

“Why We Forgive — and Why We Don’t”

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Midcoast Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

“Forgiveness is the final form of love.” ~ Reinhold Niebuhr



Message for All Ages — The Feathers

The village wise woman was sitting in her garden when she saw a stranger approach — at least, she thought it was a stranger. The traveler was carrying such an enormous bag on their back — nearly scraping the ground — that she couldn’t be certain.

Compelled by curiosity, the wise woman called out, “What on earth are you carrying?”

“Grievances, wrongs, resentments,” the traveler explained, peeking out from the billowing pack, “along with some sorrows, injuries, and axes to grind. Each of these items is matched to a person’s name and face; each of these hurts belongs to a person who I wish to avoid — or even punish.”

“Looks heavy,” observed the wise woman. “Surely you must get tired of such a burden on your back.”

“It is, and I do,” the traveler confirmed. “Some days, I wish I knew how to empty it, or lighten it. But its weight is familiar.”

The wise woman thought for a moment. “Are all of the items in your pack the same?”

“No,” admitted the traveler. “There are some large, heavy grievances at the bottom. Those are the betrayals and deep injuries that may never leave this bag. There are also some medium-size sorrows and resentments.”

“Anything else?” asked the woman.

The traveler looked sheepish. “There are a great number of small resentments and wrongs. A *great* number. But they’re light, so it’s hardly a bother.”

“Your bag is full to bursting,” the wise woman counseled. “Would you perhaps take out one of the smallest grievances, to show me?”

The traveler set down the pack and opened it — and a feather escaped. The traveler grabbed it quickly. “I nearly lost that one!”

The wise woman looked down into the top of the pack. The bottom of the pack, as predicted, was filled with bulky weight, and its middle with lumpy items. But she could see that the entire top of the pack was filled with feathers, each seeking the breeze and ready to take flight.

“It seems to me,” she said, “that there’s no room left to add new grievances, should one occur.”

The traveler nodded. “As I said, I wish I knew how to make space.”

“I don’t suppose,” the woman ventured, “we could unpack one of those large, heavy grievances at the bottom?”

“I think those are probably stuck to the bottom of the pack,” the traveler said.

“Then here’s what we’ll do,” she advised. “If you’re willing to let go of any of these injuries and resentments, why don’t you try one of those? These feathers are so small, so light, that surely you won’t miss them once you’ve released them.”

The traveler slowly opened the pack more and allowed the wind to lift and carry a stream of feathers. As they both watched, the pack settled down to a less formidable size, with just a few lumps in it.

“There, now,” said the wise woman. “You’ve made room in your pack. You won’t miss the weight. You are free to empty it further: to remove the sizable grievances, and even the unmanageable ones. But do you see how much space was taken up by the small ones?”

“I had no idea,” the traveler admitted. “Thank you for your help. Now I can carry more food, more delights, more tools to make my journey easier. It will be a joy to carry on with my journey now.”

From that day on, every time the wise woman saw a feather floating on the wind, she hoped that it was the traveler letting go of small grievances, so that there was more room in the pack for joyful mementos from the journey.

Reading: “Hall of Records” by Rev. Theresa Soto

In the Administrative Department of my heart, which is down the hall from Feelings, Major, I wrote down the time you offended me. The clerk, my own silent witness, filled out the forms in triplicate. We wrote your name. We added your number. We added the hurt to the Memory Banks, photocopied and indexed. We shook our heads at the bitter sharpness of the hurt.

We made the Record of the Hurt. We announced it over the loudspeaker. And then we were proud of our work. We stood quiet in the halls of Everything, hands in our pockets, and waited.

But human still we both remain. And while we were recording, you grew some more, and changed some more, and so did I. Believing the best yet to come, I was surprised to see that no recording of a single moment could reflect accurately who you are right now—in this moment, different from the last. Some people say that forgiveness, Destruction of the Record, is for my own benefit.

Perhaps. But perhaps I don't need you to apply to the Department of Sorry (third floor, two doors down from Master List of Everything Unreasonably Kind), because mistakes are a human condition. There are too many forms and fines and details in the Administrative Apology. I want everything good for you. And for me. And this includes the way we just, as necessary for beings of our kind, begin again.

Expungements and refreshments at noon in the atrium.

Reading: “Communion” by Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno

from *Slamming Open the Door*

Kathy Bonanno is a poet and a teacher. She's a longtime Unitarian Universalist. She's also a mother. In July 2003, her daughter Leidy was killed by her estranged boyfriend.

When your minister
proposes *forgiveness* —
because, after all, he must —
he lifts the word
like a wafer,
into air.

You counter
by hoisting the cup of wine.
Here's to hate, you say,
slugging it back,
eyeing the dregs.

Sermon: “Why We Forgive... and Why We Don't”

Any sermon about forgiveness is a sermon about pain. Neither concept is tidy or simple, but then again: our lives aren't tidy or simple — including our spiritual lives.

If you've been a Unitarian Universalist for any length of time, you know that our congregations are places where we talk about difficult things; complicated matters. We don't dole out easy answers or polished platitudes; we get down in the mud to wrestle with life until we close our fingers around what feels like Truth.

I was reminded of this earlier in the week when — proving yet again that the Universe has a biting sense of humor — a friend of mine in New York hurt me in a way that stung quite a bit. I'm going to call her Cassie, and all I'll say is that after a few months of planning to team up on something important to me, she withdrew in a sudden and hurtful way, leaving me feeling abandoned. I got to watch my own inner-workings, listen to the chorus of voices that arose in my mind (some of them reasoned, adult voices and some of them wounded, childish voices), and choose how to respond.

That process confirmed what I'd been planning to say to you, about forgiveness and the pain that is its starting point.

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The first thing I know about forgiveness — and I'm not claiming to know All The Things about it, being a flawed human being — is that It cannot be extended from a place of pain, because forgiveness requires emotional energy and a spacious spirit.

You can hear in Kathy Bonanno's words (or imagine) the sheer, harrowing grief of losing her daughter in a horrific way, in response to her UU minister who, perhaps, used the word "forgiveness" a bit soon.

If you've been hurt by someone's betrayal, mistake, or ill will, you can't begin to consider forgiveness until you've metabolized your own pain. In the words of Father Richard Rohr,¹

If we do not transform our pain, we will always transmit it — to our partner, our spouse, our children, our friends, our coworkers, our "enemies." Usually we project it outward and blame someone else for causing our pain.

In terms of the soul, no one else is your problem. You are invariably the primary problem. You are always the locus of conversion and transformation.

When we're wounded, we have an obligation to heal our hearts first. Sometimes that happens by sitting quietly with our pain (and in my view, the only thing our culture has

¹ This quote is from Fr. Rohr's daily blog post, "Transforming Our Pain," Sunday, July 3, 2016. <https://cac.org/transforming-our-pain-2016-07-03/>

more trouble with than sitting quietly with our pain is engaging in respectful political conversation). More often, transforming our pain requires us to tell our story — better yet, to have our story be heard by loving ears.

When I say that pain is metabolized by people listening to our story, I don't mean taking sides, or promising to offer up vengeance. I simply mean validation; *bearing witness*, much in the way that I, as a reader of Kathy's poems, bear witness to the story of her loss.

I also believe that transforming our pain entails attending to the larger story of the wrong that's been done to us — and there is always a larger story.

What do I mean by "larger story"? I mean zooming back the camera's close-up from our own dented heart, and taking in the wider landscape. It might be as simple as the gentle reminder offered by therapist and Buddhist writer David Richo that "people are not always loving and loyal,"² or the larger story might take the shape of curiosity about the person who hurt us.

In feeling betrayed and wounded by my friend Cassie this week, I gave free (albeit very brief) rein to my internal voices (and, friends, a couple of them were ugly: "Unfriend her on Facebook!" and "I'm going to write a snarky email!"); I called a friend to talk through my bewilderment, and felt heard; and then I could make room to consider Cassie's position. What was her story? Whether she intended to hurt me or not (and I don't believe she did), what was going on for *her*? — and there's the entryway for compassion.

I will not argue that victims of terrible hurt can always find compassion for the people who hurt them, but I'll argue that curiosity can do something else for those who have been wronged: it restores agency to those caught up in feelings of powerlessness.

Being hurt, betrayed, or wounded upsets the balance of power. Often, I think, we hang onto resentment and bitterness because it imbues a false sense of power: "Look how angry at you I can be!" (Sometimes we're not the spiritually mature beings we'd like to be. Sometimes we thirst for retaliation more than enlightenment.)

Tuning into what I'm calling "the larger story" is a way to reacquaint ourselves with our agency, with our connective power — without resorting to revenge and other rabbit holes that take us far from our values.

By now, you may be hearing — or remembering — what forgiveness is *not*:

² in *The Five Things We Cannot Change and Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*.

- Forgiveness is not excusing or dismissing someone’s hurtful behavior
- Forgiveness does not bypass accountability
- Forgiveness cannot change what happened in the past
- Forgiveness doesn’t change other people,
- Forgiveness isn’t “open[ing] yourself up again for future mistreatment”³

What forgiveness *is*, is a choice: a choice about who I want to see when I look back at this incident in a month or a year: which self do I want to see in operation? My petulant child self? Or my wise, sacred self?

Forgiveness, as writer Elizabeth Gilbert explains,⁴ can be the choice to say not “THIS SHOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED TO ME” but rather to say:

IT HAPPENED... and I may never know why it happened, but now I am ready to move on — even if I am never apologized to, and even if I am never given justice... Because all those thoughts of anger and shame and pain and indignation are doing nothing but causing me to continue suffering, when the only thing I want is to be free.

Or forgiveness can be a choice about whether we want to carry a grievance in our figurative pack, heavy as a stone, or whether it’s a feather that we might be able to release to the wind?

Perhaps you came here today stinging from a hurt delivered to you this week; perhaps you haven’t yet been able to tell the story.

Perhaps you’ve been carrying a hurt or grievance for many weeks, or even months, and it’s grown tiresome.

Or perhaps you’re noticing that your traveler’s pack is so full of bulk and weight that there’s no room for the tools you’d like to have on the journey.

As you leave this place today, feel free to choose a feather to take with you — whether you release it to the wind or tuck it in a safe place, may it remind you of what to do next.

(On the altar were scattered gorgeous feathers, humanely-harvested from an heirloom rooster breed.)

³ Gilbert; see next footnote.

⁴ In a December 2014 blog post; see <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/dear-ones-should-we-keep-talking-about-forgiveness-today-lets-keep-talkin/>