.

Forgiveness is not, to consider a few options, pardon, condoning, or reconciliation—all of which are past oriented.

- Pardon is a legal form of mercy, in which someone is given a lighter punishment, but the active reaching out is absent. President Clinton's last-minute flurry of pardons (hours before he left office) were apparently issued for various reasons of reward, friendship, and redressing legal wrongs, but seemingly involved no movement of his soul toward active compassion—nor did he allude to that.
- Condoning refers to tolerating a moral wrong because of the pressure of circumstances. One of my clients has recently seen her boss be kind one day and the next day cruel, twice. The first was confusing, the second instructive, and she condoned it long enough to change her employment.
- Excusing says the event was not worth getting worked up about. Excusing is a rational over-ride of flood tide emotions to diminish a strong reaction to minor rudeness, like someone ignoring your presence or quickly turning their car in front of yours.
- Reconciliation is conditional on changed behavior, a re-establishment of trust, and a behavioral contract for mutual safety. If your best friend betrayed you but apologized, told you how they will change, and then followed through over a period of time, then reconciliation is happening.
- Experiencing peace or self-centering: (Luskin's definition relies on this) helps relieve oneself of painful emotions. Forgiveness is willing to meet another with compassion or

change one's judgment of the other. Luskin's work deserves respect because he has insight into the necessary conditions for experiencing the ability to forgive and forgiveness itself. Luskin took mothers of murder victims from the Protestant and Catholic fighting in Northern Ireland, put them together in the same group for a week, and a year later their sense of loss and stress had been cut by half, while their forgiveness had increased 40 percent. He taught them a lot about the oppression of revenge carried on over the generations, becoming obsessive, and ways to change those roots in their own psyche.

Forgiveness is not personal vengeance. Recent research contributes to a view of vengeance as a biologically rooted sense of justice that functions in the brain something like an appetite. Michael McCullough: "Revenge can be a very good deterrent to bad behavior and bring feelings of completeness and fulfillment." Plenty of research—and good common sense—supports a view of vengeance as good for social cohesion and balance. The punishment underlying rules and laws keeps people pretty much in line, and besides, it lessens the ongoing obligation to continue multigenerational family or ethnic warfare. It reassures people that there is, generally speaking, a justice to the prevailing order of things. Some will wait years, nurturing their vindictiveness, for the right moment and the right retribution, thus failing to do well by both individual and social wellbeing. In this context of much time and energy wasted, much mental space given rent-free to people who do not deserve it, the freedom and high moral ground of forgiveness can be a relief.

As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize that the source of transcendent values is not external but within each of us. We give Higher Powers a name distinct--but not separate--from who we are. We choose that value or Being, define it, and keep faith with it. Basically, if a person is made capable --through a relationship with a Higher Power, God, Allah, Brahmin, the Way, or whatever transcendent value they recognize—of forgiveness, it is because the determination derived from that Higher Power grants them a source of strength. The decision to derive from a Higher Power the ability to forgive another unilaterally is from a spiritual dimension.

Finally, this adds up to forgiveness being an active, developmental, moral process that takes time and occurs in many areas of life. The pragmatic benefits of forgiving are most commonly alluded to. For example, Richard Fiske was a Marine Corps bugler on the battleship West Virginia when Pearl Harbor was bombed. The memories of the bombs and

torpedoes, burning shipmates, and swimming through burning oil never left him. But it was when he nearly died of a bleeding ulcer in the 1960's that his doctor warned him that his hatred for the Japanese people was poisoning him, saying: "I can cure your stomach but not your head." Fiske burst into tears and began a slow process of forgiveness and reconciliation with the Japanese, a particularly useful one in his case because his daughter would later marry a Japanese American. If we look at this carefully, Fiske had a lot going for him. How forgiveness happened was that he had a doctor who knew him and his history and cared enough to confront his emotional pain. He had a family who must have discussed the issue with him, sometimes in tears, sometimes in anger, to loosen him up. He may have had buddies who tried to talk sense into him. People loved him and he felt it. For another example, Marietta Jaeger's seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped and murdered in Montana. She was filled with rage and grief but resolved, with a weary willingness, to try to forgive. Over the next year it took to find the perpetrator, Marietta remembered the kidnapper was a member of the human race, resolved not to speak of him in subhuman terms, and prayed for good things for him every day. This was very hard. It felt, at different times, disloyal to her daughter, false, mechanical--and relieving. Relieving, because chronic resentment is a chronic stressor, and people who forgive suffer less anxiety and depression and have higher self-esteem. Some studies say they enjoy better physical health. Marietta Jaeger had a spiritual discipline of prayer and loving behaviors, people she talked to at length, and the ability to look inside herself. Forgiveness for Marietta was both difficult and ambivalent, but it may have saved her from her husband's fate; he became morose and depressed, sunk in helpless rage. He died several years later of bleeding ulcers and a heart attack.

The active process of forgiving members of a despised group is one of getting to know particular people that are exceptional and then broadening that awareness to numerous others. The process of forgiving a fickle lover, deceitful family member, or cruel antagonist is more emotionally difficult, as it involves a reaching out with compassion despite distrust and fear. Further, people who were chronically traumatized in a close personal relationship have the most difficult task of healing within before forgiveness can be considered.

And what about my mother's brother, the one who unjustly accused her of taking funds he mistakenly thought existed? After twenty years of my mother intermittently trying to

reconnect with him, he consented to visit us a couple of times, with his wife and children. My mother had forgiven him for his accusation, and he was at last willing to have tentative contact. They were able to agree on the importance of family.

Forgiveness is not a simple, once-and-its-done. Forgiving is more than either will-power or strategy. We need to take it to our communities, whether it is family, friends, FUSW, or all three. We need to accept the pain of facing that we have very real, intense emotions about very real, intense destructive events. Feelings of hurt and anger must be uncovered repeatedly. We need to understand how a terrible wrong alters our hope of being fairly treated. There is grief in realizing that our expectations will not be met, but also freedom to have new hopes. We need to feel whole in the present and hopeful for the future. Forgiveness is not just a therapeutically useful technique but a process of developing a sense of the other person's potential goodness. There is in that sense of potential a humility that everyone makes mistakes, but redemption is possible. Only then can a decision to forgive be honestly considered. That decision will be made and reconsidered many times but signals a changed direction. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

The only problem with this whole sermon and that quote is that some of you will decide that you are terrible people because you do not think you can forgive someone—an old boss, a romantic partner, a parent, your next-door neighbor. You have already started yelling at yourself inside your head, berating yourself for not being able to grant another their full humanity or still begrudging a slight from 20 years ago. You remember the major flaw or mistake from yesterday or last year that renders you unfit for forgiveness. Hold that thought. Really. Take a deep breath. Remember that you are human, only human, and humans make mistakes. And in three weeks I am giving a sermon on self-forgiveness, so show up for that.