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Reflection: On Being Released  
San Miguel UU  
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### Part I

Today I invite you to reflect with me on *seeking* forgiveness, *asking* for forgiveness and, most importantly, *understanding* ourselves both as needing forgiveness and as forgiven. And... this is not so easy. It is far more easy to talk about forgiving others.

The underlying assumption of forgiving *others* is a comfortable one, even an empowering one. The assumption is this: *you* are right and the *other* is wrong. Even more deliciously, you are right and the other has wronged *you*.

Oh, now, all that pent up disappointment you lug around with you everyday is given a blank check to both luxuriate in our minor martyrdom and also to vent itself in resentment until such time as we remember that we might *do* and *be* better by forgiving (which we'll get to next week). But first the little narcissistic bubble bath of martyrdom, resentment, victory and then forgiving. Right?

Throughout it all, and even afterwards, there is the ego gratification of being momentarily superior. And that feels nice..

So it's easier, and even somehow automatically correct feeling, to think about forgiveness when *we're* the one doing the forgiving. The far trickier thing is to talk about forgiveness when we are *seeking* forgiveness. We don't like to think about that much.

Now among UU's especially there is a fundamental and institutionalized predisposition that does us a disservice in this regard, even though it was honestly and righteously acquired. Our first principle holds that all people have inherent worth and dignity. This is, to use theological language, a salvific message. It is the evolving form of Universal Salvation, that soil within which the Universalist root of our tradition was planted. And this notion of inherent worth absolutely saves lives and empowers our best behavior.

But because it is not paired with a balancing statement about our fallibility, it *can* be superficial and comes with a dark side of unintended consequences. The lack of this balancing statement is

likely because, in some ways our first principle is a critique of, or alternative to, or reaction to the Christian concept of original sin.

Original sin is that concept rooted in the story of Adam and Eve and eating the apple against the wishes of the God that designed them. The idea being that all subsequent people shared in that original sin. We are therefore inherently sinful. We are inherently flawed.

It's a story that has some wisdom in it but has also been much abused and *used* to abuse over the ages. I am certain many here have been offended by such use. It was used to shame and scare and exacerbate self-loathing in people, generating a need for the salvific goods sold by the church. In reaction to that, to push back on that, *our* tradition insisted that we were all saved. And we now insist that we are originally, inherently worthy and dignified. Instead of a *mea culpa*, we offer encouragement and comfort and hope.

The dark side of that encouragement has been the denial, or at least ignoring, of our inherent imperfection. This aids and abets expectations for perfection, which, conveniently, we usually apply primarily to others... sometimes to ourselves. This expectation never ends well. This in turn has led to the curious and hypocrisy that we as UUs are *institutionally* accepting, but individually and interpersonally no less judgemental than those other religious traditions we disparage for being so.

Curiously, many of us UU's, myself included, admire the teachings of the Buddha as an alternative source of religious wisdom and stories. And yet, the very first of Buddha's teachings was that suffering -*dukkha* - is woven through life. And this highlights the same thing that original sin highlights, which is this: the inherently painful nature of being alive. I think the difference between the Christian and Buddhist ideas here are more in their presentation and semantics than their theology, anthropology, or ontology.

Original sin feels more personal; like it's a judgement upon us that we did not earn. Whereas the Buddhist concept that with life comes with suffering feels more like an observation. But the Buddha was not saying that *we* are pristine and all *else* in life is fraught with suffering, that we are innocents in a hostile world. Just the opposite. In fact, Buddhism makes us *more* responsible for original sin than does the Biblical traditions. After all, Gotama was saying that *human* engagement with the world is *constantly* corrupting itself for itself. This is not some mythical inheritance, but a behavior.

Thematically, the Christian and Buddhist claims regarding our inherent fallibility are quite similar. These two stories have both been used and misused in distinct and different ways. But they point to the same idea and it is an idea to which the UU irreverence and optimism afforded

by our historic and present privilege has blinded us. That idea is that we are flawed. Fundamentally. Inherently. Eternally. Flawed. And what a relief!

I think it would help if we acknowledged our inherent imperfection. Affirming the inherent imperfection, *and* dignity and worth, might help us to treat our adversaries, each other and ourselves with more compassion. As it is, our principles are left open to a cognitive dissonance we are all too willing to employ.

For by not explicitly comprehending our inherent imperfection, by leaving it up to impotent implication, we frequently ignore or deny it. This is like walking around, carrying a heavy boulder. But we don't acknowledge the boulder. So we can't figure out why it is so hard to walk.

## Part II

Now part of the genius of our first principle - that all people have inherent worth and dignity - is that it does not say that we are all inherently *good* or that we are *only* worthy and dignified. And so there is ample room to acknowledge our sins.

And look as a valuable aside I want to acknowledge that sin is a loaded word and has been terribly misused to abuse. But really, it is an English translation of a latin misunderstanding of the *Greek* word *hemartia*, which sought to bring a Hebrew concept into a Hellenistic context. The word *hemartia* means, "missing the mark," which, coincidentally enough, it seems to have done itself.

At any rate, *hemartia* does not mean you are a shameful wanton puss bag damned to hell and eternal pain. It means you didn't hit the bullseye that time. It means imperfection. It means mistake. It means flawed.

So while our principles neglect to acknowledge our sins, they do not preclude them. We do that on our own. Probably because our culture encourages us to do so and also because it is not comfortable to admit our flaws and acknowledge our mistakes.

And so we walk around with this great burden of unaddressed imperfection. And then when that burden gets too heavy, we just drop it and it breaks things; either ourselves or others. We walk around without truly comprehending, in spite of ALL evidence, that we are all flawed and then when we recognize one, we freak out. We berate ourselves or resent others. We get angry or ashamed. Our reaction cycle ramps up.

And let me tell you something, if it is freedom you want reactivity is your enemy. We lose our freedom to reaction. But when one of our cracks emerges through the narrative white wash of our lives, reactivity ensues. Denying our inherently flawed nature actually ceedes our freedom and imprisons us in reactivity.

Acknowledging our inherently flawed nature helps us to acknowledge our particular flaws of behavior, body, and disposition in a way that frees us from their grip. It's not an excuse. It won't do for us to go around causing harm and then saying, "Hey, it's my inherently flawed nature. So I'm off the hook."

No, much like granting forgiveness does not imply we are encouraging the offense, it is also true that being forgiven does not mean you are no longer accountable. In fact, it means just the opposite, doesn't it?

Once forgiven - more accurately, once we understand our need to be forgiven - we have comprehended a mistake made and are now aware of it. That awareness ought prevent its repetition.

Now, even though it fails to acknowledge our shadow side, our First principle does point to the way out. Comprehending worth and dignity as inherent means that there is within each of us access to an understanding that is uncompromised by our engagement with life. Comprehending worth and dignity as inherent means that there is within each of us access to an understanding that is uncompromised by our engagement with life.

And though it is in a different vocabulary, this is thematically in line with the ways out presented by the two other traditions - sources of ours - that we have been considering this morning.

Ultimately, the Christian lens reveals the way out of *original sin* is the understanding of our brokenness coupled with the grace of God. Ultimately, the Buddhist lens reveals the way out of the inherent corruption of living - *dukkha* - is the comprehension *of* suffering and the cessation of the habits that create it. In other words, while life may be suffering, there exists at every moment the possibility of freedom from suffering.

Another word for "at every moment" is eternally. And so both these traditions find redemption in an eternal possibility, a possibility that is not beholden to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, an eternal, unperturbed sanctuary that is available to us, no matter our circumstance or prior choices, something inherent, something unearned, something bestowed by grace.

We name this something dignity and worth. Not so grand sounding as the grace of god, nor so exoticly seductive as nirvana, inherent worth and dignity is yet their theological peer. But the wisdom these other traditions make explicit, remains for us obscure.

And the wisdom is this: to find this unperturbed eternal sanctuary available to us each, we must first come face to face with our imperfections and holding them in balance with our inherent worth. Ignoring our imperfections turns them, and us, into disappointments and imprisons us in reactivity. Facing them, comprehending them frees us from reactivity, which to my way of thinking, is the only kind of pure, unmitigated freedom that is possible. And it feels good. And does good.

By seeking forgiveness for our missteps, we move beyond our missteps. Some of our mistakes offend a friend, some offend ourselves, and others seem to offend some deeper understanding. So you may need to ask your friend to forgive you. Or you may need to ask yourself to forgive you. Or you may need to ask something more difficult to define. But do not let pride, nor shame, nor lack of clarity impede you. Ask.

As soon as I say that, I feel the old, “what have I got to be forgiven for,” protestation well up inside me. That is a patently ridiculous response. There is plenty. There always will be. But it is through the acknowledgment of imperfection through which our dignity is accessed. It is also true that through the denial of our inherently flawed nature that our bafoonery is displayed. Denial of it is proof of it.

Asking forgiveness is a response to the comprehension of our anthropological imperfection. It doesn't mean you are to wallow in self pity and beg for pardon. It means you are to seek your freedom in responsibility. There is freedom in feeling forgiven. More than that there is freedom in the heartfelt petition for forgiveness. For therein you will find the path to that unperturbed sanctuary, your inherent worth and dignity, as you free yourself from reactivity.

Earlier I said that affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people saves lives and empowers our best behavior. But it does so for those who understand that their lives are in jeopardy or their behavior can always improve. You do not know that your are inherently forgiven until you find the need to be forgiven.

Be let go of. Understand you are released from reactivity. All you have to do is ask. Aphiente.