

For Giving Forgiveness

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 23 September 2007
Chip Roush 23 Sep 07

FIRST READING Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in England, in 1772. He preached in a number of Unitarian congregations, and even became a Unitarian minister, before taking up his true vocation of poetry.

In his classic, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge wrote about a man going to a wedding, who was stopped by an old seaman, who practically forced him to listen to his tale:

“The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone :
He cannot choose but hear ;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

“The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top.”

Things began well enough, but a storm drove the ship south, where it was surrounded and stopped by ice. When an albatross shows up, the crew hails it as a good omen; they welcome the bird by throwing it food:

“It ate the food it ne'er had eat,
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder-fit ;
The helmsman steered us through !”

After they escape the ice, though:

“God save thee, ancient Mariner !
From the fiends, that plague thee thus !--
Why look'st thou so ?"--With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS.”

Then the winds, too, die, and the ship is stuck:

“Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion ;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink ;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.”

The crew fears that they've been cursed by the spirit of the albatross, so they hang the albatross around the neck of the Mariner, assigning the guilt to him. This may have worked, or it may have backfired, because the figures of Death and Life-In-Death come and kill every other sailor:

“The many men, so beautiful !
And they all dead did lie :
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on ; and so did I.”

The Mariner, frightened and appalled, lives for seven days among the stench of the dead bodies, trying desperately to pray for their souls, and for his. Then, somehow, one night, his gaze catches some beautiful creatures in the sea:

“Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes :
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire :
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam ; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things ! no tongue
Their beauty might declare :
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware :
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray ;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.”

The rains return, to slake his thirst, and the winds carry the ship onward, and after a few more adventures, he survives, with one condition: he is cursed to tell his tale over and over:

“Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns :
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.

I pass, like night, from land to land ;
I have strange power of speech ;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me :
To him my tale I teach.”

So, with the wedding guest his latest student, having finished his story, the sailor leaves:

“The Mariner, whose eye is bright,
Whose beard with age is hoar,
Is gone : and now the Wedding-Guest
Turned from the bridegroom’s door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn :
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.”

SECOND READING Ani DiFranco was born in Buffalo, New York, on this date in 1970. A singer-songwriter, she created her own record label, *Righteous Babe Records*, to give her greater control over her work. Last year, she became the first musician to win the “Woman of Courage” award from the National Organization of Women.

This is from her 2005 album, *Knuckle Down*

Paradigm

I was born to two immigrants
Who knew why they were here
They were happy to pay taxes
For the schools and roads
Happy to be here
They took it seriously
The second job of citizenry

My mother went campaigning door to door
And holding to her hand was me

I was just a girl in a room full of women
Licking stamps and laughing
I remember the feeling of community brewing
Of democracy happening

But I suppose like anybody
I had to teach myself to see
All that stuff that got lost
On its way to church
All that stuff that got lost
On its way to school
All that stuff that got lost
On its way to the house of my family
All that stuff that was not lost on me

Teach myself to see each of us
Through the lens of forgiveness
Like we're stuck with each other (god forbid!)
Teach myself to smile and stop and talk
To a whole other color kid
Teach myself to be new in an instant
Like the truth is accessible at any time
Teach myself it's never really one or the other
There's a paradox in every paradigm.

HOMILY I

“for giving” How many of you know that this is the Jewish year 5768? How many have ever attended a service during the Days of Awe? How many of you are at least a little glad, that Unitarian Universalists don't schedule 25-hour fasts every year?

Yom Kippur ended at sundown last evening, so, according to Jewish myth, G-d has written another year's worth of deeds into the Book of Life. Beginning on the first day of the new year, Rosh Hashanah, God writes the names and deeds—or misdeeds—of people into the Book of Life. During the ten Days of Awe, it is imperative to repent and atone for one's wrongs, to make things right between ourselves and those who we've harmed. The tenth day, Yom Kippur, is called the Day of Atonement because that is the day that people seek forgiveness from G-d.

Before seeking atonement with G-d, Jews are supposed to atone for their misdeeds to their fellow humans. Then, having restored right relations with other people, observant Jews fast for 25 hours, refraining even from water, and attend synagogue for six or seven hours in the morning and afternoon, then return for another four or five hours that evening. They do no work during that time, and they refrain from sexual relations. Some also refrain from washing or bathing, or anointing one's body—with perfumes or deodorants, nowadays—or wearing leather shoes.

After all of that, after ten days of repentance and twenty-five hours of strict ritual, G-d seals the Book of Life, and Jews enter the new year cleansed and ready to start the new year fresh.

Rabbi Chava Bahle told me that she preached for five straight hours on Rosh Hashanah last week at the congregation she serves in Chicago. Seeing as how I am usually exhausted after two 75-minute services, with a break between the two—*and* I have usually eaten at least one meal, maybe two in the twelve hours prior, which she was prohibited from doing—I asked her how it went. She said she got through it

well, although she has heard of Rabbis who arrange to have people stand behind them, to catch them if they collapse.

I repeat: I am glad that we UU's don't observe such rigorous practices.

On the other hand, maybe we *need* such grueling rituals, to allow us to do the difficult work of forgiving. Sometimes, we place a lesser value on things that come too easily.

Almost a year ago, now, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a man killed five little girls in an Amish one-room schoolhouse, and then killed himself. The very same day, the grandfather of one of the murdered girls said, "We must not think evil of this man." Another explained, "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss...but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

Part of me wants to honor and praise these people for living out their commitment to forgiveness, and part of me wants to shake them, waken them from their too-pious soundbites and demand from them how they can so easily forgive this person who took what is most precious in this world away from them.

Maybe it is an imperfection in me, but it seems almost unseemly that they should forgive so quickly.

I was going to say that it dishonors the memory of those girls, that their killer is so quickly forgiven, but maybe that's wrong. Maybe it does honor them, and their Amish heritage, to forgive him. Maybe attaching our horror and our rage and possibly even a thirst for revenge to their names would actually dishonor the girls and their beliefs more than forgiving their killer.

And I'm actually okay that the Amish *did* set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. That feels like them, living out their values. It feels appropriate to me because it probably happened later, at least a few days later, after a period of rage and grief, and grief, and more anger and more grief and then finally, acceptance, and the peace of mind to set up a fund.

I'm not trying to judge the actions or beliefs of others, here. I am not pretending to know how they *felt* as they said and did these things. I just know what it would take for me to suffer such a loss, and come to grips with that much horror.

I sometimes get miffed when the person ahead of me has one or two items more than the "express lane" allows. So for something that much bigger, I imagine that I would need lots of time, and some kind of physically and mentally taxing ritual to do the work of forgiveness.

I do know that forgiveness is as much for the forgiver, than the person forgiven. It is less about absolving the perpetrator than it is healing the survivor and allowing him or her to get on with life.

Should something happen to me, or to someone I love, may all the goddesses and gods forbid, I would know that it would be more healthy to accept, honor and move through my suffering. I would know the psychological and physical benefits of forgiveness.

And I would probably still need some time and some difficult ritual like a 25-hour fast to honor and make meaning out of such a loss.

If we need a ritual to help us forgive other people, imagine what kind of ritual we would need to help us forgive ourselves! At least, with another person, that person can go away; we can live our lives apart and let go. We cannot leave ourselves. You know, when you've got a sore toe, or a hangnail, so everything in the universe seems intent on bumping and aggravating that wound, that can be like living with our own guilty conscience. Every conversation, every behavior, every room where we live may contain some reminder of our transgression.

We could use some kind of super-ritual to allow us to let go of all of that.

In my coffeemaker at home, I just poured vinegar water through it, to clean out the sediment in the pipes. Wouldn't it be great, if we had something to pour through us, to remove the sediment of our own guilt?

I don't know that it works for everyone, but some Jews find that kind of cleansing in the rituals of the Days of Awe; and some Catholics are refreshed by their sacrament of Confession. Some Christians find absolution in god's grace, certain that a loving god is a forgiving god. Others find it elsewhere.

At least a few times, I have been fortunate enough to find it in Nature. Like the Ancient Mariner and the water-snakes, there has been such an abundance of natural beauty, that the moment just felt right. Everything in the universe was exactly as it should be; the world was good and I was good, too, part of all that perfect wonderfulness.

I've felt it in the gaze of someone who loves me—seen myself through their eyes, felt their acceptance of my faults, and their primary focus on my strengths. It is easier to forgive ourselves, when we are bathed in the love of others.

Because of the variety of these experiences, and because some people do achieve forgiveness at different times, in radically different ways, it makes me think that maybe, forgiveness is always available to us. Even if we do not or cannot allow ourselves to accept it, it is always waiting as a possibility, waiting for the right circumstance or the right amount of time to pass, or the correct words to be said.

I know that people do sometimes feel their guilt lifted, feel the albatross drop off their neck. Somehow, for some reason, some people are able to forgive what was done to them. Like Ani DiFranco wrote, in our second reading, some of us are able “to be new in an instant, like the truth is accessible at any time.”

It does happen; it can happen. Despite some ridiculously awful occurrences, lots of people do forgive.

Perhaps forgiveness is a process inside us. It is always available to us, accessible at any time, but we require some amount of inner work before we allow ourselves to find it. Rituals can help; time may help; a certain amount of tears may need to be shed.

Then, when somebody looks at us in just the right way, or says the proper word or phrase, or we experience a moment of exquisite natural beauty or joy, there is an opportunity to let go.

It doesn't always work, but over time, those opportunities keep coming, and eventually, bit by bit, we can learn to let go and we do forgive.

Let's try it now. Reverend Kevin and the Vocal Ensemble and Chamber Orchestra will now play some beautiful music. If you do not need or want to contemplate forgiveness, then may the music inspire you in other ways. Otherwise, let us open ourselves to the possibility of forgiveness, for whomever or from whomever we most need it, including ourselves.

MUSIC

HOMILY II

“forgiveness” Once upon a time, according to Dan Millman, a man was heading homeward, rowing his little boat upstream, when he felt another small boat, heading downstream, collide with his. Since he had the right-of-way, he felt angry. Turning, he yelled at the other boatman, “Watch where you're going! Be more careful!” The other man apologized, and passed by without further incident.

But an hour later, as the man continued upstream, he felt another boat collide with his. Furious, he turned to scream at this new reckless person—and his anger vanished when he saw that the boat was empty. It must have come loose from its moorings, and drifted into him. Calmly, he pushed it aside and continued on his journey.

He never lost his temper again, because from then on, he treated everyone like an empty boat.

CLOSING HYMN If you have harmed people if you have abandoned something or someone, if you are a wanderer if you are an idolater, a worshipper if you have broken your vows a thousand times, if you are *human*, please come, come again with us on our journey together. Please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing #188, *Come, Come, Whoever You Are* Please remain standing for our closing words.

{singing}