

First Unitarian Church

March 31, 2019

When my son was in middle school, he took up a time-intensive, high-concentration hobby. He started using our digital camera to make stop-motion videos. Frame by frame, he constructed short films of Matchbox cars involved in scenes all around our home. They engaged in drag racing (down the hallway), car chases (across the floor and around the corner), and death-defying stunts (straight off the edge of the dining table).

He did this by setting up the scene, and then taking a picture. And then advancing the action a tiny bit, and taking another picture. Repeat. Repeat. At the end, he'd be able to flip through one or two hundred pictures, and there would be whole short movie unfolding in stop motion sequence.

(That kid is now a film student at UNM with a focus on the automotive industry.)

Well one day, I was transferring his photos from the digital camera into a computer, and... something went wrong. I think I disconnected it before the transfer was complete. The technology was from the early 2000's. It wasn't that great yet. So... with a poorly timed yank of one cable, I accidentally lost half of the 400 stop motion photos. They were deleted from the camera, and not yet downloaded onto the computer. Hours and hours of his work and creativity. There was no way to retrieve them. I felt terrible.

My son has a gentle soul. He never was a kid who threw fits or stomped or anything like that. So when I broke the news to him, he received it with quiet affect. But I knew it was a big loss. He was probably about eleven years old. Would he forgive me?

Later that night, I told him again how sorry I was. In a sincere voice he replied, "You should still feel guilty because I still feel bad."

Oh. I loved this line. The parity of it. I feel bad, so you should feel guilty. Equity. *Justice*. The offender should not be let off the hook. Who has not felt this way when someone has wronged them? It's so human. You want that instant karma kind of thing. If somebody steals from you, it would feel better to know they are tormented by what they have done. That they are truly sorry.

Instead, the universe is often like that little rhyme:

The rain falls on the just and the unjust fella,

But the unjust has the just's umbrella.

The fact that the universe usually does not instantly balance out wrongdoing or painful mistakes between people is why we need the concept of forgiveness. If everything were automatically in balance—if everyone suffered from an amount of guilt equivalent to the harm they cause others—then we would not need forgiveness, because everything would be even. Not only that, people would try a lot harder not to harm others.

There would be no thoughtless words. No interpersonal violence. And our nation's entire economy would be dumped on its head. No longer would the richest one percent own more wealth than the bottom ninety percent. All that excess wealth would cause a crushing feeling of guilt, equivalent to the suffering of being born in poverty and not having enough to eat, because the system benefits the rich at the expense of the poor.

No one could stand it.

But, that's not how it goes. Sometimes a person does us harm, big or small, and they seem totally fine with it. And we are the ones left with all the negative feelings—disappointment, pain, suffering, sadness, anger, rage—and perhaps other costs, to our bodies or to our lives. Or, even if they apologize, we may feel it is still horrible, what happened, and terribly unfair. The apology may not make things feel right or balanced again. Maybe we don't even believe their apology. It is as though the other person still owes us something. Maybe their debt is so big, that nothing they could do would ever be able to set it right.

To forgive is to let the debt go. It is to release a claim you have against someone. It is to say, "We are no longer bound to each other by what happened, and what remains unresolved. I release you, and in doing so I release myself."

Sometimes people speak of forgiveness as a gift to the person who is forgiven. It certainly can be. It can be an undeserved gift, which is to say, there is nothing the other person could have done to be *entitled* to it. Of course if you revel in how undeserving the other person is, you've probably cancelled it out. But if you do it well, you can forgive someone in such a way that it does not involve a sense of superiority—which is actually rather toxic—but leaves you feeling a burden has been lifted from your shoulders: the burden of being angry. Where forgiving with a sense of superiority or condescension leaves you with a new

negative way of thinking, forgiving freely is liberating and helps us to be at peace and well in our selves.

What's interesting is that the liberating, peace-giving effect of forgiveness on the forgiver is possible even if the other person never knows they have been forgiven. It works even if that person has died. We can hold a claim against someone who has been dead for years. And when we finally release it, we can still be set free. It opens up more space in us for gratitude, love, and awe. Releasing our claims against the past allows us to become more present to this moment now and to what goodness is still possible in the world.

That's why so many sacred scriptures contain forgiveness stories.

In the Torah, there's the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis.<sup>i</sup> Joseph's brothers band together and attack him one day. Then they sell him into slavery, and eventually he ends up as a slave in Egypt. But the powerful man who buys him takes a liking to him. And Joseph ends up rising to power. Later a famine drives his brothers into Egypt too, and they wind up right in front of Joseph, who now has the power to help them... or to kill them.

In the end, he breaks down in tears and embraces them with unconditional love.

The Quran also tells the story of Joseph in a similar way.

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus tells the parable of the lost son.<sup>ii</sup> It's a story about a man who has two sons. One is responsible and helpful. The other abandons his family and squanders all of his inheritance on "wild living." Broke and ashamed, he returns home in hopes of becoming a servant in his family's household so at least he will be able to eat. But instead of humiliating him, his father fully celebrates his return, welcoming him back with open arms.

A Hindu sacred text, the Bhagavad Gita says, "If you want to see the brave, look to those who can return love for hatred. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can forgive."<sup>iii</sup>

And Buddhism, of course, with its teachings of compassion and non-attachment to negative feelings, has many stories about forgiveness.

The Forgiveness Project is a wonderful website that contains reflections and stories about forgiveness. One of the things I appreciate most about it is that it, without any trace of judgment, it also includes stories of people who do not want to forgive, and stories of

people who want to but just can't seem to get there because it's just too hard. It has these stories along with many stories of incredible forgiveness.

And that's just life, isn't it? At any given time, like right here in this sanctuary, there are all of those kinds of stories. And some will resolve, and some may not. But we do what we can to try to achieve some peace and some equanimity in our lives. And church is a place where we can come just as we are, and find both resources and acceptance.

One story on The Forgiveness Project was written by Marian Partington.<sup>iv</sup> In 1973, Marian's younger sister disappeared. Twenty years later, her remains were discovered, along with other victims of two serial killers, a married couple. The husband took his own life after being found out. The wife didn't though, and she ended up on trial all those years after Marian's sister's disappearance. And so Marian learned that she was going to be sitting face to face with one of her sister's killers in a courtroom.

That year, she had started attending Buddhist retreats. While on retreat before the trial, she made a vow. She vowed to forgive the killers. She said it seemed like "the most liberating, positive way forward," even though she wasn't sure how to do it. She writes about what happened next: "When I came home from the retreat," she says

I had an overwhelming, involuntary, and profoundly physical experience of murderous rage: it went... Whoosh! All the way up from my belly to my skull. I wanted to scream, pull my hair out, claw at the ground. So for me, forgiveness began with murderous rage. Until then I hadn't thought of myself as a murderous person, but at that moment I was capable of killing. In other words, I was not separate from the [the people who killed my sister].

She went on to learn that the woman had been the victim of tremendous violence as a child. Marian decided that she did not wish for the woman to experience any more pain.

C.S. Lewis says, "If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo." But forgiveness often does begin with cultivating compassion within ourselves—even just a tiny bit—and this can be possible, as Marian Partington's story shows, even in really terrible circumstances.

Compassion may begin with curiosity. How did this person come to do what they did? Have they been broken by something beyond themselves? What does their behavior or their way of being cost them? Are they happy? Are they caught up in larger systems of oppression and violence? Do I have any personal experience with that kind of mindset? Is it possible that, on some terrible level, they are doing the best they can? That's a tough question. I am not saying the answer to that question has to be yes. But it's a question that can open up

our perception, and maybe lead us in important directions in our thinking. Once we stop finding it incredibly irritating. Then it might become an important question.

In the end though, it's not actually necessary to believe the other person *deserves* to be forgiven. It's more important to believe that you deserve to be free of anger, resentment, and the desire for revenge. Anne Lamott says, "not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."<sup>v</sup>

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. It does not require speaking to the other party, or—as I said—that they even still be alive. Forgiveness does not mean being okay with what happened. It doesn't mean letting a person continue to do harm. It is not weakness. We can forgive and still find it best to end a relationship.

Forgiveness does not mean liking or agreeing with bad or even evil behavior; it does not mean becoming close friends with someone who would continue to hurt you; it certainly does not mean excusing them from any legal consequence of their actions or from paying restitution. We can forgive, and still expect the offender to face reasonable consequences. To forgive is to say, out loud or in our hearts, I'm not going to be angry any more. It is saying, "Even though what you have done is bad, and it would be perfectly reasonable for me to stay angry with you for years or even the rest of my life, I am releasing this debt."

To forgive is to acknowledge that it's too late to have a better past. But it's not too late to be present to what is, and to experience liberation, as we live in the present and look toward the future. When you forgive another, you release the power their action has over you to keep making you react *as though it were still taking place*. The tension of that debt pulling on your heart and soul is released, and you can get back to yourself. Back to peace. The chains between you and the other person are broken. Studies have shown this kind of peace to have a physical effect on us. Forgiving is good for your health.

What do we do when it's too hard? When the gap between where we're at and forgiveness is about a mile wide? Well, what would it look like to move just one inch closer?

Maybe it would look like just sitting with those compassion questions. Just thinking about them without any attachment to resolving them. Or maybe moving one inch closer looks different. Maybe you start by breathing, and letting yourself feel what it feels like, in your body, to carry the burden of anger. To still be caught up in that debt relationship. And then you breathe and visualize what it would feel like to have that lifted from you. What it would feel like in your head, and shoulders, and chest. Heart, stomach, back. And that's the whole meditation. That's the whole inch. Just noticing how you feel now, and visualizing what it would feel like to shed all of that. To leave it behind, or let it float off away from you, and be free.

Now, I haven't said anything yet about asking for forgiveness, or learning to forgive ourselves. But I will. I'm going to preach that sermon on another day, because I know we need it. Here in this room are people in need of forgiving, and people in need of being forgiven. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that a good part of the time we are each both kinds of people. At the same time. I am and you are. But the message of our universalist faith is that every one of us is forgivable. Everyone is forgivable, everyone is loved. It is like our reading this morning, in which Mary Oliver says, "I am so distant from the hope of myself." We know what she means. We have felt that.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Goodness and discernment. Those are big things to fail at. Yet the trees stirring around her remind her that she came into the world "to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."

My hope for each of us, for you, is that you will experience forgiveness however you need it. May you give it and receive it as often as needed.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 37-50

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 15:11-32

<sup>iii</sup> [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_ancient\\_heart\\_of\\_forgiveness](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_ancient_heart_of_forgiveness)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/marian-partington>

<sup>v</sup> In her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (1999).