

UUMAN

March 13, 2016

A Dispatch from the Borderland of Forgiveness

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Words to enrich the spirit...

There's a beauty to forgiveness, especially forgiveness that goes beyond rationality.

—A.J. Jacobs in The Year of Living Biblically

Prelude

Gathering Hymn

Welcome

Hand of Friendship

Chalice Lighting (unison)

Opening words

Joys and Sorrows

Meditation and silence: *Marni Harmony*

I say that it touches us that our blood is

sea water and our tears are salt, that the
seed of our bodies is scarcely different
from the same cells in a seaweed, and
that the stuff of our bones is like the coral.

I say that the tide rolls in on us, whether

we like it or no, and the sands of time
keep running their intended course.

I say we have to go down into the wave's trough

to find ourselves, and then ride her swell
until we can see beyond ourselves into
our neighbor's eye.

I say that we have got to walk the waves
as well as the solid ground.

I say that anyone who goes without
consciousness of this will remain
chained to a rusty anchor.

May the journey find us worthy. Amen

Worship Associate's reflection
Anthem

Sermon: A Dispatch from the Borderland of Forgiveness

Maybe you had a conventionally religious upbringing. Maybe you never darkened a Sunday doorway until the day you found UUMAN. Whether or not you're aware, your values, ethics and outlook on religion and spirituality have been influenced by the Bible. As I get ready to talk about forgiveness and forgiving, consider Jesus's well-known parable of the prodigal son.

A man has two sons. On attaining his majority, the younger son demands his share of the family wealth, runs away from home, and proceeds to spend his birthright on partying. Some years later, down at the mouth, and likewise to his last penny, the dissipated youth returns penitent to the family homestead, whereupon Dad kills the fatted calf and uncorks the barrel. The elder son, who

has stayed at home on the farm being indispensable to his father, is understandably outraged. A heated argument ensues, in which the father says famously to the elder son, *Thou art always with me, and all I have is thine, but... thy brother was dead and is come to life, was lost and is found.*

In short, the prodigal son is forgiven immediately and unconditionally. Take a couple of seconds to note your reaction to hearing that story with modern ears. Singer Michelle Shocked suggests the prodigal *daughter* would have met with a far less forgiving reception. She has a point. Are there gender differences between who gets forgiven without fuss and who waits penitently, possibly forever?

The stay-at-home brother's rage really does get out of hand. Nevertheless, I've always been indignant on his behalf. Baby bro runs away, squanders his inheritance even before it can *become* an inheritance, slinks home penniless. Not only does Dad forgive him right away, he *throws the jerk a party?!*

You see the problem. Few of us are able to summon *unconditional* forgiveness on the spot. Yet so often we measure ourselves against religion's ideals, and judge ourselves not to be measuring up. So we stop right there.

Take away a few layers of agenda added by biblical authors, and a number of modern theologians believe Jesus's parables... his teaching stories... to be closest to anything the man ever actually *said*. Interpreting what Jesus *meant* in any given parable is a more conflicted matter, because a parable is like a Zen koan, capable of yielding multiple meanings.

Therefore I feel perfectly free imagining a coda to the parable of the prodigal son. Here's what happened next. In time elder brother *did* forgive his wayward sibling. Who can carry around that much rage and resentment indefinitely? The brothers applied themselves with great co-operation, civility, and even friendliness to helping Dad run the family farm. But for years, maybe always, they never hung out together after work. At family gatherings they were never seen in the same room. Yet they forgave and were forgiven.

None of us is inoculated against the need to forgive and be forgiven. *How much rage and resentment can anyone carry around indefinitely?* What is forgiveness and why do we place such a premium on it? The Bible and all scriptures may *channel* wisdom on forgiveness, but the instinct to forgive appears to be fully human, as scripture itself is.

To forgive harm done to you, or to be *forgiven* by someone whom you have harmed, is to halt the cycle of grievance and pain... to restore broken relationship... to underscore our common humanity. Of course reality doesn't always work out so smoothly. Whether the instinct to forgive comes from a religious or a secular place isn't worth debating. Forgiving transforms for the better how the offended person or people feel about whomever committed the harm. In a world where forgiveness and weakness are equated a lot lately, transformation like that is a good goal. We don't necessarily have to hang out after work with those we've forgiven. We can choose separate corners.

The difficulty for Unitarian Universalists is that we are so staunchly rational. Even those of us with more mystical leanings have difficulty bringing our rational and our non-rational minds to bear at the same time. Remember A.J.

Jacobs? He's the guy who devoted an entire year to living biblically in New York City, beard sandals and all. He writes, *There's a beauty to forgiveness, especially forgiveness that goes beyond rationality. Unconditional love is an illogical notion, but such a great and powerful one.*

Community freed from conditions that get in the way of love. Imagine that.

Forgiveness does not equal letting an offender off the hook. The offender may have confessed and/or been judged guilty in a court of law. Forgiveness is not a substitute for accountability to the justice system. In the proceedings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many who had been victims of apartheid were willing to forgive police or government officials who had harmed them. Nevertheless they recoiled when perpetrators greeted them with handshakes and open arms. Those who have been harmed hold the power to forgive and accept forgiveness. Forgiveness must be bestowed freely. It's not a reward to be claimed.

Legal scholar Martha Minow author of *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, has witnessed the *shadow* side of forgiving through her work for global justice.

To forgive without a good reason is to accept the violation and devalue the self.

Forgiveness declared by a public official claiming to speak on behalf of all citizens can also be a call to forget or seal off unresolved differences among individuals. Women are at risk of being silenced by the still overwhelmingly male voice of public officialdom claiming to speak for them too.

Then there is the nagging matter of *self-forgiveness*. Yes, we must forgive ourselves, before forgiving others can go forward with the greatest hope of success. Unfortunately *self-forgiveness* is not without shortcomings, chief among them is lapsing into a *forgive and forget* frame of mind that lets us off the hook and short-circuits reconciliation. “I’m sorry” is the beginning, not the end.” *Forgive and remember* is good advice in circumstances more serious than the moral equivalent of someone stealing your parking space.

Forgiveness is not simply a matter of letting go toxic anger or crippling guilt.

What if you have good reason to be angry and even to long for revenge? What if you are guilty? If you snap to forgiveness, but still simmer with resentment or

remorse, can you be said to have done the work of forgiveness fully?

Someone who is consumed by guilt or revenge fantasies might find relief in professional therapeutic help before, or even *instead* of quick counsel to forgive. Forgiving comes out of an unfettered capacity for love, and this can't be summoned on cue. Pardon the expression, but forgiveness is not all about you and me. It's about foundational moral ideals: healing, inner growth, spiritual and human renewal; truth-telling; mutual respect; responsibility toward others; reconciliation and peace. *Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past*, not an overnight achievement for most of us.

There is no algebraic formula for determining when it is timeliest to forgive. Boston University philosophy professor Charles Griswold divides the quandary in two. To forgive unilaterally is to forgive the wrongdoer independent of any steps he or she takes toward reconciliation. Recall the Amish unilaterally forgiving the murderer of their children. More typical is to coax the offender into owning up to his or her responsibility. Most of us are aware when we have caused harm, even when we're reluctant to set aside defensiveness.

A long time ago in a congregation far, far away, two friends made an appointment with the minister. For years, they had been close, like sisters they said, but lately their friendship was strained. A breach of trust had been the last straw. Should they forgive and reconcile, or should they go amicable separate ways? Too much had changed between them.

What did the minister think?

The minister felt like King Solomon, and not in a royal way. She described a set of formal steps toward forgiveness and reconciliation applied by mediator and UU Paula Cole Jones, who had healed a deep estrangement from her birth sister. These included admissions of responsibility, contrition and recognition of what the wrong-doing felt like from each woman's perspective. Did they want me to send them the link? Yes, but they weren't much for formality.

They agreed to resume going out to dinner a couple of times a month and to set aside time for talking things through over another glass of wine. They never returned to the minister's office, together or separately. But after a few months the minister noticed they'd resumed sitting side-by-side on Sunday. Forgiveness need not be dramatic.

Sometimes we don't get anything close to reconciliation. We're left to face an offender's stubborn inability to give so much as an inch. Worst of all is *ghosting*, when the offender simply goes silent without returning calls or letters. Because chances are, if someone offers to take responsibility for harming you, to set aside defensiveness even when the details of what happened aren't clear, chances are you would accept and forgive. Forgiveness doesn't require a committee.

Are any wrongdoers *unforgivable*? I knew you'd ask. How could one even consider forgiving Hitler or Charles Manson? No remorse could compensate for the atrocities they perpetrated. To be forgiven, one must first acknowledge fault. Both participants must join as best they can in restoring dignity.

[Griswold] *Osama bin Laden is not unconditionally forgivable for his role in the attacks of 9/11. But does that render him unforgivable for all time, and if so, what does that say about the boundaries we place around forgiveness for anyone?*

Our liberal religious ancestor Thomas Jefferson would have a lot of explaining to do should he turn up tomorrow. His racial ethics were deplorable.

Religiously speaking Jefferson was a deist—a heretic in his day. A deist believes

that while God may have wound the watch of human existence (pre-battery), God then stepped aside to let humans work out earthly history for ourselves.

Toward this end, he compiled the Jefferson Bible. With scissors Jefferson stripped away all supernatural references. *Begone resurrection and virgin birth! Jesus Christ delivered, The most sublime and benevolent code of morals [ever offered]: love of neighbor, the pursuit of peace, and the liberation called forgiveness.*

The inquisitive title of a children's book I've never read asks *What If Nobody Forgave?* From the slightest slight to the gravest harm, imagining is easy. Easy and illogical. We'll never have all the data we'd like to have to forgive anyone expertly, starting with ourselves. Human nature is a mystery. Might as well get on with living and forgiving.

Thomas Jefferson himself is a good candidate for forgiving. WWJD? Did Jefferson include the parable of the prodigal son in his cut and paste Bible? Yes.

Offertory
Announcements
Closing hymn

Closing words: *Mark Belletini*

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly. Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Do not desire to be wealthier than your peers

and stint not your hand of charity.

Practice forbearance.

Speak the truth or speak not.

Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift.

Crave peace for all people in the world,

beginning with yourselves,

and go as you go with the dream of that peace in your heart.

Extinguish the chalice

Postlude