

First Unitarian Universalist Church
The Forgiving Self
Rev. Sandra Fees
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A few weeks ago, I was on the phone trying to straighten out a problem with a computer. I was on the phone a few times already and dealt with more frustrations on this particular issue than I care to describe. And finally I lost my patience. I spoke harshly to the customer service rep.

I didn't swear or call him names. I didn't need to. I was rude and hostile. I was angry at the company not the man, but he had to absorb the brunt of my irritability. I'm still feeling badly about that.

I tried to justify my behavior to myself. Have you ever tried that? I told myself that sooner or later nearly everyone loses it with a customer service rep. Or at least with telemarketers. Or sales reps. It comes with the territory. I told myself that if the company were doing a better job, then I wouldn't be upset anyway. So it was their fault, really, not mine.

It's tempting to think it's okay to be unkind and short with a sales rep or customer service agent. But I knew better. I acted almost as if I thought it is part of his job to have people like me be mean to him.

I also tried to tell myself this was just a small thing, not important enough to fret over. But all of our encounters and all the ways we interact with each other matter. How we treat each other in everyday conversations and exchanges matters.

I was speaking to another human being. I was speaking to another human being who also has feelings, has a family and friends, who cares about the work he does, and wants to do a good job.

I didn't feel all that great after the phone call. I was agitated and out of sorts. I felt lousy not only because I was having computer problems, which is bad enough, but I had made them worse by taking it out on someone else.

I like to think of myself as an even-tempered and kind person. But there I was snipping away angrily at someone. I was not being my best self and I knew it.

After speaking harshly to the sales rep, I had to admit to myself that I was not treating him with the level of respect I strive to afford people or with the level of respect with which I want to be treated.

If I want to truly be able to move beyond such an encounter what I really need is forgiveness. I need to be able to make amends for what I did.

Owning up to the times like this when I don't live up to my best self forces me to deal with some uncomfortable feelings and situations. I have to acknowledge situations I may be tempted to gloss over or pretend never happened at all.

The Forgiving Self (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

Even for what is a small thing, the search for forgiveness is hard. It requires a level of honesty, truth-telling, and often awkwardness. It can be downright embarrassing to admit having done hurtful things. Sometimes we'd rather carry around a burden of guilt than confess our shortcomings. The things that need forgiving are painful because they strike deeply at the core of who we are.

Forgiveness is not only about our forgiving others. It is also about being forgiven Today it is this second part that I want to focus on. How do we receive forgiveness for the wrongs we have done?

In the Jewish tradition there is a special time set aside for it each year. During the High Holy Days, Jews are called upon to atone for their sins. This holy time starts with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

It is followed by the 10 Days of Awe, also known as the Days of Turning. During these 10 days, individuals are expected to spend time in prayer and reflection, thinking about who they may have hurt or wronged over the past year. Note that this is a time to think about who they have wronged not who has wronged them.

During those 10 days, they are expected to find a way to go to those they have hurt and heal the relationship. At the end of the 10 days, everyone gathers in a ritual time at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to confess their wrongs to God. This year, Yom Kippur began at sunset on Friday and ended at nightfall yesterday.

This is a tall order. It isn't enough for Jews to reflect on their mistakes. It isn't enough for them to privately confess them to God or to self. They also have to go to the people they have wronged and try to set things right by telling the truth and asking for forgiveness.

Judaism is not alone in recognizing the need many of us have for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a central theme of Christianity. In Christianity, it is known as the doctrine of atonement. The word atone means to be at one, to reconcile. This doctrine teaches that Jesus died for the sins of humanity, and through Jesus, humanity's sins are forgiven. In other words, only through Jesus's death does God forgive humans.

Our Universalist forbearer Hosea Ballou didn't quite agree with this orthodox Christian doctrine. So he reinterpreted it. In his 1805 Treatise on Atonement, Ballou offered a radical and influential reformulation of the traditional Christian view.

He argued that Jesus's death was not about a God who was angry at us and needed to forgive us. Instead, he said, Jesus's death was about a God who was demonstrating love for humanity and a desire for humans to turn to God in love.

Ballou argued that human beings are "incapable of offending an infinite God" – a God of love. He did not see God as the kind of deity that needed to reconcile with us. Instead, we humans are the ones who need to be reconciled to God. (from the "Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography")

The Forgiving Self (cont'd.)

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What the Universalist side of our faith assures me is that God's love has no bounds. It does not mean we are off the hook. We need to take responsibility for our behavior. We need to do the best we can to set things right. But in the end we are still lovable and forgivable.

Unitarian Universalism as a whole does not have a Doctrine of Atonement, nor do we all observe a Day of Atonement. Many of us are even reluctant to use the word "sin" to describe our mistakes. But our seven Unitarian Universalist principles suggest how we are to be in relationship with each other.

Our first principle calls on us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. If we fail to respect someone and cause them injury, we need to find a way to reaffirm our respect.

The second principle tells us how to do that. We need to seek justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. If we injure someone, then we need to try to make it right.

I encourage each of you to take some time today and in the coming days to reflect on the things you have done this past year that you regret. Who have you hurt? Have you failed to show respect for another person?

Perhaps you have you spoken harshly to your child. Maybe you have lost your patience with your spouse or partner and said an unkind word. Maybe you have lied to someone, cut someone off in traffic, betrayed a friend or loved one, or injured someone physically or emotionally?

I encourage you to take time in prayer and reflection and also to seek forgiveness from those you have injured. There isn't a shortcut to forgiveness. Forgiveness is not cheap. It is not easy. Forgiveness is not about forgetting what has happened or pretending to. And it isn't about saying a casual "I'm sorry" in passing.

Have you ever tried this kind of apology ... "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. You just made me so mad." Or here's another one: "I'm sorry about what happened between us. We both did things we shouldn't have." Or, there's this classic I hear a lot: "it takes two to tango."

All those qualifiers may be absolutely true. But doing our best to make a sincere apology means leaving the excuses behind. It's an incredibly hard thing to do. It makes us so vulnerable. We need to be willing to be vulnerable. Making mention of how we feel wronged by the other person only serves to undercut the authenticity of our admission of guilt.

I like to watch Dr. Phil from time to time. The other night his guests were a couple wanting to reconcile and the wife's best friend. Dr. Phil repeatedly asked the man if he had in fact had an affair. The man said, "yes, but she had an affair early in our marriage." The man said, "yes, but it wasn't my fault. The woman seduced me." The man said, "yes, but I've changed now." He even tried to blame his wife's friend.

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He seemed incapable of simply saying, “yes, I behaved in a hurtful way toward my wife. And I’m sorry.” This kind of confession is what it means to offer an unqualified and direct expression of remorse.

A half-hearted apology suggests there is more reflection to be done. And failing to complete our own inner work can stand in the way of true forgiveness.

There are other factors that may get in the way of forgiveness. For example, it may not be possible to go to the person you hurt and ask for forgiveness. In the situation I described earlier, I don’t know the man’s name or how to reach him. Sometimes a person has died. It is also entirely possible that the person you wounded may not be ready to give up a grudge against you.

The important thing is to get started and do the very best we can. Forgiveness is a process. It is some of the most intense inward searching and relational work we will ever do. It can take moments or years or a lifetime.

When we begin to acknowledge in a sincere way what we have done that requires forgiving, the process begins. We can move toward releasing ourselves from the terrible burden of guilt and regret.

The things that we ignore or deny and refuse to try to heal will haunt us. Forgiveness offers us the possibility of being freed from them. We allow ourselves the chance to be transformed by love and be made whole.

Our religion offers us this promise. We are lovable and forgivable. Relationships can be healed. What greater message can there be than this.

I want to close with the words of Hosea Ballou. He knew the power of love in our human relationships. He wrote, “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury; but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”

Amen