Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Self-Forgiveness

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My talk today has three basic parts. First I will talk about forgiveness in the major religions Then I will share a contemporary UU perspective on forgiveness. Finally I will talk about forgiveness from a psychological point of view.

“*Yom Kippur,*” the “Day of Atonement,” is the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar. It is a day when many Jews engage in a 26-hour period of fasting and prayer as an act of contrition for sins committed over the course of the previous year. The period of atonement for Jews actually begins on the Jewish New Year, 9 days before Yom Kippur. According to the tradition, God makes tentative entries into the “Book of Life” and the “Book of Death” on the New Year and confirms his decisions about who will live another year on Yom Kippur, based on acts of contrition and prayer. Seeking forgiveness is a matter of life and death for practicing Jews!

Note that atonement and forgiveness are not exactly the same. Forgiveness means letting go of resentment and the desire for revenge. Atonement is about making restitution, correcting the wrong. For example, if I spill wine on your carpet and stain it, I might say, “I’m sorry,” and you might forgive me. If I proceed to have the stain removed, that is atonement. In spiritual terms forgiveness seeking and atonement lead to restoring relationship to the divine.

As for forgiveness, Judaism is of course not the only religion that offers such redemption. The Christian faith is established on the principle that Jesus died for the sins of humankind and that through the act of turning one’s life over to Jesus one is forgiven of sin and is “saved.” Catholics use confession, baptism, and other sacraments, as the means of forgiveness. Most protestant denominations rely on baptism and prayer as the primary rituals in seeking forgiveness. In Islam, as I understand it, one is forgiven by expressing regret to Allah. In Buddhism “wrongdoing” is redeemed by the acknowledgment of the wrongdoing and then seeking to make amends. In many Native American tribes when an animal is killed in hunting the hunter offers a prayer and asks forgiveness from the soul of the animal.

The wrongdoing or sin that merits forgiveness in most world religions, can be categorized as either transgressions against other people or against “God.”

One of the questions I want to explore with you is why forgiveness is so central to virtually all the major religions? I think it is because we humans, when faced with choices of doing the right thing, often fall short; we often do the “wrong thing.” The philosopher Martin Buber said people are “promise making, promise breaking and promise renewing” creatures. It is part of our human nature to err, to fall short of our promises, or in religious language, to “sin.” A Hebrew word for sin is “cheht” which literally means to miss the mark. We tend to cause harm to others, intentionally or unintentionally, in small and big ways, and we need a way back. Religions understand this.

Returning to the concept of atonement and Yom Kippur, in the era of the temple in Jerusalem (until about 70 AD) a “scapegoat” was selected and pushed off a cliff by the high priest on the Day of Atonement to be devoured by a beast. The idea was that if all the people were properly contrite, the life of the goat would take punishment for the sins of the people, in the eyes of God. God would only forgive the community if everyone were truly repentant. In addition to the annual holy day of Yom Kippur, during the time of the first and second Jerusalem temples, when a Jew has committed a sin, they could bring a sacrificial animal or some wheat flour, to be placed on the alter in the temple in Jerusalem and burnt, as a way to atone for a sin. According to the Biblical text, the animal for the offering was required to be without flaw or blemish. In other words, the sinner needed to select from the best of his flock for the atonement offering. If wheat flour was offered, it had to be the best of the crop.

You may be wondering what this ancient ritual of sacrifice has to do with us? Well, I see two basic points here. First, the religion is offering a path to forgiveness, which is a universal need. When we don’t feel forgiven there can be serious consequences such as depression, or disrupted relationships, as I will discuss. Second, the individual seeking forgiveness had to give up something of value to be forgiven and restored. The person had to atone. In modern times among Jews, fasting and praying all day in the synagogue replace the scapegoat or giving of an animal, or the wheat flour, in sacrifice. Jews are asked on the Day of Atonement and the nine days prior, to engage in reflection on misdeeds committed throughout the previous year. They are also required to ask for forgiveness of those harmed. Catholics are asked to give up something during lent, and some fast, in recognition of Christ’s sacrifice. Even if you and I don’t engage in fasting or prayer perhaps we can grow spiritually, psychologically, interpersonally, and morally, if we are willing to reflect on our misdeeds, seek forgiveness, and make amends or atone.

Some of Western civilization’s earliest ideas about sin perhaps date to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When the couple disobeyed God’s commandment to not eat fruit of the tree of knowledge, they were punished by being banished from Eden. Some interpret the meaning of this story in terms of separation of humans from God because of disobedience. The role of traditional religion is to redeem from sin and restore connection with God. Our ideas about what exactly “God” and “sin” are need to evolve with the advances of science and other forms of knowledge. But I think the concept of “sin” or missing the mark as leading to separation from what I will call the “sacred whole” still has meaning to me even without a punishing God. When we do wrong, we may feel separated from our best selves and the community of our peers, family or friends, and we need to be restored to ourselves to a larger whole.

Most UU’s do not expect to find forgiveness through baptism or by going to confession, and certainly not by sacrificing an animal. Perhaps not even by fasting. If these images, metaphors and practices worked to redeem us we’d be in a different place on Sunday morning than here. I want to say though, that talking to another person about our guilty feelings as occurs in confession in the Catholic faith is psychologically healthy, but the trappings of the Church are not necessary for religious liberals.

I ask, what in the UU tradition helps self-forgiveness? Several things, I think. Our first principle reminds us that even with our transgressions we still have “inherent worth and dignity.” The Unitarian tradition adheres to the concept of “living in covenant,” which allows us renewal through community when we err. A covenant is a sacred agreement among members of a spiritual group in terms of how they will behave together and especially in worship. So, the Unitarian tradition also incorporates the idea of atonement or restitution and reconnection. We may have acted badly, we may have breached the covenant, but we are not inherently bad, quite the opposite, and we strive to do better. The Universalist tradition taught God’s infinite love was always available to all humanity, meaning in part, that all of us are forgiven for our transgressions whether we ask for it, fast, go to confession, etc., and none will go to hell. If we are forgiven in the spiritual sense that God will not punish us, we are then free to seek forgiveness from self and others. Whether we believe in a personal God or not we might believe in a “universal” source of love, the “sacred whole” that created the world and us and is forgiving. UU’s tend not to believe that we were created in a state of original sin. On the contrary, we believe we are born with a clean slate and we ourselves are responsible for our actions positive and negative. We don’t have to take the blame for Adam and Eve. But we can learn from the Adam and Eve story that it is better to take responsibility than to blame someone else, or a snake, for our mistakes.

Since we see ourselves as responsible for our misdeeds, “our missing the mark,” we also see ourselves, not a priest, not Christ, as the means to restoring to wholeness and forgiveness. We restore ourselves by reaching out to rebuild our connections with family and friends. When we take positive action to atone for our mistakes, when we make amends, we can move past guilt. We undo wrong by doing right. We must be willing to give something of ourselves, something of value such as our time. You may remember the story about the Hindu man who came to Gandhi to ask what he could do to find forgiveness for having killed a Muslim child during the Hindu-Moslem war of 1946? Gandhi told the man he must find a Muslim orphan and raise the child as a good Muslim.

As UU Rev. Galen Guengerich points out, the more aware we are of how much we depend on others and everything outside us for our existence the more grateful we should strive to become. In turn, an enhanced sense of gratitude leads to more actions to improve the lives of others and the status of our world. We are “saved,” UU Rev. Rebecca Parker says, when we save others. This is perhaps why Jesus said, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” This is the principle of salvation through deeds, rather than through faith alone. It is also what Mahatma Gandhi told the man seeking redemption for the innocent death he caused during the war in India.

Psychotherapy shares much in common with spiritual practice and religion. As a prime example, psychotherapy frequently involves the management of guilt. Guilt often plays a significant role in mental illness most commonly in depression. When a person feels consumed with guilt, they need to find a way to achieve forgiveness. The therapist tries to help the client steer between twin hazards: either denying the existence of the guilt and the wrongdoing behind it or being overwhelmed to the point of hopelessness, inaction,self-loathing, and/or self-destructive behavior. Denial of guilt is a way to defend against what the client subconsciously believes is overwhelming and devastating beyond redemption. But to avoid confronting guilt keeps the client psychologically frozen; walled off from self and others. When we are not free to see our mistakes and learn from them, we simply don’t grow emotionally or spiritually. We may also alienate others in the process. On the positive side, others might be more willing to accept our misdeeds if we are willing to acknowledge them and seek to make amends. The failure to acknowledge our wrongdoing breeds resentment in those around us. How many times have we heard people who have been wronged say, “I just wanted them to say they were sorry!”

The other extreme reaction to our wrongdoing besides total denial is to feel so oppressed by it that we see no way out. This is a cause for many suicides. Clearly all of us need help to deal with our missteps and poor choices, our thoughtlessness, and lack of consideration; our failure to acknowledge what others have given to us. Despairing over guilt tends to isolate one from one’s community because it is associated with feeling unworthy, not good enough to be in the company of others and or to feel “less then.” Religion and psychotherapy both offer help, a pathway back into the community of others, and to healthy self-acceptance. Our capacity to forgive others is enhanced by our capacity to forgive ourselves. When someone does something to me that I don’t like, I try to remember that I may very well have done something similar. Humility allows us to see our missteps.

By way of analogy, to reach the summit of Cloud Peak you have to cross a narrow bridge of boulders called “the knife edge.” On either side is a drop of about 1,000 feet. If you are to climb to the summit you must cross this bridge. In my example, one side of the knife-edge represents denial and the other side, self-recriminating guilt.

The psychologist Nathaniel Branden offers a way to strike the necessary balance, in order to cross the bridge safely. He suggests that self-forgiveness has three parts. First, we need to be able to be on our “own side,” and believe even though we did something wrong we are still worthy people. Secondly, Branden says we need to be open to looking at our misdeeds. For many of us, myself included, this is very hard to do, but the third step makes it easier: Third we need to have compassion for ourselves and try to understand the context of the wrongdoing. We need to cut ourselves some slack by noting the circumstances in which the wrongdoing occurred. For example, I may regret that I hurt another person’s feelings by speaking harshly, and I might wish I had not done so. I can also remind myself that I am still a worthy person, and I can have compassion for myself that for example, that it occurred during a challenging or stressful period. Brandon believes this stance, which includes self-care and self- compassion, makes it possible to look at misdeeds, learn from them, and move forward. Without being willing to stand up for our right to exist even with our wrongdoing, and without the capacity for compassion and self-understanding, self-forgiveness and growth would not be possible, according to Branden. We can certainly learn from our mistakes and wrongdoing! This idea of balancing between acknowledging our wrong and practicing forgiveness Branden calls “self-acceptance.” Self-acceptance means being able to be comfortable with ourselves as we are including our flaws, shortcoming and misdeeds. I have found the concept of self-acceptance to be very helpful to the clients have served. It became an inspiration for a workbook that I developed. It is also a cornerstone of a form of group therapy that I initiated and is still in use at the VA

A veteran I worked with a few years ago told me that he could never forgive himself for something he did and the only option for him was suicide. During the first month or so of working together he would not share what he had done to cause the guilt he was feeling. I kept prodding him and eventually he told me. He served in the Air Force in Germany during the Cold War and was part of a team that ran reconnaissance flights. Normally he explained to me these were not especially dangerous. Once when he was scheduled to fly he asked his good friend to trade with him so he could attend a wedding. Well, the day the friend flew in his stead the plane was shot down and he was killed. My veteran blamed himself and felt he deserved to die. I thanked him for sharing that. I then pointed out that he had no way of predicting the outcome of the switch. Then in order to help him to feel compassion for himself I asked what he would imagine his friend would think if he were alive. I also asked if the tables were turned and he flew a mission in substitution for a friend and his plane was attacked would he blame the person he traded with? He began to cry as he felt compassion for himself and sadness at the death of his friend.

Forgiveness involves respect and compassion for ourselves. It allows us to look past our errors and reestablish our healthy and sacred inter-connection with all that is and with the people we affected. It is our awareness of the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part (our seventh principle), which I referred to as the “sacred whole” that helps to restores us. Forgiveness is as natural as what some call sin and we might call mistakes, misdeeds and the harm we cause to others. When we accept our mistakes without descending too far into guilt we learn and grow. When we get stuck in guilt or are unable to look at our mistakes, we become separated from our sources of spiritual nurturance and we lose our capacity to be the fully functioning humans we were intended to be. Being in a community of faith helps restore our sense of wholeness. In the spirit of YomKippur and in the embrace of this loving community where we strive to be our best selves, may we have the courage to acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, forgive ourselves and then strive to make amends. May we also be open to forgiving others and seeing the good in them.

May it be so.