Atonement and Self-Forgiveness

Victor Ashear

Oct. 12, 2014

This year the worship committee is planning to honor as many religious holidays and holy days as possible. Speaking for myself, I am pleased with this plan. After abandoning the faith of my childhood for many years I was without a spiritual life. In recent years I have been able to find value in aspects of many of the world’s religions including Judaism, although I remain an agnostic.

My talk today has three basic parts. I will talk about *Yom Kippur,* a holy day in the Jewish faith, and about forgiveness and atonement in other religions. I will then talk about self-forgiveness from a psychological perspective. In the third segment I will share a contemporary UU perspective on forgiveness.

I spoke about forgiveness a few years ago in a talk about MLK’s concept of Beloved Community and reconciliation. I will try not to repeat myself too much today. Janet asked me to talk about this topic because “*Yom Kippur,*” the “Day of Atonement,” occurred this year on October 4th. 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 begins on the Jewish New Year, 9 days before Yom Kippur. According to the mythology, 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.

Atonement and forgiveness are not exactly the same. Forgiveness means to excuse wrongdoing, to be let go of resentment. 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 atonement leads to restoring relationship to the divine.

Regarding forgiveness, Judaism is not the only religion that offers a path. 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 and “saved.” In Islam one is forgiven by atonement. In Buddhism “wrongdoing” is also redeemed by the acknowledgment of the wrongdoing. The Universalist tradition teaches God’s infinite love is 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. The Unitarian tradition adheres to the concept of “living in covenant,” which allows us renewal through community when we err. So the Unitarian tradition also incorporates the idea of atonement or restitution.

One of the questions I want to explore with you is why is forgiveness 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 we 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.” UU Rev. Galen Guengrich said the “fundamental sin of the modern era is the tendency to disregard our utter dependency upon the people and the world around us.” What I think Guengrich means by this is that we get too focused on ourselves that we don’t appreciate what the world and others provide, without which we simply would not survive. We don’t see the harm we cause by our insensitivity and we don’t realize the debt we owe. This is a common human failing. In psychological terms we recognize the most extreme form of this common tendency as “narcissism.” People characterized by narcissism see others as merely extensions of themselves whose only purpose is to serve the needs of the narcissist. But most if not all of us cause harm to others, intentionally or unintentionally, 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 redeem 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, if a Jew has committed a sin he (it was commonly a man) he could bring a sacrificial bullock to be sacrificed, 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 bullock 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. The priest ate a part of the sacrificial offering.

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. Second, the individual seeking forgiveness had to give up something of value to be forgiven and restored. In modern times among Jews fasting and prayer replace the giving of a bullock, or the wheat flour, for 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, up to three times. The idea is you have to keep trying to gain forgiveness, but after the third trial it is assumed forgiveness will not occur. Even if you and I don’t engage in fasting or prayer perhaps we can grow spiritually and morally if we are willing to reflect on our misdeeds, seek forgiveness, and make amends.

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 from God. The role of traditional religion is to redeem from sin and restore connection with God. Our ideas about what exactly God and sin need to evolve with the advances of science and other forms of knowledge. But I think the concept of “sin” as leading to separation still has meaning to me even as an agnostic. When I do wrong I feel separated from my best self and the community of my peers, family or friends, and I need to find a path back. This may be true for you too.

When I was of school age I did many things I am not proud of. I stole sodas from the machine at school. I got into fights with some of my teachers. I engaged in some acts of vandalism. I didn’t like myself and I didn’t feel that others liked me much either. I caused my parents a lot of grief. When I was older I caused much additional hardship to my parents although I didn’t want to. To heal, in part, I have needed to work towards forgiving myself for these and many other wrongs.

Psychotherapy shares much in common with spirituality and religion. As a prime example, psychotherapy frequently involves the management of guilt. Guilt often plays a significant role in mental illness. 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 and inaction, or self-destruction. 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. 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 and own them. The failure to acknowledge our wrongdoing breeds resentment in those around us. In its extreme form, denial of guilt is associated with narcissism or psychopathic character.

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 our “utter dependence,” as Guengrich put it. 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 or at least not on equal terms. Religion and psychotherapy both offer help, a pathway back into the community of others, and to healthy self-acceptance. We might call that pathway forgiveness. It is worthwhile to seek to be forgiven by others but I want to focus today on self-forgiveness.

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 in our right to exist. Secondly, Branden says we need to be open to looking at our mistakes. For many of us, myself included, this is very hard to do. 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. Brandon believes this stance, which includes self-care and self- compassion, makes it possible to look at mistakes, learn from them, and move forward. Without being willing to stand up for our right to exist even with our mistakes, and without the capacity for compassion and self-understanding, self-forgiveness and growth would not be possible, according for Branden.

The Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous includes the request to conduct “a searching and fearless moral inventory,” a “step four” as it is called. I find the choice of words here to be quite powerful. Why “searching?” I think it is because it may not be obvious to us at first glance where our mistakes lie. We need to really dig deeply if we are going to be able to see them. Why fearless? It is because if we are too anxious to look at ourselves we will not see our transgressions. And if we don’t see them, they will continue to get in our way and we will not learn. The twelve steps also promote admitting our “wrong-doing” and making amends. For a person with an alcohol or drug problem the failure to admit mistakes means the risk of relapse. When we feel can’t forgive ourselves we continue to blame ourselves and label ourselves as “bad.” And if we are bad logically we simply can’t help but to continue to do wrong. That is what bad people do! The point I want to make here is that what is true for people struggling to recover from addiction is true for all of us, in the sense that, without self-understanding leading to self-forgiveness we will not grow; we’ll remain stuck in a pattern of behavior that neither benefits ourselves or others. And we may suffer psychiatric symptoms and alienation.

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

I’d like to ask, what in the UU tradition helps self-forgiveness? Our first principle reminds us that even with our transgressions we still have “inherent worth and dignity.” We may have acted badly but we are not inherently bad, quite the opposite. We believe in a “Universal” love that created the world and us and is prepared to forgive us. We don’t 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. We don’t have to take the rap for Adam and Eve. But we can learn from Adam and Eve 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 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 mistake, 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 and raise the child as a good Muslim.

As Rev. Guengrich 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 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.

Our Unitarian tradition calls us to be the best we can be by joining a loving community of faith with a shared covenant. We know when we enter into covenant we will likely fall short of being our best selves. However if we work to remain in covenant, it means we are willing to acknowledge our missteps and then strive to do better and restore our ties and commitments to one another. So in the Unitarian tradition covenantal relationship is a means of forgiveness and to spiritual growth.

Forgiveness involves respect and compassion for ourselves in spite of our flaws. It allows us to look past our flaws and reestablish our healthy and sacred inter-connection with all that is. It is our awareness of the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part (our seventh principle) that restores us. Forgiveness is as natural as what we used to call sin and now we might call mistakes. 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 it be so.