

**“Forgiveness”**  
**Service of the Living Tradition**  
**January 6, 2008**  
**Rev. Barbara Gadon**

In my office hangs a Navajo weaving of birds in blues and golds and greens. There are birds flying in toward a corn plant, and birds flying out away from the corn plant. The weaver explained to me that the corn plant symbolized the community. Birds flying in represented people entering the community, through birth or by marriage. Birds flying out were those leaving the community through death, or to marry into another community.

Our service this morning, our annual service of the living tradition, is like that. It marks the birds who flew into our church community last year, and the ones who flew out. I like this image of a church as a container of life. I sometimes wish it were as simple as this lovely, simple image of birds and corn. The Navajo image has a few things missing from modern life. There were no adopted birds in the weaving, and no birds going through divorce – churches don't often get to keep both birds in a divorce. There were no college-bound birds going off to seek their fortune.

Probably the biggest difference is the fact that for most people in tribal cultures, at least in prior times, your being part of the community was never up for grabs. The decision to join or to stay was largely made for you. You didn't even get to decide whether or not you liked corn in the first place. You couldn't say, Maybe I'm more of a tomato kind of person. Uh-uh.

Modern times offer more choices than this. This is both good and bad. Several times a day, through advertising, we get a message that tells us the world revolves around us, so we need to make a choice, like ordering the exact double mocha, half-caf, skim latte we want at Starbucks. Used to be that you would serve coffee in your office; cruddy coffee, as I recall. Now everyone brings their own little paper cup or water bottle with exactly what they want, and it's one less thing we share. Better coffee, no question, but less sharing, I think.

And we have more choices about religion, and how we worship. Many of us here wouldn't be in a church at all, if we hadn't had this faith, based so squarely on the idea of respecting choices. And it becomes an important choice to stay with a community. There are no birds in the Navajo weaving that signify someone leaving because they felt the no longer belonged with the corn plant. I have spoken with people who have left our church in recent times. The decision is difficult and painful. But a church sees tumultuous times, and birds do fly out. We mourn them, but silently, as a community.

In a few minutes, we will honor those who celebrate 35- and 50-year anniversaries in their memberships with us. They represent the choice to stay with one person over time. Through disappointments of not getting what they wanted. Over tremendous change. Past hurts and conflicts. They have chosen to stay, and to contribute to the health of the community. We celebrate them, noisily. And we celebrate all of you, who have chosen to help make this church the beloved community.

So what are the things that we can do, to help strengthen relationships – all relationships – whether it's with our friends, with our families, or with our church? Those of you who are just beginning your journey with us at this church, what might you do that would help bring you to a 35- or 50-year anniversary with us?

David Richo wrote a book I find myself reading and re-reading, called “How to Be an Adult” - which might sound a tad insulting, until you read some of his criteria for what makes for a mature adult, and you have to admit that for most of us, it's sort of an ongoing project. Mature adults, Richo says, *can commit to maintain a relationship in periods when one's needs are not being met, since the other is valued for their inherent worth, not just for need fulfillment. Healthy adults can tolerate love and anger at the same time. They can say, “You can be angry at me and will still love you. When I am angry at you, I still love you.” Mature adults can pass through the normal phases of relationships – from romance through conflict (and disappointment) to commitment – with love that matures through each vicissitude. And finally, healthy adults can commit to an essential bond – an enduring 'given' of mutuality – that weathers the stresses and crises of change.* (Richo, *How to Be an Adult*)

I don't know about you, but I look at this list, and start to realize that it takes a fair bit of work. It takes a fair bit of patience. It takes a fair bit of discernment. The word I return to over and over, the word that seems key to the whole thing is, “forgiveness.” There was a good article in yesterday's News Journal about forgiveness. It said, among other things, that a “national survey, published in the Journal of Adult Development in 2001, found forgiveness rare enough; only 52% of Americans said they had forgiven others for hurtful acts.” (“Forgiveness Does a Body Good, Too”, by Melissa Healy, The News Journal, January 5, 2008) This surprised me, since people usually answer surveys in ways that make them look a little better than they are.

So forgiveness is more rare than I would have expected. And yet, it is “a pivotal point in spiritual growth...” according to Christina Baldwin. “Without forgiveness, life does not move.” (Christina Baldwin, *Life's Companion, Journal Writing as Spiritual Quest*) It is a practice that is stressed in all major religions. Probably because it is so hard. So what do I mean by forgiveness? First, I don't mean discounting what has hurt you, or saying, “It's okay” when you really haven't dealt with what's happened. Nor do I mean forgiving someone because someone told you you have to, or for the sake of other

people. That is what the News Journal article called “fake forgiveness”, and that's usually what people think of when they can't stomach the idea of forgiving someone. Or that you somehow shift the blame to yourself. That's poisonous. But unresolved resentment can also be poisonous.

Forgiveness requires that you somehow find compassion for both the person who hurt you, and for yourself. For so many of us, we think we can only have compassion for one “side” or the other – for ourselves or for the person who hurt us. That somehow showing compassion means that someone is “right”. It doesn't. By forgiveness, I mean when it's possible, to actually say what happened – if possible, directly to the person you need to forgive. To actually talk about how you were hurt, and what you would like from the other person. It has got to be one of the most terrifying things most people could imagine.

And when it's not possible to do that face to face, there are ways to do it within yourself. There's a practice in the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, of writing down all those for whom you feel resentment, and describing the situation that stirs up resentment. Then when you're done with that list, you need to make a parallel list beside each item, of *your part* in the resentment, or conflicted situation. Guess which list you will then be asked to focus on. Guess which list you can actually do something about. Guess which list is going to help you move on in your life.

I think we need to regularly forgive people for not being all that we want them to be. Jesus' students were griping to him one time about having to forgive people. “How many times do we need to forgive?” one asked, hoping the rabbi would see the rhetorical nature of this question. One of the elder disciples suggested, “Seven times?” Jesus said, “Seventy times seven.” Clearly Jesus had been in a few relationships.

When you first fall in love with someone, it's so great, because they are everything you have ever wanted. There's that floaty, delicious feeling that's like you're bathing in warm chocolate. You're not good for much. You don't care. And then gradually or suddenly you realize that they aren't exciting or funny or kind or interesting all the time. They have separate needs and interests from you. You have to forgive them for not meeting all of your needs. They have to do the same for you. Unless both people can do this, the relationship doesn't stand a chance. It seems so obvious said like this, but how many of you have been surprised when this has happened to you? I have.

Rev. Meg Riley once said that she loses patience with couples whose wedding vows do not grasp this reality. “They write vows,” she says, “like 'Each time you cry, I promise to wipe away your tears.’” She tells couples: “Only commit to what you can really deliver on.” This advice is based on her experience as a middle-aged person in a 23-year partnership. She's pretty sure that she horrifies young romantics. “Forget it,”

she snapped at a couple who actually wanted to vow to wipe away each other's tears. "You'll be lucky if your partner isn't crying about you!"

I've heard more parents talk about being bathed in a feeling of love, of weeping with gratitude and joy over the cribs of their new babies. And that is a romance that wears off, too. Over and over, parents and children have to forgive each other because they have been disappointed. And because you have given your heart, they have the power to hurt you. You don't give your heart in any substantial way, without being disappointed at some point. And having to make the decision to go forward, anyway. With churches, it's the same.

"Every adult relationship," says David Richo, "includes some hurt... Every adult relationship REQUIRES conflict before true commitment can happen."

I'm not saying that every relationship can be reconciled. Sometimes the healthiest thing is to move on. I know good and honorable people who try their best and a marriage simply doesn't work. Or a relationship with someone is simply too toxic to continue. I am saying that forgiveness and tolerance are the only possibilities for any relationship to work. And if we don't understand that, we are doomed from the beginning.

I spent a part of my adult life estranged from my family. There were things that my parents and my siblings did that I once found unforgivable. Some of it legitimately could be called abuse. Some of it was meanness and lack of compassion. On both sides, although I'm sure that wouldn't be the story I would have told when I was in the middle of it. I am on a journey of forgiveness with them. I'm not finished with it, I have a long ways to go, but I have seen the power of forgiveness. I am a witness to the miracle of it. Of being able to be who I am, and say what is true for me, and to accept who they are. I know they see a change in me. It is still not easy, but it is, I am learning, much better than the old way of resentment and unforgiveness.

Christina Baldwin writes, "The only choice we have is to reconcile ourselves to our own flaws and the flaws of other people, or withdraw from the community. If we choose to withdraw, we withdraw both from our humanness and our connection to the sacred." Which we UUs might describe as the interdependent web of all life. "Forgiveness," Baldwin says, "is the act of admitting we are like other people."

She also says that all relationships have some kind of contract, whether we know about it or not. You can either state what you want directly and upfront, she says, or you can find out afterwards what the contract was, because you broke it. "I expected you to take off time from work to take care of me when I was sick." Or, "I expected you to put in family money into this business venture, if the capital ran out." But because the

contract was unspoken, neither person really made a choice. And it makes negotiating and forgiveness harder.

In Jewish tradition, the couple enters marriage with a contract, with an agreement defining the terms of the marriage. Many couples have their ketubahs done in beautiful Hebrew calligraphy and ornamentation and hung on their walls. A traditional ketubah spells out the obligations of each spouse under Jewish law. Many modern couples write their own, personal contract. Robert and I wrote one before we married, which was signed by us and by the minister in our wedding ceremony. It was a deeply moving experience. And it was a humbling experience, since it took into account our deepest flaws and our deepest fears about what could go wrong.

In the world of churches, our word for this kind of contract is “covenant”. Today you will have the chance to discuss the covenant we are proposing for our church community. A covenant is not a kind of magic spell or incantation; we don't say what we expect and then because everybody knows this, assume we will all abide by it. We write human frailty into a covenant. We sign a covenant expecting people to be human and to fail at times. But you sign a covenant admitting up front that you are like the other people. We need something to keep us accountable. And we need something for all to turn to so that it's clear when it's been broken, and work needs to be done to make amends. A covenant says that forgiveness is possible, if we can provide a framework and some language that makes it possible. I hope that you will join us for this meeting. Tell us if these “vows” are something on which you could realistically deliver, or what you think it needs to say. A covenant will help make this corn plant grow straight and tall, and be a shelter for all the birds that choose it. Amen.