

“Mending What is Broken”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Readings

Anne Lamott, from the Salon “Trust Me on This” series, December 2014¹

“Forgiveness has become a pursuit more important to me than almost anything. Because as I said in an old book, it’s not my strong suit...W]hen my son started school, I realized I was holding grudges and resentment, sometimes against the other mothers. They might be too thin, or they might flaunt their wealth, or flaunt that their child was already reading in first grade. It took a lot of work to stick with the unpacking of the resentment to realize that it was always about self-loathing -- most of these people in the trajectory of the drones I fired were pretty innocent bystanders. The lack of forgiveness had to do with really bad old feelings I had about myself. The [others] were just conveniently annoying. They might say something really stupid about me or my son, and I would seize on it a like a dog with a bone – throw it over my shoulder and chase it and fling it over the other side of the room and chase it down...So I began a tradition, at that point, of examining these resentments I had so much trouble letting go of...

I really believe that earth is forgiveness school – I really believe that’s why they brought us here, and then left us without any owner’s manual. I think we’re here to learn forgiveness.”

selection from *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* by Desmond and Mpho Tutu

“I would like to share with you two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness. When you can see and

¹ https://www.salon.com/2014/12/03/anne_lamott_look_at_the_tea_party_some_of_the_angriest_most_hateful_people_on_earth_and_they%E2%80%99re_backed_by_what_they_think_is_scripture/

understand that we are all bound to one another—whether by birth, by circumstance, or simply by our shared humanity—then you will know this to be true...There have been times when each and every one of us has needed to forgive. There have also been times when each and every one of us has needed to be forgiven. And there will be many times again. In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again.”

Sermon

The topic of this Sunday’s sermon was suggested to me by Marsha Bancroft who was the winner of the Gifts of Love raffle this past October.

When Marsha and I met to discuss her ideas back in December, we talked about a few possibilities. Marsha had previously met with me to share a bit more about herself and some important and formative events from her life. The very first idea that Marsha shared was a sermon about forgiveness. I will explain a bit more in a just a moment.

I have to admit that the topic of forgiveness, though it is one that can be found over and over in many religious traditions, isn’t one that I dwell on all that much. It may be that I got more than enough of the topic during my Catholic upbringing. But, I am surprised again and again when it is brought into my life even unexpectedly.

One such experience happened on Thursday. I was driving down to the Hulbert Outdoor Center in Fairlee for a clergy retreat with other Unitarian Universalist ministers from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The whole drive I kept hearing this ominous scraping sound each time the road dipped just a little bit. Uh-oh, I thought. That can’t be good. When I arrived, I checked out my front bumper and sure enough, there was a giant crack in my bumper and half of it was falling off and had been scraping the road. “How could I have let this happen?” I thought to myself.

As I settled in for our morning worship service, my colleague invited us into a time of ritual. The focus of the ritual was our collegial relationships and recognizing relationships for which we feel grateful and also relationships that have been broken, where hurt exists from harm that someone else caused for us or harm we have inflicted upon others. In the ritual, my colleague invited us to take dry leaves and crush them in our hands making a kind of compost of these hurts.

As we did this, I also realized that I was carrying that anger at myself for the broken bumper and I needed to forgive myself.

“Earth is forgiveness school,” says Anne Lamott.

The reason this topic came up right away for Marsha as she reminded me was because of something that happened in her family that one never wishes would happen. Marsha’s mother was murdered in her home nearly thirty years ago in 1991.

I want to say that I have permission from Marsha to share this part of her story with you all, and I am grateful for her openness, vulnerability and courage in allowing us all to bear witness to this deep source of pain in her life and the life of her family.

In July of 1991, a young man broke into Marsha’s mother’s home. In the act of robbery, the young man also took Marsha’s mother’s life. It turned out that the young man wasn’t a complete stranger to Marsha’s mother or the family. He had previously done some yard work for her, and a cousin of Marsha’s had taught at the local high school where he was a student.

I can only imagine the pain of such a violation of one’s humanity and the rupture caused in Marsha’s family and community. What Marsha shared with me in that conversation, though, is that she has held onto a desire to meet the man who murdered her mother who is now 51 years old and living in a prison in Georgia. In relating the story to me, Marsha shared such incredible compassion and empathy and also a recognition of the role of structural racism in shaping the life of the perpetrator of this heinous crime. The man is black and Marsha’s family is white.

Based on this experience, Marsha said, she has reflected for many years on the theme of forgiveness and invited me to share my own thoughts and reflections in a sermon.

When I hear such stories of profound hurt and also the openness to forgiveness and reconciliation, I am just astounded. It amazes me that we human beings do have the capacity for such depth of spirit and transformation.

The Forgiveness Project catalogues a breathtaking array of stories of forgiveness.

There is the British Pakistani man who was brutally attacked when he came to the aid of two Pakistani women being harassed who decides to forgive his attacker.²

Two sisters, one of who ends up in prison for theft crimes after many years of drug addiction and the other who had supported who through may tough times and then shut her out of her life who come back together and reconcile their relationship.³

There is the man who at the age of 15 was shot six times and paralyzed from the waist down who goes on to embrace forgiveness as the only path to letting go of hatred.⁴

There is the story of parents of two teenage girls who were killed in an accident caused by a drunk driver who forgive and build a new relationship with the person responsible for their daughter's death.

In story after story, people somehow find there way through the darkest of times, through events that shatter one's heart and have the potential to pull you into a cycle of anger, resentment, and hate. Through the brokenness, they somehow find their way to healing and wholeness.

Not all of us, thankfully, will have to face such egregious and life changing wrongs committed against us or the intensity of that much pain.

But, each of us does endure smaller hurts or causes smaller hurts on a daily basis in our relationships with others.

“Earth is a forgiveness school,” says Anne Lamott. Our lives are full of so many more teachable moments about forgiveness than we might want.

In the heat of an argument, you say that one thing that you know will get right under the skin of the one you love.

Your best friend takes days to call you back after you reach out asking for their support.

² <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/shad-ali>

³ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/linda-apo-marilyn-vierra>

⁴ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/hashim-garrett>

You spend days ruminating over that conversation with your co-worker feeling the sting of an off-colored joke and also wondering whether you should have spoken up about why the joke was offensive.

We are each just as likely to be harmed or hurt as we are to be the one causing harm or hurt.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu state this truth in their book: "Each of us is born whole, but that wholeness can so easily be shattered."

Our wholeness is shattered by both the pain that we inflict upon others - intentionally or not - and the pain that others inflict upon us.

We know this. We know that it is especially in relationship and in community that we are most likely experience both wholeness and brokenness.

Some of you have engaged in the process started in the fall of creating a congregational covenant - a solemn and living promise of how we want to be with one another in community. This whole process acknowledges that we don't always get it right. We are bound to hurt one another because we all make mistakes despite our best intentions. But, we also have the intention of continue to return to wholeness and reconciliation.

How do we get back to that place of wholeness? Of knowing ourselves deeply connected to one another and part of a greater whole?

In their book entitled, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, Desmond and Mpho Tutu, present what they describe as a Fourfold Path of forgiveness. Many of you probably recognize the name of Desmond Tutu who is an Anglican priest from South Africa who served as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in that country following apartheid. His daughter, Mpho, is also a priest and a theologian. The Fourfold Path they describe includes: Telling the story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.

Telling the story - You describe, perhaps to the person who hurt you or to someone else, what happened that caused you pain, that needs forgiving.

Naming the Hurt - You also identify why whatever happened hurt you - what emotional impact did it have.

The step of granting forgiveness may happen quickly or it may take a long time. If it takes along time, it may be that you still need to tell the story and name the hurt - to work your way through the pain and brokenness.

The final step is renewing or releasing the relationship. In this final step, you write a new story for the relationship beyond the hurt that had been lying between you.

In many ways, I think that these first two steps of the process are the most vulnerable. To tell the story and to name the hurt is to bring out wounds and our brokenness into the light of day. Telling the story and naming the hurt means acknowledging that our wholeness has been compromised. These emotional wounds are tender places that many of us try to protect and shield.

Yet, unearthing these wounded places is a necessary part of our healing and the continual movement towards wholeness. Some hurts, of course, are so traumatic or painful that they need to be examined with the support of a counselor or therapist who can help create the safe space for you to be with that trauma and pain. And, many of you know how healing that work can eventually be.

For all of us, our work is to recognize when and how we have been pulled away from our own sense of wholeness and to engage in a process of forgiveness where healing is needed.

One such incident came up for me while I was on my recent trip to Honduras. I sat in a small group with other delegates to do some reflection on our trip to that point. One woman sat down next to me. She and I had not yet introduced ourselves and so we exchanged our names and said a bit about ourselves. When I told this older, white woman that I was the Minister of a congregation, her face was overcome with surprise, and she exclaimed, "Oh my, so young to be a minister!" Ouch. Her words stung. They stung through until the next day. During the next morning's program, this woman approached me, and said "You know, I realized that what I said to you last night was not appropriate. I shouldn't have made that comment. I'm sorry." I want to be able to say to you that I was able in that moment to fully accept her apology, to feel the wave of release of any harm done, and to say to her unequivocally, "I forgive you." But, that isn't the case.

It really wasn't until reflecting on this story in light of this sermon that I realized that I hadn't released her or me from this hurt more than two weeks later. So, I went back to the beginning. I told the story to my husband. I named the hurt - the hurt of feeling my ministerial authority and call disrespected and disregarded because of my age. As I shared the story and named how I felt hurt, I could also feel some of the sting lessen. I could better empathize with my fellow delegate who was doing her best to connect and who probably hasn't had the experience of meeting very many younger women clergy. I could more intentionally accept the apology and forgive her.

Because I am unlikely to ever see this person again, I will probably not take any active steps to renew my relationship, but I can feel more at peace now letting go.

In story after story of forgiveness, it becomes clear that as the Tutus say in their book, "Empathy is the gateway to forgiveness..." When we are able to see ourselves in one another's stories, when we know that it is by luck of birth or upbringing that our life paths went one way rather than another, when we can see and understand the pain of another, when we recognize that we are indeed part of a whole, then we are able to mend what is broken, to open our hearts to forgiveness.

Then can we tell the story and name the hurt,
then can we look one another in the eye and know ourselves as both harmed and
healed,
then can we find a deeper peace and freedom than was possible a moment before.

May we create together a world of forgiveness and a world of wholeness grounded in
our empathy and our connection to one another.

So may it be.