

Keeping Broken Things

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First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

The Head of the Year by Marge Piercy

I Will Keep Broken Things by Alice Walker

SERMON

“He sat up, and put his hands together, as if to pray.

“I am left here with my guilt,” he said, “In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough. I have longed to talk to a Jew and beg forgiveness...I want to die in peace...”

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands.

Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower.

At last, I made up my mind

and without a word

I left the room.”ⁱ

These words are from *The Sunflower – on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal, exploring moral questions around guilt and confession and forgiveness.

While Wiesenthal was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, he was asked to come to the bedside of a young dying Nazi soldier. The soldier, after telling the story of what he did in the war, was asking Wiesenthal for forgiveness – for absolution.

This soldier didn't know Wiesenthal – and had only asked for a Jew – anyone.

After hearing the soldier confess his sins,
he remained silent.

Years later, meeting the soldier's mother, who had lost her son and her husband now, too – she spoke of the soldier as a “good and decent boy” and yet and still, knowing much different, Simon remained silent.

He ends his book with these words:

The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness.. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision. You who have read this...ask yourself the crucial question, “what would I have done?”

As our Jewish neighbors celebrate the new year of Rosh Hashanna and the day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, there is much wisdom to draw from meanings of forgiveness in the Jewish tradition.

A world still broken, still full of suffering and injustice and genocide – of cultures, of people – as old practices have morphed and changed into modern practices – of prejudice and discrimination that function as prisons.

Forgiveness, in some of the most extreme circumstances, is more a question about agency and power.

The assumption, or the moral certainty, that forgiveness is always good and right and appropriate, takes away the power that choosing forgiveness, or not choosing it, may create for the victim or the sufferer of pain, humiliation, or hatred.

There is power in the ability to choose forgiveness, and in that process, to discern, for an individual or a community, what forgiveness means.

In a recent edition of *The Sunflower*, there are responses from religious, ethical, philosophical, political, and social leaders from around the world – they are responses to the final question, and their lack of unanimous response adds depth and nuance to the conversation.

One of the respondents, Harold Kushner, writes:

“Forgiving is not something we do for another person, as the Nazi asked Wiesenthal to do for him. Forgiving happens inside us.

It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps more importantly a letting go of the role of victim.

For a Jew to forgive the Nazis would not mean, God forbid, saying to them, “What you did was understandable, I can understand what led you to do it and I don’t have you for it.”

It would mean saying, “What you did was thoroughly despicable and puts you outside the category of decent human beings. But I refuse to give you the power to define me as a victim. I refuse to let your blind hatred define the shape and content of my Jewishness. I don’t hate you; I reject you.”. And then the Nazi would remain chained to his past and to his conscience, but the Jew would be free.”

For Kushner, the focus is about agency and power –
a laying down of grievances –
because the burden of the experience
was resting on the one who was oppressed.
The lack of forgiveness, in this perspective,
added more weight and more suffering –
and the agency expressed in forgiveness
was not an absolution of guilt,
but the chance to choose freedom from holding on to anger
like a pack of stones on your back
that you were waiting to throw, if you just had the chance –
and one day you simply decided – to set them down.

Another respondent to Wiesenthal, Deborah Lipstadt, writes of the importance of right relationship, reconciliation happening on a relational, human level – a difference between simple repentance, from the same root as *repel* – as in to refrain or stop doing something – to repent is to turn away from sin or vices or behavior;

while atonement – stemming from similar roots of “one-ness” or literally “at-one-ment” – is about right relationship and a practice of making right on wrong that has been done. She writes,

“Judaism believes that it is only through human interaction that the victim can best be healed and the wrongdoer most profoundly changed.

It is important to differentiate between teshuvah, repentance, and kaparah, atonement. Atonement only comes after one bears the consequences of one’s acts...Judaism is founded on the notion that actions have consequences... ”

I’m surprised at times,
after studying ethics and morality formally
I still find myself having regular refresher courses –
perhaps it is living with two very young humans
and an elementary educator –
but there are moments that I read a children’s book
or see a cartoon around character development –
and something just clicks in a way that it hadn’t for me before.

So maybe I should have skipped seminary and watched more cartoons.

But a recent one, that sticks with me –
is from Daniel Tiger –
which, for those who are unfamiliar,
is a new cartoon based on Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.

And the simple song, which you hear repeatedly during the episode, is,
Saying I’m sorry is the first step – then how can I help?

Saying I’m sorry is first – but it is not all.

I’m not sure if they were trying to capture the nuances
between repentance and atonement –
something tells me that wasn’t their focus –

but it is perfect –
repentance is saying “I’m sorry” with a contrite heart –
saying “how can I help” or “how can I make this right”
is atonement – at-one-ment – the rebuilding of broken relationship.

And on the other side of agency,
the other side of claiming power over the ability to forgive another –
is the ways in which we seek forgiveness for our own wrongs –
the ways in which we long to be forgiven,
or, as is sometimes the case,
the challenge of forgiving ourselves.

Lucille Clifton writes,

*I am running into a new year
and the old years blow back
like a wind
that I catch in my hair
like strong fingers like
all my old promises and
it will be hard to let go
of what I said to myself
about myself
when I was sixteen and
twenty-six and thirty-six
even forty-six but
I am running into a new year
and I beg what I love and
I leave to forgive me*

There is, in seeking the forgiveness of another,
a deeply humbling experience
of naming and knowing our own failings, faults, and injuries.

Of recognizing our imperfections, our mistakes,
our not meeting our best values and deepest commitments –
by failing to attend to our relationships,
by failing to notice the suffering of others,
or our failing to try to pay attention to them at all.

We soon realize,
when we are in the position of seeking forgiveness –
what one philosopher says,

*that the line between good and evil
goes through the center of every human heart.*

We mess up, we make mistakes,
we fail at being our best self –
who we strive to be, who our loved ones expect us to be –
and how we hold our imperfections
and name and notice and attend to making them right again –
is far more an expression of our character
as how often we get things right and do things well.

One final respondent to Wiesenthal is Hubert Locke, speaking of the depth and importance of the young Jew's silence in the face of the Nazi confessor – Locke writes,

“There is much that silence might teach us, if we could learn to listen to it. Not the least of its lessons is that there may well be questions for which there are no answers and other questions for which answers would remove the moral force of the question.

There are matters that perhaps should always remain unanswered; questions which should lie like a great weight on our consciences so that we continually feel an obligation to confront their insistent urging. There are questions that are unanswerable queries of the soul, matters too awe-full for human response, too demonic for profound rational resolution.

By our silence, perhaps we acknowledge as much; we own up to our humanness. We concede that we are not gods and that we lack, as much as we might be loath to admit it, the capacity to provide understanding and assurance for every inexplicable moment in life.”

I don't know about you,
but when I read these words
I was struck with a profound dual feeling –
convicted and freed.

Convicted –
in the sense of, *“oh my god, I do these things – I want to know the clear answers to things and provide understanding for inexplicable moments in life...”*

And Freed –
in the sense of, *“I don't have to have all the answers – I don't always need to know what to do, what to say – I can own up to the fact I'm not a god – I can be a human – imperfect, flawed, and still be okay.”*

To own up to our own humanness
is to, in the words of Marge Piercy,
*void ourselves of injuries, insults, incursions –
go with empty hands to those who have hurt and make amends.*

To own up to our own humanness
is to know that at times,
we won't be able to forgive –
on behalf of someone else,
as Simon Weisenthal was asked to do and, rightly so, was unwilling to do –

we may not be able to forgive something or someone
who has taken something, violated something, that cannot be repaired –
and that realization, that humanness,
is to also know
that at times sit with the silence of someone we are seeking forgiveness from,
that just may never come.

We, too, may need to sit with the weight of it on our conscience,
for a short or a long while,
as we find a way to reconcile our own soul
in changed behavior or deep repentance
or the attempt at making things right -
without necessarily having the release of guilt
from those we have wronged.

It may make us feel broken – but that, too, is part of owning our humanness –
and when we are aware of it, and the messiness of it,
we might be able to find a way to hold the burden
that helps guide us toward our best selves again.

I will keep broken things
writes Alice Walker.
Their beauty is that they never need be “fixed”
I will keep broken things -
I will keep you, pilgrim of sorrow –
I will keep myself.

Sometimes,
even though the work is hard,
and it may take a long time,
and never be perfect again -
the humility in asking for forgiveness
or the empowerment of choosing to offer forgiveness -
creates a new depth of relationship, honesty, and possibility
for the remaking, the reconstituting, the recommitment

of our hearts toward reconciliation
with those we love, with the world for which we hope,
for living into the person
that we are called to be.

A young daughter, frustrated with her parents, decided to leave home. She was trying to establish who she was as a person, define her world and her life, to be freed from the old ways of her family, the morning milking of the cows and fixing fences and the daily grind of reading books she didn't like and studying something that did not ignite her spirit.

She packed her bags, and quietly, in the middle of the night, took a train to the coast to live her own life; free and without obligation or need for obedience.

She left a note of harsh words, ending with – “I'm going to live a free life. Your way of life has fenced me in, suffocated me from being who I can be. I'm done with you and this place. Go ahead with your own life – leave me alone.”

She landed in a new, strange land. She landed in a place so unfamiliar there was no set way for her to be, nobody telling her what to do or what to study...complete freedom. She made it work – tried to find a job, meet people. But she wandered, in this new found freedom, aimlessly. And she began to feel a loss. A deep hollow within. There was nobody telling her what to do or what to study, so there was only that: nobody...what seemed like freedom began to feel like complete loneliness. Nobody to listen to her. Nobody to talk with, nobody to challenge her or encourage her or to love her.

This new found freedom quickly turned sour and became not freedom, but isolation and deep loneliness and longing for home.

Perhaps, she thought, perhaps I can return home – perhaps I can live into my true self, out of the mold but still part of the fabric that brought me up – still connected to the soil of that farm and the hands held around that table. Maybe I need to start again. “But I left” she thought. “I left, writing harsh words, telling them to leave

me alone, in the middle of night – they must be furious. Why should they welcome me back.”

She decided to write a letter. It read, “Dear Mom and Dad – I know I left suddenly. I know you must be angry with me – I didn’t show you respect. I thought I wanted something different – and I’m not sure this is what I want, exactly. I’m not sure what it is I want. But what I do know is that I am lonely, and even in my wanting to be free, I don’t want to do it alone.

The train from where I am will ride on the tracks near the farm. I will ride the train soon. I will look to the farm as we pass – if I am welcome home, would you hang my blue bedsheets on the clothesline by the barn? If I see my blue bed sheets hanging on the clothesline, I will know I am welcome to come back and we can find a way to start over. I still need to live differently, and find my voice and my identity – but I would like to do it at home. If the line is empty, I will know I should keep going and continue on this path by myself. Whatever you decide, know that I’m sorry.”

She sent the letter. She bought her ticket. She got on the train. For the several hour ride she tried to sleep, tried to eat – but couldn’t. She grew increasingly nervous. She looked out the window – she couldn’t see forward from her seat. They were getting closer, closer – and now quite close. She began to recognize the countryside as the place of her home. She said to the gentlemen across from her:

“Sir, I know this sounds very strange, but around this corner there will be a farm with an old fence and a big red barn with a clothesline by it. Could you tell me if there are blue sheets on the clothesline?” The man, with a slightly perplexed face, said, “sure – I suppose.” They rounded the corner.

The girl’s face was toward the ground, and her eyes were fixed intently on the man. His brows furrowed, his eyes squinted – and then his eyes opened very wide. “What is it?” The girl said. “Are their blue sheets? What is it? I can’t look - What do you see?” “My, goodness” he said, with a quiet amazement, as his gaze became fixed out the window and he perched on the edge of his seat with the shape of his face moving from puzzlement to wonder,

“Would you look at that?

Why, yes, there are blue sheets covering that clothesline,
and there are blue sheets all along the fence,
there are blue sheets nailed to the barn,
hanging on the roofs of the buildings,
covering the porch railing and the horse in the pasture –
my dear, there are blue sheets everywhere!”

ⁱ From *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal