

We Begin Again in Love
September 14th, 2008

“The world is sustained by three things, by truth, by justice, and by peace.” So say the words of the Hebrew song we just had the pleasure of hearing Marty and Mary sing. Having heard the song, and knowing also that the Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are nearing, how might we weave together the song’s words with the Holy Days’ meanings? How might those particular days speak to just how truth, justice, and peace can be accomplished, therefore sustaining, indeed, this world we all share?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as you may know, are the days of remembrance and atonement. They are the days in which Jewish people across the world reflect back on the year that has passed, and pray to be written into the Book of Life.

But before they can be assured that they will be written in, on the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of atonement, they must seek forgiveness for their wrongdoings. On this day they must focus on prayers something similar to the words we shared earlier: “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.” Considering that Yom Kippur is one of the holiest days of the Jewish year, and knowing that forgiveness is at the center of that day, might forgiveness then be an essential part of bringing truth, justice, and peace into our lives?

Of course, being Unitarian Universalists, being free and passionate thinkers regarding right and wrong in our world, the idea of forgiveness as requisite to the sustaining experiences of truth, justice, and peace might not always sound very appealing as the first path we want to take. We might argue that our inherent worth and dignity was violated

when someone else harmed us, or that governing bodies we live within have violated the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. To violate such guiding principles is unforgivable, we may believe.

If you *are* one of those people who finds yourself feeling a little bit unforgiving about the idea of having to forgive or ask for forgiveness—and even if you are not—in honor of Yom Kippur, I ask that you ask yourself this: Who am I if I forgive? Who am I if I do not forgive?

We all have in our minds, I'm guessing, little inner super 8 film projectors, and if we close our eyes, there appears a screen that reveals image after image of times in our lives when hurt was cast upon us by others, and by us onto others. What do we do with those images? How do we relate to them?

Perhaps we play them over and over again, keeping our eyes—and often subsequently our hearts—closed to the

present moment. Perhaps we switch on the light so we can pretend that what's playing isn't there at all. But still the projection continues, playing out our memories onto those with whom we are in relationship in the present moment.

How do we let go, then, of habitually both returning to and projecting outward the pains, the hurts, of our pasts? And, again, who will we be if we forgive?

That is the mystery that leaps of faith are so often about; I don't *know* who I will be if I let go and forgive, if I give up completely my hurts from the past. What I do know is who and how I have been in my *inability*, or unwillingness, to forgive. Watching my own inner super 8 films, it is sometimes admittedly a struggle, as I mentioned in the prayer, to see beyond notions of evil to experiences of mutual, universal pain and suffering. "My *evil* stepparent," I find myself saying when telling stories about my youth, as if I'd lived it in a Grimm

Brothers fairy tale. But no matter how much pain there was in my relationship with this stepparent, each time I characterize that stepparent as evil, *I* perpetuate the very notion of evil, of good versus evil. I “fall into line,” as Andrew Rice, brother of a September 11 attack victim, says, “with visceral hatred between two sides.”

I do not want to be someone who, claiming to be on the side of good, carries visceral hatred within me.

For example, this past Wednesday, what started out as a silly, innocuous moment, in which I accidentally left my tea cup on the roof of my car as I was pulling onto the street, led to an ugly encounter when the man yelling at me that my cup was on my car grumbled that I was an idiot for not stopping the first time he called out to me. Having been served such a label, I shot back some hurtful remark of my own. When he then addressed me by my sexual orientation prefaced with an

expletive, I returned the favor once more with a curse involving an active Anglo Saxon verb. Only when another man walking with this man stopped and said to me, calmly, “Have a good day,” and I responded, “Thank you, you too—and I hope *he* does too!” only then did the visceral and mutual pain and *suffering* of the moment begin to come into focus. Now, I admit, I did not then walk up to the first man with wholehearted compassion and forgive him on the spot. I drove away angry and upset.

And, for an hour or so after that, I played the scene over and over again in my own private, psychic movie theater, and though I came up with some pretty clever lines I could have used had I had them in the moment of the encounter, what persevered, more than the need for a good line, more than the need for retaliation, was a growing understanding of how much anger—his and who knows who else’s?—that that man

must have been weighed down by; how much *shame* I was feeling because of my own angry behavior; and how much hurt we had both verbally thrown back and forth at each other, all because of a cup on the roof of a car and a mutual misunderstanding of intentions. If I could not forgive both him and myself for this one encounter, I would be, essentially, sunk.

Why? Because out there in the world have been exchanges so exponentially more hurtful, directly affecting so many more people, exchanges which have been followed, amazingly, by such unbelievable struggles towards and gracious acts of forgiveness, for me not *try* to forgive would be to begin to resolutely build around me, stone by stone, a virtual fortress of bitterness, anger, and hurt. As we heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu say in the reading Martha shared

earlier, “Remaining in *that* state locks you into victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator.”

Now, while locking ourselves in to anger and certainly into hatred will only add to our suffering, allowing ourselves to *feel* our anger, our hatred, Archbishop Tutu reminds us, is part of being human. “You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger.” But, Tutu continues, “when I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by hatred and anger.”

Hearing this, the question might arise, wait, why do *I* have to improve myself, become “better,” when it was someone *else* that did something bad to *me*? Why can’t I just show them how angry I am? Mariane Pearl, widow of the journalist Daniel Pearl, who was brutally murdered by militant Islamic

fundamentalists in 2002, states it this way: “Revenge is a basic human instinct, the animal part of man, and it gets us nowhere. Not to retaliate doesn’t mean you’re weak. In fact, being able to rise above your instincts is a sign of strength,” she says, “far more heroic than bombing another country or planning a suicide mission. Dialogue is the ultimate act of courage, far more courageous than killing someone.”

Now Pearl herself, whose story is featured in the Forgiveness Project along with that of Andrew Rice and those of others which we heard Martha share earlier, doesn’t always see forgiveness alone as enough. She states that sometimes, “Forgiveness is not a value strong enough to stand on. You have to win some sort of victory over the people who have hurt you, and you can only do that by denying [them] their goal. They try to kill everything in you – initiative, hope, confidence, dialogue. The only way to oppose them,” she says, “is by

demonstrating the strength they think they have taken from you. That strength is to keep on living, to keep on valuing life.”

While I admire Mariane Pearl’s determination not to let tragedy weaken her desire *for* and love *of* life in this statement, I wonder if she might fall just short of freedom, as I have in my own life, by staying within the paradigm of us vs. them, which perpetuates the notion of good people vs. evil people? In other words, if we stop at “them” (whoever they may be) *being* evil, or bad, do we also stop ourselves from seeking to understand the *root* causes of these bad, evil actions perpetrated by those people?

Throughout others stories shared in the Forgiveness Project, there are those who express such a desire to understand the suffering that is the foundation of the acts of evil they have been victim to. Take, for instance, the story of Camilla Carr and Jon James, who were kidnapped and held

hostage for 14 months by rebels while working with war-traumatized children in Chechnya. Carr, who was repeatedly raped by one of their captors, states, “Rape is a terrible violation of a human being. I can never forgive the act, yet I can forgive the man who raped me; I can feel compassion for him because I understand the desperate place he was coming from.” Her partner Jon James adds, “Like Camilla, I’ve come to an understanding of where our captors, and where her violator, were coming from. Not many people in this world do stuff out of pure maliciousness. But, “he admits, “it’s taken me a long time to get to a point where I can think about what happened without feeling a charge of negative energy.”

Similarly, Marian Partington, whose sister Lucy was the victim of a serial murderer, sees her journey toward forgiveness as the only way to free herself of *her* negative energy, her suffering. She states, “I know it’s the only creative

way forward, because it allows me to find a positive relationship with my own suffering which can be beneficial to others. In this way I can use my life to transform the cycle of violence.”

Such compassion, however, was in no way the beginning of Partington’s path. She admits, “For me, forgiveness began with murderous rage.... I hadn’t thought of myself as a murderous person, but at [one] moment I was capable of killing. In other words, I was not separate from the Wests.”

She reflects especially on Rosemary West, who colluded with her husband Frederick West in the murder of Partington’s sister as well as of others:

At the committal trial, when I saw Rosemary West sitting there, it was almost impossible to match her expressionless face with the endless graphic details of sexual depravities and brutality. But then I heard her voice on tape, shouting, swearing and full of rage, and I

began to have some insight into her mind. I later discovered she'd been sexually abused by her brother, then abducted from a bus stop and raped at aged 17.

Partington continues,

[Rosemary West's] story seems to be about the impoverishment of a soul that knew no other way to live than through terrible cruelty. A life deprived of truth, beauty or love. I imagine that the deviant ignorance that fed her sadistic, egotistical crimes was rooted in her ruined, crooked childhood. Will she ever know the sacredness of life?

My work has been about connecting with Rosemary West's humanity and refusing to go down the far easier and more predictable path of demonizing her. I take every opportunity to talk about her as a human being.

Finally, Partington says,

I once met another [woman] whose daughter had been murdered. She gave me a phrase that I now have pinned

to my door: “forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.” Gradually, I have grown to face, accept and integrate the unresolved pain of the past. I have imagined something of Rosemary West’s suffering, something of Lucy’s suffering. I do not wish Rosemary West more pain.

Notice that Partington’s journey begins with her rage being her primary connection with the Wests’ evil acts. She is, for a time, as Archbishop Tutu says, negatively “dependent on her perpetrators.” But through the conscious practice of compassion, it is forgiveness that finally connects her *humanity to their* humanity.

By gaining insight into the interdependent nature of suffering among human beings, it is as if Partington is opening a door to that Universalist belief of universal salvation. It is as if, through acts of remembrance and forgiveness, Partington, as well as all who strive to forgive, takes her own pen and writes all of humanity once more into the Book of Life.

Does that mean that the evil acts from our pasts are thus condoned or forgotten? Of course not. But it may be that we can begin to give up hope of a better past, and so not play our inner films over and over again, projecting them onto our present lives. It may be that we can finally say, “we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love,” and thus begin once more to sustain the world and the humanity we share through truth, justice, and peace.

Amen.