

**Words of Inspiration “Atonement, Forgiveness and Salvation”  
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration, October 2, 2011  
Rev. Kathryn Ellis**

We come together to communal worship on this Sunday before the Jewish High Holiday, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement which begins with the Sabbath at sunset on Friday night. Yom Kippur is a solemn and joyful time. Rabbi Arthur Waskow tells us that “Yom Kippur has become the moment when most Jews individually and the Jewish people collectively experience the strongest sense of partnership and covenant with God.”<sup>i</sup> Beginning on the Sunday before Rosh Hashanah, stopping for Rosh Hashanah itself and then continuing for ten days between the new year celebration and Yom Kippur is a time of preparation, *the Days of Awe or the days of repentance*. Waskow writes:

(T)hroughout the (this)period, the congregation recognizes that the root of all reconciliation is in the Root of Being. But the tradition teaches that remorse toward God can bring forgiveness only for those hurts that we have done toward God alone. Wherever we have hurt another human being, we must try to make some redress for the harm that we have done. And we must seek forgiveness from the people we have hurt.<sup>ii</sup>

And so, we asked you, too, who are Unitarian Universalists, to think about and meditate on forgiveness.

Bernadette and Jim h shared powerful stories from their own lives, particularly of the need to forgive parents for one’s childhood, forgive them for being human and to forgive ourselves for being human. Often, we need to forgive ourselves for our own childhoods. I have shared with you that my childhood was often difficult, and I, too, learned to forgive and reconcile with my parents. Before he died, my father actually apologized for the way he was during my childhood. Although I had already forgiven him, it was a great gift to receive that apology.

This morning I’d like to share another forgiveness story with you, one from my adult years. It’s a story in which pain and anger and eventual forgiveness were part of my own transformation, my awakening to what Richard Rohr says is true religion. “True religion is always a deep intuition that we are already *participating* in something very good . . .”<sup>iii</sup>

When I was thirty years old, I had a plan. I had just had a beautiful, baby girl, so together, Rick and I would love her and raise her in a world that I thought was getting better for girls and women.

I started a doctoral program in counseling psychology as a way to help people, serve the world and make a life. When I completed the degree, I got a tenure track position at a state university where I taught master's degree students in counseling and worked in the university counseling center. I loved this combination of work. I am still in contact with some of those graduate students and proud of them. Several of them went on to get doctorates including one who studied with our own Portia Hunt. I thought I would stay in that position until I retired and I went through the academic steps of applying for promotion and applying for tenure. I was given them both, and I was making a good living. But I was not making a good life.

Taking the position had been costly to my young family. We left our home in West Virginia; Rick left his job and had to find a new one. We even lived apart from some months when my little girl was only five. I was determined that this sacrifice would lead to a good life for us all. We did make a new home and Rick went to work at Dickinson College where he still works.

But like many young women entering academia in the eighties, I was naïve and unprepared for academic politics. Two of the graduate students gave me a school shirt embroidered with my name and "*tw.*" TW for token woman; I hadn't thought of myself in that way. I was neither the first woman in the department, nor the only woman in the department, but I was the only doctoral level, tenure track woman in a department of eight tenured men. Another woman with a doctorate was in the department on a one year contract.

Six years after I began that job, I told Rick that I had to leave it or it would kill me. I meant that quite literally. By then, I was sick and tired and angry. I had had two miscarriages. I was completely stressed out and I left the job without finding another. I was fortunate in that I both could and wanted to start a private psychotherapy practice. I could hardly to be in the same room with most of those men. Later, some women on the university faculty told me that they saw me as heroic for escaping the "golden handcuffs." I did not feel heroic; I was exhausted, enraged and despairing.

I did get a favorite riddle from the experience. "Why are the fights in academia so vicious? Because the stakes are so small."

How did it get so bad? No doubt, part of it was my own personality; my wish to be helpful and my wish to make things better for women. Certainly, my lack of understanding of academic politics contributed. But sexism and racism were thriving. One day at the counseling center, the center director, a male professor, told me that I had the "right gentalia" for the position.

I believed that as more women entered the department on tenure track the atmosphere would improve. It did not. Later, I read some reports that demonstrated what I experienced: at first the entrance of more women makes the sexism worse. When the department hired a lovely Taiwanese woman professor, I was amazed and appalled by the overt racism shown by some of these male counseling professors.

As a woman counselor, I heard lots of stories of sexual abuse and rape. The phrase “sexual harassment” was fairly new. With an activist faculty women’s group and a new, young university president, it seemed like the time for the university to address sexual harassment. My woman colleague and I conducted a research study on faculty attitudes and experiences of sexual harassment. Part of our learning was the way in which we were viciously, vulgarly and usually anonymously attacked for doing that research.

My woman colleague and I helped to create a sexual harassment policy and a grievance board. Over the next several years, we learned that five of the eight men in my department were sexually harassing students. These were men that I had respected in a department where at least 3/4s of our students were women. I expected better of them. As a counselor, I knew that many of these young women had been seriously sexually abused as children. I could see that they were hurt even more, hurt and confused. Some of them became suicidal. I was furious. Probably it tapped in to my own childhood and young adult history. No doubt, my wish for my daughter to be safe and healthy played a part in the intensity of my feelings. Certainly my wish to make the world better contributed to my burn out.

If any of these men took responsibility or showed remorse, perhaps my reactions may have been different. But they did not. When I left the university, we still lived in the same place. I was so angry that I could not stand to be in the same room with those men, could not talk with them. One of my women colleagues was so angry by the time that she left that she vowed never to set foot in the state of Pennsylvania again! I think she has kept that vow. Once I was in an antique store in their basement show room; I heard one of these men come in upstairs. I was immediately stressed and would not come upstairs until I thought he was gone.

Now who was this hurting? Certainly not the men. Mostly my anger was hurting me and because it hurt me, it also hurt my family if only by depleting my energy so that I had less to give them. I had less energy for really being alive, less energy for joy and play. I was not whole. I was too angry to be whole. I worked to heal myself and gradually got better. I engaged in spiritual practices: yoga, meditation and spiritual reading. Gradually I came to realize that I had forgiven those men. The truth is that they really did not understand the harm that they did. They did not understand why I was angry, why all these women get so angry. They were not involved in my forgiveness process; I never talked with them about it. But I was able to talk with them again, to meet them at conferences or local events without distress and even to feel sorrow when they died.

Without knowing it, I had been on the spiritual path that Richard Rohr describes in his new book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. He describes the path that I followed without knowing. His message is one that many young people reject, certainly I would have. That is that we must fall or fail in some way before we grow spiritually in the second half of life.

Then and only then will deeper love happen. . . .  
*great love is always a discovery, a revelation, a wonderful surprise, a falling into something much bigger and deeper that is literally beyond us and larger than us.*<sup>iv</sup> (italics in original)

The adepts in all religions are always forgiving, compassionate and radically inclusive. . . . Mature people are not either-or thinkers but they bathe in the ocean of both-and. . . . By definition, authentic God experience is always “too much”! It consoles our True Self only after it has devastated our false self. We must begin to be honest about this instead of dishing out fast-food religion.<sup>v</sup>

Wholeness and holiness will always stretch us beyond our small comfort zone.<sup>vi</sup>

In order to be whole and healed from my own brokenness, I had to let go of my sense of righteousness, let go of my anger, let go of lingering beliefs about controlling life. And then I found myself held in amazing love, comforted and encouraged by a great love that is more than human. I call that love God, but I don't care what you call it. What I can tell you, is that you are also held in that love as are all people, all of the time, all of creation. I found unity, joy and gratitude. For me this is atonement and salvation.

Rohr is a Franciscan priest. As a Christian, he says, “The only consistent pattern I can find is that all the books of the Bible seem to agree that *somehow God is with us and we are not alone.*”<sup>vii</sup>

From despair and anger, I followed a spiritual path to a feeling of wholeness and freedom. Unitarian Universalist minister, Ton Own-Towle wrote, “Forgiveness frees people from spiritual slaveries of all sorts.”<sup>viii</sup> And Fred Muir wrote, “The need for wholeness, . . . , is part of the forgiving process.”<sup>ix</sup>

Often people get stuck or confused in their thinking about forgiveness. I think this happens for several reasons. Many see it as a religious obligation, a commandment. “If I am a good person, I must forgive.” Then tend to deny their own feelings of hurt and anger. Psychologist, Robert Karen wrote, “There is always something deadly about inauthentic forgiveness.”

People confuse forgiveness with condoning, excusing or forgetting. We even have the phrase “forgive and forget.” Forgiving is none of those things, nor is it to open yourself to the same hurt. It is about accepting the past and not being ruled by it. It is about letting go of anger, resentment, bitterness and self-righteousness.

Sometimes we think that forgiveness is for the other person and that it requires the other person to show some remorse, to apologize. It does not. It is very good when someone shows genuine remorse, makes amends. But forgiveness is primarily for the forgiver. It takes only one person. Reconciliation takes two.

Forgiveness is seen as a one time event, but it is not an event. Forgiveness is a process. That process begins with feeling what you feel, then thinking about your feelings, knowing them and understanding them. What led to this feeling? What do you wish were different? What meaning have you given to the other's behavior?

People confuse forgiveness with condoning, excusing or forgetting. We even have the phrase "forgive and forget." Forgiveness is not public accountability or justice which is a different process.

Forgiving is none of those things, nor is it to open yourself to the same hurt. It is about accepting the past and not being ruled by it. It is about letting go of anger, resentment, bitterness and self-righteousness. Through forgiveness, you can come to a place of acceptance, of healing, of starting over. A place of open eyes and open hearts. The process takes its own time. It requires acceptance and compassion. It takes practice and repetition. It leads to a place. This morning, I want to give my friend, the poet Hafiz, the last word.

### **Stop Being So Religious<sup>x</sup>**

What  
Do sad people have in  
Common?

It seems  
They have all built a shrine  
To the past

And often go there  
And do a strange wail and  
Worship

What is the beginning of  
Happiness?

It is to stop being  
So religious

Like

That.

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- <sup>i</sup> Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, p. 27.
- <sup>ii</sup> Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, p. 8
- <sup>iii</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. x.
- <sup>iv</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, pp. xxvi-xxvii.
- <sup>v</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, pp.10-13.
- <sup>vi</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 48.
- <sup>vii</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 63.
- <sup>viii</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice press, 2011, p. 264.
- <sup>ix</sup> Muir, Frederic John. *Heretic's Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. Annapolis, MD: UUCA, 2001, p. 79.
- <sup>x</sup> Ladinsky, Daniel. *The Gift*. New York: penguin Books, 1999, p, 119