

In the New Year: Forgiveness

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Unitarian Society of Hartford

by Sue Smolski

The start of a New Year brings with it a sense of the Unknown; a sense of new opportunities; perhaps, a time to consider how priorities might shift or what new opportunities for growth might lie ahead.

It can also bring a time for Reflection.

Peter Meny's opening words on Christmas Eve resonated deeply with me. They bear repeating....

He said, "It has been a year of significant change, uncertainty, and challenge at the Unitarian Society of Hartford. At times some of us have been anxious, hurt, and/or bewildered by the unexpected challenges we have faced together and the losses we have experienced. At the same time, we have been blessed with extraordinary commitment, inspired worship, friendship, care, generosity, and compassion...".

In the spirit of that message, an invitation is extended to reflect personally about the past year and your current life situation, including as a member of this congregation-community.

A look back at some of the pulpit messages from this church year of "Love In Action" found that QUESTIONS were prominent in several services.

In September, Reverend Jan Carlsson-Bull asked these questions about the Jewish New Year, written by Julia Cadrain, Senior Cantor in Westport, Connecticut. "What would I do if I weren't afraid? How have I supported my family or community in the past year? When in the last year have I felt connected to God or to a cause greater than myself?".

Just after Thanksgiving, Reverend Aaron Payson began his sermon, "The Courage to Hope", with these questions: "What does fear tell me to do? If you are hope, what does hope look, sound, or act like?; What does it take to try see yourself?".

Throughout the Fall, Judy Robbins, frequent pulpit guest and Worship Associate, asked these questions AND we were invited to respond during the Forum Services (and respond we did!): "Why do I come to the Unitarian Society of Hartford? How do I make decisions?; Why am I a Unitarian Universalist?; How does my religion play out in my Life?".

This morning's question is How might this year unfold for each of us and this community if we were more forgiving?

This question grows out of a need that I have been grappling with, off and on, for some time.

During the Winter Solstice Service, there was a Burning Cauldron Ritual---The Cauldron of Letting Go. We were asked "to identify, from our hearts, what burdens we no longer wanted to carry with us into the new Season, an issue, struggle, or negative thoughts we no longer wanted to carry. We wrote them down on small pieces of paper and each of us dropped our paper into the deep cauldron bowl during the ritual.

What did you write, if you were there or what would you have written? Me? I wrote "grudges".

I am aware of one longstanding grudge that I am weary of carrying. It impedes my efforts to be my better self AND it is in conflict with our first three principles!

The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, and Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

During our Christmas Day Service, Ron Friedman and I spoke broadly about Gifts. Ginny Allen shared this reading about Forgiveness following December's Lunch Bunch Gathering.

The author is Carl Scovel, Minister Emeritus, King's Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts and was printed by Skinner Books in "Never Far From Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit".

"The Gift of Forgiveness" begins with a conversation between the discipline Peter and the adult Jesus:

" 'Lord, I know you think we should forgive each other,' Peter must have said to Jesus. 'But what do we do when we forgive someone, and he is not as nice as we are? What if he keeps on sinning against me? How many times should I forgive? Seven? Seven times seven?'"

" 'No,' said Jesus, 'seventy times seven. For that's how it is in the Kingdom of God.' "

"Peter's answer is not recorded. I'll bet he was thinking, 'So who wants to go there?' "

"If we hear what Jesus is saying as a rule, we misunderstand him. Jesus did not mean that Peter or we should count offenses right up to the 490th and then let our enemy have it on the 491st. Jesus meant that Forgiveness is a way of life.....what on earth does that mean?"

"First, we must understand that there are three things forgiveness is not. It's not denial. When we forgive, we don't forget that we were hurt, that we hurt now, or that we may hurt for a long time--- perhaps a lifetime. Forgiveness is not denial."

"Second, forgiveness is not excusing. It's not being 'nice'...when we forgive, we don't pretend that the offender is not responsible because of childhood or biology. A human being is responsible. Forgiveness is not excusing."

"Third, forgiveness is not forgetting. When we forgive, we do not block the memory, nor do we nourish it."

"What, then, is forgiveness? That's a hard one to answer, but again as I thought of that discussion, an answer came to me."

"Forgiveness is not something we give or do, but something we receive. It is not an action. It's a gift. It comes when we want it, and it does not come before."

"It is easy to cherish anger and hurt. They give us an identity, however, false, and sometimes the wrath and pain feel better than the emptiness which comes when we surrender them. But we pay a price for indulging our anger. It cripples us. We become paralyzed."

"When we forgive, we are freed, not from the hurt, but from the dominating power of the hurt. We are able to give up our anger. The hurt and wrath will no longer direct us. However, it happens, we are free."

"We may still suffer the consequences of the offense, but the offense no longer masters us."

"Do you see? Forgiveness comes first for our sake, and then for the sake of the offenders, if they are penitent."

"They might not be. They may not know. They may not want to know. But we, the aggrieved, are free."

And now, a bit of the science and psychology of forgiveness...These days if you have a smart phone, Ipad, or computer, you can access these ideas and much, much, more.

"Forgiveness means the release of resentment or anger, it doesn't (necessarily) mean reconciliation. One does not have to return to the same relationship or accept the same harmful behavior from the offender."

"Forgiveness propels people forward rather than keeping us emotionally engaged in an injustice or trauma. However, there are scenarios in which forgiveness is not the best course for a particular person. For instance, sometimes a victim of sexual abuse becomes more empowered when they give themselves permission not to forgive". (Psychological Today, no author cited).

Rubin Khoddam, PhD, in his article, "The Psychology of Forgiveness" describes forgiveness as the "cornerstone of any relationship, romantic or otherwise. We assume people see Life the way we see Life. However, there are as many perceptions as there are people in the world. Our lack of understanding of other people's perceptions can create gaps built on miscommunication, anger, animosity, and emotional disconnection. However, our relationship with forgiveness can help bridge that gap."

"Forgiveness is a PROCESS that takes time for most. When betrayal and miscommunication inhibit our ability to forgive, it is OK to feel these feelings. Shock and anger often comes before forgiveness."

Psychologist Robert Enright delineated these four steps to Forgiveness---they might be helpful:

"The first is to uncover your anger by explaining how you've avoided or addressed the emotion.

The second is to make the decision to forgive. Begin by acknowledging that ignoring or coping with the offense hasn't worked and therefore, forgiveness might provide a path forward.

Cultivate forgiveness by developing empathy for the offender. Reflect on whether the act was due to malicious intent or the offender's life.

Lastly, release harmful emotions and reflect on how you may have grown from the experience and the act of forgiveness itself."

Rubin Khoddam finishes his article this way:

"I want to leave you with one last quote from Oprah Winfrey, who said, 'Forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past could be different.' "

Rubin wants us to begin to think about forgiveness and how we can incorporate it into our Lives. Who can we forgive? Are we ready to forgive? He concludes with: "Sometimes the person we need to forgive the most is ourselves."

Perhaps, these words from Buddah will resonate with you..."If you focus on the hurt, you continue to suffer. If you focus on the lesson, you will continue to grow."

If it is Forgiveness that calls out to you as you begin this New Year, I wish us success. If it is something else, I wish you success, as well.

Perhaps you would like to bring these ideas along with you on your journey--four things that lead to wisdom and 3 questions to ask before speaking:

"These are four sentences we learn to say and mean. (He held up his hand in a fist and raised one finger with each point). I don't know; I need help; I'm sorry; I was wrong "
(from "Still Life", 2005)

"Before speaking, you might want to ask yourself these questions--Is it true? Is it kind?; Does it need to be said?" (From A Better Man, 2019)

The source? the writings of award winning, author extraordinaire, Louise Penny.

In the spirit of entering fully into this New Year, let us rise in body or spirit and sing hymn #168, One More Step.
