Forgiving and Letting Go – January 8, 2017

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Forgiveness isn't something that's discussed much among Unitarian Universalist.

I think that's because of the way the ability to be self-sufficient is perceived, so that forgiveness doesn't come easily. It's associated with concepts like salvation and surrender, actions that belong over in the main stream Trinitarian sector. Or with the Jewish faith in the season of the high holy days beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur. To practice forgiveness is to spiritual health what exercise is to physical health. Moreover, forgiveness is not unique to any religion, or to people who are religious. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, forgiveness occurs in the context of reconciling, and in many Eastern traditions, forgiveness is urged not out of sense of duty or obligation, but for one's own peace. Forgiveness isn't about denying or forgetting, nor is it simply saying that everything is ok, and excusing an action, or explaining it away, nor is about letting people off the hook from being accountable for their wrong doing. So, what is forgiveness? It's a response to being wronged that acknowledges that each of us is imperfect and flawed in some way, because we're all human. However, forgiveness is not instinctual for most of us, because when wronged the tendency is to get angry and want to retaliate. But hurt and anger are like fires that consume and destroy everything they touch. The destructive power is unleashed not only the object of the offense, but on the person of the offended, and all of those that are around them. One can never be healed of hurt and pain unless there is forgiveness. To forgive is to free ourselves from the power another has over us, and ironically often that individual may not even be aware of that power. Oprah Winfrey told a story on the power of forgiveness, as she related an incident that happened to her. She says that she and a friend had a falling out over some minor incident, and for a couple of years they didn't speak to each other. One day (Oprah) tells us that she spotted her former friend on the street with a companion by her side, and the woman was laughing and talking appearing so happy and carefree, and it became an aha moment for her, as she realized that this person wasn't giving her a thought and she had allowed someone to have power over her without them ever knowing it. You see in forgiveness we release ourselves from the bond of another's actions. Ultimately, it's the forgiver who becomes the beneficiary of the work on liberation and freedom. Contemporary society encourages us to smooth over, deny, or forget indiscretions, and exploitation of others. We see that on news feeds every day, with celebrities, and elected officials, both locally and nationally. The disappointment and betrayal that so many of us feel because of the presidential election is a prime example of pain and anger. It takes a lot of energy to remain angry, and when our emotions are being fueled by anger, we don't think clearly. But I must say that with few exceptions, connections through social media, have acted as a release valve, so that for the most part, at least the people that I know aren't keeping the pain locked away. And that's a good thing, because when we keep the pain locked away in the depths of our being it only changes us into spiteful human beings, and we become prisoners of that anger. Some people assert that forgiveness is a sign of weakness, but if there ever was a case of that being untrue, it's the case of Nelson Mandela. Wrongfully imprisoned for 27 years, following his release, Mandela brought about change of power with remarkably little violence, because rather than forming a

criminal tribunal, in 1996, the government set up a truth and reconciliation commission. He informed that even in the grimmest times during those 27 years when he and his comrades were pushed to their limits, he would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps for a second, but, he continued, it was enough to reassure and keep him going. Mandela said that deep down in every human heart there is mercy and generosity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also held that belief, and informed that forgiveness is not an occasional act, but a constant attitude. Moreover, darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. People aren't born with hatred inside, they must learn to hate. So, following that line of thinking, they can also learn to love. For some it might take longer than others.

In his book on forgiveness, Patrick Miller tells us that chronic hatred begins when someone attacks, someone suffers, and no one forgives. But forgiveness means opening the heart, and acknowledging that the person we are upset with is as full of weakness and vulnerability as every one of us, then we can see the other through the lens of our own humanity. However, you don't have to do this work alone, it helps being in a community that affirms our inherent worth and dignity, and cultivates virtues like understanding and compassion that help us to forgive, and that accepts us not just for who we are but where we are on our path to wellness and wholeness.

From my heart to yours, may it be so.

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