

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church  
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**The Risky Work of Forgiveness**

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**Reading**

“[There] is a hard truth about forgiveness. It must often begin in anger and sadness, because it begins with the discovery that some fundamental human trust has been betrayed. The heart naturally recoils at this discovery, and is flooded with dark emotions. Yet it must overcome these emotions, and rise toward the light. If, in its desire to avoid these emotions, it turns away from the events that cause them, it is not acting with forgiveness; it is acting with denial...

“...What the forgiving heart must do is wade into the darkness, knowing that against the light of goodness, darkness cannot stand. It must recognize the darkness, but act toward the light.

“This, it seems to me, is the key to forgiveness. When our actions are based in love and a belief in the sanctity of all life, they are actions of forgiveness.”

— Kent Nerburn, *Calm Surrender: Walking the Path of Forgiveness*<sup>1</sup>

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There was good reason for me to resent my father.

During my childhood, Dad pretty much washed his hands of me and turned the job of raising me over to Mom. I thought this emotional abandonment and paternal abdication happened around the time I was ten or eleven—when my failure to conform to the 1950’s standards for “normal boys” became pretty obvious. I didn’t cross my legs in the appropriately masculine fashion; I carried my school books like a girl, with them clutched to my chest rather than extended down to my thigh; and I greatly disliked all team sports, preferring gymnastics and, in the winter, figure skating. After seeing a performance of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet when they came to Sioux City as part of the Concert Course series, I was entranced (for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was the danseurs in their amazing tights)—I wanted right then to run away with the company. So I was doomed from an early age to fail all the usual tests for masculinity.

But just a few years ago, when Dad and I ventured into this risky terrain once again, he told me how bad he felt, still, that he had turned his back on me when I was little. “It’s okay now, Dad,” I said to him. “It was hard when I was ten, but I’m over it.”

“Oh, you weren’t ten,” he answered. “I remember you being about three or four.” He got a little choked up, and said, “I’m sorry—I don’t know what was wrong with me.”

I knew by then that his treatment of me was one of his biggest regrets as a parent; but I did not know what to do with this new information. *Three or four? My god, what was going on with him—and darn right he should be sorry! Darn right there was something wrong with him!* (I may not have been as “over it” as I thought...)

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<sup>1</sup> Nerburn, Kent. *Calm Surrender: Walking the Path of Forgiveness* (Novato CA: New World Library, 2000), pp. 114-15.

To *forgive*: to cease to feel a resentment towards (an offender). This concept has irritated me for years. I have tried to dismiss it, to toss it onto a growing pile of outmoded theological ideas, made irrelevant by modern psychology. After all, in my years of hard work in family systems-based therapy, hadn't I discovered my perfect right to be angry? Didn't I come by my resentments honestly?

But in the life I have tried to live as a recovered alcoholic who wants to stay that way, a couple of things bothered me: first, the quote from a book many of us use: "Resentments are our number one offender," meaning that to harbor them is the leading cause of spiritual malaise, and puts us on the fast track to relapse. And the second thing that lodged in my head was one of those not-so-rhetorical questions my first Twelve-Step mentor often posed: "What good does it do to lie awake at night resenting some...*jerk*...who's home asleep?" (I edited his language for family listening.)

So there I was, caught—caught between the long-time-coming therapeutic epiphany that Dad had let me down, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the necessity of forgiveness if I were to stay recovered from alcoholism.

Wow! Unfair! So was *this* how living a spiritual program was going to go?—that just when I'd finally gotten to the place of naming and claiming my experience and my feelings, now I was going to have to let go of my hard-won Truth?

In his sweet little book *Calm Surrender*, artist/writer/theologian Kent Nerburn makes a deep exploration of the complicated work of forgiveness. He started writing in response to a letter from a friend, who was out for a walk with his daughter when they encountered a forlorn and obviously abused little dog chained to a fence behind a rundown house. As the dog responded to them with desperate friendliness, the man and his daughter found themselves torn as to what to do. The dog's nearby dishes were layered in dust—obviously, the dishes had been empty for many days. The dog pulled at its leash and wagged its tail frantically as they leaned down to pet it, and suddenly, both parent and child found themselves crying. "That little dog was pushing against us like we were his only hope in the world. We just sat there hugging it and crying while the little dog shivered in our arms," the man wrote to Kent.<sup>2</sup>

After the daughter's anguished question, "What should we do, Dad?" the man could only mumble, "I don't know. I'll think of something." But as he confessed to Kent, he couldn't. Unable to come up with any reasonable response, he turned away and continued walking, while the little dog barked and yipped and pulled at its chain, as if begging them to come back and save it. He went on to write, "My cheeks burned with shame. I tried to hide my tears from my girl, but it was like some floodgate had been opened. It wasn't just the dog. I could call the animal control people and they'd probably take care of it. But what about all the other little dogs? What about all the old people trapped in their houses like dogs chained to fences because they're afraid to go out on the street? What about all the misery and cruelty we see in the world around us every day?"<sup>3</sup>

At this point in the book, Nerburn pauses to reflect on his own easy-to-derive list of miseries and cruelties. No doubt each of us has our own list—sadly, they're easy to come up with. Injustices and incivilities abound in the world, in our state, our cities, our own neighborhoods—maybe even in our

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. x-xi.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

own back yards. Our feelings of helplessness often leave us trapped somewhere between frustration and rage.

A little further in the letter, Nerburn's friend went on: "I get sick of all the weak-kneed sermonizing I hear about forgiveness. All this talk about turning the other cheek and how we need to ignore the negative and try to find the positive in everything, [wait, does he know my mother?] about how the world is perfect in its abundance if we only know how to look at things. Just once I'd like one of those 'perfect world' people to walk down that alley with me and look into that little dog's terrified eyes..."

The friend's indictment of the "turn-the-other-cheek" crowd leads Nerburn to ask, "How do we deal with cruelty and evil in this world when we are taught to turn the other cheek and to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven? How do we acknowledge the darkness of life without becoming ensnared in it? What is the true shape of honorable forgiveness?"<sup>4</sup>

Like Nerburn, I do not have easy answers. He needs a whole book to explore the subject; I am needing a whole lifetime, so far. But as Archbishop Desmond Tutu observed: "Without forgiveness, there is no future." In a sermon published on the internet, Dr. Ray Pritchard expands on the Archbishop's assertion, saying, "Without forgiveness, there is no freedom. Without forgiveness, there is no recovery. Without forgiveness, there is no healing."<sup>5</sup> Then he makes this further observation about Tutu's remark: "[The Archbishop] was speaking not just of personal pain, but also in the larger context of South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid. What is true of individuals is true of families, and what is true of families is true of cities and states. And what is true for states is true for nations as well. *Without forgiveness, there is no future.*"<sup>6</sup>

So it would seem that this whole business of forgiveness may start small, as it no doubt has to, with the personal and the intimate; but it quickly encompasses just about every realm of relationship in which we humans live and breathe. In other words, it involves every corner we inhabit.

Going back to the relationship between my father and me: that turned out to be a very good place to try something new. There were several years when I had little or no contact with my parents—it just felt too complicated, too burdened, to try to relate to them. Those truths that I had uncovered in therapy—I needed to give them time to take root, to see what I might grow into as I integrated them into my consciousness. But when Stuart and I got together, I observed from a reasonably safe distance how he related to his family, particularly to his own dad: he'd be upset sometimes, but he seemed to have some detachment. The relationship didn't define either of them. So I began to wonder if there was something in between—a middle way between no contact, and total reversion to the old ways of being together, where I was required to be small, to be relatively powerless, to be "the problem."

Little by little, I began having contact again, in limited doses at first. And as months went by, I began to see that I could be with them, and not have to completely give my Self up. Sometimes I still felt small—but maybe there's a part of us that always is inclined to make our parents bigger than life. But a remarkable thing began to happen: my dad didn't look like the same guy any more! He'd say things to me, share a few seconds of actual feelings, or maybe a story about his own growing up. And finally, I could listen, and actually *hear* who he was, rather than see and hear only my projection of "Dad."

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p xii-xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Ray Pritchard, president of *Keep Believing Ministries*, "Is Total Forgiveness Realistic?" at <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2003-06-01-Is-Total-Forgiveness-Realistic/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Gradually, I tried out sharing more of my Self as well—and what I discovered amazed me. Dad started saying things like, “I’m so proud of you, Doug!” and “You’re doing so much with your life.” Somehow, we’d uncovered a new source of water in a well I thought had long ago dried up—certainly, I’d been to it enough times in the past to know there was nothing there for me.

Back in April, in my morning journaling, I was startled by an insight that seemed to appear out of nowhere on the pages. I was thinking about forgiveness, knowing that I’d foolishly given the Worship Committee here a sermon title a couple months earlier, and now I’d have to follow through. So I was pulling the word apart, and the result seemed so obvious that I wondered why I’d never seen it before. Taken literally, to forgive means to *give before* there is any certainty of getting something in return—to offer something ahead of time, *before* someone else has changed.

Why did this startle me so much? Because as much as I have reflected over the past fifteen-plus years since I got this new relationship with my father, it had never occurred to me that what I did was *give* my Self back to him—by which I mean, I made a decision to try being in relationship with him again, prior to his ever apologizing to me for the childhood hurts and the damage he did to my heart. And again—so simple—but his response was to open up himself in ways he’d never been able to before. I suspect that he, too, began to sense that maybe it was safe to drink again from this well of relationship—that maybe the new water there was not poisoned.

For the sad fact was: *I* had poisoned the water myself. Oh, I don’t mean he didn’t have a part in it. He did, and he’s confessed as much now. But as long as I held fiercely to my resentments and my justified anger, any drops left in that well were definitely not potable! And I was not free to see what possibilities might be there, if only I could let old Dad off the hook. *Without forgiveness, there is no future*—and certainly there would not have been any freedom. What I see now is that I gave up waiting for Dad to show up as anybody other than who I knew him to be; without conscious awareness I was doing it, I was taking the risk to *give* of myself before he did anything to demonstrate that it would be safe. How things would go was not known to me—nor was it to him, I’m sure.

So how to make this bigger, because if we accept Pritchard’s assertion that what is true of the individual is true of the family, is true of the city and state and so on, then this intimate risk has potentially global consequences. I think of the popular quote from Margaret Mead: “Never underestimate the power of a few committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.” As an individual, if I am willing to risk forgiveness, then I am freer to relate to a small group of dedicated others, and we in turn are free to change the world.

I realize it may be a little more complicated than that—but *is* it? Maybe it is that simple—but it’s *hard*. Because there is a lot at stake in this process of forgiving.

So what exactly might be at risk?

- First, my *right to be right*: I was so sure I had my dad “pegged”—I was *right* about how I felt. But what I eventually let go of with him was the *right* to be right. And when I could do that, I could begin to allow that there just might be some things *he* was right about as well. I am his son, after all, and some of his ideas about are in fact accurate.
- A second thing at risk is an *identity* that might have been formed around old hurts and hostilities. As Kent Nerburn observed, forgiveness “must often begin in anger and sadness, because it begins with the discovery that some fundamental human trust has been betrayed.” But when I stopped at that, I had become defined by the old pains, limited by justified

resentments. I was stuck there—I had no room for expansion, either. So my view of myself as the victim had to be reconsidered.

- Another perception at risk: a view of self as *limited* and as *fragile*. If I think there's no way I can change my patterns, my perceptions, I am limiting myself. And I internalize a belief that I am fragile when I fear that I will be damaged further in the process of forgiveness—that it's too risky to be in relationship again with anyone or anything that brought pain. But thinking I am limited and fragile are really just defense mechanisms, and they keep me small, and thus still in bondage to old beliefs.
- And in some ways the biggest thing at risk may very well be my own sense of *comfort* – because I will inevitably need to face “the dark side” – both within my Self, and within others. I'll have to be prepared to encounter my own ugliest instincts, my own prejudices and judgments—and that's just plain uncomfortable. It requires being vulnerable to my own imperfect humanity—never my favorite pastime.

It can be pretty difficult to “wade into the darkness,” as Nerburn puts it, even if I do believe his assertion that “against the light of goodness, darkness cannot stand.” In more of my recent journaling—Morning Pages can be dangerous to one's sense of comfort!—I had this reflection on a line from the prayer that Jesus taught. I was playing with that irritating line “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” or as we Congregationalists preferred to say in less King Jamesian language, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” I began pursuing it:

*What if I lived in such a way that no one, nobody, no person, place, or thing, or principle or institution—owed me anything? What if I expected nothing in return for what I do or say?—no praise, no criticism; no payment or recognition—what if I lived expecting nothing?... What fierce beliefs, expectations, would I be called upon to relinquish?*

A disturbing little reflection, this—because plenty of people, and plenty of institutions, have a lot to account for in my book. What about the woman in a former workplace who fabricated a story about me and threatened a law suit? What about the hoodlums on the street in our old neighborhood who attacked Stuart and I when we were out walking our dog? And what about Rush Limbaugh, for God's sake, who offends the entire nation every time he opens his trap? They all owe me apologies, big time! Don't try to tell me my feelings aren't justified!

And...and: my feelings are perfectly normal and totally understandable, BUT as long as I predicate forgiveness on that small but powerful word “if,” then I am still enslaved. When I base forgiveness on *If she apologizes* and *If those creeps are brought to justice* and *If Rush shuts his pie-hole*, then there is no freedom.

This is hard, hard work—risky work. On the morning that the jets were flown into the Twin Towers and I watched, horrified, along with the rest of the country and most of the world, what I thought about was extremely personal: one of my best friends, and fellow revering alcoholic and a marvelous wit, worked at the Borders Bookstore on the plaza and mezzanine levels of Tower One. And the horror was distilled into the torturing fear of Kim, in there, as the building came down on top of him and his colleagues and customers. (I found out, not until many hours later, that Kim was late for work that morning because of a dentist's appointment, and that when he exited the subway one stop earlier that World Trade Center, so he could pick up his customary cup of coffee, he saw what was happening, turned right around and fled as fast as he could.)

But what if he, like the thousands of others, *had* been in there, and dead—could I forgive the crazed extremists who hijacked the planes? And to make it even harder, more complex, more controversial, can the families and countries of those terrorists forgive *us* and our country for policies and attitudes that have also wreaked havoc?

This is the point at which I want to just go to more room, get in bed, pull the covers up over my head and stay there for a very long time. Because I don't know how to do this—I don't know if I *can* do it. It's too much—too much is being asked of me, of all of us.

But in my heart of hearts, which I sometimes get in touch with in my journaling meditations, I know that giving it up is the only way, the only path to freedom, recovery and healing.

All I can ask for is that you walk the path with me, catch me when I stumble, help me relax my grip a bit on my hurts and resentments. All I can hope for is, that none of us is in this alone.