



# TOUCHSTONES

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## Forgiveness

## Wisdom Story



### Introduction to the Theme

The word *forgive* comes from the Old English word *forġifan*, which has the meaning “to give completely.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word *forgive*, “to excuse for a fault or offense; to pardon” and “to renounce anger or resentment against.” It means “to pass over an offense and to free the offender from the consequences of it. To



forgive is to grant pardon without harboring resentment.” Pardoning without harboring any resentment conveys the sense of “giving completely.” True forgiveness cannot be

forced. It is a process that must unfold authentically.

The Russian writer, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn said, “It is not our capacity to think that makes us different [from animals] but our capacity to repent, and to forgive.” To be fully human we have to practice daily the craft of forgiveness. We also have to practice repentance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” Repentance has traditionally involved three aspects: remorse, restitution, and regeneration. There is tremendous healing in two words deeply felt and compassionately communicated: “I’m sorry.”

Perhaps we resist forgiveness because of what we think it entails. Rejecting what forgiveness is not, frees it of popular stereotypes. Forgiveness does not mean condoning by failing to see or judge the action as wrong. It is not excusing the action by somehow not holding the person responsible for what he or she has done. Forgiveness need not

*(Continued on page 6)*

### The Prince and the Rhinoceros *an Indian tale*

Once upon a time in India, a rare rhinoceros was born, with skin so beautiful it almost glowed. The rhinoceros was given to a noble prince who was very lonely and whose kingdom was poor. The prince was so delighted that he laughed joyfully, and named the little calf Great Joy.



The prince treated her with great kindness. He fed her rice, fruit, and choice tender plants, and spoke in a kind and gentle voice. Great Joy grew and was happy.

At sunrise she would be golden. At sunset, she would be a canvas of pink and red and orange, and later the dark blue of evening. She seemed almost enchanted.

“You are wonderful and special to me,” the prince whispered softly.

In time, Great Joy grew into an enormous rhino. She was very strong. One day she said, “I am only a rhino, but I can use my strength to help him earn gold for his kingdom.” She suggested that she compete in a contest of strength against the town’s strongest bulls.

A rich merchant with many fine oxen

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Forgiveness & Building Beloved Community

Beloved Community cannot exist without forgiveness. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber is credited with stating that humans are the “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing” creatures. Forgiveness lies in the chasm between promise breaking and promise renewing. Without forgiveness, we can never come back into right relationship with a person who we have harmed by breaking a promise. Beloved Community begins with the promise of creating it and then working to make a reality. Since there is no easy roadmap to the destination, the path forward will be blocked with broken promises. These can only be removed through forgiveness. Otherwise we will never reach the promised land.

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## Building Beloved Community

## Great Joy

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

agreed to the wager: Great Joy would pull a hundred loaded wagons usually towed by his team of eight oxen. The bet was one thousand gold pieces.

The next day, the prince inspected the wagons and harnessed Great Joy to the front. Then he climbed onto the driver's seat. Great Joy waited for a few kind words before starting. Instead, the prince waved a whip in the air and shouted, "Pull, you big wretch. Move, you worthless rhino."

Great Joy was shocked. Wretch? Worthless? "I'm no wretch," she thought. "I'm not worthless, either." She stiffened her huge legs and refused to move an inch.

Humiliated, the prince ran home and hid in his royal bed. "I'm ruined," he cried. Great Joy was filled with pain and sorrow. After many days and nights without food or sleep, she went to the prince's palace. "Oh, Prince, in all our years together, have I ever done anything to hurt you?" "No, never." "Then why did you say those terrible things to me?"

The prince hung his head. Tears ran down his face. "The gold distracted me. I forgot the importance of our friendship. I am so ashamed."

"Then we will try again," Great Joy said. "Go back to the merchant and double your bet." Again the carts were loaded. The prince climbed up and sang out, "All right, you marvelous marvel, you splendid rhino, my Great Joy. It's up to you!"

The powerful rhino snorted, pawed the ground and charged forward. Her sides heaved as she pulled, until the last cart crossed the finish line. The townspeople cheered wildly.

The prince collected his 2,000 pieces of gold, then humbly thanked Great Joy. That evening, the prince and the rhino walked along the river in the red sunset.

"I didn't mean to say such hurtful words to you," the prince whispered. "Please forgive me."

"I already have," said Great Joy. And that's how they lived forever after.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/welcome/session3/prince%20rhinoceros>

## Circle of Forgiveness

### Forgiveness Meditation

Jack Kornfield

"Forgiveness from others: *There are many ways that I have hurt and harmed others, betrayed or abandoned them, caused them suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, and confusion. ...And then one by one, repeat, I ask for your forgiveness, I ask for your forgiveness.*

"Forgiveness for yourself: *There are ways that I have betrayed, harmed, or abandoned myself through thought, word, or deed, knowingly or unknowingly. ...Then say to yourself, For each of the ways I have hurt myself through action or inaction, out of my fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive myself, I forgive myself.*

"Forgiveness for those who have hurt or harmed you. *There are many ways I have been wounded and hurt, abused and abandoned, by others in thought, word, or deed, knowingly or unknowingly. ...Now say to yourself, In the many ways others have hurt or harmed me, out of fear, pain, confusion, and anger, I see these now. To the extent that I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. I have carried this pain in my heart too long. For this reason, to those who have caused me harm, I offer you my forgiveness. I forgive you.*

If you would like to explore this meditation further, get Korn-



field's book, *A Path with a Heart*. The flow of the meditation is important, as one part provides a foundation for the next. When we begin by meditating on the forgiveness that we desire from others, we acknowledge that we are part of the unforgiven. Meditating on this reality makes it possible to seek forgiveness from others. Then, seeking our own forgiveness from our self creates the possibility of the release that only we can provide. Both of these lead us to the possibility of forgiving those who have harmed us, if we are ready. Meditating on forgiveness can open our heart to healing.

Source: *A Path With a Heart* by Jack Kornfield

## Final Form of Love

### Forgiveness

Rev. Tom Owen Towle

The process of forgiveness enables us to face the worst and the best of humanity, our most grievous impasses and highest resolves. ...Reinhold Niebuhr hallows forgiveness as the "final form of love."

...[Forgiveness] has challenged us to anchor hurts and wrongs in the past, while advancing with our lives. Practicing forgiveness has stretched progressives to experience the full course of hurt, bitterness, healing, and reconnection.

Forgiveness has ...summoned [us] ... to humanize rather than demonize wrongdoers. It has compelled us to shape distinctions between justice and retaliation. It has obliged us to grasp that forgiveness is a choice not a compulsion. Forgiveness is integral to growing up theologically.

... "To forgive or not to forgive," is perhaps the trickiest theological query of them all.

...It's quite tempting to turn forgiveness into a "should." If there's any *ought* involved, it's not an *ought* of obligation, but more like an *ought* of opportunity. ...Dwight Lee Wolter puts it: "To err is human, to forgive is an option." Forgiveness comprises a theological option akin to grace, unfolding, if at all, on its own timetable.

...One must ask: is forgiveness a purely personal transaction or can it be applied in a political way to reconcile enemies?

...Understandably, there are complexities of forgiveness that involve the question of justice. Personal or divine justice isn't public justice, and it shouldn't be permitted to override justice.

Despite its enormous difficulties, even drawbacks, there remains a formidable power to the gift of forgiveness, both personally and globally. Forgiveness doesn't look much like a tool for survival in a bad world, but that's what it is. Forgiveness frees people from spiritual slaveries of all sorts—forgivers and forgiven alike.

Source: *Theology Ablaze* by Tom Owen Towle

# Readings from the Common Bowl

**Day 1:** "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

Lewis B. Smedes



**Day 2:** "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future."

Paul Boese

**Day 3:** "It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend."

William Blake

**Day 4:** "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Day 5:** "Without forgiveness life is governed by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation."

Roberto Assagioli

**Day 6:** "Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we ...had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves."

Sidney & Suzanne Simon

**Day 7:** "In our society, forgiveness is often seen as weakness. People who forgive those who have hurt them or their family are made to look as if they really don't care about their loved ones. But forgiveness is tremendous strength. It is the action of someone who refuses to be consumed by hatred and revenge."

Helen Prejean, csj

**Day 8:** "As we know, forgiveness of oneself is the hardest of all the forgivenesses."

Joan Baez

**Day 9:** "It is not 'forgive and forget' as if nothing wrong had ever happened, but 'forgive and go forward,' building on the mistakes of the past and the energy generated by reconciliation to create a new future."

Carolyn Osiek

**Day 10:** "Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It is a permanent attitude."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Day 11:** "Forgiveness, in its most signifi-

cant form, does not involve ceasing to be angry at someone who has hurt you. It involves ceasing to be angry with life for the hurt."

William Bridges

**Day 12:** "If you can't forgive someone, then pray for the willingness to forgive them."

Anonymous

**Day 13:** "Forgiveness is a door to peace and happiness. It is a small, narrow door, and cannot be entered without stooping. It is also hard to find. But no matter how long the search, it can be found."

Johann Christoph Arnold

**Day 14:** "It is not our capacity to think that makes us different [from animals], but our capacity to repent, and to forgive."

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn



**Day 15:** "Life is an adventure in forgiveness."

Norman Cousins

**Day 16:** "It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend."

William Blake

**Day 17:** "Love is an act of endless forgiveness."

Peter Ustinov

**Day 18:** "Vengeance has grave dangers and holds out false hopes of closure for those aggrieved by violence and injustice.... Our hope, rather, is in the creative act of love. Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries and brings new possibilities into being."

Rebecca Ann Parker

**Day 19:** "Forgiveness means: What has happened in the past—I won't say whatever, for judgment is not ruled out—shall not completely determine the future. You can make a new covenant; you can renew the commitment and you can start again."

James Luther Adams

**Day 20:** [Forgiveness is] "surrender[ing] the right to get even because forgiving is

always a decision to put up with an uneven score."

Lewis B. Smedes

**Day 21:** "Forgiveness is about healing what is broken in ourselves. It's about reconciliation with the nature of life itself."

Marilyn Sewell

**Day 22:** "Forgive yourself for your faults and your mistakes, and move on."

Les Brown

**Day 23:** "We forgive to the extent that we love."

Francois de La Rochefoucauld

**Day 24:** "If there were no likelihood that forgiveness would produce the spirit of forgiveness, and mutuality the spirit of mutuality and reciprocity, it would be hard to love and trust each other."

Reinhold Niebuhr

**Day 25:** "Forgiveness is the economy of the heart.... Forgiveness saves expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits."

Hannah More

**Day 26:** As long as you don't forgive, who and whatever it is will occupy rent-free space in your mind."

Isabelle Holland

**Day 27:** "You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. ...I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, 'I forgive. I'm finished with it.'"

Maya Angelou

**Day 28:** "In human terms this means that we are not caught in the vise of cause and effect, the past determining the present. It is possible to introduce something new: That is the meaning of forgiveness."

James Luther Adams

**Day 29:** "If you haven't forgiven yourself something, how can you forgive others?"

Dolores Huerta

**Day 30:** "Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again."

Dag Hammarskjöld

**Day 31:** "For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?"

Bell Hooks



# Faith and Theology

through the boundaries of prejudice and enmity. Love embraces the goodness of this world and seeks paradise on earth, a heaven

## Against Vengeance

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

[How do we respond to] ...an unfettered enthusiasm for vengeance... To approach this question, we need a wiser understanding of religiously sanctioned violence, a deeper awareness of how trauma affects human life, and a clearer grasp of what offers saving hope in the presence of violence.

...The idea that God saves through violence has been a core doctrine of Western Christianity for the past thousand years.

...In the West, Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment, and liberal theology attempted to dethrone this bloodthirsty God and to replace him with the primacy of Reason. But... now that Reason is our God, we justify destruction of our enemies as reasonable.

...Vengeance... holds out false hopes of closure for those aggrieved by violence and injustice. ...And vengeance can generate a downward spiral of violence.

...Alfred North Whitehead observed that there are times when violence is a last resort in personal or national defense. But the most violence can do is stop something. It can stop a violent aggressor. But violence can never create. It can never console. It can never bring peace into being. It can never repair what has been lost.

It is important for us as Unitarian Universalists to remember that our religious heritage ...consistently protested the image of God as a sanctioner of violence. When Hosea Ballou issued his treatise on the doctrine of the atonement in 1805, he objected to the God of violence who required the death of his son to save humanity. Universalism proclaims that violence does not save the world. ...

Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries and brings new possibilities into being. Love speaks out in the face of injustice and oppression, calling leaders to account when policies and practices are injuring people. Love tends the wounds created by injustice and evil and offers compassion in the presence of life's suffering. Love builds communities of

of mutual respect. Love generates life—from the first moment of conception of a child, to the last moment when love creates a way for those who have died to be remembered with gratitude.... ...When our hearts are breaking, it is the discovery of a love that chooses unshakeable fidelity to our common humanity that renews us and redirects us to a life of generosity.

...Our calling is to witness ...how the anguishing aftermath of human violence can be healed. We must speak as public theologians and religious critics....

...Such speaking will not suffice if we are merely idealistic, innocent as doves. ...We need to speak as wise serpents who know the human capacity for atrocities, cruelties, stupidities, idolatries, and shortsighted, self-serving strategies. We cannot flinch in the presence of evil....

...The events of our time call us to make a religious response—publicly, proactively, and persistently. What we do in this time must be done out of ecstatic love for life—because we have seen life's beauty and goodness.... What we do in this time must be done with fidelity..., even when the task at hand seems like it cannot hold against an overwhelming tide. And what we do in this time must be done in communion—...rooted in our relationship to one another and to those who have gone before..., who, when the forces of injustice were at their strongest, had the courage to stand against the tide and ...witnessed for the things that make for peace.

Theologies of redemptive violence too easily obscure the saving message of the world's best spiritual wisdom. ...Our calling is to speak and act theologically. We are to proclaim what is moral, what is just, what reverences life, what gives hope in the face of violence, what restores life when it has been fractured by human cruelty, what is worthy of our ultimate loyalty, what sustains us in the long night of pain, what connects us in right relationship to our neighbor, what saves the world.

Source: 2002 Birmingham Lecture delivered at the UU Ministers' Association Convocation.

## Necessary Mercy

### Forgiveness: Hallelujah

Anne Lamott

...Let's say we believe that mercy and forgiveness are in fact foundational, innate, what we are grown from and can build on; also, that they are hard to access.... What if we know that forgiveness and mercy are what heal and restore and define us, that they are the fragrance that the rose leaves on the heel that crushes it?

...Mercy is radical kindness. Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable. Mercy brings us to the miracle of apology, given and accepted, to unshamed humility when we have erred or forgotten.

...Mercy, grace, forgiveness, and compassion are synonyms, and the approaches we might consider taking when facing a great big mess, especially the great big mess of ourselves—our arrogance, greed, poverty, disease, prejudice.

...Kindness toward others and radical kindness to ourselves buy us a shot at a warm and generous heart, which is the greatest prize of all. Do you want this, or do you want to be right? Well, can I get back to you on that?

...When we manage a flash of mercy for someone we don't like, ...we experience a great spiritual moment, a new point of view that can make us gasp. It gives us the chance to rediscover something both old and original, the sweet child in us who, all evidence to the contrary, was not killed off, but just put in



the drawer. I realize now how desperately, how grievously, I have needed the necessary mercy to experience self-respect. ... [It] comes from within, from love, from the flow of the universe; from inside the cluttered drawer.

Source: *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope* by Anne Lamott

### What if Nobody Forgave?

Barbara Marshman

...A wise old man ...arrived at a strange village. In this town all the people were carrying what seemed to be great bundles on their backs. They couldn't look around very well, [or up] because of the heavy burdens they carried.

Puzzled, the ...man ...stopped a ... fellow. "My good man, I am ...fascinated by these large bundles you all carry.... What is their purpose?"

"Oh, these," answered the young fellow in a matter-of-fact way. "These are our grudges." "My," said the wise old man, "that's a lot of grudges to collect at your age!" "Oh, they're not all mine. Most of them were passed down in my family." The young fellow heaved a weary sigh. "See that man over there? I have quite a load of grudges against his family. His great, great grandfather called mine a horse thief when they both wanted to be elected mayor."

The man looked around and shook his head sadly, "You look so unhappy. Is there no way to get rid of the burdens?"

"We've forgotten how," said the young fellow, shifting his load a little. "You see, at first we were proud of our grudges. Tourists came from miles around. But after a few years, Grudgeville became a dreary place. Nobody came. We forgot how to stop holding our grudges."

"If you want to get rid of those grudges," said the wise old man, "I think I know five magic words that will do the trick."

"You do?" asked the fellow hopefully. "That would be a miracle. I'll go and have the mayor call the people of Grudgeville together." And off he went, as fast as his grudges would let him. The mayor lost no time calling the people to the village square. The mayor and the wise old man stood on a platform where they could see all the hunched-over villagers.

When the people had quieted down, the mayor said, "Good people of Grudgeville, a wonderful thing has happened! A very wise stranger has come into our town. He says he can tell us the magic words that will rid us of these grudges we have carried for generations. How many

of you would like to be able to straighten up, have your grudges disappear, look at the world in a whole new way? Listen to the wise words of our visitor, then, and do as he tells you."

"My friends, these are simple words, yet some people find them hard to say," said the wise stranger. "I think you have the courage to speak them. The trick is that you must say them to each other and truly mean them. The first two words are 'I'm sorry.' Can you say them? The other three are 'I forgive you.' Can you say that? Now say these words to each other."

There was a long pause, then a low grumble from the townspeople. First one person, and then another, said the words. Soon they were all saying them to each other—quietly at first and then louder. And then—would you believe it? Just like the wise man predicted, the grudges disappeared! What joy there was in the town. People were heard saying, "Look how those trees have grown!" and "Is that you, Jim? How good to see your face!"

There was dancing in the streets that day, and it wasn't long before the mayor changed the name of the town to Joytown

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/5955.shtml>



### Family Activity: *Forgive*

Read the story and then discuss these questions. Do you think it's a good idea to make people apologize when they've done something wrong? Why or why not? How can you tell when an apology is real—when the person making it is truly sorry? What are some ways, besides apologizing, that you can show someone you're sorry? Can you remember a time, when you apologized to someone? What happened? How did you feel? When has someone apologized to you? How did you feel? Are you able to forgive a person who has hurt you but isn't willing to apologize? How?

### Restorative Justice

Restorative justice views crime primarily as a conflict between individuals that results in injuries to victims, communities, and the offenders themselves, and only secondarily as a violation against the state. It seeks to create peace by reconciling the parties and repairing the injuries caused by the dispute through participation of victims, offenders, and their communities.

Howard Zehr offers these ten suggestions for living restoratively.

1. Take relationships seriously, envisioning yourself in an interconnected web of people, institutions, and the environment.
2. Try to be aware of the impact—potential as well as actual—of your actions on others and the environment.
3. When your actions negatively impact others, take responsibility by acknowledging and seeking to repair the harm—even when you could probably get away with avoiding or denying it.
4. Treat everyone respectfully, even those you don't expect to encounter again, even those you feel don't deserve it, even those who have harmed or offended you or others.
5. Involve those affected by a decision, as much as possible, in the decision-making process.
6. View the conflicts and harms in your life as opportunities.
7. Listen, deeply and compassionately, to others, seeking to understand even if you don't agree with them.
8. Engage in dialogue with others, even when what is being said is difficult, remaining open to learning from them and the encounter.
9. Be cautious about imposing your "truths" and views on other people and situations.
10. Sensitively confront everyday injustices including sexism, racism, and classism.

Source: <https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/2009/11/27/10-ways-to-live-restoratively/>

(Continued from page 1) **Intro to the Theme** result in reconciliation in which the relationship is restored. And, perhaps, most importantly, forgiving does not require forgetting, unlike the word amnesty, which shares its root with amnesia. Faith Baldwin writes, "I think one should forgive and remember.... If you forgive and forget in the usual sense, you're just driving what you remember into the subconscious; it stays there and festers. But to look, even regularly, upon what you remember and know you've forgiven is achievement."

Theologian Miroslav Volf writes, "Forgiveness doesn't come out of a command. I can be commanded to sweep the floor, but I can't really be commanded to forgive. Forgiveness is something that comes from the depths of the soul or it doesn't come at all."

Forgiveness is the process by which right relationship is restored. At the same time, there may be those things that exceed our power to forgive. While he was on the cross, Jesus, in referring to those who were persecuting him, asked, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He did not say to those persecuting him, "I forgive you." Such forgiveness may have exceeded his power to extend, even if Jesus desired that they be forgiven.

Forgiving has a number of connotations, many of which are negative: giving in, giving up, admitting defeat, turning the other cheek, condoning, or letting someone off the hook. Perhaps these negative connotations emerge from our early experiences with forgiveness.

An adult often influences childhood experiences with forgiveness. We tell children, "Say you're sorry." These words, while well intentioned, seek to impose reconciliation between children from outside the relationship. A child being told to say these words often says them without conviction because he or she is not sorry. The child receiving the apology knows that it is not sincere and correctly disbelieves it. The true feelings of both children remain hidden in this transaction. If the true feelings had been

## Judaism

Within Judaism, it is understood that only God can forgive offenses against God, and only people can forgive you for any offense that you committed against them. The 40 days leading up to *Yom Kippur*, which ends the high holy days, is a time of seeking forgiveness from those you have harmed. The imperative to forgive is clear: if a person sincerely asks for your forgiveness three times and you refuse each request, then you have harmed that person by your refusal and must now seek their forgiveness.

## Buddhism

Forgiveness is seen as a practice to deal with the impact of negative influences on one's thoughts and karma. As one Buddhist said, "If we haven't forgiven, we keep creating an identity around our pain, and that is what is reborn. That is what suffers." In place of anger, sorrow, and the desire for revenge in response to harm, Buddhism emphasizes loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Through these, one can better understand the nature of suffering and thus be motivated to forgive for one's own sake as well as the sake of the person who caused the harm.

## Hinduism

The *Bhagavad Gita* (i.e., *Song of God*), is one of the most important sacred scriptures of Hinduism. Its 700 verses are part of the much larger epic poem called the *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* has been called a concise guide to Hindu theology, as well as a guide to life. A verse from the *Gita* states, "If you want to see the brave, look for those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look for those who can love in return for hatred." This sentiment may have informed the last gesture by Mahatma Gandhi as he was shot three times at close range. As he fell, he put his hand to his forehead in the Hindu gesture of forgiveness.

## Islam

Islam teaches that *Allah* (i.e., God in Arabic) is "the most forgiving" and the original source of all forgiveness. Of the 99 names of God, Allah is *Al-Ghaffār*, the Ever Forgiving, and *Al-Ghafūr*, the All Forgiving. For offenses against God, one is expected to seek forgiveness from *Allah*. For offenses against other people, the offender is expected to admit the offense, promise not to repeat it, make amends, and ask for forgiveness from the person or persons harmed, and from God.



## Jainism

In the Jain religion, the eight-day festival of *Paryushan Mahaparva* is a festival of seeking and giving forgiveness. It occurs in the month of *Bhadra* (August-September). The eighth day is called *Samvatsari*, the Day of Forgiveness. The *Meatri Mantra* is repeated as an individual seeks to give and receive forgiveness through the heart: "I forgive all the living beings of the universe. May all the living-beings forgive me for my faults. I do not have any animosity towards anybody. I have friendship for all living beings."

## Christianity

In the *Sacrament of Reconciliation* in the Roman Catholic tradition writes Fr. Tom Ryan, "Forgiveness [is]...part of a broader process of reconciliation with God, others, the world, and oneself. there are basically three 'movements' that come into play for penitents in the process....: repentance, admission of sin and reparation. ... *Repentance* is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed together with the resolution not to do it again. In the *admission* or *confession* of our failures, we look squarely at the sins we are guilty of, take responsibility for them, and open ourselves again to God ...in order to make a new future possible. And in *reparation* we do what we can in order to repair the harm.... The whole process brings reconciliation not only with God, but also with the community of the Church."

## Doctrine of Love

(Continued from page 6) **Intro to the Theme** expressed, the way to forgiveness may have been discovered. No one is well served by a superficial civility that masquerades as forgiveness.

When forgiveness is granted and right relationship restored a certain freedom emerges individually and mutually. One of the more compelling reasons for forgiving someone is what the forgiveness does for us rather than what it does for the person we are forgiving. The often-unexpected benefit of extending forgiveness is the fact that it frees us from living in the past, or from harboring resentment.

In our tradition, in which love is the doctrine of our church, our approach to forgiveness must be informed by this question: What does love require? To forgive is to dwell on the side of love. Yet sometimes that is impossible because the injury is so heinous that it simply cannot be forgiven. But when you can, despite the challenge and the pain, consider choosing forgiveness. For often, our failure to forgive traps us in a prison of the past. The sentence continues until we consider the possibility of forgiveness and extend leniency at least to ourselves, if not to others. It doesn't really matter if your forgiveness is accepted or appreciated by the one you forgive. They will hear and do what they can. The important thing is that you will be free.

A failure of our forgiveness occurs when we withhold our forgiveness of our self. Rev. Forrest Church wrote, "We are all guilty. Most of the crimes we commit are not horrid, simply human—crimes punishable only by conscience. Our consciences sometimes fall asleep or are lulled or drugged, and we do bad things we don't notice, at least for the time being. We also manage to blame others for our own actions or rationalize our behavior through some convenient trick of mind. But more often, we convict ourselves in the tribunal of conscience. Every day we find reasons to judge and then punish ourselves for what we do or fail to do. Some of this punishment is justified. Much is not." Because of this, self-forgiveness is also essential.

## Why Forgive?

### A 24-Year Nightmare

Johan Christoph Arnold

John Plummet [was] ... a helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War who helped organize a napalm raid on the village of Trang Bang in 1972—a bombing immortalized by the prize-winning photograph of one of its victims....

For the next twenty-four years, John was haunted by the photograph...: a naked and burned nine-year-old running toward the camera, with plumes of black smoke billowing in the sky behind her.

...In an almost unbelievable coincidence, John met Kim during an event at the Vietnam War Memorial on Veterans Day, 1996. [Her full name is Phan Thi Kim Phúc. She is now a Canadian citizen].



...In a speech to the crowd, Kim introduced herself as the girl in the famous photograph. She still suffered immensely from her burns, she said, but she was not bitter...: "Behind that picture of me, thousands and thousands of people died ... and nobody took their picture."

Kim went on to say that... she had forgiven the men who had bombed her village.... John ...pushed through the crowds ... and identified himself as a former pilot in Vietnam and said that he felt responsible for the bombing of her village.... He says: Kim saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow.... She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was "I'm sorry; I'm sorry" —over and over again. And at the same time, she was saying, "It's all right, I forgive you."

...It is ...a mystery. He still can't quite grasp how a short conversation could wipe away a twenty-four-year nightmare.

Source: *Why Forgive?* by Johann Christoph Arnold

## Sunflowers

### Struggling with Forgiveness

In his book, *The Sunflower: on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness*, Simon Wiesenthal recalled life in a concentration camp and his envy of the dead Germans who had sunflowers marking their graves.



One day, Wiesenthal was taken to a hospital at the request of Karl, a dying SS man. Tormented by his crimes, including the murder of a Jewish family with a small child, he wanted to confess to and be forgiven by a Jew. Karl told Wiesenthal all that he had done and asked for forgiveness. Wiesenthal responded by silently walking out of the room.

Judaism teaches that only the one harmed can forgive another person. This is why murder is always unforgivable. Years later, Wiesenthal asked 53 notable people what they would have done.

In her response, UU minister Sarah Schurr writes, "I would say, 'Karl, what you ask of me is very difficult to give. You gave me a gift when you told me your story, the gift of yourself and your honesty. Now you ask for a gift in return, the gift of absolution from your terrible sins. That is not possible, I am afraid. I cannot forgive you on behalf of all the Jewish people who you have wronged. No one on earth has the power or the right to do that. But I can give you this. I can tell you that I know that there is good in you. I know it with all my heart. Your sins are great and that is a reality that you live with. But your sins do not define who you are as a person. You have worth as a human being. You are a man, Karl, not just a Nazi. I cannot offer you final forgiveness and absolution, but I can say to you truly that I do not hate you Karl. Hate would not erase the wrongs you have done and it would just eat away at my humanity as well as yours. ...Instead, I offer you this. I offer you my compassion, something so needed in the world. I give you my compassion so that it may speak to the compassion and goodness that I know is in you. Karl, I hope you die in peace.'"

## Theme for Discussion Forgiveness

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** "It's forgiveness that makes us what we are. Without forgiveness, our species would've annihilated itself in endless retributions. Without forgiveness, there would be no history. Without that hope, there would be no art, for every work of art is in some way an act of forgiveness. Without that dream, there would be no love, for every act of love is in some way a promise to forgive. We live on because we can love, and we love because we can forgive."

Gregory David Roberts

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake) (adapted) (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

**Reading:** "Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's

revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else's nightmare." *Lance Morrow*

**Living the Questions:** Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

How does your experience as a child affect your attitude towards mistakes and forgiveness?

What relationship do you have to forgiveness?

Do you forgive easily, or do you find it hard to let things go? What, for you, gets in the way of forgiveness?

Is there a process to your forgiveness? What are the steps? How do these help you forgive others or yourself?

What is un-forgiven in your relationships with others? Is forgiveness possible? What would it require?

How would your life be different if you utilized forgiveness as a spiritual practice?

Is the world a forgiving place? If yes, why? If no, what changes would be necessary to make this a possibility?

What practices help you with forgiveness and letting go?

When have you felt the need to be forgiven?

When have you felt the need to forgive?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

### Extinguishing Chalice

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison)

*We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

**Closing Words** Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

## The Gift of Forgiveness

Rev. Carl Scovel

When we forgive, we don't forget that we were hurt, that we hurt now, that we may hurt for a long time, perhaps a lifetime. Forgiveness is not denial. ...It's not being "nice." When we forgive, we don't pretend that the offender is not responsible because of his or her childhood or biology. Forgiveness is not excusing.

...Forgiveness is not forgetting. When we forgive, we do not block the memory, nor do we nourish it. But no, we do not forget. Forgiveness is not something we give or do, but something we receive. It is not an action. It is a gift. It comes when we want it and not before. ...

When we forgive, we are freed, not from the hurt, but from the dominating power of the hurt. We are able to give up our anger. The hurt and wrath no longer direct us. However it happens, we are free.

We will still suffer the consequences of the offense, but it no longer masters us.

Do you see? Forgiveness comes first for our sake, and then for the sake of the offender, if he or she is penitent. They may not be. They may not know. They may not want to know. But we are free.

Source: *Never Far From Home* by Carl Scovel

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