

Our service this week is about forgiveness. Often we speak with platitudes about the more difficult human emotions, fear, anger, hurt, forgiveness, even love. I thought I might tell you a real story of forgiveness and it happens to be about my father.

My father was an angry man. I have stories about his anger at me, and how he expressed it. I still clearly remember the many instances of his rage even now. I remember him grabbing me by the shirt under my neck and picking me up in the air from the time I was about 6 or 7. He would bring me close to his face and scream at me as he made a fist with one hand, threatening to hit me. I was sure he was going to hit me, but the thing I remember most is the saliva from his mouth spraying on my face.

What my father did was wrong. I know that. Many times I was just the innocent place where he could express his rage safely, in order to reduce his anger and his pain. Yet what he did affected me deeply for my entire life. When we are children and we are abused, or abandoned, we freeze at first, tensing up in the hopes we can resist the abuse and survive. In time we handle our fear by trying to control the situation, so that we cannot be hurt again. This strategy is not very effective because it is difficult to control any situation, and even more so for a child. When abused children fail at keeping things in control, sometimes our rage, our feelings of injustice, sadness and resentment can come out of us..... even when we do not want them to.

That happened to me latter in life. Joan my partner and I have three children, Keith, Lee and Simon. Whenever one of my children would do something wrong, and this happened daily, I could feel the rage at my father stir inside me. When our young children would hit me or push me away innocently, I could feel my whole body stiffen. I realized that this

was not a good feeling and I sought out a good therapist. Carl my therapist, allowed me to get comfortable with my rage by using a tennis racket and smacking a pillow. He helped me get to know the signs of rage coming on, and my feelings of injustice and resentment. As I reflected on how I wanted to live my life through these powerful feeling, I realized the only way I could creatively work with them was through forgiveness. My father did not have the capacity to apologize and heal our wounds and I needed my wounds to heal if I was to raise my boys to be good men. I could not wait for him to apologize, I had to do something myself.

Often forgiveness is like this, others who have hurt us cannot apologize. They cannot do the things the Jewish Talmud requires us to do that I mentioned in the opening words, apologize, promise never to do it again, and offer some kind of compensation for our pain.

With my father's anger, In an act that can only be considered grace, I truly do not know what else to call it, it came to me. Whenever I felt anger toward one of the boys, I would forgive my father. I would utter the words "I forgive you Father", silently in my head. This became my practice. It seems silly at first. When Keith once threw his cereal at me and it landed on my face as I was trying to get to work and do 1,000 things, I could feel the rage stiffening my body. "I forgive you Father"

When lee jumped on top of me from the top of the stairs, thinking his dad was invincible and I fell down the stairs trying to keep him safe as we tumbled, the electric feeling of rage filled me, "I forgive you Father". These words brought me into balance. As soon as I said them, I could be present, I could clean up the cereal and be reflective and diplomatic about my reactions. After the fall, I was able to be grateful that both Lee and I were not hurt and respond to his tears. These words were not like a light switch turning on forgiveness and turning off anger. When I said, "I

forgive you Father”, it slowly dissipated the rage, and began to change the injustice and resentment I felt. Saying “I forgive you Father”, helped me breath and to find compassion for myself and my history. This helped me become a better Dad.

For me, forgiveness was a gradual process. In nature things take time, and it was like that with forgiveness. I imagine forgiveness like waves on a beach slowly wearing down the rocks and my hard heartedness. Each, “I forgive you Father”, helped soothe the wound in my soul. I have used this practice for more than 30 years. When the person who hurt you does not apologize you have to act yourself.

I believe when we choose forgiveness as a path to wholeness, grace often comes. When my children were still small and I was in the process of learning how to forgive my father we all went on a holiday together. That meant, my sister and her family, my father and mother, and Joan and I with our three boys. We rented a house together on the beach in South Carolina. One day I was walking with my dad on the beach hoping to talk with him or learn about his life. We were walking in the surf and all of a sudden a sneaky wave hit us both. My dad was frail by this time and the wave knocked him down and he floated into my arms. So there we were, me standing with him in my arms. I could feel the rage coming into my body, the turning of the tides. I was in control now. He saw my face and he looked afraid. The words, “I forgive you Father” came into me and out of me. I can’t tell you what that did to me. We looked at each other deeply for a short time. My anger lessened and he said, in a bumbling way, I’m sorry and ...thank you. I’ll take that as grace.

I can say from my experience that when we are hurt, and we harden our heart to protect ourselves, it is perfectly normal and natural. We have to protect ourselves from the slings and arrows of outrageous

fortune, we have all been wounded. At the same time we are also called upon as social and spiritual human beings to reflect on our experiences of being wounded. And as soon as we are able to remember, we are all imperfect, learning how to live a precious human life together, the grace of saying something like, "I forgive you Father" becomes possible. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor does it restore trust. Our pain lives viscerally in our bodies. MLJK said, "forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." When King said this, I understood his words, in my body. Forgiveness is something we must do so we can heal and so we can act well in the world, even if others do not. If my father was still alive, I would not trust him unless he repented. But my forgiveness healed me.

In our UU tradition, we do not have religious language around redemption, forgiveness, or even love. We take inspiration from various sources and personal spiritual practices, as we grapple with the reality of evil, and rage and injustice. We reject the notion of original sin, yet we see it daily. So we need to find ways to use our custom spirituality, especially when difficulties present themselves in our lives and in our communities. Forgiveness is one spiritual practice we can use daily

We often miss the mark, not like my father thank goodness, yet we all miss the mark and we hurt each other. When we miss the mark we need to recommit ourselves to begin again in love. We need to apologize, promise to never do it again and offer some way of paying for our behaviour. We need to learn how to repair relationships not run from them. If we use this as one of our spiritual practices, working to re-enter that sacred space of caring, compassion, commitment, we can heal not only with each other but deep inside ourselves too. And this allows us to

do the larger work of respecting the inherent dignity in all people that can only be accomplished in community.

Forgiveness says theologian, Rienhod Neibuhr, “is a possible only for those who know deeply that they are not good, who feel themselves in need of mercy/ grace, who live in a dimension deeper and higher than that of moral idealism, and who can feel the commonality of our sacred human condition”.

Forgiveness is not easy. Many of us know people who are unable to forgive, maybe at times we are unable to forgive. But if we spin our outrage over and over in our mind, our inner dialogue builds up resentments that are difficult if not impossible to dispel. When we are hurt, in my case by my father, he could not apologize, so I had to forgive him, so I could grow, and take care of my children.

Can we say, “I forgive you father”, or Mother, or brother or sister, or friend here at in the community? If they do not apologize we can say it silently, I forgive you. We never forget, but we forgive because we want to soften the walls on our heart. We do it so we can later say, even though I have been hurt , it will not stop me from loving others. Forgiveness in its essence, is a practice of love.

Try it out some time soon. If someone hurts you, first remind them of the Jewish scriptures on forgiveness which btw, supports the overwhelming research on forgiveness. But if they cannot apologize, try saying quietly, I will never forget what you did, yet I forgive you. Maybe you can even laugh quietly when you realize the immediate effects it has on your heart.

Start this spiritual practice anytime, we do not live forever you know.