

Reflections on Vengeance and Forgiveness

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*The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.*

*The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking.*

*and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.*

*When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton*

*while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.*

I love this poem from Billy Collins. It takes a completely annoying, irritating moment that has happened to so many of us and turned it into beauty. What I love best about it is that it is titled, *Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House*.

It's brutal in its honesty and honestly, who hasn't been there at one time or another? Who hasn't felt wronged at one in the morning when all you want is a little sleep and the neighbors' dog won't stop barking, or when the middle school bully picked you as his favorite, or when you were just trying to get safely home from work and that guy cut you off at that really dangerous intersection? And who hasn't felt anger rising within them when schoolchildren are shot in what we believed to be the safety of a classroom, or when two people are killed in the sanctuary of a Unitarian Universalist Church? Who hasn't felt the desire for revenge burning through the tears of sadness, disbelief, and rage?

In the face of a world filled with hatred, violence, terror, what is the role of forgiveness? And as our world seemingly spins horrifically out of control and violence increases across the globe, is there a role for forgiveness at all or is our world too far gone, are we surrounded by the unforgiveable?

Desmond Tutu argues on the side of forgiveness "It is not some nebulous thing." he says. "It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future." And in a little book on forgiveness, Patrick Miller says, "Every chronic hatred began when someone attacked – someone suffered – and no one forgave. This suffering has been multiplied and passed on through the generations. Someone needs to end this cycle. The future is too important to remain tangled up in the wrongs of the past."

Traditionally, we have viewed vengeance as a disease, as an illness that can ruin a person and spread from one to another and forgiveness as its only known cure. In 1948, influential psychoanalyst, Karen Horney, published an essay titled "The Value of Vindictiveness." "In that essay, Horney described how the desire for revenge could absorb people for a moment in time, or for life – becoming, effectively, a chronic illness. 'This drive can be the governing passion of a life-time to which everything is subordinated, including self-

interest. All intelligence, all energies, then, are dedicated to the one goal of vindictive triumph.' Horney went so far as to argue that people prevented from exercising their vengeful impulses may exhibit symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and insomnia – in short, the desire for revenge produces such a powerful psychological toxin that it literally makes you sick.” (McCullough, p. 6)

And many mental health professionals see forgiveness as the best “treatment” for the illness of vengeance. A psychiatrist recently endorsed a colleague’s work on forgiveness by saying that it “may be as important to the treatment of emotional and mental disorders as the discovery of sulfa drugs and penicillin were to the treatment of infectious diseases.”

There are many who agree with Horney’s thesis that hanging on to anger, living out of place that is filled with the desire for revenge will only destroy us and rot our beings from the inside out. Psychologically vengeance will fill a mind with hatred and therefore ruin a life; spiritually vengeance destroys the soul, leaving an empty shell where the light and energy of a life once lived. Spinoza wrote “He who wishes to revenge injuries by reciprocated hatred will live only in misery,” and the reason for that misery was given by Francis Bacon when he said “Whoever practices revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal.”

In April 1995, 23 year old Julie Welch was killed when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. For months afterward, Julie’s father Bud craved nothing more than revenge. “Three days after the bombing, as I watched Tim McVeigh being led out of the courthouse, I hoped someone in a high building with a rifle would shoot him dead. I wanted him to fry> In fact, I’d have killed him myself if I’d had a chance.”

For months, Bud tried to alleviate his grief and slake his thirst for revenge with alcohol, but it just wasn’t working. Then one day in

January 1996, while nursing a terrible hangover, Bud returned to 200 Northwest 5th Street in downtown Oklahoma City where the Murrah Building once stood. There, his epiphany began: “For the next few weeks I started to reconcile things in my mind, and finally concluded that it was revenge and hate that had killed Julie and the 167 others. Tim McVeigh and Terry Nichols had been against the U.S. government for what happened in Waco Texas, and seeing what they’d done with their vengeance, I knew I had to send mine in a different direction.”

During a visit to New York State, Bud initiated contact with Tim’s father, Bill McVeigh and his daughter Jennifer – Tim’s sister – with a brief visit to their home.

We spent the first half-hour in the garden getting to know one another. Then we went into the house, and spent an hour visiting at the kitchen table. As I walked in, I noticed a photograph of Tim above the mantelpiece. I kept looking at it as we were sitting at the table. I knew that I had to comment on it at some point, so finally I looked at it and said, “God, what a good-looking kid.” Bill said, “That’s Tim’s high school graduation picture.” A big tear rolled out of his right eye, and at that moment I saw in a father’s eyes a love for his son that was absolutely incredible.

After our visit I got up, and Jennifer came from the other end of the table and gave me a hug; we cried, and I held her face in my hands and told her, “Honey, the three of us are in this for the rest of our lives. And we can make the most of it if we choose. I don’t want your brother to die. And I will do everything in my power to prevent it.”

This wasn’t forgiveness (yet), but forgiveness would eventually arrive. “About a year before the execution I found it in my heart to forgive Tim McVeigh. It was a release for me rather than for him.” (As told by Michael McCullough)

This kind of forgiveness may seem incredible to you, perhaps even unthinkable. But new information is arising that tells us a very simple truth: forgiveness is available to all of us and we need to change the world to enable more of us to behave, to forgive like Bud Welch. There is a different understanding of both vengeance and forgiveness, coming from an unlikely source, evolutionary scientists. What their research is showing is that the desire for revenge isn't, as previously believed, a disease to which certain unfortunate people fall prey. Instead, it is a universal trait of human nature, an instinct crafted by natural selection that exists today because it solved critical problems in the ancestral environment in which the human species evolved.

Researchers tell us that revenge served two major functions during evolution:

The threat of revenge was effective in deterring our ancestors' rivals from harming them; and it helped to dissuade those individuals who were fearless or gutsy enough to harm our ancestors from doing so a second time.

The desire for revenge after being mistreated has been seen in virtually every society that anthropologists have studied. What's more, chimpanzees, monkeys, birds, and even a couple of species of fish have been shown to use revenge to solve problems related to aggression. And rather than residing in some dark part of a diseased or corrupted brain, neuroscientists have discovered that the desire for revenge activates the same parts of our brains that are activated when we're pursuing goals we really care about, or when we're enthusiastically sitting down to enjoy a good meal. Feeling vengeful when you've been wronged isn't evidence that you're mentally ill or morally defective. It is proof of only one thing – that you're human.

We are also seeing a new evolutionary, understanding of forgiveness as well: not as a "cure" but also as an instinct – another sign of our

humanness that evolved due to its effectiveness in helping repair valuable relationships, following the betrayals and arguments that inevitably arise in friendships and families. Over the past thirty years, animal researchers have found about 30 different species of communal mammals that use some form of “reconciliation gesture” after an argument. These resemble our human forms of forgiveness: handshakes, slaps on the back, and hugs.

Theoretical biologists have come to the surprising conclusion that without the ability to forgive spats like these, social organisms just can't maintain cooperative relationships. No forgiveness, no cooperation, no community.

The research appears to be pointing in one direction – forgiveness is as intrinsic, as inherent to humanity as the desire for revenge.

When we think of revenge and forgiveness from an evolutionary standpoint we substitute our metaphors of disease and cure for the language of adaptation and instinct. But so what? What can this change of metaphors really buy us? Maybe quite a lot. It can help us see that our hunger for vengeance and our desire to forgive are both turned on and off by real social conditions. This implies that if we want more forgiveness in the world, what we really ought to do is figure out how to make the world more plentiful in the characteristics that promote forgiveness and less plentiful in the characteristics that promote revenge.

We already know a lot about what those characteristics look like. When people live in places where crime and disorder are high, where policing is poor, where governments are weak, where fear is rampant, and life is dangerous, they'll tend to use revenge as a problem solving strategy, because its ability to punish aggressors and deter would-be aggressors works now, as it did for our ancestors. Likewise, we'll see

higher rates of forgiveness under conditions that worked for our ancestors as well. This means we'll see more forgiveness in places where policing is reliable, where the systems of justice are fair and trustworthy, and where people are highly involved in complex networks of cooperative relationships and connection. (adapted from Michael McCullough, Beyond Revenge)

How do we influence our world to create changes like these? The need has been apparent for many decades. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of this when he said "We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. And history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path."

Rebecca Parker, President of the UU Starr King School for the Ministry gives us this distinctly UU view: "Vengeance has grave dangers and holds out false hopes of closure for those aggrieved by violence and injustice...Our hope, rather, is in the creative act of love. Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries and brings new possibilities into being. Love speaks out in the face of injustice and oppression, calling leaders to account when policies and practices are injuring people...And in the deepest night, when our hearts are breaking, it is the discovery of a love that chooses unshakeable fidelity to our common humanity that renews us and redirects us to a life of generosity."

My friends, we can influence our world to create the changes necessary to promote forgiveness by being active participants in communities that live out this active, creative love; that bring this love to life.

In our Unitarian Universalist community, we have the real opportunity to make this creative act of love visible when we come together as a communal force to speak out against injustice whenever and wherever

we see it and when we work together to create social institutions that engender trust and confidence in our world communities and diminish suspicion and fear.

We have a message that needs to be heard loud and clear – each and every person is worthy, valuable, and deserving of respect and human dignity. If it is denied to any one of us, it is denied to us all. Our faith gives us a calling – to create justice, equity and compassion among one another and to work together to create a world community of peace and justice and love. This calling can no longer remain only in our hearts and minds, only in words we say to one another and teach to our children. It needs to be brought to life in our actions each and every day, in our homes, our workplaces, our neighborhoods and our cities. We can longer sit back and allow the god of hate to continue living among us.

We have a better way.

And when we bring it to life, let it live in our being, our world will bend toward justice, toward forgiveness.

I leave you with this prayer from UU minister Richard Gilbert:

In the midst of this noisy city, where violence is too much with us, in a land teeming with rancor, we lift up our prayer of life to all that is Holy.

We pray for the victims of violence, those whose loved ones have been taken from them, that they might be healed in their hurt and come to forgive. We pray, too, for the perpetrators of violence, that they might be redeemed and made whole, and learn to live in peace. We pray for broken families and communities ripped apart from violence that they might once again be made whole.

We pray for those of us who are torn and tormented by angry voices,

vindictive voices, and for those who are tempted to join them. May we have the courage to acknowledge and reject vengeance, working each in our own way, to restore the wholeness of community and bring reconciliation.

The road to peace is a hard way; the temptations to vengeance are many; may we encourage the better angels of our nature, influence our world to bend toward forgiveness and become messengers of peace and good will. May we be the peacemakers and the life-affirmers who are harbingers of Beloved Community. In the name of all that is Holy we pray. Amen.