

## What Do We Do When We Can't Forgive (especially Ourselves)?

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Life is a contact sport, and we all carry with us the scars and psychic wounds of the wrongs we have done to others and the wrongs others have done to us. At the very least, we spend time and energy ruminating about these hurts and sorrows. If the injuries are severe, we organize our actions and thoughts in ways to protect ourselves from future injuries, or from the pain of remembering. These defenses can be effective in the short term, but often end up cutting us off from our present and future opportunities for joy, love, and engagement in the world. The more energy spent maintaining the defenses, the less we have to invest in the quality of our lives going forward. If we struggle to forgive ourselves for past deeds, we may be so busy castigating ourselves that we miss out on opportunities to connect with others and have the experiences that may create the satisfactions that give life meaning.

Over the past few weeks as I've thought about what I might add to our discussion on Forgiveness and Mercy, I ran across this quote from Joseph Campbell:

**"The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature."**

I liked the thought, and somehow these words stayed with me and have shaped this talk in ways I will describe a little later.

As UUs, most of us aren't counting on an afterlife, or the promise that God, will judge and mete out justice for deeds done to us or by us in this life. [That may be the good news or the bad news, depending on our particular

circumstances!] At any rate, we can agree that our current lifetime is a long time to suffer from the consequences of our own acts, or those of another. There are also "Acts of God," but as terrible as those are, we have more trouble forgiving and moving on if we suffer from "Acts of Humans".

If we have one single lifetime, whatever satisfactions and pleasures we're going to have better happen here and now. So what if things go wrong, we are treated badly, things happen that we regret or aren't fair, and we get stuck in a pattern of resentment, rage, or regret? Life is too long to be stuck in misery (especially if it's someone else's fault), and it sure is a waste if one bad event or deed permanently screws up this life--especially if it's the only one we've got.

Unfortunately, this happens to a lot of people. We all have our scars and disappointments, but what if life has turned sour or intolerable? Are we doomed to inevitable and unending suffering? Whether it's hurtful words that can't be taken back, or physical injuries that have changed the course of our lives, other people leave their mark on us and it is then up to us to deal with it. Some people certainly have more than their share of things to forgive. When they have been so wronged—or traumatized—by events, they may be unable to forgive the parties involved—whether it be others or themselves. Or both. When we are stuck like this, we go to great lengths to preserve or protect ourselves. But sometimes those mechanisms aren't always healthy and in other cases they stop working. We can be challenged by the need to forgive at any point in life, and may even have to go over the same territory as our life circumstances change.

We are all marked by our experiences, and we devise means (based on our life experience and resources) to avoid further injury. Thirteen-year-old Virginia Reed, one of the survivors of the Donner party, wrote this advice to her cousin:

I have not wrote to you half the trouble we have had but I have wrote enough to let you know that you don't know what trouble is. But thank God we have all got through and the only family that did not eat human flesh. We have left everything but I don't care for that. We have got through with our lives but don't let this letter dishearten anybody. Never take no cutoffs, and hurry along as fast as you can.  
Virginia Reed (written to cousin Mary Keys, May 16, 1847)

Now, If Virginia spent the rest of her life avoiding cutoffs, and hurrying along, she might have still been able to live a life of some quality. But for other people, the strategies they come up with (and we all do the best we can) prevent life from unfolding, and they are stuck and can't escape.

Today I will give some examples of people who were stuck in not forgiving and what they did in their stuckness. Charles Dickens created the indelible character of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. She is the ultimate jilted bride, who heard the news that her betrothed would not show up at the altar. In the midst of preparing for the ceremony, her life came to a screeching halt at the moment she learned the news: veil not quite in place, one shoe off, jewelry (including a time piece) waiting to be fastened in place. We probably all have seen images of this woman from old movies: decades later, the shriveled spinster is still wearing the now-shabby white veil and gown and single shoe, her wedding cake shrouded in cobwebs. In the following years, Miss Havisham stayed stuck in her disappointment. She raised Estella, her beautiful adoptive daughter, to share her hatred of all men, believing this would protect the girl from the hurt she has suffered. It is only at the end of the story when Miss Havisham is on her deathbed, that she realizes what she has actually done. Estella rejects Pip, the main character, who has loved her most of his life. When Miss Havisham sees the pain in his eyes, she realizes she has not exacted revenge, but has simply spread her own pain and grief to

another hapless person—one who has shown her great kindness—and in those final moments Miss Havisham begs Pip's forgiveness. We could conclude that she has wasted her life. Although we don't begrudge Dickens his unforgettable character, we might agree that we would expect most jilted lovers to get their clothes changed, get rid of the cake, get over it and move on.

But let me tell you a few stories of real people with bigger hurts—these are some of the combat veterans I had the privilege of knowing. These veterans are deceased, and details and have been altered to protect their privacy.

I'll call the first veteran Charlie. Although he suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder related to his combat experience in Viet Nam, he buried his feelings and was able to get on with life. He became a successful businessman, owned two large businesses in Michigan. Although there were things he didn't talk about, he never stopped working and never had time to think about things. This wasn't a conscious act, but if you can't sleep and can't get along with people, and can't control your anger, being the boss and working all the time is a pretty good way to cope. As he got older, Charlie sold his businesses and retired here in the west to live his dream. He loved horses, bought a ranch, and immediately immersed himself in that life. He rode horses every day, worked his head off, and was very happy. All went well until he had a catastrophic accident—his horse fell on him—shattering his pelvis and other bones, and causing damage to some internal organs. The healing didn't go well, and he developed osteonecrosis (bone death) in his pelvis. Chronic pain and enforced inactivity turned his life upside—all the memories and feelings he had spent a lifetime keeping at a distance came down on him. He needed treatment for his acute and never-before-addressed PTSD. He made some progress, but it was an uphill battle to deal with all these issues in addition to his diminished health and chronic pain.

Luke was also a combat veteran, alcohol was the main way he managed his chronic anger. Eventually he worked to get sober, but without medicating himself with alcohol he came face to face with his PTSD, and anger is usually the most common symptom. Anger feels better and more appropriate than the feelings that are just under the surface: fear, lack of control, grief and guilt over the comrades who didn't make it back. He was in and out of treatment to work on his PTSD, but he could not change. No way could he let go of these survival tactics and allow himself to feel the feelings just beneath the anger. He was who he was, and he was an angry guy. Then Luke got a lung infection that caused so much damage that he needed a double transplant. He got put on a waiting list for well over a year, maybe two, and anger became his worst enemy—when his anger was triggered he literally couldn't breathe. He had a choice: manage the unmanageable anger, or die before he got his transplant.

He learned that he could manage the anger after all. He got the transplant and lived a number of years of some quality (as he continued to work on his skills for managing the PTSD).

David was also a combat vet—a door gunner—and the angriest man I ever met. If you've ever stood at the base of a glacier and felt that cold rolling down on you, that's what his anger felt like. You could physically feel it when he was in a room with you. The first time he came for specialized inpatient treatment, nothing much got past that raging torrent of anger. He coped with his severe PTSD by isolating, drinking, and watching movies about Viet Nam—movies like Hamburger Hill. He had so much survivor guilt, among other things, that he spent his life making sure he didn't forget the tragic loss of so many fellow vets. He would drink, watch movies, and use his fist to smack himself repeatedly in the neck to cause physical pain. This self-torture came to an end when the repeated impact of his fist caused a rupture of his carotid artery. Once that medical emergency was treated, he was referred back to treatment of his PTSD. Soon after he arrived, he has his first grand

mal seizure. His health deteriorated so fast he could no longer maintain this bizarre system of coping. His life was cut short by years of heavy drinking and the damage he'd done to his artery and, in turn, his brain. His was the saddest story—he stayed stuck and then he died.

"Gunny" was a WWII vet who kept his PTSD pretty well controlled until his 80's, when his health failed. He came to his first treatment program, was diagnosed with metastasized cancer during his stay, and learned he had only months to live. It was OK, though, because through the conversations with his veteran peers, and classroom discussion, he discovered for himself the knowledge he needed to find peace at the end of his life: He answered his own question which had plagued him for decades: why had he survived when others hadn't? This allowed him to forgive himself, finally.

Finally, there is Fred, a Veteran of the Korean conflict. He struggled with alcohol, anger, isolation and issues of trust. His survival strategy included a rule that he wouldn't trust anyone, but especially Asians. This worked pretty well for him in Northern Wyoming, until he was flown to Denver for cardiac surgery and his doctor walked into his room as he was being prepped. Of course, his doctor was Vietnamese. Fred had been in years of therapy, heard a thousand lectures on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and took the leap. He accepted his physician as a caring individual and the surgery saved his life. He came back home and was as giddy about his breakthrough as he was about his improved health.

One sad thing that runs through all these stories is that the healing (if it happened) took a lifetime. The message I want to emphasize is that all these people believed they couldn't change. They thought they were helpless victims of their life histories and the injuries they sustained. Most of them—but not all—were able to make dramatic changes when they were approaching death. They made changes they never dreamed were possible at

an earlier point, but what a difference it would have made to their lives if they could have found healing earlier in their lives! Hopefully sooner, rather than later, we reach a point where we want our lives to be fuller, richer, and more satisfying than we can have without making changes. By listening to the stories of others we may find the courage, or dare to hope, that we can make changes, too. For some, the damage of the wrong is so pervasive that they will need professional help from a compassionate mental health provider to find their way to a more comfortable resolution. The persons I've described all fell into this category (with the possible exception of Miss Havisham).

Whether it's being treated badly by a fiancé, or by being a young man changed by war, no one wants to spend a life spent in vengeance, grief, social withdrawal, rage, substance abuse, rigidity, or an excessive need for control (this is a partial list). What about those of us who have less acute cases? Some of us are plagued by guilt, rather than hurt or rage. We spend sleepless nights and blame ourselves for things said or done, or not said or not done, and the forgiveness of ourselves eludes us. What would it take to convince myself that I could make the changes now? Who am I expecting will give me permission, or reassurance, that healing is possible? I am realizing that my healing is within my reach now and not after everything is over. I need to get it done so I can enjoy myself, and enjoy the people I love, even the ones I've hurt.

I'm giving these examples not to inflame anyone, but hopefully you may recognize some things in yourself that serve to keep you stuck. If there is someone in this group who has been severely traumatized, and this discussion brings up issues that cause a great deal of pain or anxiety, please let me know privately after the discussion so that we can make sure you are safe and have the means to manage your symptoms.

So what do we, the generically messed up, do to work on forgiveness of

ourselves or others? We need a chance to start over—we don't deserve to be stuck in this suffering until the end of our time. How do we do that? I've been thinking a lot about this in my own life, and Joseph Campbell's words came back to me.

**"The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature."**

So here is how Joseph Campbell's words have shaped my thoughts about being stuck. I have not been able to forgive myself for some regrets that haunt me. Holding onto the guilt accomplishes nothing, and probably interferes with my ability to relate in a healthy way to the persons I have hurt.

How do I match my heartbeat to the beat of the Universe, to match my nature with Nature? I cast around for an idea that might help me refresh my position toward the past events that haunt my current nights. And I looked out the window and saw the bleak, cold landscape of fall turning into winter. I thought of the cycles of the seasons, and the way plants become dormant, animals hibernate, people creep inside their houses and huddle by a source of heat. For those of us lucky enough to live in a part of the world with seasons, we are constantly reminded that Time in the natural world does not go on endlessly without change. There are cycles. Nature gives us seasons, and a sense of renewal. In spring there is the promise of growth and rebirth, and summer the fullness of that growth. Fall brings a winding down, a quieting, the harvest, and then winter. A time to lie fallow, let things hibernate, or become dormant.

I am thinking of this natural cycle as a metaphor for the healing that we may be seeking. When we are stuck, yet continually demand that we do something to fix our messes, perhaps this season of winter may guide us to take a break. I am going to allow this festering pain to become dormant,



providing myself a rest. I intend to back away from my customary way of thinking about things that cause me anxiety or pain. Not because they are unimportant or hopeless, but because I need a rest so that I can go at it with renewed energy at a later time.

While I take a season for this quiet and restful time, I will not be idle, but will strengthen my ability to come at it in a different way. What if I spent this wintertime caring for myself in a new way? When my tired thoughts of self-recrimination surface, I will use them as prompts to redirect my thinking. I intend to practice self-quieting and loving kindness meditation—toward myself and the wronged persons. Just that. For the winter. Nothing fancy or even new, but it feels good to me. I will give myself a holiday from self-reproach, guilt, and pain. I will simply let my soul or heart lie fallow and rest while the earth around me sleeps. I will enjoy the bright sun of our western skies, and practice being as gentle as a single snowflake, as quiet as a night when it's 40 degrees below zero.

A metaphor for what I'm trying to do might be this: Deep cold settles down upon us, but because the plants are dormant, they are not harmed. This tough season serves a purpose by purging some of the pests that would otherwise afflict the plants when they are alive and growing. In winter we humans seek warmth and companionship to endure the long dark months, and distract ourselves with traditional celebrations of light and renewal. We remind ourselves that this bleak season is temporary, and that the earth will come alive as the seasons turn. In my quest for healing, I will always regret the pain I have caused some others. My behavior took its toll, but I don't think punishing myself will cause any good to come of it. I will turn this time to practice renewal—a personal season of love and nurturing. I will focus my attention on healthy, positive self-care, and perhaps some negative self-talk will wither away from my deliberate neglect of it. I don't know that I will jump to another kind of self-healing when spring arrives on the calendar or in

my backyard, but it is comforting to be reminded that life has cycles before it ends. And I am hopeful that a diligent winter of doing things differently will put me closer to forgiving myself by then.

Let this deep wintertime be a time of gentle healing, and let us be reminded that each of us is on a journey that includes pain and loss. May we gather together in the warmth of this community where we strive to be our best selves. And may we support each other on our human quest for forgiveness and peaceful hearts.

**Opening Words:** We gather together to face ourselves honestly, to forgive ourselves gently, to love one another fervently. Phillip Larson

**Chalice Lighting:** Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul. It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life. It is the fire of reason; the fire of compassion; the fire of community; the fire of justice; the fire of faith; the fire of goodness. It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart; the divine glow in every life. Rev. Dr. Eric A. Heller-Wagner

**Reading and Silent Reflection:** Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's

apprentice, who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Hannah Arendt

**Closing Words:** When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. Viktor E. Frankl