

TO FORGIVE OR NOT TO FORGIVE?

“To forgive or not to forgive” is perhaps the trickiest religious question of them all. I confess that, over time, I’ve modified my views on forgiveness due to public events, personal soul-searching, and ministerial counseling. Situations vary, and as Unitarian Universalists, we simply can’t be rigid about profound emotional, spiritual, and moral matters such as forgiveness.

I admit, however, that it’s quite tempting to turn forgiveness into a “should.” But if there’s any *ought* involved, it’s not an ought of obligation but more like an ought of opportunity. As Unitarian author Dwight Lee Wolter puts it: “To err is human, to forgive is an option.” Indeed it is. More and more I realize that forgiveness comprises an option akin to grace, and happens, if at all, on its own time-table.

Today I’m digging deep to share benefits of the forgiving act, but I’ll also pay homage to occasions when forgiveness may not be warranted, or at best, partial forgiveness is in order. In any case, I’m clearly against compulsory forgiveness with no choice.

Let’s start with a couple live illustrations of the fierce ambiguity inherent in the forgiving process.

Near the end of his life Gandhi, you’ll recall, went on one of his long and serious fasts in protest against Hindus and Moslems killing one another. Finally, they came to their senses and temporarily ceased their bloodshed.

Among those who begged Gandhi to end his fast was an agitated Hindu who confessed that in retaliation for the murder of his young son he had smashed the skull of a Muslim baby

against a wall. Clearly distraught over the absurd enormity of two innocent deaths, he asked Gandhi what he might do, if anything, to redeem himself.

With that profound practicality characteristic of his moral genius, Gandhi, from his bed, urged the man to go find a Muslim youth, a boy about the same age as that of his dead child, and to raise him like a son, but in the Muslim, not the Hindu, faith.

And here's another example of forgiveness in action. You may recall, years back, of the pardon from the Pontiff of the man who had tried to take his life. In a bare, white-walled cell in one of Rome's prisons, John Paul tenderly held the very hand that had held the gun that was meant to kill him. For 21 minutes, the Pope sat with his Turkish, would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. The two talked softly. Once or twice, Agca even laughed.

The Pope forgave him for the shooting. At the end of the meeting, Agca either kissed the Pope's ring or pressed the Pope's hand to his forehead in a Muslim gesture of respect.

Of course, one must ask: is forgiveness a purely personal transaction or can it be applied in a political way to reconcile enemies? The Pope seemed to be suggesting that such acts would at least dampen some of the more vengeful desires that are constantly set loose in hotspots throughout the world.

Understandably, there are complexities of forgiveness that surely involve the question of justice. Personal or divine forgiveness is not public justice, and it shouldn't ever be permitted to override justice. The Pope forgave Agca, but Agca remained in jail and should.

Despite its enormous difficulties, even drawbacks, there remains a formidable power to the gift of forgiveness, both personally and globally. Forgiveness doesn't look much like a tool for survival in a bad world. But that's what it is. Forgiveness simply frees people from spiritual slaveries of all sorts—forgivers and forgiven alike.

But before I get to some useful guidelines on the forgiveness process, I've got to deal head on with both our blocks to forgiving as well as offer some words of caution. It will make for the kind of balanced sermon I want to share on this most stubborn and convoluted of topics.

First, some comments on how we bypass forgiveness, a skill at which we humans are quite adept. We regularly race with lightning speed from our hurts to conciliation without recognizing what must be forgiven before any durable healing can take hold. Truces are often made and signed, then broken even before the ink is dry. That's happened all too frequently in the Middle East and Ireland. And America's been party to our share of busted treaties. There simply has to be sufficient pause between the hurt and any reconciliation, so that genuine forgiveness can evolve.

The fact of the matter is most humans have been programmed since childhood to keep a stiff upper lip, to pretend that we're unaffected by other people's cruelty, deliberate or accidental—in other words, primed to end-run forgiveness. We can all remember a parent somewhere commanding little children to “kiss and make up” or a mediator prematurely encouraging estranged adults “to hurry and get back together again.” The premium has been on speed. The quicker we move away from our anger and grief, the better. Better still, not to notice it at all.

And how tempting it is, indeed, to rush toward redemption, especially when our own heart isn't on the block, engage in what could be called “forgiveness lite”. I recall, early in my ministry, inviting a grief-stricken person to begin the process of forgiveness toward someone who had murdered her husband. And she plaintively cried: “Oh, pastor, not yet, not yet!”

You see, I was moving toward a premature pardon, out of some noble theology combined with my own raw uneasiness, rather than caring about this person's fresh loss and intense suffering. To do the opposite: to confront our hurts, to pursue responsible restitution, to allow

people to grieve properly...has often been regarded as an act of self-serving pity. Not so, not so, for patience and deep listening are crucial steps in the process toward genuine reconciliation.

A couple more examples from all-too recent American presidential history. Remember when Gerald Ford opened the flood gates of criticism and popular censure as President, when he pardoned Richard Nixon? President Ford later defended his action by claiming it to be an act of kindness and charity, and well it might have been. Yet our nation wasn't ready for that gesture. Reconciliation seemed untimely, like an arm around the shoulder of a wounded country before the shrapnel could be picked out and the wound cleaned up a bit and bandaged. Healing is a worthy goal, but you have go through a lot more than a premature pardon to get there.

Not only did the American people need time to forgive, Nixon also needed to do some apologizing himself. Repentance is a precondition for absolution, and Nixon showed little sign that he ever repented the deeds that forced him to resign. He simply toughed it out. Same thing with President Clinton whose initial apology for his sexual misconduct appeared staged and insincere.

It's easy but wrong to bypass the demands of that arduous and agonizing process known as forgiveness.

Hasty forgiving usually entails blatant denial of the pain involved. A wise woman I know said she couldn't ever forgive her father for abusing her as a child, until she was able to say directly to his face, "Dad, I hate you; Dad, I hate you." After she was able to vent her profound pain and rage, she was nearing a place where she could genuinely begin to move toward forgiveness.

Another subtle distinction. Is forgiving the same as excusing? No, not at all. My wife, Carolyn, and I excuse one another all the time. Forgiveness needs to be reserved for serious offenses that are without precedent or explanation. Being wronged, you see, is what separates

forgivable from merely excusable acts. When wronged, one must boldly say, “I’ll never understand why you hurt me like that. You didn’t have to do what you did. It wasn’t written in the stars or in your genes. You did it of your own free will, and I despise you for it. At least, I hate that part of you, and I blame you for it. I can’t get around or over it, absolve or understand it. You not only hurt me, you wronged me.”

Forgiveness, you see, has nothing to do with excusing, explaining, or forgetting but everything to do with remembering. And forgiveness isn’t tolerance. Many offenses can be forgiven but simply not tolerated.

Real forgiveness is always concerned about full accountability—“with justice not vengeance” to use Simon Wiesenthal’s phrase. Gandhi’s forgiveness was accompanied by his actions to end British imperialism in India. Martin Luther King, Jr. forgave lynch mobs, even as he worked for laws to protect all citizens from such mobs.

But again, remember, the process toward full-fledged reconciliation remains excruciatingly difficult. And some psychologists, ethicists, and theologians would contend, and I can’t disagree; sometimes it’s simply not possible.

There are times to be a moral unforgiver, telling the truth, asserting fundamental rights, and opposing injustice, while refusing to forgive.

Here’s a story of partial forgiveness, all too familiar in our contemporary world. A gay man is ostracized by his born-again Christian parents who are active members of *Return Incorporated*, an international evangelical organization dedicated to converting gay people to heterosexuality. The parents claim to hate the sin and love the sinner but have stated publicly: “our son’s homosexuality is worse than a death in the family.”

This young man's parents' entrenched, sanctimonious refusal to admit their hostility toward their son is a non-negotiable obstacle to full reconciliation. To disapprove of his sexual orientation is one thing; but to wage a conversion campaign, while insisting that they're acting out of compassion, is another.

Therefore, although Peter refuses to underwrite his parents' behavior by forgiving it, neither will he abandon them in retaliation; mature separation is not amputation. So Peter has decided, and I think wisely, to maintain occasional contact with his folks, provided *Return Incorporated* isn't mentioned. However, any illusion of family harmony, of course, is lost forever, being replaced with something limited, painful, yet real.

So it goes for Peter and countless others, including you and me, who have faced similar dilemmas in our own lives, where unforgiveness or partial forgiveness is the only healthy choices.

Frankly, learning not to forgive, after a life in which forgiveness has been knee-jerk, compulsive or imposed, is an impressive achievement in our adult lives. When it's genuine, forgiveness must remain an option not an obsession. That's why the same person can grant or withhold it, depending on the circumstances. The ability to discern, make discriminating moral choices, signifies maturity and freedom.

Naturally, there are still times when complete forgiveness is mandated, possible, and healthy. Because staying in a state of hate has its costs as well. Here's an example of the damage of protracted bitterness and vengeance.

I know someone whose mother's illness was misdiagnosed by a physician and whose mother subsequently suffered brain damage because of an improper medical procedure. The daughter was not only unconsolated when awarded over two million dollars in a malpractice suit, but the court award exacerbated her pain, because it forced her to remember and reopen wounds

in her own life that were trying to be healed. Sadly, her resentment was triggered every time she passed a car with a MD license plate.

Bitterness, you see, digs two graves. And the word resentment is derived from the Latin meaning “to feel again.” The non-forgiver, then, is a resenter, someone who often feels and reacts to the pain again and again, caught in the cycle of spite.

In the long run, most all of us desperately want to break these vicious cycles of hatred and revenge, don't we? Eventually, we want to bury the hatchet, move beyond animosity toward some semblance of forgiveness. And when we're able to do so, here are some reminders.

First, folks, it isn't necessary to tell the person we're forgiving that they're the subject of our efforts. If sharing such information helps, fine, do it. But if sharing worsens an already difficult situation, then avoid doing it.

In short, forgiveness need not always be a two-way street. Sometimes we gather the courage to extend forgiveness only to find the other side unwilling, reluctant, or unable to cement a truce. It appears to be a no-win situation, until we remember that forgiveness doesn't have to be reciprocal...to be real to you.

Early on, I wrote letters both asking for forgiveness and sharing forgiveness, especially for the multiple hurts and resentments surrounding my divorce. In return, I received partial and inadequate responses, but such, you see, is the potential result of risking forgiveness.

So I've grown to feel something like this: “Well, you can't really forgive me, and I regret that. It would likely be better for me, and maybe for you, if you could. But that's not my responsibility anymore. I was accountable for any harm I did to you, and I sincerely apologize. I cannot be responsible for your forgiving me. You're on your own with that.” In short, do what you can, then surrender the outcome.

You see, at the very least, when we venture some degree of forgiveness, we're left with the freedom of no longer holding a grudge or carrying a resentment. Venturing some level of forgiveness enables us to anchor a wrong in its own time, so neither the wrongdoer nor the wronged have to lug it around like a burden forever. You don't forget the wrong, but it belongs to past history.

Second, even though the person who hurt you and is in need of your forgiveness, or vice versa, is distanced geographically or has even died, it's never too late or impossible to forgive. You and I can forgive as long as we have breath.

Third, who needs to be forgiven? Well, the list is endless, and we're all on it. Institutions, parents and children, countries, enemies and friends, lovers, even God. But forgiving ourselves is the nubbin of it all, since we're always the toughest nut to crack. We stand in constant need of separating ourselves from our failures and affirming our worth, even while disapproving of things we do.

We need to forgive ourselves, because, if we don't, we'll never be able to receive another's forgiveness, even that of the Eternal Spirit. When we forgive ourselves, we don't take away the wound, because, we're forever wounding and wounded people, and, yes, we will likely feel the pain again and again, but there's still some release and relief. And our souls can rest more easily, when uncluttered with remorse, resentment, recrimination.

Over the door of a prison at the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua, are words that read, "We are here to build the future, not repeat the past." The possibility of forgiveness, of pardoning ourselves as well as others and of allowing ourselves to be forgiven by those whom we have wounded is rooted in the belief that we need not be enslaved by the past nor shut the door on it. At the core of Unitarian Universalism is the conviction that, whatever else we may be, we're undeniably renewable beings. We can always open another door to fresh hope.

Forgiveness is a sublime and difficult enterprise, sometimes possible, sometimes not...but I'll never abandon it. I don't plan to quit on me or you or you or you, because forgiveness has the power to save us from despair and bitterness. And that power is huge and signals the ultimate form of love.

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