

“The One Who is Hardest to Forgive”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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Unitarian Universalists in many congregations are focusing on the theme of forgiveness this morning. That’s because this Sunday falls during the Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and they are part of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Many Jews follow a custom of asking for and offering forgiveness every year during this time, which seems like a very good practice. I say this because forgiveness is an act that we might otherwise choose to avoid. It can be hard to do and most of us have some misconceptions about what it really is. But forgiveness is so important, because not forgiving has all kinds of negative effects on our own lives and the lives of the people around us.

Everyone’s heard the saying, “Forgive and forget.” I really dislike that saying, because I think it has kept a lot of people stuck in their hurt and resentment. It seems to imply that we should feel OK about the other person and simply erase from our mind what happened. As if that were actually possible!

I think the notion of forgive and forget has really done a great deal of harm in terms of people being able to repair their relationships. It keeps people from understanding what forgiveness really means and how to move in the direction of forgiving.

We may have Shakespeare to thank this bit of misguided advice. In “King Lear,” the old king says, “Pray you, now, forget and forgive.” We could also thank Cervantes for the line in “Don Quixote,” “Let us forget and forgive injuries.”

Obviously, there’s not much we can do about the pervasiveness of the saying “forgive and forget.” What we can do, though, is to take the time to consider what forgiveness really is and what it isn’t. It is said that a fresh perspective is often the first step toward positive change.

One of the biggest misunderstandings about the act of forgiveness is that it means that we're saying, "What you did was OK." That we're condoning what the person did. So let's get that straight. Forgiveness is saying, my forgiving doesn't change the wrongness of what happened, but I'm not going to continue to keep myself trapped in this anger and resentment. I'm not going to hate you anymore for what you did, because it's just not worth it.

There's a story of two ex-prisoners of war. One says to the other, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" "No, never," says the second one. And the first one says, "Ah. Well, they still have you in prison then, don't they?"

We could be walking around all day every day trapped inside a black cloud, focused on the injustice, the betrayal or whatever it was, thinking negative thoughts about that person who hurt us, maybe even hoping that something bad will happen to them. Meanwhile, the person who did that thing could be lying on a beautiful beach in Hawaii. So by not forgiving, who are we hurting?

Forgiveness is something that we do for ourselves. We do it to find a place of peace within ourselves. We do it for the health of our minds, our spirits and even our bodies. It's an act of self-love. It is caring deeply about ourselves. We forgive others, not because they deserve to be forgiven, but because we deserve peace. (Inspirationboost.com) There is no peace without forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an act of courage. It means having the willingness to open the doors of the prison and walk out into the sunshine, and enjoy the simple fact of being alive. The Bhagavad Gita says, "If you want to see the brave, look to those who can return love for hatred. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can forgive."

Forgiveness is a deep, emotional process. It's not quick or easy. We need to honor the feelings of grief, of anger, of hurt, of fear. It can take a long time.

Forgiveness means having the capacity to let go of the pain of the past. Forgiveness shifts us from this place of pain and suffering to an openness to love, to gratitude and to a greater awakening to the present moment.

In practicing forgiveness, it can help to begin with those for whom forgiveness feels the least difficult. Maybe we can try to see the other person's point of view. Sometimes it's just easier to say to ourselves, "They made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes." Once we've forgiven a few times, then we can work our way toward forgiving those for whom forgiveness feels the most difficult.

Minister Anne Felton Hines used to think that it was her parents who would be the most difficult. Years ago, she was trying to forgive her parents for all the angst she felt they'd caused her. She was pretty sure that just about every problem she had could be traced to something one or both of them had done. But every time she got close to seeing them in a more forgiving light, something inside her put on the brakes.

Years later, she came to understand that "when we fail to forgive ourselves of our transgressions and shortcomings, we become unable to accept and forgive others as well."

You see, the person who was really the hardest to forgive was herself. If she forgave her parents, she'd have to forgive herself for her own failings as a parent, and in her mind, "that was just not possible."

She says, "In that struggle, I came to understand that my challenge wasn't to forgive my parents. The real, almost insurmountable challenge facing me was to forgive myself. And I couldn't do that for a very long time. It literally took me years, and a couple of conversations with my children about it, before I could begin to let go of the guilt and shame I'd carried around for not being the kind of mom I thought I should be."

But, once she was able to let it go and accept that she had done the best she could at the time, here's the thing -- she was easily able to accept her parents as being the best parents they could be, and she began to see that they were "pretty darned good ones at that!"

The takeaway for Anne was this: once we understand that who we are is good enough, then we can allow others to be good enough just as they are.

Many of us can be very hard on ourselves. But think about it—all the energy it takes to harbor those bad feelings toward ourselves is energy that we don't have to spend on more positive thoughts and actions. Sometimes we can even get caught up in a sort of self-flagellation mode: "Oh, I'm the worst person ever." Without ever really stopping to question our attitude toward ourselves, we may unconsciously decide to punish ourselves by being miserable for the rest of our lives.

Well, that's a waste! That's not what we're here on this earth for! We are here to learn to live peacefully and ethically, to have compassion for one another and to enjoy the beauty and abundance that life has to offer.

A counselor named Erin Pavlina was working with a client who was going to have to declare bankruptcy, and the woman was very upset about it. She had quit her job a year before, taken all the money that she and her husband had in savings, and started a business that did not do well. She sank into debt for a year, and she and her husband finally admitted defeat and prepared to file for bankruptcy.

She became depressed and withdrawn. She even considered suicide because she couldn't stand her shame and the looks of disappointment she thought she read on the faces of her husband and children. She felt like a complete and utter failure. She simply could not forgive herself for, as she put it, "ruining her family's financial lives."

The counselor asked her, "If your best friend came to you with this problem, what would you tell her?"

"Oh, I would tell her that she shouldn't be so hard on herself, that everyone makes mistakes. I would tell her that she is resourceful and intelligent and can recover from this setback. I would tell her not to give up, but to dig in, make better choices, learn from her mistakes, and move on."

So then the counselor said, "And why can't you say this to yourself?"

She was stunned for a moment, speechless. Then she said, "But I don't deserve to be forgiven."

So the counselor said, “How come your friend deserves forgiveness but you don’t?”

She didn’t have an answer.

By forgiving ourselves, especially in a situation like this, we don’t get to escape from the consequences of our actions. But living with the consequences doesn’t have to mean that we punish ourselves with guilt, shame and depression. In the wake of a mistake like this, we need to become stronger and focus on solutions, and we can’t do that if we’re mired in the muck of self-abasement.

The counselor asked, “Don’t you owe it to your family to focus your energy on navigating your way out of this situation in the fastest and best way possible?”

She said, “Yeah, I suppose I do owe them that. But if I forgive myself and act all happy, won’t people think I’m not taking my failure seriously?”

The counselor asked, “Do you think your family wants to you sit in a corner and cry and blame yourself? Or do you think they’d prefer you to be resourceful and working every day to improve your situation? Don’t you think they know you’re sorry?”

Tears welled up in the woman’s eyes.

When we make a mistake, we may be profoundly disappointed in ourselves. Somehow, we thought we were better than this. We hold ourselves to a higher standard than we hold other people. When you think about it, in a twisted way, we’re seeing ourselves as better than everyone else. Guess what? We’re just as human as everyone else. We all make mistakes. Some of them are bigger mistakes than others. Some of them just happen to be financial mistakes.

The counselor urged the woman to forgive herself. She said, “Give yourself the same compassion and understanding you’d give one of your children if they made a decision that had a negative consequence. You want them to learn from their mistakes, don’t you?”

“Of course. I want them to know they should never give up.”

“Well, show them how to fall and get back up,” said the counselor. “You have an opportunity to model for them what true success is, which is learning how to recover after a setback. Being happy and resourceful after a setback doesn’t mean you’re denying responsibility for your actions. It just means you’re acknowledging the situation and being committed to doing something to improve it.”

By seeing her mistake from a different perspective, the woman adopted a new belief about her situation. Instead of thinking of herself as a failure, she started thinking of herself as a “success in progress.” She was committed to spending her time and energy on improving her situation instead of beating herself up for it. She started treating herself the way she would treat an imaginary friend in the same situation.

If you have done something for which you haven’t forgiven yourself, please remember: you are worthy of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a huge gift that you give yourself. And you deserve this gift. It’s a gift that says, you’re human. You are a beautiful human being, flaws and all. Forgive yourself and set yourself free. Don’t wait. May the spirit of forgiveness shape the days of our lives beginning with this very moment.