

*Why is it sometimes so hard to forgive?*

Sermon for October 16, 2005

by The Reverend Lone Jensen

These are the days of atonements in the Jewish tradition, a time for repentance and turning toward the good. Call it a spiritual house cleaning if you like, this annual ritual of asking forgiveness of those we have wronged in the past year. Once all this fell on the head of a poor goat, the original scapegoat chased into the desert carrying symbolically the entire community's sins with it. Seems to me it must have taken a very big and very strong goat in certain years, a super Arnold Swartzenegger muscle bound goat on steroids. I can see it now, straining under the weight, so many sins, barely able to walk off. Just imagine all those wars, all that violence, too much lying, taking the poor man's only cloak and far too much coveting not only your neighbor's wife but your neighbor's brand new Porsche. Ok you can imagine it.

How very human it is to want to get rid of our collective and individual guilt, our bad conscience, that nagging feeling most of us have when we have not lived up our better selves. Atonement is not our strong suit though. First of all Unitarian Universalists are not really into sin, mainly because we have a really hard time agreeing on exactly what it is. We do not always agree on whom

we have sinned against either, unlike the Jewish tradition. Alan L Berger writes:

*Judaism teaches that there are two types of sins. One is that committed by humans against God, The second type consists of sin committed by humans against other humans. I may forgive one who has sinned against me. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another.*

Strong words those. And yet he has a point. I cannot forgive on behalf of someone else. I surely cannot forgive on behalf of God either. Although I find slavery to be America's great shame, I find Presidents Clinton's apology a few years ago a bit silly. How can he apologize on behalf of a nation? It solves nothing, it absolves no one.

Simon Wiesenthal who spent much of his life seeking justice wrote a story about sunflowers and the un-forgivable. He was in a concentration camp prisoner on work assignment and saw a soldier's cemetery with a bright beautiful sunflower marking each grave, each soldier remembered, still connected to the outside world. Not like he felt he would soon be, abandoned, isolated and buried in a mass grave. He envied the dead soldiers their sunflowers. Later in the story he was brought to the bedside of a dying SS soldier named Karl who told him his life story, of how he once was a good Catholic but later volunteered for the SS. He had

committed mass murder, helped to herd Jewish civilians, women, children and old men into a house that they then set on fire. But a father holding a young boy and shielding the child's eyes from the horror looked him straight in the eyes before he jumped to his death. This had struck even the SS soldier's conscience and now he wanted Simon, as a Jew to forgive him. Simon listened to his story and then silently left the room. It is a powerful story and Wiesenthal leaves us with the question: what would you have done? What was the right thing to do?

Primo Levi supplies one answer: *When an act of violence or an offense has been committed it is forever irreparable: it is quite probable that public opinion will cry out for a sanction, a punishment, a "price" for pain; but the initial offense remains and the "price" is always (even if it is "just") a new offense and a new source of pain.*

*This having been said, I think I can affirm that you did well, in this situation, to refuse your pardon to the dying man. You did well because it was the lesser evil: you could only have forgiven him by lying or by inflicting upon yourself a terrible moral violence.*

What Levi writes is far from the "forgive at any price" I grew up with. But I agree. The ones who could have given absolution were dead. The offense was so immense. Can we forgive such horrors? Should we ever? *Bring me a Jew, was the dying Nazi's*

*request. Any Jew will do. Karl has learned nothing. His desire is to "cleanse" his own soul at the expense of the Jew.*

But forgiving is also an act of liberation on behalf of the one who is wronged. Andre Stein sees Simon's silence as redemptive. As if he was saying to the soldier: *"I heard what you did, how you feel about it. I see how scared you are of dying with a burdened conscience. And this is all I can do. I am not telling you how much I hate you, for the flames of my hatred would burn me before they would reach you. I cannot forgive you not only because it is not in my power to speak for your victims but also because you have forced me to hear your story. For me this is a curse:"*

Hate will destroy the one who harbors it. But to forgive is not to be defenseless or to deny the wrong. Few of us here today, if any of us, have such immense, inhuman offenses to forgive as did Simon. Most of our wrongdoings are small in comparison and most of what has been done to us is not of that magnitude. I am not saying this to minimize anyone's suffering, but there is a scale here. For someone who did what the SS soldier did, the return, the turning back toward humanity is a long and nearly impassable road. Yet the soldier is also human and therein lays the dilemma. None of us can say we could not do this. We hope we would not, we pray we would resist but until we are tested we do not know.

I was born in 1946 and belong to the generation that grew up in the long shadow of World War II.

We had to come to term with evil somehow and to stubbornly believe in the possibility of human goodness was a large leap of faith. Yet without such a faith no future worth living in is possible. Such faith in an inherent goodness is also a cornerstone of our Unitarian Universalist Faith.

For most of us forgiving is a daily and very messy business. I saw a documentary recently called Hiding and Seeking about a man caught in this dilemma. Menachem Daum is an Orthodox Jew and child of Polish Holocaust survivors. He spent many years interviewing camp survivors about the impact of the Nazi "final solution" on Jewish religious faith. Daum worries about his two sons' inwardly-focused Orthodoxy and their growing intolerance toward the world outside the confines of the yeshiva. Daum's wife, Rifka, comes home one night with a tape of a rabbi openly preaching "hatred" of the non-Jewish world. Daum's first reaction is to try to raise an outcry but community leaders ignore him. His second reaction is to consider the "ethical legacy" he should be leaving his children.

This is an important question to ask of ourselves. What is our ethical legacy? When Menachem plays the tape for his sons, the older says it is wrong but understandable. The younger says the

rabbi is only expressing the hard truth. Menachem has evolved for himself a conciliatory "Jewish humanism." He saw in the Holocaust the lesson that only by seeing the spark of God in all human beings could humanity progress. His son's reactions disturb him. So he decides to go on a pilgrimage back to Poland to discover both the past and the truth. His father-in-law warns Menachem saying that all Poles are dangerous and treacherous. On the agenda is to find some memory of the rescue of Rifka's father and his two brothers. They spent 28 months hidden in a pit under a haystack in the farmyard of a non-Jewish Polish family who did this at great risk to themselves. After nearly 60 years, the very farm where the boys were saved remains intact and the same Mucha family lives at the farm. The grand mother remembered by Chaim back in New York, as a fetching girl is now old and bent nearly to the ground but remembers everything.

For the Daums, the encounter is steeped in unanticipated emotion and the realization of a long unpaid debt. For the Polish rescuers, there is a kind of wistful reception of visitors long past expected. Daum returns to New York and asks his father in law why he never wrote to the farm family. *I couldn't!* he says. *The debt was too great. I did not want to remember. I would not have done the same.*

The reason I chose this story is that this is how reconciliation and forgiveness works. Menachem's belief that only by seeing the spark of God in all human beings could humanity progress is also my belief. But it is not simple. His father in law had pushed aside the painful past and thus it remained unresolved, unfinished. The suffering was not lessened but increased by this avoidance.

Why are we often so angry at those we owe the most? Maybe because they offer us a mirror of what we could be. Ego and self image play a part. It is too painful to see or believe that we do not measure up to the image we have carefully created

Forgiveness is hard because we do not want to feel the hurt again. But I can honestly repent of my actions and ask you to forgive me. I can accept an apology with an open heart. Forgiving though is not forgetting. And since I grew up Lutheran forgiveness was trust upon me as a religious obligation and guilt, well that was a way of life. I do guilt exceedingly well! That of course solves nothing.

How many of you have on this day pockets of guilt, unresolved anger, sticking places in your soul, unfinished and unforgiven? Within my soul I have such spiny nagging thorns, from long ago and yesterday. Most of them are small, a few quite large, none thankfully of the magnitude I have talked about today. But they still hurt now and then. There is the time I had promised my

son when he was very young to play badminton with him on the weekend. I worked and was too busy most of the time. He looked forward to it all week and then I let him down by only playing for a short time. He never forgot it and I have not either. A small thing and yet I still cringe when I think of it. Why is it so hard for us sometimes to forgive each other? Why is it so hard for me to forgive myself?

Matthieu Ricard writes in his response to Simon Wiesenthal's story: *For a Buddhist, forgiveness is always possible and one should always forgive.*

*According to the Buddhist teachings, an action is not considered negative or sinful in and of itself, but because it produces suffering. Likewise, a virtuous act is what brings about more happiness in the world.*

*There are all kinds of situations in life that we find difficult to forgive. This is because we believe that there is such a thing as a self that defines who we are for our whole lives; when this self is offended, we try to protect it. But our bodies and minds are not stable; they are changing every second. The notion of a stable and autonomous self is, from the Buddhist point of view, itself the source of inner poisons such as hatred, obsession, pride, and jealousy, for it divides us from others and prevents us from being more compassionate.*

Unlike Ricard I am not a practicing Buddhist. But I think his measure of how our acts affect others and the world is absolutely true. *An action is not considered negative or sinful in and of itself, but because it produces suffering. Likewise, a virtuous act is what brings about more happiness in the world.* Yom Kippur is a day to atone for the suffering we have caused. No goats are provided. It is up to us to do our own spiritual housecleaning. Like physical housecleaning it is not always a pleasant task but it is necessary. In our closing words after the last hymn we will recite a litany of atonement. The words repeated are: we forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love. What is it in your life that needs healing and forgiveness?

Lift it up and sweep it out! Run imaginary Goat, Run!