

Forgiveness: The Final Form of Love

By Rev. Lyn Cox

Disciplined voices rose to the top of the dome in the Naval Academy chapel. Autumn light flowed down from the high windows, making the white walls glow. Most of the pews behind me were filled with midshipmen about my own age. If my cousin had lived through the summer, he would be joining them for their final year at the academy. Instead, we were gathered to mourn his death in a hit-and-run car accident.

The vocal ensemble finished singing "All Is Well" and sat down. A man in a dark suit stood up and asked my uncle and aunt and cousins to stand with him. I think he was the president of the local stake of the Latter-Day Saints. He explained that my cousin was sure to meet his siblings and parents in heaven, where families of their faith stay together for eternity.

All was not well for me at the reception after the funeral. I fidgeted with napkins, barely able to see past my crinkled eyebrows. At 21 years old, I hadn't thought much lately about what the afterlife was like. I didn't think there was a hell. One thing I did know for sure was that a very good man had been violently killed.

My cousin was born two weeks after I was. We were opposites in many ways: country versus city, conservative versus liberal, military versus peace-loving neo-hippie. On the other hand, we both loved nature, looked after our younger siblings, and believed in democracy. Whatever may have divided us, he was family. And now he was gone. The driver of the car that had run him off of a narrow mountain road had not been caught.

My relatives had a faith that looked to the future. At that time, my gods were most vocal about demanding justice in the present time and space. Grief and rage each took one of my ears, whispering that the debt of my cousin's life had to be repaid somehow. In the absence of someone to punish, I vowed to pay the debt as best I could with my own life, working twice as much, trying to be twice as good. When he was alive, my cousin and I matched strength for strength. I felt that I wasn't enough to give the world all of the benefits he would have and also keep up on what I owed on my own account. Grief, masquerading as justice, demanded that I try.

I worked a double portion and slept a half portion, trying to live enough for two people. I flew off the handle whenever I perceived even the smallest injustice. If I made a mistake, I felt like a collar was tightening around my neck, reminding me that I was yoked to a promise not to fail. I had turned my desire for vengeance in on myself. I thought my desperate push to balance the scales had rendered me isolated and unlovable, but that was the deal I had made.

After a couple of years, I got tired of being constantly angry. I had forgotten why I was so committed to living in double time. I wandered from city to country to city. I landed in Silicon Valley, where I became a Unitarian Universalist. The Universalist side of our heritage called to me. I liked the idea that all of us share a common destiny. Universalism

erases the dividing line between the saved and the unsaved, preaching that all people are worthwhile. Divine love is for everyone.

As my Universalism has matured, I've come to realize just how much my faith demands of me. My Latter-Day Saint cousins believe that families are forever. They put a lot of energy into researching genealogy, committing family memories to scrapbooks, and staying in touch with relatives because they believe those relationships are built to last. If you're going to be seeing a lot of your siblings in the next world, you might as well learn how to get along.

I believe that all of our relationships are forever. Choices we make reverberate through the ages. We all share a common destiny. I can't assume that someone's soul will be cast into the outer void because they disagree with me or have committed a terrible sin. That means that my cousin's killer is a person of inherent worth and dignity, deserving of divine love. Universalism calls me to put aside my vengeance and come to terms with his humanity. That process has something to do with forgiveness.

Reinhold Niebuhr calls it the final form of love. I offer this theme with no small amount of trepidation, because religious teachings on forgiveness have been misused.

Let me be clear about what I don't mean: Forgiveness does not mean allowing a harmful situation to continue. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that an act caused less harm than it actually did. Forgiveness does not mean continuing a relationship as if a harmful incident never happened. Relationships continue, but they are changed in the process of hurting and healing.

Universalism has taught me a couple of things about forgiveness. First, that all life is interconnected. People who have a damaged relationship are still connected. Second, forgiveness means seeing the other person as a human being. Third, forgiveness helps us to have faith in a human's capacity for growth and change.

Interconnection

First, a word about interconnection. Pain can cause us to ignore it. If someone I'm close to hurts me, I might say, "Fine! Henceforth this person no longer matters to me. I will behave as if this person never existed." It feels like trying to hurl a rock to infinity. Let's say infinity is represented by a mobius strip. So I throw the rock, and eventually it comes back. The weight of that broken connection is still with me, no matter how much I pretend that it doesn't matter anymore.

There's a story, claimed by many traditions, of a wise teacher who used potatoes to demonstrate the effect of holding grudges. The teacher asked students to take one potato for every person against whom they harbored anger. They wrote an offender's name on each potato. The teacher told them to carry these grudge potatoes with them wherever they went. The students went about their daily tasks, figuring out clever ways to carry the

potatoes along with them. They made potato sack backpacks, they kept potatoes in the bottoms of their purses, they put potatoes in the roomy pockets of winter coats.

At first, the students were confident. "I've got this potato thing licked. I can run around town all day AND carry my grudge potatoes." After awhile, though, the extra weight began to take its toll. The students had back problems. They couldn't rest at night with the potatoes right beside them. The smell was also a problem, as the potatoes started to rot. Carrying grudges was limiting the students' lives more than they expected.

That's what it feels like to me when I hang onto a grudge. There's an extra weight. I get used to it, and I can pretend it doesn't matter, but it's there. Cause leads to effect, all the way across the interdependent web. Taking on a grudge has consequences because the begrudger and the begrudgee are both members of this web. All of our destinies are intertwined.

Human Beings

The second thing Universalism has taught me is that forgiveness means seeing the other person as a human being. When I've been hurt, and I let that anger gel into a grudge, I've stopped seeing the one who hurt me as a person and started seeing them as a malevolent monster. If I stay accountable to my faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the interaction is different.

A couple of years ago, I attended a workshop by a celebrated educator and organizational leader, I'll call her Nell. Nell has a reputation for stating her opinions up front, without apology. During her workshop, Nell spoke harshly to a friend of mine who was going through a difficult time, hurting my friend's feelings. Nell showed no regret or compassion for my friend that I could see.

For a very long time after that, I avoided Nell at all costs. I skipped professional conferences where I knew she would be giving workshops. Whenever her name came up, I would purse my lips, and it felt like my heart was being reduced inside a pressure cooker. I didn't think of her as Nell, I thought of her as "That Woman" or "A Menace" or, most telling, "She-who-must-not-be-named."

I found out that my friend Dee Dee was working in a job that required her to interact with Nell on a regular basis. I asked Dee Dee how she could stand being around That Woman. Dee Dee said, "She's one of my spiritual teachers. When she does things that annoy me, I examine my reactions. I learn a lot that way."

Dee Dee was right, of course. My emotions could teach me, if I let them. I had built up so many barriers to protect myself that the real lessons of life, not to mention the teachings of the celebrated educator and organizational leader, couldn't get through.

There is a difference between learning enough to stay safe and letting a grudge take over. If I didn't like Nell's workshops, I didn't have to go. Take whatever learning is useful

from the experience of anger and leave the rest behind. That's all. My faith did not ask me to spend time with someone I knew was likely to hurt my feelings.

My faith does ask me to regard other people as human beings. That means owning up to commonalities between myself and the person against whom I had harbored a grudge. I have been known to state my opinions up front, without apology. I'm capable of hurting someone's feelings and not realizing the right time for compassion. The line between good and evil runs inside all of us, and even people I can't stand are capable of good things. People are complex that way.

I went around and around in my head like that for some time, but was still having trouble replacing my mental image of She-who-must-not-be-named with the image of Nell as a human being. My anger cycled into guilt for holding a grudge and back into anger about being put in this uncomfortable position. I was having trouble talking myself out of my grudge using the power of reason.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes that "Forgiveness is a generosity of the heart, not an example of clear thinking. To forgive someone is to believe them to have been wrong, and to let go of the moral leverage that grants us over another. Forgiveness is renouncing the position of remaining superior. It is a leveling borne of letting go."

I realized that I kind of liked feeling justifiably angry at someone who was supposed to be so smart. My grudge had been this fort, where I was up here, looking down from the parapets and across the moat at my mental image of Nell, way down below me. I was right and good and compassionate, and she was mean. Letting go of my grudge started to sound more attractive than being petty.

While acknowledging that something unpleasant had transpired, I tried appreciating what Nell had offered the world as an educator. I know a lot of fans of her work. Focusing on the positive helped me to re-frame my image of Nell. Now I don't tense up when I see her coming around the corner at conferences. I feel a lot lighter in my shoulders. When her name comes up, I only purse my lips a little bit.

Unitarian Universalists are in the business of celebrating life. If reflecting on what seems to be a life-lesson is making me grumpy and afraid to learn more, it's possible that what I've really got is a grudge in disguise. If a lesson is helping me to thrive as a flexible, ever-growing person, that's life-affirming. I try to keep focused on what nourishes life. Remembering the inherent worth and dignity of every person takes practice.

Growth and Change

The third thing Universalism has taught me is that forgiveness helps us to have faith in the human capacity for growth and change, including our own.

In my early twenties, I earned part of my grocery money making coffee and cappuccino. I learned to appreciate carefully crafted foam, the right balance of quality beans, and

different levels of acidity. About the same time I gave up red meat, I stopped drinking caffeine.

A National Geographic article recently informed me that caffeine isn't so bad after all, and I've returned to my former habit with a vengeance. So it was that I found myself standing in line at a grocery store coffee spot recently, eagerly anticipating 20 ounces of French Roast. I bantered with the barista as well as I could in my caffeine-deprived state, then happily took my cup with me as I shopped for some last-minute dinner items.

After I let the coffee cool for a bit, I raised it to my lips. It tasted bitter and acidic, the subtleties of the French Roast obscured. Could it be burned? I thought about getting angry, until I remembered three things:

- (1) I was likely to visit my neighborhood grocery store coffee spot again, and I didn't want to burn any bridges.
- (2) The barista was a human being with feelings, there was no need to get testy. The coffee was drinkable, just not as good as I had hoped.
- (3) Third, I remembered back in the day how many complaints I got about burned coffee. I got better at brewing and so would she.

I smiled at the memory and continued with my shopping, relieved that I could let it go. Maybe an espresso shot would be fresher than brewed coffee. I resolved to get a cappuccino next time.

If I keep practicing forgiveness for minor transgressions, I can prepare for more challenging opportunities to forgive. The coffee episode reminded me that people have a capacity for growth and change. I think about the potato story, with all of those students lugging around sacks of slimy, heavy grudges. Planting the potatoes, allowing the incident that inspired the grudge to flower into a learning experience, would be so much more productive.

Which brings me back to where I started, coming to terms with the humanity of my cousin's killer. In general, I don't believe that people who do bad things are sent off to hell. I don't believe that people who make deadly mistakes are less human than anybody else. On a good day, I can imagine sharing heaven with the person who caused that hit-and-run car accident.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that "Forgiveness is not to condone or minimize the awfulness of an atrocity or wrong. It is to recognize its ghastliness but to choose to acknowledge the essential humanity of the perpetrator and to give that perpetrator the possibility of making a new beginning. It is an act of much hope and not despair. It is hope in the essential goodness of people and to have faith in their potential to change. It is to bet on that possibility."

I heard that someone had been arrested in connection with my cousin's death. I don't know what happened after that. I hope the other driver was able to accept responsibility,

and I hope that the memory of that day doesn't consume them for the rest of their lives. I hope that they are able to make some positive contribution to the world, because there's no need to throw another life away after losing one.

Imagining the other driver as a human being with some essential goodness helps me to see myself as a human being. On those days, my mistakes don't feel like the end of the world. Developing my capacity to forgive has helped me have faith in a person's capacity for growth and change, including my own.

Universalism has taught me a couple of things about forgiveness. First, that all life is interconnected. We are all in this together, and our relationships are worth working on. Second, forgiveness means finding humanity instead of dehumanization. Third, have faith in the possibility of new beginnings.

Unitarian Universalism calls us to strengthen communities by respecting all people. Forgiveness is a skill we will need for this sacred task. May it be a skill that we all practice together in this religious community.