



# *Forgiveness*

## Small Groups: October 2014

As October begins, the Jewish High Holy days are drawing to a close. They end with Yom Kippur. Throughout the month preceding Yom Kippur, Jews are asked to look back and do the work of forgiveness in areas of their lives and relationships that need repair. Yom Kippur is the first day of the New Year, a day to begin again after relationships have been repaired. Throughout October at UUCP, we will be exploring the meaning and work of forgiveness.

Forgiveness touches everyone's life. No life has never been touched by hurt. No relationship is completely free of mistakes or hurt feelings. What would it mean if no one ever forgave? How isolated we would be if we could not forgive. And so forgiveness is a key religious principle. Yet it occurs to me that we can't really talk about forgiveness without also wrestling with anger. Anger is not something we talk much about, not with our friends, not with our families and certainly not in our congregations. Yet, anger and forgiveness are often wrapped up together.

What is anger? Anger is the reasonable response to having our values or our person violated. Did you hear that word, reasonable? When we get hurt, when something or someone threatens us, injures us, or violates something we hold dear, anger is a reasonable response to the hurt. We generally think of anger, however, as volatile and destructive, so it's difficult to know what to do when we are angry. Often we bottle it up.

For some, we are afraid of anger, so we try very hard not to get angry. Sometimes the violation we experience, like a violation of our dignity, happens in a place where we can't get angry (like at work). I think of Michael Brown, the young person killed by police in Ferguson and the ways that people of color can experience from a young age having their worth and dignity violated, being assumed suspicious, because of the color of their skin. Learning to control one's anger can be necessary to survival.

Gender adds a layer of complexity, too. Anger is a reasonable response to pain; yet anger is said to be unseemly in women, and pain or vulnerability is said to be unseemly in men. And so women often internalize the pain, never giving themselves permission to be angry and name the offense, while men are more free to let the anger out, but don't have the same freedom to really name the pain and offense that underlies it. What a mess!

In the meantime, religion tells us to forgive, forgive, forgive, seven times seventy times forgive. Okay, but we know that there is much in our lives and our world that is wrong and rightly makes us angry. So, an important question is how do we use our anger and pain, how do we deal with them in ways that help us not be burdened or imprisoned by them, but free to move our lives (and our world) forward toward reconciliation, toward the kind of forgiveness where we speak the truth and can repair our broken bonds?

Every year, we have a service on forgiveness. This year, we are taking a whole month to look at what forgiveness means, how do we live it in ways that invite truth telling and accountability, and what lessons can we learn from other people and countries who have found healing and reconciliation after even the worst offenses.

This is an emotional subject, but a powerful and needed one. May our exploration lead us to a more empowered understanding of forgiveness.

Yours in love,  
**Rev. Susan**



# *Living the Theme: Forgiveness*

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience forgiveness and what you learned from the practice.

## **1. Small Steps to Forgiveness**

Throughout this month, try all or some of these ways of making small steps in forgiveness. Small steps help us eventually take bigger steps.

- Look for people who have forgiven others, and ask them to tell you their stories.
- Remember when you have forgiven, and remind yourself you can do it.
- See if there are any forgiveness stories in your family.
- Practice forgiving the smallest offenses against you.
- Practice forgiving for just a minute at a time.
- Forgive a driver who cuts you off on the road.
- Think of times that you have hurt others and needed forgiveness.
- Notice whenever someone is kind to you after you have hurt him or her.
- Notice how often you naturally forgive those you love.

## **2. Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT)**

1. Bring your attention fully to your stomach as you slowly draw in and out two deep breaths. As you inhale, allow the air to gently push your belly out. As you exhale, consciously relax your belly so that it feels soft.
2. On the third full and deep inhalation, bring to your mind's eye an image of someone you love or of a beautiful scene in nature that fills you with awe and wonder. Often people have a stronger response when they imagine their positive feelings are centered in the area around their heart.
3. While practicing, continue with soft belly breathing.
4. Ask the relaxed and peaceful part of you what you can do to resolve your difficulty. Some people find that after practicing this daily, their resentment begins to soften and fade.

## **3. Practice a Better Apology**

The next time you find yourself seeking forgiveness from someone, remember these four communication tips:

- **“I’m sorry for...”** Be specific. Show the person you’re apologizing to that you really understand what they are upset about.
- **“This is wrong because...”** Until you understand why it was wrong or how it hurt someone’s feelings, it’s unlikely you will change. This is also important to show the person you hurt that you really understand how they feel.
- **“In the future I will...”** Use positive language, and tell the person what you WILL do, not what you won’t do.
- **“Will you forgive me?”** This is important in an attempt to restore your relationship. Now, there is no guarantee that the other person will forgive you. Sometimes, they won’t. That’s their decision. Regardless, it is important to ask.



## *Some Questions to Live With*

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

- **When you feel that you have hurt or wronged someone, what do you do to earn forgiveness? How to you go about asking forgiveness from others?**
- **Have you ever had to or been able to forgive someone even though they did not apologize or take responsibility? Does forgiveness always take two parties, or can it be an internal process?**
- **What keeps you from forgiving?** Why, when we know it will ease our own suffering to let go, do we continue to hold onto things?
- **Two common phrases are "forgive and forget" and "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget." Is it possible to forgive and really forget?** Is there ever a time when you shouldn't forget but you can forgive?
- **Are there examples in your life where you forgave or overlooked things too easily/too often and it came back to bite you?** Do you have any regrets about this? SHOULD we forgive easily?
- **What people in your life are easy to forgive? What people in your life are difficult to forgive? Why do you think there is a difference?**
- **How do you know when you have truly forgiven someone?** What actions really show forgiveness?
- **What characteristics in your life might indicate that you haven't fully forgiven past hurts?**
- **Do you find it relatively easy to forgive others for their negative actions but continue to struggle with guilt over your own mistakes in life? Or do you find it easier to forgive yourself than to forgive others?**
- **How do we teach our children to be forgiving?**
- **What is your most powerful experience of being forgiven? What is your most powerful experience of forgiving someone else?** What made it powerful? What did you learn from it?



## Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

### *First Thoughts and Wise Words*

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**“Forgiveness”** (n.) *the act of forgiving someone or something; the attitude of someone who is willing to forgive other people*

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*Before we can forgive one another, we have to understand one another.*

Emma Goldman

*Forgive and be free. Forget that you have forgiven and be freer.*

Buddha

*Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass.*

Confucius

*We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this; we are less prone to hate our enemies.*

Martin Luther King

*Forgiving does not erase the bitter part. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.*

Louis B. Smedes

*Forgiveness is the needle that knows how to mend.*

Jewel Kitchler

*To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.*

Louis B. Smedes

*“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” What antidote can there be for an idea that popular and poisonous? Revenge provides revenge, which is sure to provide revenge, forming an endless chain of human misery. Here's the antidote: Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.*

Kurt Vonnegut, UU

*Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control ... to be locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else's nightmare.*

Lance Morrow

*Holding onto resentment is like letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.*

Ann Landers

*Forgiveness is choosing to love. It is the first skill of self-giving love.*

Mohandas Gandhi

*The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.*

James Baldwin

*NOT forgiving is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick.*

Author Unknown



*Forgiveness is giving up the possibility of a better past.*  
Author Unknown

### Love Fills My Heart

*I can almost see God inside you,  
Behind that wall we both have built.  
I believe it's there, for you are Spirit, too.*

*You don't get off for what you did,  
But I want to be free,  
And I can't be if I hold this pain.*

*I release you from any claim on me.  
I reject your intent to harm, and  
I release me from any hurt you caused.*

*I love you, I bless you, I release you,  
And I love and bless and release me.*

*Love fills my heart.*

Gwen Meyer

*The Talmud tells us that if all the world were to repent, the Messiah would come. Knowing this, I decided to do something about it. Where to begin? The world? It was too large and I was too small. So I thought: Let me start with my own country. That, too, proved too much for me. My own town? I failed there as well. My neighborhood, my own family? Even there I did not succeed. Never mind, I thought, I shall work on myself. With oneself, one reaches the irreducible minimum. We can each begin with ourselves.*

Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg (Chasidic)

*Always forgive your enemies—nothing annoys them so much.*

Oscar Wilde

*Marriage is three parts love and seven parts forgiveness of sins.*

Lao Tzu

*To forgive somebody is to say that one way or another, 'You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done and though we may both carry scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend...' When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom to again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence.*

Frederick Buechner

*You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything... We don't have to tolerate what people do just because we forgive them for doing it. Forgiving heals us personally. To tolerate everything only hurts us all in the long run.*

Lewis B. Smedes

*If we all hold on to the mistake, we can't see our own glory in the mirror... You can ask forgiveness of others, but in the end the real forgiveness is in one's own self.*

Maya Angelou

*All major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness ... the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives.*

Dalai Lama

*Anger ventilated often hurries toward forgiveness; and concealed often hardens into revenge.*

Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton



*A wise man will make haste to forgive, because he knows the true value of time, and will not suffer it to pass away in unnecessary pain.*

Samuel Johnson

#### You Can Talk

*You can talk about  
The balm in Gilead  
But what about  
The balm  
Right  
Here*

*What about  
The healing of  
The wounded heart  
When someone  
You have harmed  
Gleefully  
Embraces you?*

Alice Walker

*You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. I don't mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, 'I forgive. I'm finished with it.'*

Maya Angelou

*Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.*

Matthew 18:21-22

*Forgiveness is not always easy. At times, it feels more painful than the wound we suffered, to forgive the one that inflicted it. And yet, there is no peace without forgiveness.*

Marianne Williamson

*A mended limb may be stronger than one never broken.*

Rabbi Chaim Stern

#### A Settlement

*Look, it's spring. And last year's loose dust has turned into this soft willingness. The wind-flowers have come up trembling, slowly the brackens are up-lifting their curvaceous and pale bodies. The thrushes have come home, none less than filled with mystery, sorrow, happiness, music, ambition.*

*And I am walking out into all of this with nowhere to go and no task undertaken but to turn the pages of this beautiful world over and over, in the world of my mind.*

*Therefore, dark past,  
I'm about to do it.*

*I'm about to forgive you  
for everything.*

Mary Oliver

*What good comes from harboring resentments? We cannot act on them, for the Torah explicitly forbids taking revenge. Since resentments have no practical purpose, and since they are obviously very negative feelings, they can do nothing more than wear down our emotions. When we find a smelly item in the refrigerator, we quickly get rid of it so that it does not contaminate the other foods. We should view negative feelings in the same light, for they can infect all our other emotions with negativity.*

Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski

*"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What I like about this is that it doesn't use "I" or "me", just "us" or "we". To me, this acknowledges that to hurt and be hurt is a universal human situation. It also puts asking for forgiveness ahead of forgiving others.*

Worship Associate



*Forgiveness is the act of admitting that we are like other people.*

Christina Baldwin

*How would you respond to a friend who came to you upset and that person did what you are having difficulty forgiving of yourself? Would you respond in the same manner as you are talking to yourself-- probably not. Can you extend understanding to yourself? It helps for me to call myself Hon, Dear, or Sweetheart in my self-talk.*

Worship Associate

*May I be among those who are hard to provoke and easy to appease. May I be a friend of peace at home and at work, and everywhere I go. When I am angry let me reflect whether my anger is proportionate to its cause and appropriate in its expression. May I strive at all times to keep from adding to the world's woes.*

Rabbi Chaim Stern

*Grudges fade quickly when you're faced with losing the ones you love*

Natalia Sylvester

*Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

*Many promising reconciliations have broken down because, while both parties came prepared to forgive, neither party came prepared to be forgiven.*

Charles Williams

*Anyone can hold a grudge, but it takes a person with character to forgive. When you forgive, you release yourself from a painful burden. Forgiveness doesn't mean that the person should still be welcome in your life. It just means you have made peace with the pain, and are ready to let it go.*

Unknown

*Forgiveness is about who I want to be—I don't want to be bitter or resentful. I had a close friend who suddenly ended our friendship of 7 years of talking to each other at least weekly, with an email. She cited a reason that didn't ring true as the whole reason but she would not allow any discussion. This was painful and still is. I did not want to let bitterness take over. This friend became the "difficult person" in my Lovingkindness meditation in which I start with myself wishing the words of our hymn:*

May I be filled with Lovingkindness

May I be well

May I be peaceful and at ease

May I be whole

*Then I move on to someone I love, my family, a close friend, a neutral person, and then a difficult person. After each, I visualize the face of someone smiling lovingly at me so I can truly feel that loving aspiration. This meditation has been helpful in many aspects of my life and especially helpful in forgiveness. I often don't "feel" the good will for my friend, but I actively work at overcoming resentment. The meditation serves to remind me who I am and the kind of person I want to be.*

Worship Associate

*I've heard two schools of thought on forgiving others: one that you cannot really forgive until you are emotionally ready and the second philosophy is the "act as if" -- you are not feeling generous minded or forgiving but you act as if you have forgiven the offending person. The latter has been helpful to me.*

Worship Associate



## For Lost Friends

*As twilight makes a rainbow robe  
From the concealed colors of day  
In order for time to stay alive  
Within the dark weight of night,  
May we lose no one we love  
From the shelter of our hearts.*

*When we love another heart  
And allow it to love us,  
We journey deep below time  
Into that eternal weave  
Where nothing unravels.*

*May we have the grace to see  
Despite the hurt of rupture,  
The searing of anger,  
And the empty disappointment,  
That whoever we have loved,  
Such love can never quench.*

*Though a door may have closed,  
Closed between us,  
May we be able to view  
Our lost friends with eyes  
Wise with calming grace;  
Forgive them the damage  
We were left to inherit;*

*Free ourselves from the chains  
Of forlorn resentment;  
Bring warmth again to  
Where the heart has frozen  
In order that beyond the walls  
Of our cherished hurt  
And chosen distance  
We may be able to  
Celebrate the gifts they brought,  
Learn and grow from the pain,  
And prosper into difference,  
Wishing them the peace  
Where spirit can summon  
Beauty from wounded space.*

John O'Donohue

## Buddhist Prayer of Forgiveness

*If I have harmed anyone in any way  
either knowingly or unknowingly  
through my own confusions  
I ask their forgiveness.*

*If anyone has harmed me in any way  
either knowingly or unknowingly  
through my own confusions  
I forgive them.*

*And if there is a situation  
I am not yet ready to forgive,  
I forgive myself for that.*

*For all the ways that I harm myself,  
negate, doubt, belittle myself,  
judge or be unkind to myself  
through my own confusions,  
I forgive myself.*

From the AA 12-Step Program:

*Step 8 deals with becoming willing to not just say "I'm sorry", but to actually make some amends if possible. "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all. (Key words: "became willing")*

*Step 9 "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do it would injure them or others."*

*(If the person we've hurt has died, or is not reachable, the amends can be done spiritually or by a letter, or by doing something for someone else.)*

Worship Associate

*That great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn talks about compassion being the key to forgiveness. The tradition is replete with stories of oppressed nuns and monks forgiving their jailers and torturers. Some share the belief that the jailers will suffer the effects of karma either in this life or the next. Regardless of what one may believe about reincarnation, we can recognize the way the offender is harming him/herself by the*





*action we seek to forgive. I find it helpful to ask myself: how have they been harmed by their action? The answer can provide a seed for compassion and lessen my resentment.*

Worship Associate

#### Law of the Garbage Truck

*One day I hopped in a taxi and we took off for the airport. We were driving in the right lane when suddenly a black car jumped out of a parking space right in front of us. My taxi driver slammed on his brakes, skidded, and missed the other car by just inches. The driver of the other car whipped his head around and started yelling at us. My taxi driver just smiled and waved at the guy. And I mean, he was really friendly. So I asked, 'Why did you just do that? This guy almost ruined your car and sent us to the hospital!' This is when my taxi driver taught me what I now call, 'The Law of the Garbage Truck.' He explained that many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger, and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they need a place to dump it and sometimes they'll dump it on you. Don't take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well, and move on. Don't take their garbage and spread it to other people at work, at home, or on the streets. The bottom line is that successful people do not let garbage trucks take over their day. Life's too short to wake up in the morning with regrets. So... love the people who treat you right. Pray for the ones who don't. Life is ten percent what you make it and ninety percent how you take it.*

Author Unknown

## Additional Resources

### Articles:

“A Better Way to Say Sorry” Exercises  
<http://www.cuppacocoa.com/a-better-way-to-say-sorry/>

“How to Apologize Better”  
<http://lifehacker.com/eliminate-if-and-but-for-more-sincere-apologies-1627907160>

“Great Leaders Know When to Forgive”  
<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/02/great-leaders-know-when-to/>

“The Forgiveness Project”  
<http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/cathy-harrington-usa/>

### Videos and Films:

“Forgiving the Unforgivable”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEMc8vZcT8>

“The Power of Forgiveness”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6VycjCq6sE>

Maya Angelou on Forgiveness  
<http://youtu.be/aHvTWvKIPHo?t=2m52s>

*Five Minutes of Heaven* (movie)

### Books:

*Forgive for Good* by Dr. Fred Luskin

*How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To* by Janis A. Spring

*Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher