

Forgiveness

by Mary Grigolia

Life wounds us in countless ways. An alcoholic parent. An absent parent. An abusive older relative. A neighborhood bully. Poverty. A teacher who vents her frustration on her students. An illness or physical loss. The death of loved ones. Racism. The betrayal of a spouse. The loss of a job. Homophobia. The loss of our sense of faith. Violence. We throw up wall after wall to guard ourselves, to wall off the pain, and we accomplish numbness. We become cynical. Forgiveness is how we reclaim our loving hearts. We can't be healthy people unless we know and practice the spiritual art of forgiveness.

Gregg Levoy recalls:

I had gone to see an exhibit called, “Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet,” during which a group of monks traveling with the Dalai Lama were creating a six-foot-wide circular mandala—a spiritual rendering of the cosmos—made of colored sand, ground from gemstones. For nearly a month, they worked silently, bent over the low platform that cradled the growing sacrament. They laid out their intricate geometry of devotion by hand, surrounded constantly by onlookers, who stood sometimes for hours, as I did, simply watching: our busy lives were uncharacteristically forgotten.

In the Buddhist tradition of nonattachment, the monks intended from the very start to dismantle it after a few months on exhibit and to scatter its remains in the sea. All that work wasted, I thought to myself.

On the day before the final ritual celebrating its completion, just as the monks were putting the finishing touches on the mandala, a woman jumped over the velvet ropes, climbed onto the platform, and trampled it with her feet, screaming something about “Buddhist death cults.”

When I read about it, sitting in my kitchen, my head filled with images of frontier justice. But when I reached the end of the article, my rage turned into disbelief. In stark contrast to my own malevolent response, the monks’ was one of exoneration. “We don’t feel any negativity,” said one of them. “We don’t know how to judge her motivations. We are praying for her for love and compassion.”

Coming from a long line of avengers—people who have demanded eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth—I have always had a difficult time with forgiveness. I have hung on to certain betrayals all my life, refusing to let go of things I long ago lost forever.

But when I heard that the museum officials were considering pressing charges against the marauder, it seemed that to do so would be a dishonor to the monks’

gesture of absolution, an act that greatly defused the situation, drained much of the bitterness from it, and set a very hard example to follow.

I have since taken a critical look at my own reaction, at the awful instinctiveness of it, and at the alternative provided by the very men who should have been the most outraged but were not.

The monks reminded me that to forgive is indeed divine, but that ordinary people can do it, and a single act of forgiveness has the power to break an escalation of violence. Laws that punish wrongdoers may have little or no effect on setting your own soul to rights after you have been done wrong. That task is hard, human work, although as the monks evidenced, even a single act of amnesty has a kind of divine contagion. I took with me, permanently, a few grains of the wisdom and compassion that were demonstrated at that impermanent exhibit.¹

I stopped by an independent bookstore that specialized in books on spirituality and props for meditation and yoga. I spotted a little dish with stones in it. Each one was marked with one word: Hope. Joy. Love. Transformation. Wholeness. I told the owner that I was writing a sermon on forgiveness. Did she have a forgiveness stone I could take home with me? “Oh”, she said. “The artist makes them, we used to offer them for sale, but no one ever wanted to buy it. So we gave them back. Forgiveness just doesn’t sell.”

Forgiveness is unpopular and misunderstood. Let’s get clear about what forgiveness is NOT.

Forgiveness is not condoning abuse or insults. It isn’t about forgetting or ignoring injustice.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean that you have to like the person who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn’t even mean that you have to confront someone, face to face, who scared you.

Forgiveness is not about the other person. It’s not for the other person. It’s about you.

Life breaks our hearts, again and again. We respond by putting up walls around our wounds. And it’s awfully easy to start identifying with those walls. Gloria Karpinski said, “The people we haven’t forgiven are living with us as intimately as our breathing. You can get away with avoidance, smoke screens, and rationalizations. But the unforgiven person keeps coming back again and again, wearing a different name or personality, but demanding that you deal with the unresolved issues... Anything unforgiven is held in the body, the emotions, the mind, and even the soul.”²

Carolyn Myss writes, “By far the strongest poison to the human spirit is the inability to forgive oneself or another person.”³ Living with an unforgiven grievance literally draws more and more of our vital energy. It means instead of being wounded once, we re-

experience that wound day after day. The failure or the unwillingness to forgive means giving your life's energy to the abuser, day after day: letting the abuse run your life.

The peace that passeth understanding might well come from the ineffable source of the Universe itself, but forgiveness is something that each one of us can do.

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But what is forgiveness? The English word comes from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning to give something away. What are we giving away when we forgive? The hurts, the wounds, the judgments, the fears, the projections, the violence, and the limitations—all that blocks us, all that does not belong within us. Forgiveness is an emotional, an intellectual, a physical and a spiritual process of letting go.

Forgiveness is a cornerstone of every religious tradition. In the Jewish heritage, forgiveness is seen through the lens of the covenant, the sacred promise between Life and the people. A covenant that is expected to be renewed every year, when you are expected to make amends with your family and with your neighbors before you ask God to write your name again into the book of life. What acts or omissions do you need to ask forgiveness for? The Jewish tradition of covenant asks us to know who will hold us accountable and whom we will hold accountable.

The stories of Jesus presented complex family dramas where no one was without blame and where the moral center was in everyone. Listeners were admonished to “judge not, lest ye be judged.” And everyone was invited into the story to decide what the moral choice would be. Sadly, the church changed these teachings, so that instead of holding individuals responsible to seek forgiveness from one another, forgiveness became dependent on doctrinal purity and resided more and more with the priests.

For a brief time in seventeenth century Poland, there was a vibrant community of early Unitarians in a small town called Rakow, or Racovia. Like other radical Anabaptists, these Unitarians struggled to create a renewed religion in the spirit of Jesus. They shared communion one Sunday a month, and the day before communion, everyone was expected to gather at the hall to ask forgiveness from one another for all the misunderstandings and quarrels which arisen in the community that week. You were not allowed at the communion table if you had failed to clear away any of the grievances against you.

That's not something we do these days in most UU churches. And yet, with the advent of covenant groups, we have been moving towards that idea of a community of accountability, where people know each other well enough and give each other permission to hold each other accountable. It's a movement back towards the Jewish tradition of covenant and atonement, where forgiveness is something we are each responsible for, within a community of care and accountability.

If we were to distribute those little meditation stones in our UU churches, I think few of us would choose that forgiveness stone. We Unitarian Universalists have associated forgiveness with punishment and the Catholic confessional. Our movement has emphasized the inherent worth and dignity and possibility of every individual. We have emphasized the positive in reaction to the pessimistic cosmology of original sin. Our tendency has been to turn away from misdeeds, because they didn't fit with a rosy worldview. Only in the last twenty years have we articulated ethical boundaries for our ministers, and even more recently started to encourage our congregations to articulate how we will hold each other accountable to live according to our marvelous principles and life-affirming values.

And so our challenge is to learn how to forgive, responsibly and fully. Gloria Karpinski writes that before forgiveness starts, there are several preconditions.

First, we must be clear about who and what needs forgiving.

Secondly, we must examine the implications of the original wound. How did it shape us? How did it become part of us? Do we need a therapist or support person to help us untangle it?

Then comes the quickening, the decision to let go of the wound or the holding.

Once we make the decision to let it go, we need to remember that there are at least four levels or kinds of forgiveness. The first may be the most difficult. First, we have to forgive ourselves, for not having been able to stop whatever happened. For having limits to our control. For not having more information or making different choices. This requires bountiful compassion for oneself.

Next comes forgiving the other, from a place of mutual respect and accountability, like the monks who prayed for the woman who destroyed the mandala.

Thirdly, we come to the dimension of systemic injustice. Our hearts are broken by it again and again. In order to forgive this injustice, we have to be able to grieve fully the loss of human potential. Once we have grieved, we are able to work from a place of inspired compassion, not just managed anger or blind hatred.

The last dimension of forgiveness requires us to forgive God, or the structure of Life itself. Forgiveness—giving it away, not holding on to the way we thought things were

supposed to be, or what was fair: this kind of forgiveness is really about coming back into relationship with Life itself.

It has often been said that prayer doesn't change things, but that it changes the one who prays, because it requires you to tune your intentions in a particular way, to tune your intentions toward healing or wholeness or reconciliation. Forgiveness is exactly the same; it may or may not change the person who is forgiven, but it certainly changes the one who forgives.

And so we get to the nitty gritty: how do you do it? There are probably an infinite number of ways to practice forgiveness. But I'd like to share at least two of them, and I encourage you to tell each other about what works for you in practicing the spiritual art of forgiveness.

Because the body is witness and holder of all of our wounds, I frequently practice forgiveness as a physical discipline. Placing my hands on the center of my chest, I imagine coming into the heart center, and opening myself to loving-kindness. I open my mind to someone whom I need and choose to forgive. I breathe into my heart, affirming my ability to open to the power of Being, the power of Love, which is so much larger than our individual selves, to help me forgive and to let it go. Breathing into the emotions, breathing into any holding patterns in the body, I imagine that my breath gathers up the resentment, or any emotional debris I've been harboring. And gradually, as I exhale, I let it go. Dissipating, recycling it, along with the carbon dioxide.

Journaling is another technique. Sitting quietly, I take an inventory of all those I have hurt, inadvertently or knowingly. One person at a time, I remember what I did that hurt them. As I sit, I let it sink in to the cellular level, with every breath. It's important to stay in those feelings of sadness and responsibility, and maybe even guilt. Only when we have fully accepted what we have done, not just at the intellectual level, but also at the emotional and causal levels, are we ready to ask for forgiveness that's real and not just glib smoothing-over. This means forgiving yourself and asking for those you have hurt to forgive you. This does not get you off the hook for making amends face to face, repairing the harm that we have done, but it prepares us for that. It allows us to take responsibility and frees us from numbness.

When I'm really ready, I put my apology into words. And I sit with each one as long as I need.

I wish I could say that first we learn how to forgive each other individually before we are expected to face systemic injustice. This is simply not the case, either for people of color, or for people living in poverty, or for children preyed upon by sexual predators, whether they are found in houses of worship or in their own homes. Forgiveness as a spiritual challenge and practice, like life, is not linear.

The story about the Tibetan monks forgiving the woman who destroyed their mandala opens a door to a larger realm of forgiveness. The Chinese have driven the

Tibetan monks from their homes and monasteries and threaten to destroy their way of life. Yet the monks respond with compassion for the Chinese people.

When asked about how he was able to teach in the United States, after the atrocities visited upon his people, venerable Vietnamese sage Thich Nhat Hanh spoke about being present to deep sadness, but not stopping there, knowing that he had to get through the sadness to reach compassion, not just for his people, but for himself, and especially for the Americans.

Sometimes we believe that we have to stay angry at the enemy or at the system in order to sustain our work as social justice activists. But anger cannot substitute for love or forgiveness. Anger creates divisions and burns us out. We have learned from the courageous people in the nonviolent resistance movements of the twentieth century that hatred does not stop hatred. Only love and forgiveness can do that.

In the work of social justice, nothing will substitute for the hard spiritual work of forgiveness. This requires a support network able to witness and to grieve the loss of human potential. It requires communities of accountability, a joyful community, with vision. Through their shared knowledge and grief, all grow roots deep enough to enable us to strengthen one another and sustain the work of justice.

The spiritual practice of forgiveness is much like the monks building the mandala, one grain of sand at a time. It is hard work. It requires commitment and vision, focus and ongoing intention. And the acceptance of impermanence.

Beloved Presence, whom we know within our own hearts, whom we see within each other's faces, and in the mystery all around us: Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. AMEN.

Notes

1. Greg Levoy, *Callings, Finding and Following An Authentic Life*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 1998, pp 285-7.
 2. Unpublished seminar.
 3. Carolyn Myss, *Anatomy of the Spirit*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 1997, p.84.
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