

## **The Possibility and Limits of Forgiveness** by Rev. Lori Staubitz

Welcome to this place of possibility!  
Welcome to this place of possibility!  
This is love's hearth, the home of hope,  
a refuge for minds in search of truth  
unfolding, ever beautiful, ever strange.  
Here, compassion is our shelter,  
freedom our protection  
from the storms of bigotry and hate.  
In this abode, may we find comfort and courage.  
Here may our sight become vision  
to see the unseen,  
glimpse the good that is yet to be.

Coming from Irish / Italian ancestry, I laughed when someone told me the joke about "Irish Alzheimer's- forgetting everything but your grudges. Of course, Italian Vendettas are the stuff of which movies are made. Unfortunately, jokes can bear an element of truth. Why even the epic feud between the Hatfield's and McCoy's has a foundation in fact.....but the real heart of the matter is ...We all struggle to forgive.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote a story about a Spanish father who decides to reconcile with his son. The son had run away to Madrid. After a long while, the father, remorseful of how he had treated his son's mistakes, posted an ad in the newspaper reading "Paco meet me at Hotel Montana Noon Tuesday. All Is Forgiven Papa." Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.

Our collective need to forgive and be forgiven goes well beyond personal, family and neighborhood relationships. We relate to others as a congregation, a community, a state and as a nation. We have much to forgive and much to be forgiven.

"Don't forgive too soon" by Donald Shriver speaking at Worcester, Mass. just after 11 September; reprinted in "The Forgiveness We Need" p4

"As we begin to speak about forgiveness, I caution myself about speaking about it too soon, before we have appreciated evil's crushing burden in the lives and deaths of those who have suffered its most immediate impacts. I am a fortunate Manhattanite who did not work last Tuesday in the World Trade Center. I was not the father who phoned from a top floor to say goodbye to his wife and two small children. I am not the orphaned child of two parents massacred in Rwanda."

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" Nor did my own government in Pol Pot's Cambodia widow me. Nor did my son disappear in a prison in pre-1990 Johannesburg. I have no right, therefore, to expect such victims of humanly enacted evil to turn soon to the possibility of forgiving those who have thus trespassed against them. As one who believes that the God and Father of Jesus means to heal this world of its sins, I must not lose touch with that belief.

As for translating it into the realm of our fractured human affairs, I must beware of calling anyone to forgive until I have struggled to appreciate the depth of their suffering, the depth of the evils which they suffer and which I have not yet had to suffer."

### **Forgiveness and justice" by Desmond Tutu**

#### **-interview by BeliefNet after 9/11**

Forgiveness is not to condone or minimize the awfulness of an atrocity or wrong. It is to recognize its ghastliness but to choose to acknowledge the essential humanity of the perpetrator and to give that perpetrator the possibility of making a new beginning. It is an act of much hope and not despair. It is to hope in the essential goodness of people and to have faith in their potential to change. It is to bet on that possibility. Forgiveness is not opposed to justice, especially if it is not punitive justice but restorative justice, justice that does not seek primarily to punish the perpetrator, to hit out, but looks to heal a breach, to restore a social equilibrium that the atrocity or misdeed has disturbed. "

To carry a grudge is like being stung to death by one bee.

#### **-William H. Walton**

Forgiveness is so essential to human relationships and health that religious traditions have developed a means for the faithful to give and receive forgiveness, even when it is denied by others.

"If we practice Forgiveness we enter into a process of cease and desist. We come to terms with feelings of resentment, indignation or anger for harm done to us by others-intentionally/ or not. We enter a state of forgiveness when we cease to demand punishment or restitution.[1]

We come into the state of forgiveness when we can love again in spite of past transgressions."-reference: Wikipedia

"In Buddhism, forgiveness is seen as a private practice to prevent harmful thoughts from causing havoc on one's mental well-being.[3] Buddhism recognizes that feelings of hatred and ill-will leave a lasting effect on our mind karma. When resentments have already arisen, the Buddhist view is to calmly proceed to release them. Buddhism questions the reality of the passions that make forgiveness necessary as well as the reality of the objects of those passions.[5] "If we haven't forgiven, we keep creating an identity around our pain, and that is what is reborn. "reference: Wikipedia

In much the same way, our relational covenant invites us to relate in ways that are equally as generous; and when our generosity fails us, our Covenant provides us with guidance through a process to act in ways that are life giving rather than destructive to persons or to our community.

"Studies show that people who forgive are happier and healthier than those who hold resentments.[24] One study has shown that the positive benefit of forgiveness is similar whether it was based upon religious or secular counseling "-Wikipedia

"However, the act of forgiveness goes hand in hand with the act of atonement, for it may be necessary for the offender to offer some form of acknowledgment, apology, and/or restitution, in order for the wronged person to forgive.[1]

Atonement: Meaning: 1. Making up for past misdeeds, transgressions; making amends for an injury or offense. 2. Reconciliation,

Yom Kippur, the final day of the Jewish High Holidays (literally, the Days of Awe), the ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah (Sept 30th) and ending with Yom Kippur(Sundown, this Thursday Oct. 9th) In Hebrew Yom Kippur means "Day of Atonement" and is the holiest day of the Jewish year. "Atonement is an early 16th century creation from at+one under the influence of Latin word "unity".

Jewish law requires the practice atonement; seeking out those you have wronged to make amends.

The ancient Israelites performed a ritual to atone for their sins and provide a means of reconciling their relationship with god.

Two goats were chosen, one to be sacrificed and the other serve as the (e)scapegoat or Azazel. The high priest laid his hands upon the sacrificial goat who then "carried the weight of sin" and outcaste the animal into the desert. That is why today scapegoat refers to someone who is blamed for the sins of others. "-Wikipedia

This concept of Divine forgiveness developed in Christianity from its Jewish roots. It is Jesus as messiah and redeemer who reconciles the believer with divine forgiveness.

Rituals for divine forgiveness are found in many religious traditions. For, indeed there are acts that are so aggrieved they fall far beyond our human capacity to forgive.

There are times when seeking intervention is the only way a victim or perpetrator can find a way to peace.

How do we forgive the unforgivable?

"While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Simon Wiesenthal was taken one day from his work detail to the bedside of a dying member of the S.S. Haunted by the crimes he had witnessed and participated in, the soldier wanted to confess and obtain forgiveness from –a Jew. Wiesenthal was to hear the confession. Faced with the choice between compassion and justice, silence and truth, Wiesenthal said nothing, but remained haunted for years by the Nazi Officer's request. The weight of that encounter compelled him to address the conflicting issues of forgiveness.

In his book, "The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness" he asks "did I do the right thing?" and invites responses from a wide range of political leaders, theologians, psychiatrists and Human rights activists as well as other survivors of genocide.

Although the responses vary greatly, each one seems to address the essential dilemma of forgiving the unforgivable. I want to share three points that I believe can inform us and provide a means for individual and congregational healing.

First: Forgiveness of others is foundational to our own healing process. If we seek to overcome the effects of the physical, emotional and spiritual wounds inflicted upon us by others, we need to have a way out of internalized anger and rage. Our willingness to engage in a healthy process of reconciliation is essential to our own growth and survival.

Second: How important acts of atonement and reconciliation are to the healing process.

Third: The role that religion has in our ability to forgive. Ritual acts of forgiveness can be a first step toward transformative change and increase our capacity to deal constructively with feelings of guilt, shame, anger, hate, rage and revenge. The concept of reconciliation, bringing the many together into a whole is foundational to our Universalist theology and mission.

We participate in Atonement when we join in transformational work and service.

It is our understanding as UU's that we do bear the burdens of the past. Not because we, individually caused harm, but because we have benefited from collective misdeeds and we are the ones who CAN begin the process to facilitate healing.

On a more global scale, we participate in acts of atonement when we engage in Anti-racism, Anti-oppression, Equal Opportunity, Fair Trade, Green Environmental practices, Sustainable living and support peace initiatives.

We open the door to reconciliation when we refuse to alter congregational history by suppressing truth or overlooking institutionalized injustice.

Our vision and mission is an important part of the long, slow process to fulfill the promise of our faith tradition by bringing wholeness to our human family and to live in harmony with all life on our planet.

But what of our own deep, personal pain? How do we reconcile those events and people in our lives that seem unforgivable?

"Forgiveness and spiritual identity

Choosing to begin the process of forgiveness brings us to the threshold of wisdom itself. Our spiritual identity is no longer dependent on what others think of us, want from us, or have manipulated us into becoming. Instead, we experience our lives as we are and as we find ourselves.- Rabbi Yehudah Fine from an online seminar

Through empathy for a person who's hurt me, I can understand that person's feelings, but I may still hate what he or she did to me. I think that in order to really have a forgiving sense, you need to go beyond empathy. You need to recognize in a humble way that you, too, have hurt people, and you've been forgiven for some of those hurts. If you think about it for awhile, you can draw on many cases where you've received forgiveness when you didn't deserve it. For religious people, it's often forgiveness from God. As people reflect on those times, they usually feel very grateful. They say, "I deserved condemnation for this

nasty thing I did, but I got forgiveness, and I'm grateful - and I really would like to give that gift of freedom to the person who hurt me."

Everett L Worthington in "Spirituality and Health" Winter 1999

Psychologists and other counselors who advocate forgiveness as a virtue (present) forgiveness as something that primarily serves the forgiver, something that will eventually be necessary for her or his mental health.

This psychological view of forgiveness has its limitations. There is, indeed, a beauty in the idea that forgiveness is something an individual does for herself, to ennoble the spirit, and to reach a certain level of peace. But ... as noted earlier, forgiving in this way requires no change from the perpetrator; it requires no apology; and it requires no response from the broader community.

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<http://www.uic.edu/~Inucci/MoralEd/aotm/forgiven.htm>

Forgiveness without apology and acts of reconciliation are at the heart of what Theologian Paul Tillich would call "Cheap forgiveness"-the act of forgiving or being forgiven that does not result in any significant change.

Cheap forgiveness happens when destructive behaviors are ignored, hidden and not addressed....when we sweep transgressions "under the rug" and behave as though they never happened. "Forgiveness as forgetting is a form of denial that can result in ongoing rage.

For indeed atonement; the act of acknowledging wrong-doing and taking steps to alter the course of the future can swing opens the doors of bondage and propel us forward into -a place where hearts and minds are transformed to a new way of being in relation. Where "never again" is a promise that is upheld through the forging of strengthened human bonds of renewed trust, love and commitment.

Act of Forgiveness- Atonement: Invitation for those who wish to participate:

Whatever pain you carry, whatever need you have to forgive or be forgiven, I invite you to come forward to feel the weight of your burden this in the form of a stone.

When you are ready-place you stone in our joys and sorrows bowl, in the hope that this water, a symbol of life and renewal will be an outward sign of your inward journey to begin the process of healing and forgiveness.

If you are not able to let go at this time, please carry your stone with you for as long as you have need. This bowl will be here each week as we join in Worship.

Reading:

Adapted by Rev. Lori Staubitz from Rev. Howard Thurman's "Meditations of the Heart"

"Restoreth My Soul" pg. 214.

"The ravages of time are at work in me. I remember when to do the wrong thing brought sharp, swift judgment to my mind and spirit. Then there followed a period when much in me that was sensitive to error grew dull and numb.

Until at last there were dead places and barren spots.

Perhaps it was a passing remark from a thoughtful friend or a forgotten moment of prayer or compassion to which my mind alone responded but of which my feelings were un-aware- but I knew at that moment how far I had drifted."

"The drain on my spirit from so much hardship has taken its toll. All my energy seems to be spent on merely keeping in step. The excuse of weariness and exhaustion seems ever at hand. Why should I care so much, while few others seem bothered? It is all I can do to handle the necessities of my own life and that I do poorly....then, somewhere along the way, all seemed wrong.

Before (life itself), I took time to confess every weary detail. When I finished I was spent. While I waited in my exhaustion, Strength and renewal were at work in me. Deep within me there was born the declaration that this risk I must not ever run again. I know now that the soul is restored moment by moment, if the doors to the heart and mind are not held tightly shut or jammed by too many cares left untended."