

“Forgiveness: Do Your Best and Surrender the Rest.”
Rev. Caitlin O’Brien
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation, New London, CT
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Chalice Lighting: *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.*
- Rumi

Reading: “Meriden Mosque Shooter Seeks Forgiveness From Muslim Community” - *Hartford Courant*, by Peter Marteka, April 2, 2016

Sermon:

Like you...like *every* human, I’ve been wronged. I’ve been let down. I’ve been unfairly judged. I’ve been physically injured by someone’s carelessness, and I’ve been hurt even more so by emotional carelessness. And I’m just gonna say right out of the gate that I don’t think I’ve ever been in *full* control of the process of forgiving those who’ve done these things to me. I don’t think it’s only a matter of will power ...I feel there’s some mystery or grace to forgiveness and atonement – I feel that *part* of it is somehow out of our hands.

Now, let me say I am pro-forgiveness, not an act that makes the harm okay, but an act that releases me from resentment. I believe what is said about the toxicity of *non-forgiveness*. The idea that holding on to anger and resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the person who harmed you to suffer for it.

Neuroscientists are starting to be able to measure the benefit to our health that forgiveness can bring about. Forgiveness brings a sense of

personal relief that can be detected on an MRI.¹ As one thinker put it, cortisol is decreased and endorphins are increased, such that “Forgiveness is another method of attaining what is sometimes called the “runner’s high.”² Forgiveness is good for the forgiver.

This data is great, and so is the inspiration of the reconciliation story from down the road in Meriden. *Boy, do we need more of that in these times.* We need nudges to do what we can to forgive *and...* I’m here saying that what we can *consciously* do may have its limits. Depending on the harm done, we can consider what was going on for the harm doer, what their life is like, we can name our wish to forgive (even if only for our own sake), and we can lick our wounds...take care of ourselves in its wake. Beyond that, I’m not aware of a forgiveness button we can press to be done with it. Like so many things in life, there are steps that can be taken and then there is a *waiting of unknown duration...*

What I’ve noticed is that *sometimes*, I realize that the heaviness of my anger and resentment toward someone has lifted, and in that sense, I’ve forgiven them...but I never noticed exactly when it occurred the way you notice when you hit a home run and celebrate with arms in the air. And forgiveness is an emotional and spiritual home run for sure! I don’t know - *I just felt the difference*, after the fact, as though forgiveness of that person came to me in my sleep. There seems to be an element of this that is *beyond the pay grade* of my conscious brain.

Years ago, leafing through a daily inspirations book by the author, Sark, I saw this image and it stuck with me.³ She is recommending we write ourselves a permission slip, “permission to forgive”...that naming of the intention...and then she suggests we imagine ourselves standing in a shower of forgiveness. That little image in the lower right hand corner captured what I’d come to believe – that on some level the forgiveness of another is a “grace,” so to speak, that we might receive like a shower of water upon us, as opposed to a task we work on and accomplish methodically. Hmmm...

¹ For example: “How the brain heals emotional wounds: The functional neuroanatomy of forgiveness,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. December, 2013.

² “Forgiveness,” *Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement* curriculum, Grade 4, p. 12.

³ Sark, *Living Juicy: Daily Morsels for your Creative Soul*. 1994

You may be thinking of someone you've not forgiven, and you may be feeling like it's unimaginable to forgive what they did. I can't tell you otherwise. *Terrible* things happen between people.

When I worked at a domestic violence shelter in Boston, I facilitated a weekly spirituality group at the kitchen table of the shelter, once children were tucked in beds. Women often brought to our table the question, "what will it take for me to forgive the person who abused me, and move forward?" **Now** we were an *emergency* shelter, so the abuse was recent, and I was troubled by the pressure that some of these women felt to forgive. I often responded that I didn't feel forgiveness could be rushed.

There's a song in the Hamilton musical that captures the slow pacing of meaningful forgiveness. In the course of their marriage, Alexander had wronged his wife Eliza in two deep ways: one involved infidelity, and one involved their son's untimely death. The song describes the passage of time in a new reality. Placing the couple on a walk in the part of town they've moved to in the wake of their loss, the song imagines, in time, a subtle gesture -- Eliza reaching out to take Alexander's hand, and commenting simply on the quiet. A small sign of a thaw.

Anthem: "Quiet Uptown," Lin-Manuel Miranda

I'm moved by this song because of its respect for subtlety in a relationship... its reverence for the unimaginable...and the tiny steps over time that can reach **across** what feels like a *vast* expanse between you and someone else. In my own life, I've lived moments, where I could choose to stay shut down to someone or not. I have felt my stomach squirm at the thought of opening up, *so there have been times I didn't*. And times that I did.

And a couple times when I did open up, I tasted that gorgeous relief, that "runner's high" that is so much better than feeling right or angry. It's **so** much better. And let me say that one of these times was while saying goodbye to someone I've never seen since. In promoting

forgiveness, I'm not promoting closeness necessarily. I'm promoting something on another plane. Rumi pointed to its mystery: *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Now, I can count on **half** of one hand the number of times I've experienced something *like* that field, so I'm no champion. I'm still learning. I know you are, too.

Judaism's Talmud says "Who is forgiven iniquity? One who passes by transgression [against himself]." ⁴ Who is forgiven? The one who forgives. Could it be that this is not as "quid pro quo" as it sounds, but more about becoming someone who reveres the sacred ground between people that holds our atonement and our forgiveness both - reverence for the field Rumi points to? Becoming someone who tries to work the muscles of forgiveness and atonement, and also knows the outcome is beyond them...knows it is a mysterious shifting that we wait and listen for.

Fundamental to the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur is the scapegoat story in the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible. God says "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of [a] live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness..." ⁵ When I first heard this story as a younger person, I remember thinking, well that sounds too easy – Aaron takes your wrongdoings and sends them away on a goat. But maybe some of it is out of our hands like that.

God says that every year, time will be set aside for this ritual...it will include fasting and "complete rest to you." Making space to reflect, perhaps readying yourself for a shift...and then surrendering it... As they say, do your best, and surrender the rest.

To what or whom are we surrendering our wish to forgive, or our wish to atone? Is it the realm of the divine? Is it an energetic space like the field

⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud*, Rosh Hashanah, 17A.

⁵ *The Bible*, Leviticus, 16:21.

Rumi points to? Do we surrender it to some formula of harm done and time past? Or to brain networks that unravel our righteous grip without our knowing? I don't mean to be flippant, but I don't think we'll ever know, and I'm not sure we *need* to.

In our attempts to atone, and in our attempts to forgive, may we be honest and genuine, may we be compassionate to ourselves and others, and may we, in time, experience a shift that takes us to that field, where "our soul lies down in the grass, and the world is too full to talk about." May it be so. Amen.