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Reflection: On Releasing Others

Part I

I want to take back something I said last week. I said that forgiving others was easier than seeking forgiveness. On further reflection I want to reverse that statement. When we cause harm to someone we care about, it is instinctive to seek forgiveness. It hurts knowing we have hurt a loved one. But when we have been hurt, it is equally instinctive to hurt back. In that way, seeking forgiveness is quite in line with our habits of reactivity. Granting forgiveness is just the opposite.

Now, it is worth recalling that forgiveness has to do primarily with you. Not the person forgiving you. Not the person you are forgiving. It has everything to do with what is going on with you. The primary action happens here. In your heart.

One way to understand forgiveness is to understand what it is not. It has been pointed out to me that forgiveness is often thought of as reconciliation when in fact these are two distinct operations. This distinction reveals something about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a cooling or a total release of emotional energy regarding what was once an offense that engaged our emotions. When you are no longer emotionally hooked or ruffled or tugged at by some event or person, that's when you *know* you have forgiven them. Thereby is paved the road to reconciliation. And now parties estranged by conflict can resume harmonious and productive relations.

Now, sometimes it's true that we reconcile without really, actually forgiving. This is not always bad. *Sometimes* it pays to fake it till you make it. But more likely the issue has been buried deep, not burned away. And it will emerge as a weapon or trigger in some reactive rampage in the future. Faking it till you make it... reconciling without truly forgiving is not the path of the spiritual seeker, the ethical explorer, or those who know that transformation is a not a one time permanent fix.

Spiritual seekers, ethical explorers, and transformers know that staying on the path takes work and courage. The spiritual path is not an escalator. It's not like you get one whopping spiritual insight and then sit back and enjoy the ride to nirvana. In fact, spiritual insight reveals how much

work is needed to stay on the path: not to *get* on the path, but to *stay* on the path. Luckily, spiritual insight also *keeps* you near the path with the *coincidental* insight into how rewarding the path can be.

The practice of forgiveness is a spiritual practice and exemplifies what I just described. The reward for staying on this path, the reward for integrity in forgiveness, the reward for dissolving the hook before declaring the peace, is non-reactivity and peace and, ultimately, freedom.

Sometimes the price of freedom is just time. In fact, that is usually true. Time *gives* and, in the end, *is* perspective. Sometimes we are afforded its luxury. Often, however, we are not. It is usually the case that we find ourselves forgiving those with whom we are around the most. In that case, time may be more difficult to come by. More often than not freedom takes, not time that we do not have, but rather, it takes work. That is to say, forgiveness takes work. It is the work of opening up. It is work to let go.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus acknowledges that the afflicted he meets are forgiven. It was not Jesus who forgave, but Jesus who recognized their inherent forgiveness... their inherent worth and dignity you might say. And the phrase the Nazarene used to convey this truth was *aphiente*, which means, "You are let go of." So forgiveness is akin to letting go. This sounds quite similar to understanding forgiveness as a cooling of emotional hook.

Forgiving is letting go of emotional reactivity. That is the state of the divine, a spiritual state, a state of mind with which we are all inherently imbued as possibility and promise if we are willing to do the work.

But how is it work? Letting go sounds so easy. But that is not so.

Hand squeezing thumb exercise.

Anger

You can't drive, or write, or play piano like this.

Impulse to forgive

In order to fully let go, you must will your fingers open. The offensive thumb is free, but the clutching hand of vengeance is still warped and useless.

Work of forgiveness

If you have not already, open your fingers wide. Wiggle them. Regain their use with your intention. This is how forgiveness happens. This is what forgiveness yields.

Part II

Last week we reflected on the transformative power of seeking forgiveness. I proposed that in seeking forgiveness, we must first come face to face with our flaws, our sins, our imperfections, our hemartia, our missing the mark. I suggested that by comprehending our imperfections - not excusing them - but by comprehending them we deliver ourselves out of reactivity and into the opportunity for responsibility and that in responsibility does our freedom finally manifest.

This same dynamic is true of forgiving someone or something else.

Here's a neat trick. Let's say you get in a fight with someone or someone harms you in some way. You, being the attentive Unitarian Universalist of integrity that you are, apologize in the first case and also, in either case, you inform them that you have forgiven them. And in the pardon you say something like, "I have forgiven you. But do you think you can apologize anyway?"

Okay, it's not a trick. It's a test. And you have just failed.

If you are in need of an apology, you have not let go of that emotional hook. You have, in fact, *not* forgiven them. You have not comprehended their inherent humanness, inherent imperfection or your own and you have not used that comprehension as a tool to pry that emotional dagger out of your side. You are not free of reactivity. You are not freed into responsibility. You are not free. Worse yet, you have made your freedom contingent, not on your own heart and work, but on the actions of someone else.

You are now captive to not only your own reactivity, but to another's reactivity. This is no bueno.

But it is useful. It is a test and a test is a tool and this one lets you understand your own reactivity that much better. It also reveals something that we've already considered: forgiveness is not about what someone else did or how someone else feels - whether they feel sorry or not. Forgiveness is about how you feel. Have you let go? Have your emotions cooled? Have you removed the dagger?

Another scenario: Someone eats the last cookie, which was by rights, yours. They apologize and appear truly sorry. You “forgive” them - or say you do - knowing that it won’t do any good to hold a grudge. And yet... it still rankles. And later, when they say or do something by most accounts innocuous, it is a hammer on the dagger and you lash out in anger.

You had not, in fact, forgiven them. You have, in fact, put spurs to the cycle of reactive habit. You have not done the *work* of forgiveness, despite the understanding that its reward is sweet as honey. Maybe you didn’t do the work because you didn’t know there *was* work before hearing this reflection. I am sort of embarrassed to admit that it was a revelation to me as I wrote it. The *work* of forgiveness?

So then the question is one of method. How are we to remove the dagger? How are we to cool out? How are we to let go? How are we to find ourselves in a state of forgiveness?

And here it helps to consider origins and conclusions. To find the *end* of forgiveness, we want to find the *root* of forgiveness. To find the the *work* of forgiveness, we want to find to *root* of reactivity. The root of *forgiveness* is all of those feelings, all of those things, all of those dispositions that have nothing to do with fear.

As I say this, it occurs to me that some things should always be feared. We must bring our powers of discernment to bear to discover which fear keeps us alive and which is death by degrees. And this leads to another uncomfortable truth. It is probably the case that there are some things beyond our power to forgive. Some things are unforgivable because our hearts will never be free of their pain. This is not a recommendation, but an observation.

I have a high school acquaintance, who is now a Facebook friend. Earlier this year she posted that it was the one year anniversary of the car wreck that killed her brother and sister-in-law. They were killed by a 16 year old, high on meth, driving a stolen car 100mph. They had 3 kids none in their teens.

How does that pain ever cool?

But even here, maybe especially in tragedies like this, there is some understanding to be had: Life is precarious and, while it is absolutely necessary, love is dangerous. Indeed, all love ends painfully. That is a guarantee. Death or circumstance or change. There is no way around it.

This leads me to consider that all those apocalyptic texts and tales are so seductive because they speak to this inherent truth in our condition, the truth that we live in the shadow of personal

armageddon at every moment and always have, from the first conscious hominid until now. It is the thorn in our paw and it is intractable.

I'm not talking about the fear of death. There are things more frightening. The fear of losing love or the fear of not being worthy of love, of inadequacy, can be more frightening and unacceptable than death. And yet it is a fear that is bound to come true. We will lose love.

But in the face of that certainty we have choice. How do you want to live? You can ignore this thorn in your paw and everyone else's paw and walk around irritable and reactive. Or you can comprehend that we all have this thorn, this inborn fear of losing the love we have or not being worthy of the love we need. That *comprehension* is the root of forgiveness. This is the root of reactivity. This is the root of freedom. The comprehension that our inherent fear of losing love or being unloved is the root of reactivity is itself the root of forgiveness and, finally, freedom.

Why was he on meth? What circumstances led him to steal a car? What hole was he filling? What love was he replacing? Why was he not free?

These questions do not excuse the boy. But they shift our perspective. And in doing that, perhaps, we are offered some relief from our fears come true. And if some things are too hard to be forgiven, if some acts will never allow our emotions to move on, then with perspective, with the comprehension that every eye you see and that sees you is visible only through the veil of the fear of losing the love we have or not being worthy of love of the love we need, we may draw nearer some peace and hope that, after all, freedom may be found. But it is always only secured in the moment and never forever. Yet it is our best hope. Sometimes that is nirvana. Sometimes that is salvation. And sometimes, it is just enough.