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“Forgiveness”

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The great religious traditions of the world are unanimous on this point: the contraction of the heart that comes about because of resentment, because of holding grudges, because of the inability to let go of wrong in our past, is exceedingly painful. And not only that, it is spiritually crippling, because all of those traits and characteristics and potentials that we have within us that it is the business of religion to bring forth in us: openness to others a lack of self-centeredness, a reaching out, a connection with ourselves at our deepest level, with other people at their essence, with this wonderful world, all of those traits, the best parts of our nature, that religion at its best helps us to cultivate; all of those are crippled by resentment. So the greatest religions of humanity are unanimous that forgiveness is essential for our spiritual health. The more that mind-body medicine advances, the more we are beginning to understand that forgiveness is essential for our physical health as well.

Redford Williams, a world-renowned researcher in mind-body medicine, has written a book with his wife Virginia called *Anger Kills*. That is literally true. People who are chronically hostile, angry, and mistrustful die young. Abraham Maslow, who was perhaps the most important psychologist of the twentieth century, found out that he had terminal cancer. He made it a project to seek out everyone in his life who was still around with whom he had had a falling out and to try to reconcile with them. He had a long career and it was a long project. What he found out was that in every case, in every single case, he had misunderstood the other person's intention and they had understood his. That their motivation was not the dark and evil motivation that he had imagined, nor was his toward them. Every one of those fallings out was because of a misunderstanding.

Among the great religious traditions of the world the Jewish tradition has a particular practice that's very important, that we celebrate today. We're a large and inclusive circle here in this religious community. We have people of Christian backgrounds, of no religious backgrounds, of Jewish backgrounds, of Buddhist backgrounds and we honor now, this time of year, the highest holy days of Judaism, the Days of Awe, which culminate in the Yom Kippur Kol Nidre ritual. We will have our own version of that ritual at this service. But before that climax of those highest of holy days, Jews around the world think about who it is that they have harmed and they need then go and seek forgiveness from those people and to see if they can make amends. All of us need to forgive somebody.

All of us need to be forgiven. If we are going to be successful in our relationships, if we are going to be fulfilled and have intimacy with other people, with our partners, with our children, with our relatives, we have to have fit forgiveness muscles. Jesus said, you remember, when he was asked how many times should we forgive someone, seven times? Surely the person who asked that question expected Jesus to say “No that's way too many.” And Jesus said, “No not seven times.” “Oh, good.” “Seventy times seven times.” What I think was meant here was that human beings are flawed and we like to be

close to others in our flawed humanity so forgiveness, letting go, understanding, correcting misunderstandings, closing our hearts, and then finding a way to open them again is just part of life and part of relationships.

I think people have a common misunderstanding about who forgiveness is for. We think that forgiveness is something we do for the other person because we are so superior to them. They have done us harm, but we being the morally superior ones, the more spiritual ones, we in our generosity forgive them. That is a fundamental misunderstanding of forgiveness. We forgive not for the other person, but for ourselves. We can find the truth of this in the very meaning of the word “resentment”. Resentment means to feel again. As long as we hold resentment we are feeling that hurt again and again and again and it keeps us from living, growing, and understanding. It puts a brake on our lives. It saps our energy. The first time somebody hurts us, it is their fault, but every time we allow that hurt to sear its way into our souls after that, we bear responsibility for that. Hatred, it is said, is a knife we wield by the blade. Forgiveness is something that we do for ourselves, a way for us to go on with our lives, to not have that other person’s wronging of us take over our minds, rob us of energy, rob us of happiness, and continue to hurt us over and over again.

Another misunderstanding is that forgiveness and reconciliation happen at the same time. It is great when they do, but they are not the same thing. You can forgive someone, that is, you can let them back into your heart, you can understand that their hurt of you is not the whole of their personality and their personhood. You can try to understand what has happened, see the misunderstandings that may have been there. In other words, forgiveness is opening your heart to that person, but not necessarily your home. It doesn’t mean that you have to again have coffee with them all the time. It just means that the hurt that was inflicted on you has healed, that it is no longer hijacking your happiness, that you’ve allowed yourself to take back your power by understanding the flawed humanity of the other person and letting them go from your heart and opening yourself up to wishing them well. If you don’t feel safe having them back in your life, you can still forgive them

Forgiveness is not condoning unskillful or hurtful acts in other people. Often in pastoral situations, people are struggling to forgive someone when the hurt is still happening repeatedly. I think it is pretty difficult for human beings to forgive someone if they are continually hurting you. And then there is the different task of getting that hurting to stop, of changing the situation so it does. I hear about people who have forgiven and established a friendship in prison with people who have killed their children. There is even an organization for people like that. The news is that you don’t have to go to those extremes to forgive.

I also think that forgiveness is not something that can be forced. It isn’t an act of will to forgive. You can’t just say, “I forgive you,” in your mind about another person when the time is not yet right. I think forgiveness is more an act of grace than an act of will and it happens a little bit at a time if the hurt is great. So we cannot will ourselves to forgive, but we can be willing to forgive. That’s an important distinction. We can be willing to

forgive and then forgiveness will come a little at a time, bit by bit, letting go, allowing, understanding, our hearts soften and open because keeping them closed hurts so much. The sincere intention to forgive is the first step.

We are going to hear a beautiful piece of music in preparation for our own Kol Nidre meditation and ritual. Kol Nidre is the renunciation of vows that we have made to God in the past year. In our understanding, some Jewish understandings, and our own understanding here in Unitarian Universalism, is that by vows to God we mean those secret vows that hinder us that are dysfunctional for our happiness and our fulfillment and our reaching out to others, vows of bitterness, vows of hatred, vows of inadequacy. Those secret promises to ourselves that say "I'm not worthy. I can't do this." It is those secret vows that we renounce to start afresh in this ritual which will follow. But remember, before that comes, the act of forgiveness or seeking forgiveness for the harms that we have created, and the vows that we have made to other people, God cannot forgive in the Jewish tradition, they must forgive. So as we prepare for our special time of Kol Nidre as we listen to this beautiful music, think about who needs to forgive you and who you need to let back into your heart.