

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“3 of the Most Important Words for the 10 High Holy Days”**

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### **3 of the Most Important Words for the 10 High Holy Days**

Tonight begins the great celebration of the turning of the year in Judaism, with Rosh Hashanah ushering in the 10 High Holy Days, which will culminate in Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Jews. I welcome you with this day's Hebrew greeting, rendered into English: "May you be inscribed for a good year!" You would traditionally wish each other sweetness this evening by eating apples dipped in honey. And then begins the 10 days of hard work toward a good, sweet coming year.

The hard work includes a practice which involves seeking and offering forgiveness. During these ten days observant Jews will say "I'm sorry" for specific things they have regretted doing this year, to particular people in their lives, and they can expect to hear the three wonderful and important words, "I forgive you."

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "The only whole relationship is a healed one; therefore forgiveness is the final form of love." That's pretty strong stuff. We need forgiveness to love, to be in whole relationships. I think it's a really good idea to have an annual reminder about the importance of forgiveness, and so I invite you all to become honorary Jews during these coming several days and consider doing the practical hard work of seeking and offering forgiveness.

Today I want to tell you a few true stories about forgiveness. One or more may resonate with you. All come from very real situations and help us to better understand our own issues around forgiveness, and perhaps find some inspiration for seeking mercy in our lives.

One story comes from Michael, who was seventeen when he told about what happened to him. Three summers before, he had been swimming with friends when one

of the boys started screaming and flailing, then slipped beneath the waves into stillness. They called out to their friend, when he was splashing in desperation, but the boy drowned, and was not found until the next day. Michael felt guilty, despite all the reassurances that there was nothing he could have done – the current was strong there, another person had drowned the year before in the same spot, and even the father of the boy who died told Michael that he would have been lost as well if he'd swum out to try a rescue. Still, Michael felt he could have done more and he could not forgive himself.

Michael met a priest and told him the story. The priest listened and said he understood why Michael felt he had let his friend down. Without putting any blame on Michael, he also did not try to reassure him, to make things better. The priest told Michael that if he was truly sorry, he could tell this to God and he would be forgiven. This was a turning point for Michael, and though he still felt bad, he knew he would be okay; he felt forgiven.

God may or may not enter into the story of how you can come to feel forgiven – theism is not a prerequisite. Many do find that the Holy is instrumental in their journey toward offering forgiveness to themselves or others, and to feeling forgiven. Mostly, what Michael needed was to be allowed to fully feel sorry, not to sweep away the situation from his mind, but to acknowledge the horror that he'd experienced and the responsibility that he felt. When we repent, when we acknowledge what is amiss or broken in our lives, then we are open to forgiving ourselves. When we forgive ourselves, we are set free for the living of our lives.

Forgiving ourselves is part of the practice of forgiveness, one that we tend to forget, noticing instead the forgiveness of and by others. Mostly, we move around our

lives with unconscious baggage, maybe nothing as clear as the memory of a friend dying before our eyes when we did nothing to save him, but we have plenty of little regrets, and occasions when our lives have strayed from our ideals, and probably some deeply felt contrition as well. We tend to bury our penitential feelings and they keep weighing us down, weighing in on our lives.

Now before we go any further, I want you to understand that interior repentance is not necessarily about our having been evil, but about our having “missed the mark” as they say in Judaism. When we take the time and make the effort to review our lives carefully, acknowledging truthfully when we have been hurtful or gone astray, only then can we begin to forgive ourselves, and perhaps seek forgiveness from others. Rabbi Michael Lerner says that we should go someplace where we are safely alone and say out loud what we’ve done, without mitigation, without explaining it all away, and with sincere repentance. Then we will forgive ourselves and lift off the weights from the past so that we can truly live now.

What about forgiving others? Isn’t that at the heart of the matter? There are huge grievances, injustices, and abuse in some folks’ pasts, as well as small injuries needling in many people’s minds – slights, rudenesses, and various minor hurts that keep cropping up. Something has been done to us that makes us feel bad, that may even challenge our sense of self, our feelings of belonging and wholeness. The big betrayals can practically slay us, and even the little injuries may simply be bringing forward other, deeper wounds. We hold onto anger and resentment because it is justified, because it helps us to feel justified, to separate ourselves from our tormenters. But feeling resentful and separate is not what we want either.

For the next story, we hear about someone who did not forgive, who is only referred to as “J”. The parents of J did something for which he could not forgive them, and when he left home for college, he cut them off. He never saw them or called them. The person telling this story did not know what the parents had done, nor how they took this ostracism, but she did know what happened to J. He was “wounded and diminished” she said. J spent his emotions on his parents, and though they were physically absent, they were always with him in his mind, dominating his life. J clearly suffered not only from what had been done to him, but also from his lack of forgiveness.

Probably he had a good reason to be angry and hurt. Forgiveness is not about dismissing the reasons or forgetting the pain. And forgiveness may take some time. I once heard a Black Baptist woman speak about her path to forgiveness for the unspeakable things that had been done to her as a child. Since she had been such a good religious girl, she kept trying to forgive by forgetting, by dismissing, by trying to live up to some impossible standard of kindness toward her tormenter. This woman, now a minister, said to us in a workshop for ministers-in-training that sometimes you have to un-forgive before you can forgive. First, you have to be angry; you have to sweep away any false saccharine “forgiveness-because-I-should-forgive” that does not work – neither for the forgiver nor for the forgiven – for it is not real, not true. Forgiveness has to be real and true, and involve love for oneself and the other, and that is a difficult process, not a quick religious decision.

Wayne Muller has written and spoken about forgiveness, from the perspective of being both a minister and a psychotherapist, working with people who have been abused and harmed in many ways. He writes about forgiveness, “If I forgive them, I’m not

condoning their actions. But by forgiving them, I can begin to understand how much suffering *they* must have been experiencing in order to have been so confused and terribly anguished to have visited that kind of distress on me. If I can forgive that and let them go, then I am no longer just a child of incest or a child of alcoholism or a child of abuse. I'm free to become the child of God or a child of the universe or a child of the family of earth. And all of a sudden, I can get much bigger. Forgiveness, then, is actually an enzyme that sets me free.”

Adolfo Perez Esquivel became an activist for human rights in Argentina in the 1970s, working on behalf of the disappeared and the tortured. He was imprisoned without cause in 1977, and tortured, then released after more than a year. He was as angry as anyone has a right to be, but he decided not to seek revenge. He continued his work for peace and insisted that non-violence was necessary to achieve human rights. In 1980, Adolfo Perez Esquivel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Esquivel taught about his path to forgiveness, which must be one of the most difficult, as a torture victim. As a Christian, he began with the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” These words did not help at first, and haunted him, since he knew that his torturers knew exactly what they were doing. But he stayed with the process, knowing that he needed to forgive, and he broke through with a revelation. He realized that his torturers did not know something that he did know, that humanity is *one*, and that all are brothers and sisters. Those torturers did not know ‘what they were doing’ because they *thought* they were hurting an enemy, when really, he was their brother. Since he understood this to be a profound truth, he

knew that to incarnate it into himself and his relationships meant that he would have to forgive and love his tormentors, which he did.

A Jewish survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp wrote a memoir many years after his torture, in which he included a prayer that sounds like he came to forgiveness in a similarly inclusive way as Esquivel did, and also through great difficulty. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 wrote, “Oh Lord, merciful and compassionate Lord, am I the one, the one who’s created Auschwitz? It’s much worse than that he – the German facing me with the death’s skull insignia on his cap, his hands deep in the pockets of his black S.S. coat – could have been in my place. It’s that I – and this is the paralyzing horror – I could have been there in his place! ... For you know that at this moment the two of us, dispatcher and dispatched, are equal sons of man, both created by you, in your image.”

In South Africa, an entire nation struggled with Truth and Reconciliation, with forgiving the many who engaged in cruelty and violence and torture during the days of Apartheid. I have heard two different African women speak positively from direct experience of this process as to its effectiveness and contribution to the healing of their people. Most of them needed to hear the truth, victims as well as everyone else, and victims needed to hear the deep-felt repentances and apologies that often were given, much more than they needed revenge or punishment or remuneration or retribution. Despite the huge success of this public forgiveness process, however, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not get perfect results and was criticized by a few people for granting too much amnesty and too little justice.

The story of Mrs. Kondile, whose son was tortured and killed, and who does not forgive, is also part of the South African story. After she listened to the testimony about

what a man had done to her son, she felt un-reconciled, and she said, “It is easy for Mandela and Tutu to forgive. They lead vindicated lives. In my life nothing, not a single thing, has changed since my son was burned by barbarians ... nothing. Therefore I cannot forgive.” As we listen to the stories of forgiveness, we must remember Mrs. Kondile’s voice as well. Sometimes it takes a very long time to forgive, sometimes a whole lifetime, and sometimes, a lifetime is not enough.

But I want to end on a more positive note, so here is a story about Dr. Juan Romagoza, a surgeon from El Salvador. He worked with the poor in the countryside, and in 1983 his clinic was machine-gunned and he was imprisoned. They cut his wrists, they said, so that he could not help others as a doctor anymore, and they shot him and left him to die. He lived, he survived, El Salvador survived. He came to this country and began a clinic in Washington, D.C. to help victims of war and trauma. He is much beloved for his healing work. One day a drunken man came to him and Juan recognized him as the man who had slit his wrists. The doctor was silent, stunned, then he decided that this broken man was also a part of his hurting community and needed healing. He offered the torturer help and forgiveness. Healing came deeply to that man, and to Juan.

I end these thoughts about forgiveness with the reminder that it is complicated, painful and very important territory for us to explore, and not to ignore. We are grateful for religious reminders, such as these Days of Atonement in Judaism. We are hopeful that together we can bring the compassion and the possibility to forgive and be forgiven into our midst. In the end, it only takes a few words: “I’m sorry.” “I forgive you.”

In conclusion, I’d like to share with you something that one of our ministers, Olivia Holmes, has written:



Let us remember that we are all slaves to that which we cannot forgive,  
in ourselves,  
in each other.

Let us forgive our fears and our angers,  
knowing that they are tools of the soul,  
proclaiming that we have work to do.  
May we resolve to use them,  
Yes, to use them wisely. ...

Let us forgive, and in forgiving let us find courage  
our own courage, the courage of my soul and your soul  
to be all that we are  
to embrace all that is our living  
to give all that is ours to give.

Let us forgive, and let us face the world in love.