

“I’m Sorry; Please Forgive Me”
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CALL TO WORSHIP

Unitarian Universalism occupies an unusual place in the world of religion. Though we came from two protestant denominations hundreds of years ago, we have treated wisdom and revelation as open books, in which we can write new ideas and read old ideas with new eyes.

Unitarian Universalism seeks the widest possible community.

In this seeking we welcome complexity, ambiguity, and eclecticism.

This eclecticism draws us to the tremendous diversity of the world of religions. We especially revere those that have a strong tradition of questioning and critical thinking while at the same time acknowledging that mystery will always be with us.

We seek wisdom that has passed through the fire of thought. This idea from our religious ancestor, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests that our religious ideas and spiritual lives are tempered by our capacity for critical thinking. For us, religion has to make sense—and it has to be relevant to our everyday struggles and pain.

Our friends at Temple Beth El are currently using this sanctuary to hold their High Holy Days services. This annual community practice of forgiveness and atonement is one that makes sense and is highly relevant to every human being regardless of faith. A few years ago, our association president, Bill Sinkford, suggested that Unitarian Universalists should celebrate an annual day of Atonement. I don’t know how many of our 1,000 congregations took him up on that suggestion, but I know that we didn’t—not yet.

What might it look like—a WUU day of atonement?

What might it feel like to set aside time to write letters, make phone call, and make visits to express our remorse and regret?

How might we sharpen our awareness of the value of this spiritual practice by performing rituals of our own making?

Come, let us explore the landscape of apology.

come, let us worship together.

SERMON

It’s a damp spring day, 2004.

I am sitting at my desk in my apartment in Oakland staring down at a blank sheet of paper.

I am writing a letter of apology to my brother.

He says I offended him during a recent visit to his home, but I can’t see what I did wrong.

We haven’t spoken for months.

He is my only sibling and I yearn to be close to him.

And so I am writing a letter of apology to my brother.

Looking at the empty surface of the paper

I try to form sentences of regret for what I have done.

But only anger rises and all I can think about is how unreasonable he is.
I set the unwritten letter aside and leave it for another day.

Why is it so hard to simply say, I'm sorry.

Last Monday marked the beginning of the High Holy Days
with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.
They culminate next Wednesday evening
on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.
During these holiest of days, people seek forgiveness
from those they have harmed
because we have all been careless in our words and in our deeds.

Jewish wisdom names three types of forgiveness:
The first, mechila, is for everyday situations. It is the easiest to ask for and to give.
The second, selicha, is more serious. It calls for the expansion of the heart.
It is an act of mercy, empathy and compassion.
The third, kappara is the ultimate forgiveness—
it comes from on high or deep within us--unbidden—
after we do the hard work of confronting ourselves and seeking forgiveness from others.

The need for apology arises again and again in our relations with others.
I'm sorry to be late with this report;
I'm sorry I forgot your birthday;
I'm sorry I didn't return your call sooner
The everyday apologies are not difficult because our self-worth is not in jeopardy. We expect to make mistakes and
we expect others to forgive us and vice versa.
This is mechila.
We say sorry, the other person says 'no problem,' or if you're in Brooklyn, Fugedaboutit!
No heart wrenching apology, no transformation of souls, just a simple pardon.

Selicha, the second type of forgiveness, takes more effort.
What is required here is a widening of the heart
and a willingness to step into another's shoes.

We have seen dramatic examples of situations calling for this type of forgiveness.
On his deathbed, Ghandi forgave his assassin.
Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 27 years, forgave his captors,

Two years ago a small Amish community in Pennsylvania
astounded the world when they forgave the
gunman who killed five children and injured five others in their one-room schoolhouse.

A Gallup Poll of 1000 Americans found that 94% of them hold forgiveness to be an important value.
Yet less than half say they actually make forgiveness a frequent practice in their lives.
The survey was done in 1988, but I doubt that the answers would be different if taken today.

What keeps us from doing something that we believe is valuable?
Those people who posted their apologies to the "Project Forgiveness blog"—

what keeps them from saying I'm sorry to real people,
instead of hiding in the anonymity of cyberspace.

What kept me from writing that letter to my brother?

Fear. Fear that I'll lose my sense of self worth.

If it is a situation in which I've wronged someone, then by apologizing, I will be revealed to be a very bad person. On the other hand, if it's a situation where the other person and I have wronged each other, then my fear is that if I apologize it will let the other person off the hook. I'll look weak and vulnerable, and made to be wrong.

After weeks of avoiding that blank piece of paper,

I overcame at least a little bit of that fear.

I sat down again, wrote the letter and sent it.

Later, I saw that it was a half-hearted, grudging apology.

It was more like a rationale for what I had done, cast in a light that made me look reasonable.

Something was still stopping me from opening my heart enough
to offer a genuine apology.

Maimonides, the 12th century Spanish philosopher, offered a practice of forgiveness that includes these four steps:

Recognizing what I did,

expressing regret,

resolving to change my behavior in the future, and

reconciling with the other so that the relationship is deepened and hearts are changed.

The practice begins with telling ourselves the truth about our part--

our responsibility in the events.

It's not surprising that the first step in repairing relationships

with others should begin this way.

This wisdom can be found in almost all religious traditions.

These traditions urge us to look into the reality of our brokenness as a path to wholeness.

It makes sense to start here because our relationships with others

will never be better than our relationship with ourselves. (James Hollis)

Realizing the full significance of what we've done

doesn't necessarily make us want to rush

to apologize to the person we have hurt.

Just the opposite can happen. We can be so shamed by our actions

that we would rather post an apology on the blog

than face the person we've injured.

There was no response to that letter I sent to my brother, of course.

After many months of no communication,

I find myself sitting in front of another blank sheet of paper.

This time I am writing a letter to myself.

The paper becomes a mirror, and now I see that

wholeness comes not from overcoming brokenness,

but rather from accepting it.

I tell myself the painful truth of what really happened—

just the facts without the excuses.

I also tell the truth of how I've been hurt by my brother over the years.

--about my resentment of the

complicated family dynamics that put the male child on a pedestal.
I put myself in his shoes.
I imagine the times when being on a pedestal must have been difficult for him.
I can feel my compassion for him grow.

And then I ask the deepest part of myself to forgive me-
the part of me beyond ego that knows
I am more than the sum of my careless words and selfish acts.

This is the third kind of forgiveness—Kappara.
This Hebrew word for Atonement, At One-Ment,
literally means the state of being at one with self, others and god.
Rabbi Irwin Kula, in his book called Yearnings,
describes Kappara as, “the forgiveness that can’t be earned or asked for [from others]... It is an inner experience of
integrating our transgression into a more expanded self.”

When we are at one with our deepest selves, we can be free from fear.
We can know that there is a part of ourselves that is bigger than the unkind thing we did.
We can know that we are not our misdeeds.
Then an expanded self that is big enough to be humble
can speak our authentic apology.
After recognition, the second practice of forgiveness is expressing Regret-
this is where you say, “It gave me great pain when I looked back
and saw what I had done to you.
I really saw the cost of my actions, not only to you but also to me.’

We don’t often get to witness apologies like this.
So many of the public apologies from our leaders
sound hollow and self serving.
One notable exception is from Jesse Jackson.
Expressing his regret for using a derogatory word to describe Jews,
he apologized, saying, “that was not my truest self. ...Charge it to my head and not to my heart. My head -- so
limited in its finitude; my heart, which is boundless in its love for the human family.”

Sometimes, a person wants very much to express genuine regret,
but the other person has passed away, or refuses to hear the apology.
This happened to a man serving a sentence at a maximum security prison in New York State.
He was participating in a 3 day workshop called alternatives to violence
when he heard a woman speak of being raped while in Mexico and then forgiving the young man who had assaulted
her.
During a break in the program, he approached her. Here’s how she described what happened: (from The Sun
Magazie, Feburary 2005)
“In the hallway he began to wring his hands nervously. “I don’t know if I can do this,” he said. “It’s OK,” I said.
“Whatever it is, say it.” He took a deep breath and asked, “Would you be a surrogate for me for a moment?”
I had no idea what he had in mind, but I felt safe, so I said yes.
Tears began to run down his cheeks as he spoke:
“A long time ago, I hurt a woman very badly.
I have tried to apologize to her family, but they want nothing to do with me.
I respect that and do not want to hurt them any more than I already have.
But I want you to know how deeply sorry I am for what I did.”

He paused to take a breath. “And how deeply sorry I am for what was done to you.”

I was speechless.

He was obviously trying hard

not to fall to pieces in the middle of the corridor.

After a moment, this giant of a man quietly asked,

“Do you think you could forgive me?” “Yes,” I said.

Sometimes it’s easier to forgive the stranger than to forgive our children, our parents, our sisters.

By the time I saw my brother last Christmas

I was ready to say

once again, “I’m sorry, Please forgive me.”

This time in a way that would express my deepest regret with sincerity and humility.

He said no.

There was no expansion of the heart, no deepening of relationship.

The Jewish sages tell us to try 3 times to seek forgiveness. I will try again.

And if no forgiveness is forthcoming from my brother,

I will still know that I have been forgiven by the part of me that is large enough

not to keep score

of wrongs.

For me and my brother there is no reconciliation, at least not yet.

Nonetheless, the relationship continues even in this broken state.

Yom Kippur was the day that Moses brought the second set of the 10 commandments to the Israelites. Yes, there were two sets of tablets.

Moses brought the first down from Mt. Sinai.

But when he saw the people worshipping the golden calf, violating the first of the commandments, he threw down the tablets in anger, smashing them into pieces.

He went back up the mountain for another 40 days and created new tablets.

Moses then put the broken pieces into the ark along with the whole ones. (as told by Irwin Kula in Yearnings)

We must do likewise.

In that Gallup Poll in which 94% of Americans said it was important to forgive,

a second question revealed that almost all of them

said they needed some outside help to do this.

This is where the community comes in.

Richard Rubenstein wrote in *After Auschwitz*, that “.one of the most important functions of the atonement ritual is that through communal confession and acknowledgement of guilt, the penitent is assured that his is the shared predicament of humankind.”

He goes on to observe that without the uniting ritual, our feelings of guilt and shame fragment the human community into individuals who must, “hide their deepest selves from one another.”

Let us continue to grow into a community that

reveals rather than hides our deepest selves.

Let us do so by reciting the litany of atonement, a responsive reading written by the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs.

I will lead with a statement; please respond with these words:

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For losing sight of our unity
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.
May it be so,
Amen