



Story for all Ages

A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. For every person they refuse to forgive in their life's experience, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. Some of their bags were quite heavy.

They were then told to carry this bag with them everywhere for one week, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, next to their desk at work.

The hassle of lugging this around with them made it clear what a weight they were carrying spiritually, and how they had to pay attention to it all the time to not forget and keep leaving it in embarrassing places. Naturally, the condition of the potatoes deteriorated to a nasty smelly slime. This was a great metaphor for the price we pay for keeping our pain and heavy negativity! Too often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, and it clearly is for ourselves!

Message

So there's this preacher who is giving a sermon called "Forgive your Enemies."

He asks his congregation, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?"

Half hold up their hands.

He repeats his question, "I said, how many of you have forgiven your enemies?"

80% hold up their hands.

He repeats his question again. "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?"

All respond, except one elderly lady.

"Mrs. Jones, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?" asks the preacher.

"I don't have any." she replies.

"Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?"

"Ninety-three." she replies.

"Mrs. Jones, please come down in front and tell the congregation how a person cannot have an enemy in the world."

Mrs. Jones totters down the aisle, turns to face the congregation, and says, "It's easy, I just outlived them all!"

We're talking about forgiveness today, forgiveness of others, forgiveness for ourselves. It is Yom Kippur, which, along with Rosh Hashanah, marks the Jewish New Year. It is a time to mark what has passed in the previous year and to set oneself right for the year to come. You set yourself right through atonement. You examine your life and where you have brought harm into the world. You approach those you have harmed, including yourself, acknowledge your harm, and ask for forgiveness.

The act of atonement is central in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures document the story of a people who, time and again, fall short of the commitments asked of them by God. It's really a very modest and humbling story. Many tribes and



peoples tell their stories using heroes and grand accounts of success and victory. Not so with the Jewish story. It's a mixed bag of success and tragedy combined with the ever present promise of reconciliation and wholeness. Over and over again, either through their own awareness, or because some prophet loudly proclaims their failures, or because they face dire repercussions for poorly chosen actions, the Israelites come to a place where they realize they have failed in their commitments. They long to be restored to a place of right relationship, they beg for forgiveness, it is given, and they continue on until it becomes clear that they have fallen short again, and the process begins anew. This is one of the primary cycles of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the Jewish New Year with its focus on atonement is not just about setting things right now, it is one way that Jews connect to their unique history and their God.

While the Jews certainly have a unique history, the need for atonement is universal. In fact every single religion engages a similar universal human need – the need for reconciliation in the face of disharmony and disrepair. We are constantly seeking to overcome the imperfections in our world and our lives and be restored to wholeness.

Atonement and its primary partner, forgiveness are no easy thing, which is probably why there so many theories about what it means, what it costs, and how it becomes real. There is no one person in this world who is not in need of forgiveness. There is no one person in this world who is not in need of giving forgiveness. I don't buy Mrs. Jones' story. It doesn't matter if all her enemies are dead. If she still holds hardness to them in her heart, that disharmony is still alive and she is still being wounded by her own resentments and grievances. And in fact, her own woundedness makes it much more likely that she will continue to do harm herself.

We all know people who build their whole identity around their resentments. In fact we've probably all done this at times in our lives. Our grievances become a point of honor. In the moment, it feels wonderfully righteous. It can feel like we get power over someone or something to hold onto our grievance against them, but what it does is weigh us down. It takes so much energy to stay focused on those who have wronged us, energy that ends up separating us from our communities, our families, and ultimately, our selves. Withholding forgiveness holds us away from our own inherent goodness, and thus prevents us from walking into the promise of wholeness that is available to each and every one of us.

It takes just as much energy to resist admitting our own wrongdoings. When we resist looking with open eyes at the consequences of our actions, when we resist admitting what we have done and asking for forgiveness, all that resistance also separates us from our communities, our families, and ourselves. We cannot be free for we are held back from our own inherently goodness and sit in a place isolation.

One Sunday afternoon, I called my grandmother. I asked her how she was, and she said, “I needed to be in church this morning.” “Why is that?” I asked her. “I needed to hear about forgiveness. I was getting angry again.” Thirty-five years ago, her third and youngest son drowned at the age of 15, pushed off of a dock by some rough boys from church. The incident was buried by the church elders, fearful of acknowledging the violence that had happened in their own community. The boys were



told to apologize, but given the poor example provided by the ministers themselves, never really did so. She still struggles with forgiveness. Forgiveness for the boys who pushed her son into the water. Forgiveness for the church elders that abandoned her family.

Walter’s death is an unresolved death. There are times when she becomes so absorbed in her loss that she seethes with bitterness. That Sunday morning, the sermon was on forgiveness. “I am so glad I was there,” she said. “I had to remember why I need to forgive. I can’t live like that.” Because my grandmother is a strong Christian, we talked about how to trust that God will take care of it. That it is not her place to judge or to exact vengeance. Not only will God take care of it in his own good time, those who committed those sins are living with the consequence of their actions. They are living with the burden of forgiveness never asked for. And truth be told, each of those boys has grown into an unhappy man. They are living with the burden of accountability that never happened. She told me she was trying to give her bitterness over to God so that she could have peace in her heart.

I highly doubt that my grandmother will ever come to that place of complete forgiveness. But her journey is a brave one. Not unlike the people of Israel, she will come to a place of peace, be pulled back into her anger and resentment, realize what has happened, bring herself back to a place of forgiveness, and go on. That is her cycle.

I think it is also ours. We too follow the cycle of the people of Israel. There are times when we feel grounded, centered, in harmony with life itself. But always, there are those things that creep in through the night and before we know it, we’re carrying a sack of rotting potatoes. We are a complicated and complex species. People move in and out of our lives. We make mistakes. Others make mistakes. We make mistakes as individuals. We make mistakes as society. And we wade through these tides that ask us to forgive and be forgiven.

Sometimes I think that all relationships are a long process of forgiving. My partner and I are constantly letting each other down, either through unrealistic expectations or ungrounded assumptions or just because of a thoughtless moment. We are constantly having to forgive each other, and if one of us resists either asking for forgiveness or giving forgiveness, these things become larger until we really just have to stop and sort things through because there’s no going on unless we do. This is as true with all our other relationships. If you let things go too long, soon you can’t even live your life. Everything is stuck.

Unitarian Universalist minister Fredric John Muir says there are four essential components in asking for forgiveness:\* remorse, resolution, restitution, and restoration.

Remorse is that first feeling, when you start to feel sorry for what has happened. It’s not just saying you’re sorry. It means being genuinely sorry for having brought harm into the world or to a person.



Resolution is moving from feeling to deciding. You make the resolution to act on your remorse. This also involves much more than simply saying you are sorry. It means making the resolution to change so you don't repeat the harm. What do you need to work on in yourself so you are not brought to that place of harm again? What were you looking for that you needed your own life? How might you address that need in a more healthy way? This takes forgiveness into the way you see yourself and who you are at a deep level.

When you act on your resolution, that is restitution, the act of setting things right. In 12 step language, this is where you make amends. When we require someone convicted of a crime to do community service, we're engaging in the practice of restitution. When a parent has a child clean a wall they have defaced, that is making amends. You change your life to indicate to yourself and those you have harmed that you will not do that harm again. The bigger principle here is that of rebuilding a new life. Not only are you setting right what you have done, but you are also rebuilding yourself, setting yourself onto a new path.

And finally, there is restoration. When you have fully committed yourself in the process of forgiveness and come to a place of peace, you are restored to wholeness, perhaps restored to the one you harmed, restored to humanity, restored to life itself.

So that's the true act of asking for forgiveness: remorse, resolution, restitution, restoration.

And then there is the task of giving forgiveness. Mennonite minister John L. Ruth says that giving forgiveness happens when we leave behind our sense of feeling entitled to an emotional payback in the punishment of one who has wronged us.\*\* In other words, we give up our sense of having the right of revenge. We give up that moral high ground we may feel we have over someone who has wronged us. Giving forgiveness means we allow for that person to meet us on equal ground.

How many of you remember the story of the West Nickel Mines Amish School. One fateful morning, a very unhappy man armed himself and stormed into the school. He killed five girls, wounded five others, and turned the gun on himself. This story is, unfortunately, not unusual anymore. What is unusual is the response that followed it. Members of the Amish community, including parents of the children who had been killed, stated unequivocally that they forgave the man who killed their children. This apology was not long in forthcoming. They did not wait for the man's family to apologize for his action. They took the lead. Members of the community went to the gunman's widow and offered their condolences on her loss. Some attended his funeral. She was invited to the girls' funerals. And, they have continued to offer her emotional and financial support for she now raises her children alone. This community took on the responsibility usually associated with the one who needs forgiveness. They took on the tasks of resolution, restitution and restoration.

The public was riveted. Where was the ringing cry for justice and the outraged voices asking "Who is to blame?" There was none of this, just a quiet humble and generous forgiveness.



**“Yom Kippur – The Time of Atonement”**

Rev. Krista Taves  
September 23, 2007

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Make no mistake about it. This was no easy forgiveness. Their forgiveness did not erase their pain or loss or anger. But it did free them.

What would it have looked like had we as a nation gone to the mothers of those who hijacked the planes on 9/11 and said to them, “We are so sorry for your loss. We grieve you the loss of your sons as we grieve the loss of our people.” What would it look like if we went to the parents of those white kids who hung nooses in the school yard in Jena Louisiana, and the parents whose black kids still sit in jail, and said, “We are so sorry for all the pain you and your children are experiencing. We forgive your children for what they have done. We grieve for how they are suffering. When our children are at war, surely we have somehow failed them. Let us heal our rifts so our children can learn to be free.”

The promise of forgiveness is freedom. Peace. Healing. Love. New Life. In the larger scheme of things, nothing is unforgivable. Nothing can erase our inherent worth and dignity, nothing can erase the inherent goodness in our hearts. Nothing can keep us from the wholeness we have been promised, if we commit to forgiveness as a way of life and a condition of the heart (Ruth, 96).

This is the promise of Yom Kippur. Let us walk into that promise.

\*Fredric John Muir, Heretics’ Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals, (2001), 77-80.

\*\* John L. Ruth, Forgiveness: A Legacy of the West Nickel Mines Amish School, (Scottsdale Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2007), 95.