

It's wonderful to back! Ever since my first visit here this past December I've looked forward to coming back to see your lovely community here in Sarnia. There are many experiences, such as guest speaking in various congregations, which have contributed to my preparation for ministry, and I've learned a lot during these past four years about theology and what it means to be a minister. And one of my most unexpected theological lessons in all this time came in the barbershop lady's chair in Louisville when I was there a couple of years ago for our UU General Assembly.

Soon after plopping myself down in her chair, and mentioning I lived in Ontario, she asked, "What do you think about Canadian health care?"

Although I couldn't see her because she was standing behind me, I could imagine her scowl.

Nonetheless, I earnestly replied how wonderfully transpersonal it is that Canadians have access to universal health care.

Then she said, "What about people who are lazy and don't want to work? Do they deserve health care if they're not pulling their weight?"

At that point the hairs on the back of my neck were sticking out.

But I didn't jump on my horse of indignation because she was right behind me holding a straight razor to my neck.

For the next bit of time we were polite, quietly biding our time until our bout over beatification was over.

It wasn't until I noticed a sign hanging over the entryway that the tenor changed.

The sign said, "Forgive everyone everything." I told her that I really liked the sign's message, and asked her what it meant to her.

She softened immediately as she told me about her gay nephew, and how inspired she was by his gentle heartedness and compassion, despite the victimization he had endured.

I was touched by her love of this young man, and found myself wishing I had more time to spend with her.

Our joining each other around the simple idea of forgiveness completely changed the spirit between the barbershop lady and me. Forgiveness has a way of joining people, but it's not nearly as simple as the adage, "Forgive and forget."

Earl of Chesterfield said it well... "What is forgiven is usually well remembered." That's because when forgiveness becomes relevant, some betrayal has typically occurred, followed by grief, and as

much as we might like otherwise, the fabric of the relationship typically does not return to its former state.

A white shirt that has been stained is now a different shirt. It may continue to be functional, and may even be a tad more interesting because of the new mark, but it's now something different.

Similar to the relationship being changed when forgiveness enters the picture, WE as *individuals* have a choice – it's not a given...we have the CHOICE - to embrace the soulful movement of forgiveness, which then transforms US to a new place...a place of freedom. In this way, forgiveness benefits the forgiver far more than the forgiven.

George Herbert appreciated this when he said, "He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass." Grief brought on by betrayal holds us back, and forgiveness is the bridge that leads us to freedom.

While this sounds fairly simple, many people struggle with compassion and forgiveness because it can appear to fly in the face of fairness.

There's a lot to be said for fairness. It reflects rationality, balance, some strength perhaps, and certainly justice.

I don't have to tell you that these are attributes that we Unitarians hold near and dear. They are some of the cornerstones of our theology.

And so we can ask ourselves, "Would I rather be fair, or do I want to be free?"

The sensible idea of fairness and balance gets a little fuzzy when we consider this concept of forgiveness.

That's because compassion defies rationality and logic.

An eye for an eye makes good mathematical sense in our head. It's symmetrical!

Forgiveness, however, will never be entirely symmetrical.

That's because it isn't as *rational* as it is *soulful*.

It calls us to leave the safety of the tree trunk, and to venture out on a limb. There's vulnerability in being out there on that limb, to be sure.

But our perspective and ability to appreciate the entire landscape of a situation, of another person, is broadened considerably from the vantage point of the limb, not the safer but limited view that the trunk offers.

It's like Will Rogers said...Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is.

Such is the case for a friend of mine whose husband had an affair with her sister, the relative to whom she was the closest, during the sister's stay with them while visiting from out of town.

You can imagine her deep grief over this betrayal from two of the people she loved and trusted most in the world.

She shared with me that central in her experience of moving beyond bitterness was appreciating the fullness of her husband's and her sister's humanity, that their lovable attributes didn't magically disappear because of their hurtful actions.

She never used the 'out on a limb' analogy, but did say that her perspective became broadened when she was able to rise above the eye level 'at first glance' perspective to see a more complete picture of these two people. She says she experienced the Divine more intimately and clearly than ever before through the experience of recognizing the goodness and the hurts of those who hurt her. Two great thinkers spoke on this matter...

Pema Chodron's focus was inward when she said,  
"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded.  
It's a relationship between equals.  
Only when we know our own darkness well  
can we be present with the darkness of others.  
Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity."

Thich Nhat Hanh's focus was on the other person when he said:

"You cannot force yourself to forgive. Only when you understand the other can you have compassion for them. When you do, you can see the many causes that led the other person to make you suffer, and when you see this, forgiveness and release arise naturally."

This calls to mind a story of a man who extended compassion toward the person who killed his brother. This man said the following of his brother's murderer,

*"For some reason I was able to feel all that he was dealing with.  
Like condemnation from others.  
And self-condemnation.  
Like this hovering darkness that surrounded him.  
People might think I'm strange to feel that way,  
but it's just part of the nature of a person that's closely connected to God. There's a connection with God that can allow you to see past what's in front of you."*

As people of faith, a central part of our journey is nurturing that connection with God so that we can indeed see beyond what's just in front of us.

Our UU principles certainly reflect this, as they encourage us to recognize...

- The inherent worth and dignity every person

- to exercise *compassion* in human relations (even when it doesn't make sense to);
- And to recognize our interdependence with each other, of which we ALL
  - you, the betrayed, and me, the betrayer- are a part.

These are lofty goals.

Just ask yet another friend of mine, a dear friend from high school, whose 22 year old daughter was killed by a man driving 240 kilometers an hour while intoxicated. Her daughter was killed, while the drunk driver walked away with a few scratches.

In the weeks following her daughter's death she would say over and over, "This isn't fair." She searched desperately for justice and couldn't find it.

I attended the sentencing hearing of the driver, where the judge would presumably exercise the voice of justice.

Not unlike at a church wedding, the courtroom was divided down the middle...the driver's loved ones on one side, and my friend's daughter's loved ones on the other.

Except, very un-wedding like, this wasn't an occasion of joining. It was very much an experience of division.

One by one people from the opposing sides went to the stand and shared stories with the judge about their loved one, pleading for an outcome that would satisfy their own sense of justice.

Finally it was time for the judge to render a sentence. You could hear a pin drop he read the verdict...17 years.

Was justice or fairness done with a 17-year prison sentence?

Does my friend feel like 17 years adequately accounts for all the years of life her daughter won't experience?

Will the driver spending 17 years in a prison cell somehow make any of this better?

don't have answers to these questions, and I'm not sure concrete answers about justice always exist.

As we were filing out of the courtroom, I crossed the divide of the center aisle and approached the driver's father, who was sitting with his face in his hands, quietly devastated by the crushing reality that his beloved son would spend years and years in prison.

I touched his shoulder, and said, "We're praying for your family." He barely acknowledged me with a slight nod.

Like those on the other side of the room, perhaps he too was wrestling with forgiveness...toward his son for the immeasurable grief brought on by his actions, toward the judge for separating his son from him for what undoubtedly felt like an eternity. And it occurred to me that all that was left now was forgiveness on all sides.

The dark cloak of grief had descended upon both of these families, and the way to light was through compassion and understanding.

This is not at all dissimilar to the story we heard about in the reading regarding the story of the Amish tragedy, where both sides had been pierced with loss. In that story the Amish were lauded for their show of compassion...to the point that "Amish Forgiveness" actually became a catch-phrase....

"All the religions teach forgiveness," mused an observer, "but no one does it like the Amish."

The Amish don't have a corner on the market of mercy. They aren't the chosen recipients of a road map or a unique theological formula that gives them a forgiveness foothold.

They are ordinary people, like you and me, and like the families in that courtroom, who don't have all the answers, but who, like the man whose brother was murdered, actively seek and nurture their connection with God, with sacredness, with the Universe, with the interdependent web of all existence... which offers internal sustenance and balance that carries them across the limb to places within themselves and in relationships that they would otherwise never be.

Each of us in this room has been betrayed. Sometimes we betray ourselves and other times our hurts come at the hands of others...all divisive and painful nonetheless.

To what extent are we willing to go within ourselves to take on the fears and sadness that our hurts have produced? You might say, "I'm not afraid or sad, I've been wronged and I'm mad!" But as a wise woman once said, underneath anger there's always fear or sadness. And for most of us it's more unsettling to feel afraid or sad than it is to put on the armour of anger.

This is an extremely personal process, one that can only be done within the confines and depths of oneself. And so you must ask yourself – how far out on a limb are you willing to go for peace and healing?

Make no mistake...just as there is inherent worth and dignity of every person, so is there inherent sacredness in each of our processes, regardless of where we are on the limb.

My hope for each of us this day is that we recognize the beckoning of freedom, healing and connection that awaits us when we are able let go and venture further out on that limb.

So may it be. Amen.