

Don't Forgive Too Soon

Transcription from the [video](#) recorded at the [Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Harford County](#)

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Abstract

When a covenant—marital, relational, congregational—is broken, what are the reasons to forgive, and the limits on forgiveness!

Hello, Harford friends. Greetings from temporarily sunny Everett, Washington. Hey, congratulations on calling your new minister. I hope you have a long and happy and fruitful relationship with her.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote a story about a Spanish father whose son, Paco, as you probably know, Paco is a very common man's name in Spain. Paco had run away to Madrid.

After a long time, the father decides to reconcile with his son. So the father, remorseful of how he had treated his son's mistakes, posts an ad in the newspaper reading, Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana. Noon, Tuesday, all is forgiven.

Papa. So on Tuesday, when the father goes to the square at noon, he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. We have a small, hard object for everyone.

I think Kim said she would collect some acorns for this little ritual. So we'll call it an acorn, whether or not that's what it actually is. So please take the first acorn or whatever it is, first acorn your fingers fall upon and put it someplace where you can find it again in a few minutes.

We are all hurt as we journey through this life. We are all Pacos. In some instances, we're able to let go of the hurts, no matter how severe.

But in other instances, we hold on to them and

let them blot out the joy and beauty of other life experiences. The unfaithfulness of a spouse, the injustice of an employer, the abuse by a parent, the rejection by a friend, hurts that can sting years after they're experienced. I am not very talented at forgiveness.

I attribute that to the fact that I come from a long line of grudge holders. When I was 18, I went to England to visit my grandparents for the last time, as it turned out. My 91-year-old grandmother, a strong-willed and big-hearted woman known as Lady, although she had been called Nelly when she was a small girl, Lady was physically incapacitated, but all there mentally.

She told me a story about how she had competed in a spelling contest in school when she was 13. Lady had spelled all the words correctly, but her teacher, she said with deep bitterness, her teacher had unfairly awarded the prize to another child. She went home that day and cried on her father's shoulder about the unfairness of it.

He soothed her, patted her back. He told her she didn't have to return to school if she didn't want to, so she never did. That was the last day of her formal education.

That's how it was in England in 1898. Lady's purpose in telling me this story was to convey to me what a wonderful man her father had been.

But it left me with a rather different impression, the realization that the teacher in question had been dead for at least half a century, and perhaps it was time for Lady to let go of her bitterness.

Of course, I never said that to her. Why try to heal life's hurts? To continue carrying hurts is to choose to continue to hurt. Just as we would seek help and healing immediately if we suffered a gunshot wound or a dog bite, we need to seek healing when we suffer equivalent wounds to our emotions.

Not doing so can damage our spiritual, emotional, and even physical well-being. Holding on to hurts, as we well know, is like carrying red hot coals inside us that can be fanned into flames at the least expected moment. We may find ourselves burying an old hurt.

We think we're never going to see it again. It's buried. It's gone.

And then one day, flying into a rage for no good reason, and only later realizing that our out-of-proportion anger really had much more to do with that long-ago hurt, which had never really been buried, than with the present circumstance. So now please take out your acorn and hold it in your hand. If you have a stony place in your heart, one that is holding on to an old hurt, just put that into the acorn.

Don't think about it too much. Put it into that acorn and then tuck it away someplace where you can find it again. Take just a moment to put that hurt into the acorn.

Okay. Back in 2012, a mentally ill gunman attacked moviegoers at the showing of the Batman movie in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 people. I'm sure that you, like me, were sickened by that horrible incident, even if you can't remember it clearly in the haze of all the other such horrible incidents since then.

One of the many stories that came forth from the Aurora shooting was that of a man named Pierce O'Farrell, a victim who survived the massacre. O'Farrell got hit by bullets from each of the murderer's three guns, but somehow, mirac-

ulously, he survived. O'Farrell recounted the attack in a radio interview just a couple of days after the incident.

O'Farrell, an observant Christian, said he forgave the attacker. He said, I would like to talk to him. I do forgive him for what he's done.

I'm sure that Mr. O'Farrell was completely sincere in his desire to forgive the shooter. After all, there are many motivations to forgive when we are hurt. Forgiveness is for you.

It's your liberation from the relentless re-experiencing of a hurt. It releases you from the gnawing feeling of ick you feel inside you each time you hear the name of the person who hurt you or see the face of the person who hurt you. Forgiveness is an incredible healer, as any of us know who have let go of a hurt truly and completely.

We have tremendous motivation to reach forgiveness, but it can't be rushed as much as we would like to speed through to a conclusion. So as motivated, as eager as Mr. O'Farrell was to forgive his attacker, I believe that his understanding of forgiveness was incomplete. As a society, we are always rushing.

When we suffer a loss, we try to rush through our grief and achieve closure. I've seen this so many times as a pastor when someone dies and the family wants to have the funeral right away, this weekend, without the least time to absorb the loss. When we're hurt, we try to rush to forgiveness to make the hurt go away.

We try to use our will to rule our heart, but it doesn't work. It doesn't work any more than yelling at a sore throat makes it heal. The sore throat will heal when it is ready to heal.

Meanwhile, we can get as impatient as we want with the sore throat, but until it receives the rest and care it needs, it's not going to go away. As you know, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross discovered that her dying patients typically pass through five stages of grief. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Matthew Lynn, a Catholic educator who teaches

about reconciliation and healing, proposes that since any hurt is a loss, it is sort of like a small death. We all pass through the same five stages in forgiving a hurt. Some medical researchers say that feeding the wounds of emotional hurts, feeding those wounds, precipitates heart disease and other serious medical problems.

Some doctors see a link between cancer and the tendency to hold resentment and nurse hurts. I don't know if that's true or accurate or not, but our spiritual lives are affected too when we allow past hurts to be part of who we are. Because people have hurt us, we keep our distance from those who could love us and from those who need our love.

When hurts are not healed, we find it difficult to see the divine light of full humanity in those around us and to be loving presences for them. Relationships are overshadowed with memories of past hurts, and in blocking relationships with others, we block the universal love that wants to relate to us through others. This can be especially difficult when it occurs in the context of a religious community.

This sermon is for me, because a person who belonged to a church I served many years ago has just started attending the church I now belong to. We clashed way back when, and when I saw that person again last month, I discovered that the coals are still glowing hotly inside me. I better start looking for that divine light.

Maybe this sermon is for you too. When we're stuck in the depression stage, it's hard to think of a creative way out of our state of forgiveness. The more we are loved in the middle of whatever we are feeling, the more we can listen carefully to the very things that tend to keep us stuck until they reveal a creative, non-violent solution.

The vital step in healing a hurt is becoming aware of how much you are loved. We can face hurts only to the extent we feel loved. Oftentimes, people have not allowed expressions of love to enter their awareness.

We have all been loved and cared for or we wouldn't be alive, and we need to let these ex-

pressions of love in. In my own personal experience, I have found that if we have a day in which we get four or five nice affirmations and one cutting remark, most of us tend to remember and feel hurt about the cutting remark and forget all about the affirmations. The church to which I belong in Shoreline, Washington, very recently voted to call a new minister, Reverend Rachel, delightful woman.

The vote to call her was over 99% affirming. The vote was something like 130 to 1. And guess what everybody was talking about at coffee hour afterwards? Who voted no on Reverend Rachel? I have a new book, a novel, out on Amazon with, I don't know, 23 positive reviews. I haven't checked for about 10 minutes.

23 positive reviews and one negative one. And guess which one I brood about? That's right. The review by the one ignorant, misguided leader.

Sometimes when I give workshops on joyfulness, I ask participants to recall and list some of the ways they've been loved. To experience again how it felt to be hugged by a grandson or surprised by friends with a birthday party or told, I love you. Perhaps you could bring such a memory into your awareness now and wrap yourself in it.

Let's take a quiet moment together to do that now. Remembering that experience of being loved. If we let the light of the realization that we are loved shine through the darkness of our hurts, we can begin to let go of the hurts and let the love in.

As we let this awareness in, we allow new healing tissue to form around life's wounds. As we open our eyes to the many ways universal love is manifested in the life-giving beauty and events of our lives and in the love that others have for us, we begin to risk living in a present awareness of love instead of with past hurts. For many people, the trap when we've been hurt is not usually vengeful retaliation.

Although fantasizing about it can be really fine for a few days or weeks, but rather our trap tends

to be swallowing our anger and passively taking abuse, including the abuse we heap upon ourselves, getting stuck in depression. Forgiveness is an ongoing process. As we forgive ourselves more deeply and heal earlier hurts triggered by the current one, we will discover more gifts.

As we discover more gifts, our acceptance will deepen and so will our forgiveness. Thus, to the degree that we can be grateful for the new life coming from the hurt, we are healed. We become grateful for the small gifts of daily life and we start tending to see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty, and we feel connected to all of creation.

Most of all, perhaps, we have courage to risk going into new situations in which we could be hurt again because we know that healing is possible. Knowing about the stages of forgiveness, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, knowing about those stages can help us to understand this process, but it's not necessary to memorize the process or to know exactly where we are at any point. The most important thing by far is to let yourself be loved wherever you are with all your thoughts and feelings regarding the hurtful situation.

When you do that, you'll automatically move from one stage to the next, and the same process applies when we're trying to forgive that most ornery and difficult person, ourselves. When we are alienated from our own heart by guilt or shame, we too often forget that our first Unitarian Universalist principle, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, very much includes our own precious self. Let love come in from your own heart wherever you are, and I believe that you cannot and should not hurry this process.

Don't forgive too soon. Some things should never be forgiven anyway. If your unforgiveness is hurting you, limiting your life, perhaps you're ready to move toward letting go, but if you're not ready, you're not ready, and that is okay.

Now, please take out your acorn. Think of our nation with its heritage of slavery and genocide

unlike some other nations that have confessed their national sins. I think of Canada and South Africa as a couple of examples.

Unlike them, the United States has not had the moral courage to do so yet. When we're caught up in the anger and pain of a hurt, even one that happened many years ago, we may try as individuals, we may try to avoid our painful feelings at all costs by distracting ourselves with addictions, dramas, or other harmful responses. I think we see this avoidance on a national scale with the attempts to rewrite history, to ban books, to smother speech, to punish victims, to sustain the illusion of a glorious past, to cling to our guns, to dull our senses with opiates.

The painful feelings will keep coming until we listen to them. If we can notice in the middle of our discomfort what our heart is telling us, we can undergo a healing. We can move through the stages of forgiveness at our own pace.

We can find a creative solution. We can release the burning hot coal that is clutched so hard in our hand. Perhaps our own small forgivings might even inspire others and spread peace and reconciliation throughout our culture.

Friends, don't forgive too soon. Don't rush it, but maybe don't hold on to hurt forever either. Maybe choose to keep moving through until the release of true, total forgiveness comes and sets you free.

Feel that acorn in your hand, the acorn that represents that hard, old hurt. Take a look at it. Listen to it.

Is it ready for you to let it go or does it want to stay with you for a while longer? Whatever pain you carry, whatever need you have to forgive or be forgiven, I invite you as you leave the service today, if you're ready to start on your forgiving journey, to place your acorn in the basket in the hopes that this little release will be an outward sign of your inward intention to undertake the process of healing and forgiveness. If you're not able to let go at this time, no worries. Please keep your acorn as long as you need to.

And perhaps when you really are ready, you can and forgiveness and with all the joys of a full
send it back into nature or to Kim's driveway. and fruitful life. Amen. ■
Friends, may you be richly blessed with peace

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