

# Forgiving Yourself

By Marsha Fawns

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I chose to write and ultimately share my thoughts about forgiveness because it became evident to me that it is something that I continue struggling with: feeling forgiveness, granting it, understanding its power to transform my awareness, and my moment to moment feeling about myself and my existence.

There have been several triggers over the past few years that have made me aware that I needed to seriously grapple with the concept of forgiveness. Most recently I have been consumed by my reactions to the nastiness in politics, prior to and following the election. I found the slandering, the outright lying, hard to forgive and found myself harshly judging the gullible folks who espoused views I found irrational and abhorrent. I didn't like my feelings, my judging attitude. I thought I had dealt long ago with acknowledging the unfairness of life, the cruel inequities that are constant and that I would not become bitter and unforgiving ... apparently not. Buttons were being pushed during every news cast and I realized that the only way I could regain a more Buddhist Nature would be to go deep inside and try to more thoroughly understand forgiveness.

My quest has been something between a term paper and a Master's thesis. I can happily report that there are a lot of resources out there: many hundreds of books and articles.

From a practical point of view, forgiving is healthy. Countless studies have documented the benefits of maintaining a forgiving attitude. From a summary by Kelly Wallace:

*“Lowered heart rate and blood pressure, reduced stress and hostility levels in general, reduced depression, anxiety and chronic pain, increased feelings of wellbeing, improved relationships.”*

We'd best develop the skill of forgiving!

In researching the Unitarian Principles and Purposes I found in the Article II: Covenant C-2 section under *“the inherent worth and dignity of every person”* the following:

*“At the core of Unitarian Universalism is recognition of the sanctity of every human being across the lifespan. We are relational creatures, capable of both good and evil. We have experienced enough brokenness, including in ourselves, to seek the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. We are called to make choices that help to heal and transform ourselves and the world, and to move toward solidarity with all beings.”*

Forgiveness ... *“including in ourselves”* ... and so it must start there.

As children we were told we were granted forgiveness after mumbling *“I'm sorry”*, even through gritted teeth, staring down at our shoes rather than at the sibling or whomever we were apologizing to. Our Catholic friends were forgiven automatically by priests after confessions. Then, some of us were taught in Christian churches, that Jesus suffered and died for our sins so that always, we are forgiven. Adlai Stevenson wrote: *“For my part I believe in the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of ignorance.”*

Slowly, the concepts of blame, guilt, forgiveness and alas, revenge, became concepts we tried to understand. As Alden Nowlan says,

*“The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent;  
the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult;  
the day she forgives herself she becomes wise.”*

A brief look at sin, guilt, and shame... and then we can work on forgiving ourselves and become wise. In his article *“The Usefulness of Sin”*, published in the UU World, Philip Simmons says

*“Shame is a communal creation; it’s a matter of looking bad in others’ eyes. Guilt is more inward, having more to do with one’s relation to oneself.” And later “We may recoil from the idea of sin because it seems to name what is wrong about us. Most of us suffer feelings of unworthiness and need no further reminders of our failings, thank you. We look to religion to lift us up, not beat us down further.”*

So how can religion lift us up? Simmons explores

*“atoning for one’s sins-as Jews do on Yom Kippur- (which) means, among other things, acknowledging one’s interdependence with others and with all existence.”*

.....Ah, back to UU principles, the interdependent web

He ends by saying *“the whole point of acknowledging our sins is to announce our openness to healing”*.

Recognizing that as part of humanity, we have, always, failings that need to be forgiven by ourselves, let us begin by filling ourselves, healing ourselves, with the **“Spirit of Life”, in your hymnal page 123.**

**Please turn to Responsive Reading #637...I’ll read the bold, you’ll read the italics.**

**MEDITATION ON FORGIVING YOURSELF**  
**by Sri Chinmoy**

*“If I cannot forgive myself for all the blunders that I have made over the years, then how can I proceed? How can I ever dream perfection dreams?”*

*“Move, I must, forward.”*

*“Fly, I must, upward.”*

*“Dive, I must, inward,”*

*“To be once more what I truly am and shall forever remain.”*

We **ARE** beautiful, and brilliant, and mistake-making beings. Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

*“We know better than we do. We do not yet possess ourselves.”*

Forgiving oneself is, I believe, accepting all our many talents and abilities AND our propensity to make mistakes. Our innate nature is such that we will forget, be insensitive at times, explode in anger when over-stressed....in short fail in an endless variety of ways, over and over again. So, we must forgive ourselves again and again.

Hannah Arendt wrote:

*“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.”*

So close your eyes if you will and focus on one action or even oft revealed trait in your behavior that needs to be forgiven. As you decide on the one, don’t allow yourself to feel overwhelmed by all the options. We all have made plenty of blunders and will continue to make mistakes. Stay mindful of the Chinese Proverb:

*“Do not be afraid of growing slowly, Be afraid only of standing still”*

I'll guide you through, using Rev. Arline Conan Sutherland's steps and some of my own:

*“Realize that what you have done is harmful...name it*

*Allow yourself brief regret*

*Explore possibilities for setting things right*

*Consider ways to avoid such a situation in the future”*

Now enclose that time, those feelings, in a bubble and gently, blow it far from you...it is in the past...no longer part of you, now....you **ARE** cleansed, new, in the present, filled with the spirit of life.

### **FORGIVING OTHERS**

Forgiveness of self means that you've decided not to let feelings of guilt and unworthiness keep festering inside. You've acknowledged regret and decided that to continue angsty accomplishes nothing. As Paul Boese put it:

*“Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”*

Forgiveness of others is, I believe, a bit more complex. We have trouble enough controlling our own thoughts and actions, we cannot control those of others. If we have high standards and expectations of ourselves and others (and Unitarians are famous for their idealism) we are bound to be hurt and disappointed, often. Frequently, continually, we **WILL** be treated unfairly. The situations range from being merely irritating to extremely upsetting and painful. There is an opportunity to examine what is irritating: who and what do you find yourself needing to forgive....why? I read once that it is hardest to forgive those we have hurt. HMMM. C.S. Lewis said:

*“Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.”*

As I explore feeling hurt, betrayed in the past and my past and current feelings about the people involved, I find that as I have matured and meditated more, it has become easier to let many things flow through, put them into perspective, and let them go.

To forgive, according to Webster ,

*“is to cease to feel resentment against.”*

Some situations are more than mere ego wounds. Some people have been truly unkind, causing harm that is not easily healed. A few relationships cannot be repaired and should not be, when objectively it is clear that they are, in new age terms “toxic”. As Catherine Morgan put it:

*“You can forgive someone, but still choose to distance yourself from them to protect yourself from their negative or hurtful behavior.”*

Some UU material I read said that in these cases

*“forgiveness is an expression which does not deny, excuse or forget another person's offense, but agrees to set it aside in the interest of healing and ongoing life.”*

So we'll assume that most of us are psychologically healthy and have learned the skills of dealing with misunderstandings and the forgettable and move into how to forgive the really unfair treatment that we all receive at times. As Dan Fallon wrote:

*"You don't have to accept the invitation to get angry. Instead, practice forgiveness, empathy and encouragement."*

In the book "Stroke of Insight" the neurologist author who is recovering from a stroke, documents the seconds between the emergence of anger and our decision to attach to it. Resentment and forgiveness are indeed choices.

For me it is the unfairness of some situations that is hardest to let go of.

A personal example: during an otherwise challenging and fulfilling teaching career, with basically wonderful colleagues, I was/we were forced for several years to deal with a co-worker who was unqualified, cruelly unfair, severely verbally abusive and arrogant but charmed the director and was in fact promoted to power over many. Her sadistic treatment of us continued for three more years. Some situations/relationships cannot be repaired, only survived.

Forgiveness granted inside yourself actually strengthens you by releasing more energy to you.

### **SOME THOUGHTS**

From Carrie Ten Boom:

*"Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."*

From Moulton Farnham:

*"Our friends are those who know their own faults well enough to forgive us ours."*

From Luke 6:37:

*"Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven."*

And then there is

*"turn the other cheek" and do so over and over..."seventy seven times"*

And

*"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."...(sometimes they DO know however)*

So back to the toxic relationship, the relationship is emotionally dangerous for you, but must continue on some level.

### **SOME MORE THOUGHTS**

From Confucius:

*"To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it."*

From Catherine Ponder:

*“When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free.”*

From Oscar Wilde:

*“Always forgive your enemies-nothing annoys them so much.”*

From Alan Paton:

*“When a deep injury is done us, we never recover until we forgive.”*

So.....an act of will, done for ourselves, regardless of whether the person wants or deserves our forgiveness.

Join me in singing Hymn #179 **“Words That We Hold Tight”**

**Let us read in Unison Selection #477**

### **MEDITATION on FORGIVING OTHERS**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote:

*“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we would find in each person’s life, sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”*

Lewis Smedes said:

*“You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.”*

From a Yom Kippur ritual:

*“All our lives we have been told to seek that which is good, To turn our faces from the dark and toward the light, toward beauty, toward truth.*

*But the truth is that the world is not always good:*

*The light we seek casts shadows, and there is brokenness amid the beauty. Our world is far from perfect, and so are we.*

*We strive to be in right relations with one another, but there are times when we are left angry or disappointed, even as we sometimes anger or disappoint others.*

*Whether it is the harsh words said by a loved one, the loss of a friendship, the carelessness of a stranger, or the scars left by a childhood trauma, Bad things do happen.*

*We cannot seek Truth, Beauty, and Light without acknowledging and affirming that which is false, broken, and in shadow, for all of these exist within us as well.*

*In this moment of silence let us remember the wrongs we have endured, the imperfections that we have perpetuated, that we may forgive them and ourselves, and forgive yet again.”*

Close your eyes, open your heart and visualize a person or a situation where you felt greatly wronged.

Consider:

- how and why the situation happened*
- how you might have contributed to the situation*
- look on this person with compassion and forgiveness*
- let them go to be who they are*
- and reaffirm who you are*

### **FORGIVING the SUFFERING of HUMANITY**

Now onto the hardest: the corruption and greed and cruelty that abounds in corporations and governments. All the suffering of friends and strangers. Each agony hurts, the randomness, the inability to stop the unfairness, or prevent the tragedies.....feelings build. It is easy and perhaps even rational, to move into anger and cynicism and depression. We are all in post traumatic syndrome every time we watch the news.

Thomas Stephen Szasz wrote:

*“The stupid neither forgive nor forget: the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive and do not forget.”*

From Bishop Desmond Tutu:

*“In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously....drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens our entire existence.”*

So how does one go about forgiving the way Life seems to be, the way that the bullies usually win and the hurting never really ends for long? One can drop out and create as safe a bubble as possible and live in denial. One can live a Don Quixote kind of life and fight the windmills.

The connectedness that Unitarians acknowledge is a strong part of capacity for approaching this kind of forgiveness. Our lives are indeed valuable but only thin threads of the tapestry.

In “Choose Your Enemies Carefully” UU Rev. Forrest Church writes:

*“National or collective sin almost always cloaks self-interest in the garb of higher virtue. Not only as individuals but as a nation, we justify questionable means by noble ends.”*

He refers to Reinhold Niebuhr’s description of

*“our penchant for adjudging ourselves good because our enemies are evil as ‘the secret of the relationship between cruelty and self-righteousness.’”*

Reverend Church asserts that “given our natural egotism and instinct for survival (which through opportunistic self-rationalization easily morph into the drive to dominate), sin is bred in the human bone.”

And yet

*“....We all want and need love and security and freedom and acceptance. We need others’ forgiveness and understanding. All of us do. This is the centerpiece of theological*

*universalism. To whatever extent we place our primary identification with creed or nation, with race or gender, with school or party, we betray our common humanity.”*

Mark Davis in a letter to the Boston Globe wrote:

*“I believe the point is not to condone evil but rather to avoid being consumed by the hatred and lust for vengeance that evil inspires. This is not softheaded mumbo jumbo. It’s a cultural strategy for self-preservation and mental health.”*

From many articles I found phrases like *“We live in a world of escalating atrocities”* ...no argument there. Gandhi’s words remind us how our actions and attitudes influence, even as we feel overwhelmed by our powerlessness:

*“Be the change that you want to see in the world” and “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attitude of the strong.”*

Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

*“Forgiveness is not an occasional act: it is an attitude.” And “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.”*

For me, it is also a matter of balancing as best I can: taking in as much of reality as I can bear, then backing off for a while to nurture myself. I do a little here and there to right wrongs while still living as I wish, claiming time for the people and activities that nourish me, while working long hours at a job and on the countless tasks required to keep a home and my body functioning.

In order to keep my spirits up as I face the suffering and the anger I feel about what could be avoided if only the CEOs and government officials would do what I think is right, I find I can move out of my anger ONLY if I work with forgiveness and gratitude and make time for my creative and spiritual selves. The space and energy I have allotted for my anger can, if only temporarily, be filled with love and compassion.

Please join me in **hymn # 34...**”**Though I May Speak With Bravest Fire”**

**Responsive Reading #461...I’ll read the BOLD type**

**MEDITATION on FORGIVING the SUFFERING of HUMANITY**

Jankelevitch wrote:

*“There is nothing in the end, cannot be forgiven, but there remains much that is inexcusable.”*

Words from Marianne Williamson:

*“Forgiveness does not mean that we suppress anger; forgiveness means that we have asked for a miracle: the ability to see through mistakes that someone has made to the truth that lies in all our hearts. Forgiveness is not always easy. At times, it feels more painful than the wound we suffered, to forgive the one that inflicted it. And yet, there is no peace without forgiveness. Attack thoughts towards others are attack thoughts towards ourselves. The first step in forgiveness is the willingness to forgive.”*

Let us open to widening our forgiveness to all the imperfect and therefore often harmful people in power throughout the world. From Rev. Dr. Neal R. Jones of the UU Fellowship of Columbus, South Carolina:

*“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Suffering anywhere rends the hearts of compassionate people everywhere.”*

*“Let us light a candle (in our hearts) of forgiveness that does not condone or excuse but seeks to understand that violence is but a symptom of vulnerability, fear, and hopelessness.*

*May understanding melt our resentment into empathy and compassion.”*

And may this forgiveness allow us more time and energy to be ourselves.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

By: Edwin C. Lynn

*“We breathe in Faith    And exhale hopelessness  
We breathe in gratitude    And exhale indifference  
We breathe in Beauty    And exhale insensitivity  
We breathe in joy    And exhale sadness  
We breathe in kindness    And exhale harshness  
We breathe in forgiveness    And exhale resentment  
We breathe in love    And exhale isolation.”*

### **BENEDICTION**

From Rolfe Gerhardt:

*“....To heal we must forgive. We must gather strength, and insight, and compassion, and kindness, and love,.....and forgive.*

*Let us forgive those who wrong us and do not know any better,  
And those who wrong us and know well what they do.*

*Let us forgive the insensitive and the angry,  
The deceitful and the exploitative, the arrogant, and the insecure.*

*Let us forgive all who do not want peace in this world.*

*Let us forgive all who do not wish to be forgiven,  
And let us forgive ourselves,*

*For it is with ourselves that we are often the most unforgiving.*

*Let us, in this spirit of forgiveness, gather all that we can  
Of strength, and insight, and compassion, and kindness, and love, and purify  
our hearts and minds that the spirit of forgiveness may shape the days of our  
lives beginning this moment.”*