

“Repairing Harm”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

November 17, 2024

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At my Catholic elementary school, we had a bake sale every year as a fundraiser for school activities. When I was in the eighth grade, I was in charge of making the sales along with a couple of my friends. The younger children paraded by on their way to lunch and pulled out quarters and crumpled dollar bills to pay for their brownies, cookies, and rice krispie treats.

And then it was our class's turn to file past. Quite surreptitiously, my friends behind the table started to hand treats to their friends without collecting any of the money due. Something in my gut told me this was wrong, but soon I was joining them in passing free cookies and brownies to my classmates.

Later in the day, our principal, a Catholic nun with a perpetually stern face came to our classroom and asked for the three of us to come out to the hallway. She said that a teacher had told her that she had seen my two friends sneaking free desserts to students and reprimanded them for their bad behavior. She turned to me and asked if I also had been giving out the bake sale items for free.

At that moment, I felt sick to my stomach. I knew I had betrayed the trust of my teachers, and I told myself that I should have known better. I was the president of the student council, the first female altar server in the history of the parish, and the top student in my class academically. My reputation was at risk, and it was also the thing I could lean on in this moment to escape my bad deed. I looked at the principal and shook my head “no.” She let me return to the classroom while she had a talk with my friends.

I left feeling a strange mix of relief and guilt. My friends snubbed me for a while after that and then we eventually all moved on and seemingly forgot about this moment of rupture.

Have you ever had moments like this? When you've realized that you've hurt someone in some way, that you've broken trust, or that something you did caused harm to someone else?

These moments can be like small cracks that form in an otherwise intact ceramic pot, diminishing the integrity of the structure. I don't think these moments elicit good feelings for any of us. For the most part, we want to avoid the guilt that often arises when the truth of our wrongdoing comes to light. And more than that, we want to avoid the shame. The feeling that attaches to the idea that we are bad, perhaps even irredeemable.

Yet, messing up and hurting others is a normal part of life. To state the obvious, none of us is perfect. And while I believe it is a worthy endeavor to do no harm in the first place, we all do at one point or another. Some of our wrongdoing can seem insignificant, giving out a few free brownies for example, but other wrongs are much more consequential.

Lying on a work application. Scamming someone for money. Engaging in hate speech and even violence against a person or community one deems as less than.

From minor mess-ups to major ones, what matters after the harm is what we do about it, how we do or don't go about the work of repair. What we do or don't do to mend the cracks and strengthen the bonds that have been broken.

Mainstream American culture and many of our religious communities within American culture aren't particularly good at doing the work of repentance and repair. We are so often quick to move past harm, to demand forgiveness, or to dole out punishment and assume that has fixed the problem rather than engaging in practices that lead to the possibility of healing and wholeness for both the one who caused the harm and the one who did the harming.

So much of the pain we experience is because we haven't learned how to hold space for loving accountability and repair of relationships. Families and countries are torn apart

by the pain of unaddressed wounds and ruptured relationships. These cracks and the lack of true repair continue to play out with reverberations far into the future.

I believe that we need stronger and more vibrant cultures of accountability and repair. We need relationships in which it is okay to admit that you've done something wrong. And, we need communities in which you will receive support in repenting and making amends rather than feeling as though you will be forever excluded or ostracized with no place to belong.

Perhaps if I had lived in such a culture when I was younger, I could have owned up to my bake sale misdeed and worked to make things right.

We desperately need models of repair and to begin to engage in them.

In her book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg presents a model for meaningfully addressing harm. Her work is grounded in the writings of the twelfth-century philosopher and scholar of Jewish law, Moses Maimonides, whose writings included the Laws of Repentance found in his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah. The model of repentance that Rabbi Ruttenberg presents includes these five steps: naming and owning harm; starting to change; restitution and accepting consequences; apology; and making different choices.

I won't be providing a detailed account of all five steps that Rabbi Ruttenberg outlines in her book. Today, I want us to consider just the first step of naming and owning harm. None of the other five steps can be engaged without this one. It is essential and often so difficult to do.

And, I think there are at least two reasons why this is so.

First, some of us here and in progressive religious spaces might hold reactionary feelings towards theologies of sin, confession, repentance, and atonement. This was true for me as a former Catholic and new Unitarian Universalist twenty or so years ago. The theology of sin I was taught left me feeling like I was always messing up. It was natural to want to reject any religious ideas about repentance.

I know this is true for others of you as well. When we were in the process of creating our congregational covenant, someone commented that they thought the last sentence, “forgive each other and start again,” went too far in implying that we are bad people. I lovingly pushed back and said that the statement simply acknowledges that we will mess up and that we can seek and give forgiveness and commit to trying to do better next time.

But, I understood the reaction. Some theologies have been taken too far in making people believe that they are inherently bad or predisposed toward wrongdoing.

It is also difficult to do that first step of naming and owning harm because most of us are not accustomed to this depth of soul searching. When was the last time you thought to yourself — “Wow, I really messed that up.” Or, “My words in that meeting were hurtful.” Or, “I didn’t act from my best self in that interaction.” — and then actually named that out loud.

This kind of honest and compassionate reckoning with ourselves and our actions isn’t the norm. It is transformative work that isn’t easy to do, but it is something we can begin to build into our lives.

Rabbi Ruttenberg writes, “The work of repentance is, in many ways, the work of looking outside ourselves, looking with an empathetic eye at what we have done, letting it matter to us, and trying earnestly to figure out how we can both meaningfully address it and ensure that it never happens again. This is, in some ways, an act of tenderness, of extending ourselves to care for others, of giving ourselves the time and attention we deserve to grow, of investing in our own learning and capacity to heal.”¹

Honestly and intentionally naming and owning the harm we have caused is an act of caring not only for others but for ourselves as well. Honest reckoning with how we’ve caused suffering can also lead to greater freedom and liberation.

The Black writer and liturgist Cole Arthur Riley writes, “Call it archaic, but I think confession is liberation. It is easy to think that in injustice only the oppressed have their freedom to gain. In truth, the liberation of the oppressor is also at stake...When

¹ Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Beacon Press, 2022), 59.

wounders, finally become exhausted of their dominion, dismantle their delusion of heroism or victimhood and begin to tell the truth of their offense, a sacred rest becomes available to them. You are no longer fighting to suspend the delusion of self. And as you rest, the conscience you were born with slowly begins to regenerate, and your mobility changes... You realize there are other ways to move in the world. It's not only relief, it's freedom.”²

Derek Black grew up in south Florida in the white nationalist movement. His father started StormFront, the first major internet hate site and online community. Derek was home schooled and almost never interacted with anyone outside of that white nationalist community.

When Derek enrolled at a liberal arts school four hours from home at the age of 21, he was privately hosting a white nationalist radio show in the morning and kept this part of his identity private. However, another student discovered this, learned more about Derek's background, and sent an email to the entire student body sharing this information.

What followed was a surprising path towards Derek's disavowal of white nationalism. It included the righteous outrage of his fellow students who let him know loudly that his views and actions were harmful. It also included the compassion of a Jewish student, who was already friends with Derek when the news broke of his affiliation, who invited him to weekly Shabbat dinner. Over the course of two years of meals, conversations, questioning, and friendship, Derek eventually came to realize the limitations of what he had been taught and the harm caused by the views he had been putting out into the world.

Looking back he says, “It was one last hard thing to realize that I had done too much damage in my activism to just be quiet now.”³ He responded to an article written by the Southern Poverty Law Center about him in 2013 and sent an email that he asked to be made public. In it, he stated, “I acknowledge that things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, people of Jewish descent, activists

² Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (Convergent Books, 2023), 137.

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/derek-black-and-matthew-stevenson-befriending-radical-disagreement/>

striving for opportunity and fairness for all, and others affected. It was not my intention then, and I will not contribute to any cause that perpetuates this harm in the future.”⁴

Since then, Derek has not engaged in any activities with that movement and has shared his story publicly on numerous occasions.

Now, sharing this single example with you isn’t intended to downplay the very real and ongoing harm being caused by white nationalism as an ideology or by white nationalists as actors in society. I am also not suggesting that befriending those who espouse hateful views will solve all our problems. But, this story is an example of the possibility of repentance and the repair that might follow.

Can we imagine what could be possible in ourselves and in our communities if we began to grow our capacity to name and own harm and engage in a process of repentance? Can we imagine how our personal relationships would change, and how our collective bodies, from congregation to country, could be transformed?

The pain that is caused by harm that goes unchecked, unnamed, and unaddressed can be immense. It can seep into the very foundations of our family, community, and national structures.

But, we can start the work of repair by creating space for genuine accountability and communities in which we expect and nurture honesty, compassion, and liberation for all of us.

Can we see the cracks and turn them into something more beautiful?

From our homes to our churches to our council chambers and halls of congress, may we not be afraid to face the broken places within us. May we honestly and tenderly face what we have done. May we move towards repair and filling the cracks with gold.

So may it be.

⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/derek-black-letter-to-mark-potok-hatewtach.pdf>