

***Habit of the Heart: Doors to Forgiveness***

12 October 2014

Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston, VA

Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman

**The Worship Theme for October is ‘Forgiveness’**

*This year I bring the spiritual practice called “Courage and Renewal” work to UUCR. This practice is based on the writings and workshops developed by Parker Palmer. Some of Palmer’s recent work involves living with what he calls ‘Habits of the Heart.’ These five practices of the heart build loving relationships and invite us to engage in authentic and honest conversation which can open many doors to forgiveness.*

**Reading / Hymn: #1037:** “We Begin Again in Love”

**Sermon**

Autumn is a time of turning. The earth is turning. Trees are colorful, temperatures are falling. In autumn, I contemplate my own turning as well: assessing personal and professional life, encouraged by the Jewish High Holy Days just past: Rosh Hashanah --- Jewish New Year --- and Yom Kippur --- Day of Atonement, when Jews are called to make amends for wrongs of the past year. A time of turning, a time of atonement --- ‘at-one-ment’ --- a time of forgiveness. Additionally, think on all the turning in life here at UUCR: a new faith development program; a new plan for Sunday mornings; a new banner; new members

This time of atonement reminded me of a short story by Leo Tolstoy’s I read a few years ago: “The Death of Ivan Ilyich.” It’s not a cheery story, but resonates with thoughts of turning. Ivan lives in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. Employed in the judicial system, he lives a good material life, among cultural elites, but his relationships are spiritually dead. Through his entire life, he has few deep friendships, he knows little about love, even from his family. Most sadly, he has no sense of his own inherent worth and dignity and no agency over his own life. He lives in global negativity. Stuck in early family patterns, he never discovered how to live out his own desires, follow his own passions. It was only when a sudden and fast-moving illness awakened his realization of mortality that he is able to confess to a priest his intense regret about the life he’s lived. It is only as he sensed something outside himself, which some call God, that he is able to open the door ever so slightly to forgiving himself for wasting his life. Alas, such awakening come late: he dies without having enough time to find complete forgiveness of himself and others.

Ivan’s story reminds us that this stuff of being human is not easy. The reader grieves for Ivan, for his flat existence. Ivan’s story also reminds us of how challenging it is to change stuck habits that keep us from finding wholeness. We humans are constantly making choices based on experiences and values to which we’ve been conditioned. Even if we approach our choices with great intentionality, outcomes are not certain. There is no human alive who has not made a

mistake or might have chosen a better path. There is no human alive who has not become tangled in situations calling for forgiveness, so to move toward atonement and wholeness. Let us explore forgiveness this morning. It's that time of the year.

### Definition of 'Forgiveness'

I like Louis Smede's definition of 'forgiveness:' I offered this before but it remains powerful. 'to forgive is to surrender the right to get even.' Forgiving is not forgetting, or just tolerating or excusing. Forgiveness is not giving in. Instead, forgiving is a turning from hurtful actions so that they do not dominate our lives. Forgiveness is letting go of resentment and the vision of self-as-victim. Forgiving is turning, so that wrongs of the past do not dominate the present and the future.

Forgiveness is complicated. It's important to remember that forgiveness goes in two directions: we can ask for forgiveness for a wrong we have done, and we can accept forgiveness from others. We can do either direction without the participation of the other party.--- Even if you want nothing to do with me, I can forgive you for a past hurt. --- Sometimes the toughest forgiveness is of ourselves: unresolved guilt about our own perceived shortcomings may keep us from wholeness with others. It can be challenging to break old habits of silence, or secret-keeping, or denial, to discover what is keeping us stuck. Ivan Ilyich had only a glimmer of forgiveness before he died.

I read Tolstoy's story as part of an online course on forgiveness. Forgiveness has been well studied in many disciplines: psychology, sociology, theology. In the course we learned several methods for engaging in forgiveness. Yet even more important for me than those methods for forgiveness, what was the greatest insight for me in that course is where we started our study. We began the course by studying shame. The need for forgiveness often arises out of shame. Rather than shame, we tend to associate guilt with forgiveness: we do something to hurt another, feel guilty about it, and seek forgiveness. Shame is the more intense emotion; we experience guilt when we make a mistake or break a rule; we experience shame when we live with a pervasive sense of failure, or understand ourselves as a mistake. Think how bullying generates shame. Shame generates alienation from ourselves and from whatever we consider as a source of life. Shame has been described as the underside of narcissism: shame creates a self riddled with unworthiness. Shame obscures our capacity for intimacy, trust and wholeness, conditions needed for forgiveness to be truly effective. Shame also interferes with creativity: it's hard to be a co-creator of the universe if we feel negative about our very being. In the long run, we cannot hide from shame: the challenge is how to acknowledge it when we do encounter it in our lives so to move past it.

Unacknowledged shame can escalate, perhaps to rage, possibly to violence. Think about families in which relatives haven't spoken to one another for years. Think how shame is used as a weapon for social and political power: messages of shame which women seeking abortions often have to work through, or maybe walk through, depending on which clinic they use. Or shame for loving someone of the same sex: what an act of wholeness this state of Virginia and other states experienced this week: thank you Supreme Court! Ian Ilyich was deeply wounded by shame. It was only when he acknowledged his shame that began to forgive himself and move

toward the state of goodness into which he was born. Unfortunately, he ran out of time. Forgiveness usually demands trust and patience from us.

### Benefits

Forgiveness has powerful benefits. It helps us maintain relationships with ourselves and others. It opens the door to the wholeness we were born into. Forgiveness can remove grudges from our back. Forgiveness can change lives. Forgiveness is also literally good for your health: subjects who avoid forgiveness have higher blood pressure, sustained for longer periods, than do subjects who have forgiven those who wronged them. Forgiveness opens us to creativity. It really does make us more complete human beings. Desmond Tutu said there is no future without forgiveness. Forgiveness brings us hope.

I have my own story of realizing shame and moving beyond it. It is a story of misconduct toward me. When I was new in ministry, I worked with a minister colleague in a particular setting where the relationship never felt right: we were by definition of different 'rank' and I felt a lot of power over me, which was manifest by giving me orders, refuting my authority in front of staff members, calling on 'old boy' colleagues to put me in my place, and more. When I spoke my truth about this power imbalance, I was pushed to places of shame for my forthrightness. I was referred from office to office around the denomination: I could not figure out where accountability lay for this situation. Just as my new career in ministry was getting off the ground, I questioned whether I'd made a mistake shifting from academia. In the end, I learned how to move beyond the shame: I survived the situation, and took it as an important learning, to not let myself get into such messes again. Yet it still nagged at me: it didn't feel right. It wasn't sexual misconduct, but it was abuse of power.

Then last summer at the Providence General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists, the new moderator (that is, the highest lay leader of the denomination) offered an official apology on behalf of the entire denomination for clergy misconduct in the past which had gone unacknowledged. The moderator's goal was directed toward the future: not to review the past, but to offer a vision, to say that there will be accountability, should abuse of power between clergy and congregations arise in the future. The moderator also apologized on behalf of the denomination. The tears in my eyes as I heard his report made me realize that I still had processing to do of the shame that I had experienced years ago. But the tears were important. There is no future without forgiveness.

The final project in that course on forgiveness I referred to earlier was a study of how to work through a personal example of forgiveness. I picked a family issue. Through this project, I came to understand more clearly how this particular family issue had generated shame throughout our entire family network. I came to realize that as long as I remained a 'victim' of that shame, even as a mature adult with numerous advanced degrees to my credit, unless I intentionally choose a new path, I would remain locked in childlike habits whenever the shame-inducing situation was replayed in current family dynamics. Once I realized these shame dynamics. I could forgive myself. I cast heavy emotional weight from my back. Forgiveness is powerful.

### The Role of Religion

Most religions in the world include forgiveness as a subject of their theological systems. How do you understand forgiveness as part of Unitarian Universalist identity and practice? Do you find ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘I forgive you’ in your vocabulary? How common are the words, ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘I forgive you’ in your vocabulary? Here at church, these words and the actions they imply are central to keeping our covenants strong, vital, healthy. How powerful these words from the responsive reading: “We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.”

### Methods of Forgiveness

As a response to the question of how this congregation might follow up with more on methods of forgiveness, I leave this question for future in-depth examination. Instead, now I’d like to turn this sermon a bit, and come back to Ivan and his shame. Let me then describe a method not for forgiveness but for fending off shame and other yucky personal states. That method is called ‘Habits of the Heart.’

I’ve told you about a particular spiritual practice I am training in, called ‘Courage’ work, developed by the Quaker spiritual writer Parker Palmer. The core of the work is about finding our authentic self: living out the self who was born in each of us, living authentically, living a life that matches our inherent or natural tendencies. Palmer has been writing about such spiritual engagement since the late 1970s. Ivan’s life story actually reminded me of Parker Palmer’s: Parker arrived at some of his deepest spiritual insight during three clinical depressions, just as it took serious illness for Ivan to begin to find himself.

The Center for Courage and Renewal which Palmer created offers retreats, workshops, and publications which promote diverse aspects of this spiritual practice. This week I will attend training in central Texas for Courage facilitators: rest assured you the congregation will have pastoral care coverage during my absence: stay tuned for Eblast messages. I might suggest that Ivan could have benefited from attending a Courage retreat. Being with others learning this program of authenticity helps us prepare ourselves for any steps we want to take toward forgiveness. Courage practices create safe places to risk vulnerability, to risk change. Courage work provides good grounding to build healthy relationships. So that even if and when situations come along requiring us to either give or receive forgiveness, we are able to handle those situations much more easily and compassionately.

Starting in January here at UUCR I will offer an adult faith development class based on Courage work, a program called Circles of Trust. This program offer specific guidelines for being together in small groups of eight to twelve to create an environment which builds intimacy, vulnerability, and ... well, as the name says... trust. In this state of trust, we can more easily negotiate life-processes. Circles of Trust includes something called Clearness Committees, which I’ll explain more about later.

One of the guidelines for creating Circles of Trust is called ‘Habits of the Heart.’ Parker Palmer articulated these five Habits of the heart with the political arena in mind, as guidelines for sustaining democracy. Yet, these Habits are so fundamental to healthy existence in both public and private arenas that they can inform the trust-building that Circles of Trust aims for. We will unpack these five Habits in detail during the class but for now let me give you a sense of them by listening Parker Palmer’s five Habits of the Heart:

1. An understanding that we are all in this together.
2. An Appreciation of the value of otherness.
3. An Ability to hold tensions in life-giving ways, a topic I preach on a few weeks ago.
4. A Sense of personal voice and agency.
5. A Capacity to create community.

In advance of January's Circles of Trust class, to get to know Parker Palmer's work, we will also have reading groups during Second Hour on three Sundays designated for adult faith development: the first will be November 2, when we discuss his book *Let Your Life Speak*. Stay tuned to the weekly EBlast for more details.

One other note about adult faith development: today after the congregational meeting, along with the reception for the artist here in the sanctuary, in the board room we will play a powerful DVD called *The Power of Forgiveness*: short case studies of forgiveness, such as of the Amish in Lancaster County, PA. Feel free to stop in and watch, for a few minutes or the entire program.

### Community

One reason we come to church is for the community of others. May we engage Habits of the Heart to strengthen this community by deepening relationships and increasing trust and intimacy. As UUCR moves forward Visioning the Future, may we strive for authentic identity in ourselves and in this congregation. May we remember that in this time of turning, we can move us toward a more authentic relationship with love, with life, and with one another.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO.

*This is a draft copy of this sermon: it has not received final editing.  
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