

Forgiveness 2012

The Other F Word—Forgiveness

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Though I spoke about forgiveness a year and a half ago and Tim McCormick gave a great sermon on the topic in August, I knew I had to give this sermon because just this week, we see two profound holy days observed by members of two *very* different religious traditions—Judaism and Jainism—both centered on a reckoning of one’s life and the asking of forgiveness of others for wrongs committed. *And that it comes at just this time in the year...* it’s as if the turning of the seasons and this year’s harvest depended on it; as though, if we didn’t re-establish right relations with ourselves and others through sincere acknowledgement of mistakes followed by “creative, constructive, reparative activity” (Don Carveth)—if this didn’t happen?—what would become of me, us, and the world? What if we lived in a world without forgiveness?

There are about six or seven million Jains in the world; historians trace the origins of the faith in India back at least to the 7th century BC. They’re a community dedicated to non-violence, education, and the belief that every living thing has a divine soul with the potential to achieve enlightened consciousness through its own efforts by possessing and living right views, knowledge and conduct. Today, around the world, Jains are observing Kshamavani, or “Forgiveness Day.” On this sacred day, each Jain approaches everyone, irrespective of religion, and begs forgiveness for mistakes and harm done both intentional and unintentional, believing that doing this can relieve a heavy burden—the sins of yesterdays—in order to start life afresh and step on to the path of liberation of self and others..

Muslims, Jews and Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and others—take a close look at the religions of the world, and before long you’ll see that teachings about guilt, repentance and

forgiveness abide at the very heart of almost every one of them. To drive this point further, when we think about religions and what they do, what people believe, frequently we talk about the nature of the universe, whether or not god or the gods exist and our relations to it, she or them, we get laundry lists of dos and don'ts, and survey the mayhem that religions may have visited upon us and human history. That's fair enough, but in doing so, don't we miss a lot of what's going on in how people live, what they feel, how they struggle, and how they overcome situations and experiences in their lives in quiet, transformative ways? The difference here is like concluding we know all about Canada by watching the CBC or reading the *National Post*, on the one hand, as opposed to actually observing the lived lives of Canadians close up, asking questions of real people, and then listening, really listening patiently to what they tell us. To know about religion and how it manifests itself in our lives, better to turn from systematic theology and doctrine to our hopes, fears, aspirations, mistakes and joys—to day-to-day lived experience which is primarily the domain of feelings, not dogma.

Forgiveness resides at the heart of religious experience, ritual and teaching because human beings have created them over time and across cultures in response to a real-life tendency, a family resemblance, that I will call the “human propensity to [foul] things up,” or HPtFu.” (I've borrowed this term from Francis Spufford who, instead of “foul,” uses a vernacular term that I cannot utter publicly in the polite company of a worship service.)

And don't we know it! From the blues to Mozart's operas, from Canadian pop songs to post World War II novels of Vasily Grossman, from Jews to Jains—that human propensity of ours to foul things up is pretty much a given in our lives.

“Some say a heart is just like a wheel,” sing Anna and Kate McGarrigle, “when you bend it, you can't mend it/And my love for you is like a sinking ship/and my heart is like that ship out in the ocean/And it's only love, and it's only love/That can wreck a human being and turn him

inside out/What I can't understand/Oh please God hold my hand/Is why it should have happened to me/And it's only love/and it's only love/Only love/Only love..."

This is a beautiful song with acutely insightful lyrics—a Canadian classic. Some say, Anna McGarrigle writes, there are wrongs done to us so grievous that it's impossible to find solace and recovery—you “can't mend it,” that's what some people are telling her. It wrecks a human being, turns her inside out—and it's beyond comprehension, it's so unfair—why should it happen to me? Then groping for perspective, some distance, some dry-eyed realism, she sings: “it's only love” after all: maybe the hurt will fade with time. Maybe the heart, though scarred, will bend back into shape—only *some* are saying that it can't. But then comes this plaintive cry: I can't do it, I can't mend it on my own: “my heart is like that sinking ship out in the ocean;” my vision's too narrow, my strength's too limited—and she bursts out: “Oh God, please, hold my hand.” And then, finally, like a mantra, a prayer: listen to how the song ends: “it's only love; it's only love; only love/only love.” Oh, that hard, baffling, comforting mystery at the heart of life—only love. “My friends,” Chief Dan George said, “how desperately we need to be loved and to love.”

The human propensity to [foul] things up—the wrong doing, the suffering entailed, the boiling anger, the keening hurt of it all—the desperate, conscience driven need to repair—they are givens in our lives and have been from time immemorial. The disciples of Jesus and Muhammad turned to their teachers with the same question arising from the heart of our lived experience; Peter asks Jesus: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” Once the Prophet, (pbuh) was asked, “How many times are we to forgive others' faults?” The Hadith says that Muhammad remained silent. The person repeated the question. But the Prophet gave no answer. But when the questioner asked a third time,

Muhammad says, “Forgive seventy times a day.” “How many times should I forgive,” Peter asked, “as many as seven times?” And Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” (from *The Sayings of Muhammad*, Sir Abdullah Suhrawardy, www.ummah.com, “The best hadith collection...” and Matthew 18:21-2)

That’s a lot of sinning, a lot of mistakes, a lot of breaking hearts visited upon our ancestors—and the response from these and other founders of the religions of the world? Forgiveness.

Abuse, anger, addictions, illicit affairs, thoughtless miscommunication between loved ones and colleagues at work—you name it—they fray the fabric and try the links that weave and bind our intimate and working lives together. And yet we’re told to hold fast to the mystery of love and forgiveness in spite, or because of it all? Systemic violence and racism, chronic poverty, the failure of leaders to imaginatively place themselves within the emotional and physical landscape of others: the needy, the oppressed, the deeply wronged who just want a level playing field and a decent, meaningful chance in life. These failures, too, fray the fabric and try the links that weave and bind our social, political and civil lives together. And yet we’re told to hold fast to the mystery of love and forgiveness in spite, or because of it all?

There is a human propensity to [foul] things up—there always has been and no doubt always will be. And yet, again, I have to ask: what would become of me, us, and the world? What if we lived in world without forgiveness?

Last week, we talked about religion and of religious community, and their role in helping us to make sense of and connect our intimate experiences and existential crises with ultimate reality, with “that transcending mystery and wonder” through shared ritual, music, and stories; through prayer, learning, social justice, and as Tom McCormick reminded me, through fun. Don’t forget the fun!

As well, according to evolutionary psychologists, the call to forgiveness, elevating it to life-saving virtue by the world's religions has been crucial to our survival, our evolutionary success. It's because we forgive one another that we are able to live in groups. People in collectives—be they families, work place settings, villages and cities—according to the human propensity to foul things up—are bound to offend one another all the time. Our capacity to forgive one another, to co-operate, in spite of wrongs done to us, may forestall our descent into the destructive, sucking spiral of retribution. But here, we hit a sticking point. As C.S. Lewis observed: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” (on evolutionary psychology and CS Lewis, see Mark Vernon, “We can't forgive, we only pretend to,” *Guardian*, 1 August 2011)

What if, as some argue, what if the religious imperative to forgive is used “to perpetuate cycles of on-going abuse?” Are we supposed to say that slaves were wrong to rebel and resist until they won their freedom? That trade unionists should have given up their struggle against miserable wages, 14 hour work days, child labour and unsafe work places? That a victim of abuse whose abuser is unrepentant and still on the loose should forgive and forget? “To forgive,” writes Clare Short, “without requiring the other to change is...self-destructive, [and may] ensure that a dysfunctional relationship will remain...”

However, Ms Short, who was a Labour MP and resigned her cabinet post in protest against Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, while raising this caution about unconditional forgiveness went on to say this:

I well remember many constituents who came to me to seek help in righting a wrong done to them in the past. If there was a chance of apology or restitution, I would pursue it; but when it was not possible, I would try to persuade them that the continuing obsession and anger was damaging their life and allowing the wrong to continue rather than be left in the past...There is no doubt in my mind that [there is something]...deeply wise...in the teaching of the Eastern

religions [that says] holding onto hatred and bitterness damages someone who has been the victim over and over again.

The event where Ms. Short shared these remarks came to a close with a story told by Bassam Aramin, a man who became involved in the Palestinian struggle as a boy growing up in Hebron. Mr. Aramin's ten year-old daughter Abir was killed by a rubber bullet fired by an Israeli soldier while she walked down the street across from her school in the West Bank. Mr Aramin, whose struggle for justice is as fierce as his resolve to prevent bitterness from crippling his life, pressed his case for accountability all the way up to Israel's Supreme Court where he was finally vindicated, and co-founded *Combatants for Peace*, an organization of former Israeli soldiers and Palestinian combatants dedicated to meeting one another to share their experiences and to campaign for an end to the occupation by peaceful means.

Mr. Aramin closed his heartbreaking and hope-giving story with these words: All of this was very important to me, "above all to protect my son. He wanted to avenge his sister's blood. It's very difficult to convince a 15 year old that there should not be revenge." And then, he pointed out the importance of creative, reparative action essential to the process of forgiveness, something that he experienced personally with Combatants for Peace: "It may have taken one soldier to kill my daughter," he said, "but it took one hundred former Israeli soldiers to [show up and] build a garden" at my daughter's school to celebrate her life. "I could not have continued without the love and support of my friends – Israeli as well as Palestinian." (Clare Short, "No Forgiveness without Justice?", The Forgiveness Project Annual Lecture, October 2011; and Donald Macintyre, "Bassam Aramin's search for justice," *The Independent*, 18 August 2010) To build a garden...

Borrowing words written by Lance Morrow, let me put it like this: "Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed... Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control... to be locked into a sequence of act and response, of

outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always” with the present “endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else's nightmare.” (from Lance Morrow, *The Chief: A Memoir of Fathers and Sons*, see www.goodreads.com)

I want to close with two stories. Leo Traynor is a Dublin based political consultant and widely followed blogger. Some time ago, he was hounded off his Twitter account after receiving sustained and poisonous personal and antisemitic abuse from an anonymous hacker who also invaded his Facebook page. It's so vile I can't repeat most of it, and it escalated from verbal assaults and physical threats to Traynor and his family to one day finding a Tupperware container on his doorstep full of ashes with a note that said: “Say hello to your relatives from Auschwitz.” Sleepless, terrified nights followed. Traynor reported the abuse to authorities who said they were unable to help.

Eventually, he found an IT whizz who tracked down the internet address of his tormentor—it belonged to the teenage son of one of Traynor's friends. Instead of calling the police, Traynor and his friend arranged a meeting with the teenager at a local café. He bought tea and chocolate chip cookies. Then he opened up a file containing all the abusive communications, and set the Tupperware full of ashes on the table.

“Why” he asked. The young man started to cry. “I don't know. I don't know,” he said. “I'm sorry. It was like a game thing.” And then Traynor told the young man in words that embody the spirit of Yom Kippur and the Jain's Forgiveness Day: “Look at me. I'm a middle aged man with a limp and a wheeze and a son and a wife that I love. I'm not an internet avatar. You're better than this. You have a name of your own, be proud of it. Don't hide again and I won't ruin your life. Now shake hands.” (Giles Fraser, “Leo Traynor is my hero of Yom Kippur, *Guardian*, 26, Sept. 2012)

Second story. In 1918, Rev. W.H.G. Carter, an Afro-American minister turned away from the Christian ministry for which he was trained to found a storefront church in Cincinnati called the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood. Other, more respectable and very white Unitarians in the city and their ministers knew about the Unitarian Brotherhood and its founder, but turned their backs away—forged no personal connections, offered no help or assistance. For two decades, Carter struggled to continue his ministry and keep his small congregation going. When Unitarian headquarters, in 1938, finally learned of Rev. Carter and his church, they sent a minister to investigate. And the official report that went back to Boston?: it described Carter as a “kindly man, and quite intelligent,” but noted that the neighbourhood was “poor and characterized by rowdiness,” with this conclusion: “I do not recommend Unitarian fellowship for Mr. Carter, or subsidy for his [church].” Shortly afterwards, the Church of Unitarian Brotherhood closed down, its sixty members dispersed, and Rev. Carter and his wife Beulah died years later in poverty and were buried in an unmarked grave.

In 1998, Rev. Sharon Dittmar was serving as an interim minister in Cincinnati and learned about Rev. Carter and that storefront church from Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed’s book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. Rev. Dittmar took that story and preached about it to her Cincinnati congregation. There was surprise, concern, and a mountain of guilt; and a congregation that determined to do something about it.

To make a long and amazing story short, let me tell you this: January 13-14 2001, 1st Unitarian Church of Cincinnati held a reconciliation weekend. Cincinnati Unitarians tracked down more than one hundred descendants of Beulah and WHG Carter and their families, and together they gathered that weekend to remember the past, where Unitarians resolved to do the only thing we can do to shape a more just future: to own up to our mistakes, to vow not to repeat

them, to ask forgiveness and to repair the harm done by concrete action. Rev. Morrison Reed said this in that Sunday morning service a dozen years ago: “In that moment when the one person feels hurt and the other feels sympathy, a bond [can be] established. That connection can be built upon. And as the relationship grows, we can move beyond avoidance, guilt, self-hatred, and let go of the anger and recrimination to embrace the only things that sustain us over the long haul—the love of God [and each other] which we find in one another, and our shared vision of tomorrow.” (see David Whitford, “A Step Toward Racial Reconciliation,” *UU World*, May/June 2001)

The human propensity to foul things up is alive and well, and no doubt always will be. And so is the need and will to own up for the wrongs we inflict on others and to make amends, to let go of the anger and recrimination, to free ourselves from someone else's nightmare, and reweave the fabric of sympathy, love and fellowship. Our present well-being, the future of our human story depends upon it.

More on Forgiveness:

During Ramadan that took place last month: Muslims around the world fasted from sunrise to sunset for weeks during those long, hot summer days; weeks during which they turned introspectively within and beyond themselves to renew their faith, repent of wrong doing and seek the forgiveness of God, named in the *Quran* as Ar-Rahman, Ar-Rahim, Al-Ghafoor: the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Forgiving.

In the *Mahabharata*, Vidura, the wise counselor in this Hindu epic says: “forgiveness is a great power...an ornament of the strong, a virtue of the weak...Forgiveness subdues all in this world; what is there that forgiveness cannot achieve?...Righteousness is the one highest good; and forgiveness the one supreme power. (*Mahabharata*, Udyoga Parva Section XXXIII) And the *Dhammapada* or “Path of Virtue,” held to be original, verbatim teachings of the Buddha states, among the very first verses of the first chapter, these words: “‘He abused me, he beat me, he robbed me,’—in those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease. ‘He abused me, he beat me, he robbed me,’—in those who do *not* harbour such thoughts hatred will cease.” (*The Dhammapada*...trans. Irving Babbitt, 1936, p.3)

“In those who do *not* harbour such thoughts hatred will cease.” This is supposed to be *The Middle Way*: states of mind, heart and action that are within our power to achieve, the kind that lie between the extremes of other-worldly asceticism fit only for superheroes on the one hand, and the rest of us, most of the time, who tend to flail about tossed from one emotional and mental state to another gripped by our faults, our hurt, our need. No wonder Anna McGarrigle cried out “Please, God take my hand!”

Meditation

In one of his teachings on forgiveness, Satguru Sivaya, a prominent Hindu teacher observed:

“when we resent or hold something against someone, we are actually connected to them....[H]olding on to our hurt...[keeps] the person who hurt us from learning from their action, from reaping the reward of it, of the effect of it and so we are keeping them stuck in the muck. By forgiving others not only are we freed from our entanglement with them, something which inhibits our own growth and development, but in doing so we allow the karma created by their violation of us to manifest itself in their life thereby giving them an opportunity to learn from it.” (quoted from Rev. Stephen Sinclair, “Forgiving Others,” 2nd Unitarian Church of Omaha, Feb. 22, 2009)