**THOUGHTS ON FORGIVENESS:**

**FORGIVENESS AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES**

**OF MARILYN SEWELL AND OTHERS**

**Presented by Bruce L. Andrews**

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan**

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Good morning, everyone. Today I’ll be sharing primarily “Five Principles for Forgiveness” from Marilyn Sewell’s book, A Little Book on Forgiveness and shorter quotes from her book, A Little Book of Reflections. One area that will not receive much coverage, although it is very important, is the area of forgiveness of self. Victor will be addressing that area next week’s presentation. It is one of the most difficult areas for me personally and I suspect for some others as well.

Now on to the principles which are in bold and Sewell’s discussion of them below each principle.

**“Principle #1: Take responsibility for any part you may have had in the hurtful situation.**

Did you invite the pain in any way? Did you allow it when you should have turned away from it? Did you go back for more, when you should’ve known better?

Some of the sting goes out of the hurt once we discover that we have contributed to its cause. Sometimes, of course, we have not been a causative agent at all. But when we are a part of a convoluted relationship with pain and we failed to accept our piece of the problem, our clinging to blame will not allow the self-reflection and change that need to occur so that we can learn and grow from our experience. We may, in fact, find ourselves in a similar situation once again, unless we see in what way we may have allowed, invited, or even collaborated in the hurtful situation.

I wonder why it is so difficult to own any part of the blame in a conflict or distressing human encounter. Perhaps we suspect that if we begin to do so, then we’ll open up a crack in our defenses – in the wall of anger, hate, and vengeance that we have built. And we need our defenses, we believe. *If I was wrong in any way, then I can’t cast all the blame on him. I’ll be letting him off the hook.* And so we continue with our vendetta, because that is the only way the offending party will be punished for what he did, we think.

But when we actually examine these thoughts, we begin to see just how illogical they are. Just who is being punished? And how are our defenses serving us in the world? We begin to see that are hanging on to our vengeful thoughts and replaying them repeatedly is what keeps us irrevocably tied to the experience we would like to leave behind, tied to the feelings that are eating away at our emotional life – and, in fact, tied to the individual who has hurt us.

**Principle #2: See people for who they are not for who you would like them to be.**

We need to understand that other people are different from ourselves – in temperament, experience, family background, and in a multitude of other ways – so why should we expect others to think and behave the way we would? Watch their behavior, listen to what they say, and learn who they are.

Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hahn uses the word “suchness” to mean the essence or true nature of a person. He says that if we want to live peacefully with another, we have to understand the substance of that person. In other words, we must recognize and respect the limits of that person. When we do, we can benefit from what that person can give, and we will not expect that person to give what he is unable to give. Let me give you a personal example. I, [Marilyn], once fell deeply in love with a man who told me, at the outset, that he was confused about relationships and didn’t know what he wanted. Furthermore, he told me that he had always had trouble with intimacy and never really loved anyone. He had recently ended a long marriage and was still in a lot of grief about his loss. On the surface of things, this fellow would not appear to be a good bet for a relationship. But I reasoned that if I loved him enough, he would come around, he would change. Logic, of course, had little to do with it – I was ferociously attracted to this man, and so I discounted all the signals that told me I was going down and emotionally destructive path.

We can’t expect people to be other than who they are. Can people change? Yes, of course. But not because of our expectations. Notice the signs that will tell you what person really is and don’t dismiss those signs. Don’t say, “He didn’t really mean to say that,” or “I’m sure that was just an oversight”. When a leopard shows his spots, know him for a leopard, not a Labrador retriever. Don’t try to pet him.

**Principle #3: Realize that forgiveness is not about the other person – it’s about you.**

Sometimes we pull back from forgiving because we misconstrue the nature of forgiveness. We may have been badly hurt by someone, and we may think that if we forgive, we believe ourselves open to new hurt from this person. But forgiveness is not about forgetting. And it’s not necessarily about reconciliation, because the other person may be absent or dead or unable to truly understand why or how you’ve been hurt. The individual may be quite willing to continue abusing you. Forgiveness may or may not include a renewed relationship with the person who has wronged us. It may be dangerous to renew this relationship.

You have every right – and in fact you have the responsibility – to set appropriate boundaries. You can forgive and decide never to see this person again. Or you can forgive and keep a distant politeness. Or you can once again have a friendship or a romantic relationship. It is entirely up to you to decide what is helpful and life giving for you.

So forgiveness is not essentially a gift to the other person, though at times it may be that, as well. It’s for you: it’s what is necessary for your emotional and spiritual and even physical well-being.

Think about what happens to us when we cannot bring ourselves to forgive. All our energy becomes engaged with this enemy, the perceived source of our unhappiness, and our power begins to drain away. Soon we cannot see clearly, for vision turns inward, supporting and nurturing our suffering. We maintain a huge reservoir of energy so that our pain might have a home, a place to live and thrive – and in the meantime, the life we could have been living escapes us forever.

My friend, the Rev. Patrick O’Neill, tells a story about his growing up days in a crowded urban neighborhood. Patrick remembers with special affection of a neighbor, a Mrs. Boutellon, who was his sister’s piano teacher, and he tells her story in the following way. An elderly woman, quiet and shy, spoke with a thick French accent. She always dressed very elegantly, always stood absolutely upright and stately. One day she taught little Patrick a lesson he has never forgotten.

He was very young, perhaps just in the first grade, when several older boys ran by him one winter day and pushed him face-first into a snow bank. He was stung with the indignity, and he sat there on the stoop of his house crying tears of outrage and frustration. Mrs. Boutellon had witnessed the incident from her upstairs window, and she came down and brushed the snow off his clothes and wiped the tears from his eyes. She brought the little boy into her kitchen, made a hot cup of cocoa for him, and fussed over him in French-accented motherly phrases that seemed to set his world right again. She said to him, “You are angry at those boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel that way. But now you must let it go. This day has other things to give you.”

It was many years later, after both Mrs. Boutellon and her husband died, that Patrick told his mother about the day Mrs. Boutellon rescued him from that humiliating experience on the front stoop. “That sounds just like her,” his mother said. “You know, don’t you, that the Boutellons were both survivors of the Nazi death camps in the War?”

It seems that Mrs. Boutellon knew a thing or two about pain and injustice. And she was able to choose to live her life and be fully present to others, in spite of all she had experienced.

Forgiveness is a profound act of self-healing. It allows us to make choices for our lives that we could not otherwise make, to make room for joy, for love. Yes, as we forgive, we find that we are no longer defined and controlled by our pain and sadness, and we see that each day has many gifts to give us. Our hearts have softened and we have opened to new experience.

**Principle #4: Stay with your grief and your pain. Get under the anger to the hurt and then on down to the sadness and grief.**

In my experience, I have found that I must navigate layers of feeling in order to get down to forgiveness. Typically, the initial feeling is anger and resentment. Underneath the anger, I have generally found pain and sadness. Toget to thehealing, we have to go there. This is a tough one. We want to deny the pain and sadness, to push it away. But the only way out of it is through it.”

In regard to”…the only way out is through it…”, I want to interject a metaphor as an aside from Sewell’s work, that I use in my counseling work often. I refer to the pain as being akin to a tear in the fabric of one’s life that weakens us. I note that if we try to go around it, over it, or under it to get by it, it sticks to us like Velcro and we drag it around with us unreconciled or unrepaired. However, if we work through it, it’s like weaving together that tear in the fabric of one’s life. And for having done that, the repair is stronger than the original fabric because of what one has learned about oneself and about life. The woven spot remains as a memory in the past where it belongs without being dragged into and interfering unnecessarily with the present and future.

Now to continue with Marilyn Sewell’s Principle #4.

“In regard to anger with another person, it’s not helpful to let our thoughts dwell on the other person. That’s of course what we tend to do – we think of her dishonesty, his cruelty, her maliciousness, his betrayal, – and the more we think about this other person who has hurt us, the more we feed our anger. We feel the pain of the closed heart.

And yet anger can be very compelling. It can make you feel strong instead of weak and vulnerable. It can also act as a bond to someone you love who has hurt you deeply, and you may come to feel that if you let go of the anger, you’re letting go of the only remaining connection that you have to this person. You may even experience a kind of perverse pleasure by wallowing around in your anger. You may enjoy the self-pity and revel in the power that you accrue as a victim. But ultimately the victim role is not an attractive one, either to yourself or to others, and remaining in that victim place is a dead-end. Give no one else the power to define you as a victim.

We don’t want to return to ourselves, for we think that the solution is outside ourselves – we think it is in blaming the other person, or getting revenge. But it is not. When we are deeply angry, the anger seems to consume us. If we can sit with the anger and the grief and breathe, in meditation, we can care for ourselves. What we notice is that space begins to form around our pain. The words of Lao Tzu offer wisdom for us:

Allow yourself to yield, and

You can stay centered.

Allow yourself to bend, and

You will stay straight.

Allow yourself to be empty, and

You will be filled.”

I, as your presenter, want to share a couple of quotes with you that help me to cope better with anger.

Anger is a dark room in which negatives are developed.

An author whose name I can’t remember

Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to

die. Buddha

**Principle #5: Realize that forgiveness is too hard to do alone – go with intentionality, but depend on grace.**

But suppose you just can’t do it. You just can’t forget. Suppose you’ve had therapy – for years. Suppose you’ve been told that old saw “Time heals all wounds,” and it hasn’t healed yours. In spite of your best efforts, and your heart-felt desire to forgive, you cannot. What then?

In the first place, don’t blame yourself for this state of affairs – forgiveness is not natural or logical, and it certainly is not easy. You can long for forgiveness. You can pray that you might open to it. But forgiveness cannot be demanded or required. Sometimes it has to be done over and over again – 70×7, as the Scripture says – because old hurts we think we’ve put away can sneak up on us with surprising force and power. Then we have to go back to the drawing board.

Something everyone should understand about us human creatures: we don’t forget loss, pain, and fear – these are stored in our very flesh, and they are stored there from the time we are born, some would say perhaps even before that, in our mother’s womb. And every new loss calls up past losses. We need not be surprised if forgiveness is difficult, or if it takes a long time. We need not feel guilty about our struggles to forgive. We are not bad people because we struggle in this way. We are just human. We cannot simply will ourselves to forgive. Quite honestly, I think forgiveness is an act of grace.

Having said that, however, I will with some trepidation suggest a path for you to follow as you move toward forgiveness, as you negotiate your way through the thicket of feeling doubts and fears. Grace is always looking for a way.

First, make a conscious decision that you want to forgive. Your feelings may not match this cognitive part of you at first, and that’s all right. That is even to be expected. The feelings will come later. Second, admit that your own volition is not enough, and without spiritual help, you cannot forgive. Third, find your own way to engage the sacred and listen. Meditate or pray or journal or walk mindfully, or do whatever seems to fit your nature. You do not have to believe in a personal God to take this step. What is required is simply the notion that there might be a dimension of knowing called “the spiritual,” and that you can receive help from this dimension.

And then, as a last step, prepare your heart to receive. What are the barriers to the spiritual work? Where is the lingering fear?

Once at a conference I ran into a woman who is known as a highly respected spiritual leader, a woman of great spiritual depth and compassion, and as we were talking, she told me the following story. She said that she had never been able to forgive her father, who had been abusive to her when she is growing up. She said that she decided to do a day-long retreat in which she did nothing but repeat a Buddhist meta-meditation as a prayer for her father. That was her way of preparing her heart. “May you, Father, be happy and peaceful of heart and mind,” she prayed. “May you, Father, be healed. May you, Father, find peace.” And so forth and so on. All day she sat and repeated these words and she said that, near the end of her day, she was suddenly flooded with feelings of compassion and love. It was a breakthrough she’d been hoping for all her life.”

Thus ends the presentation of Marilyn Sewell’s “Five Principles for Forgiveness”.

We all need to be thankful to Marilyn Sewell for her generous contributions to today’s service.

In closing this presentation, I need to say that we can all carry the weight of pain from the past and the interference that it forces into our present and future lives. Or we can practice forgiveness for ourselves and others and experience the freedom that brings. We are blessed with the opportunity to choose. Why would we chose to carry an unnecessary weight of pain when the other option is achieve greater freedom in living by gaining time and energy previously wasted on carrying an unnecessary weight? I hope freedom holds sway over pain for us all.

So may it be.

The Compassion Exercise ©

By Harry Palmer

This exercise can be done anywhere people congregate (airports, malls, park benches, etc.). It should be done on strangers, unobtrusively, from some distance. Try to do all five steps on one person. Expected results are a personal sense of peace.

Step 1 With attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

“Just like me, this person is seeking some happiness for his/her life.”

Step 2 With attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

“Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life.”

Step 3 With attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

“Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair.”

Step 4 With attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

“Just like me, this person is seeking to fulfill his/her needs.”

Step 5 With attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

“Just like me, this person is learning about life.”

1. Maybe done by couples and family members to increase understanding of each other.
2. May be done on old enemies and antagonists still present in your memories.
3. May be done on other life forms.

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