

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“The Evolution of Forgiveness”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 16, 2008

Meditation

Dearly beloved,
Ye have heard that it was said,
An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
but Jesus, the Prophet, urges you,
Resist not those who seemeth evil;
and whosoever smiteth you on the right cheek,
present the other also.

And if anyone would go to law with thee,
and take away thy coat,
let him have your cloak also.

And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile,
go with him twain.
Give to him that asketh of thee,
and from him that would borrow of ye
turn not him away.

Ye have heard that it was said,
Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy:
but Jesus the teacher says unto you,
Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you;
that ye may be incarnations of love:

for the sun rises on the evil and the good, and
the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye?
Do not even the bureaucrats do the same?
And if ye honor your brethren only, what do ye more than others?
Do not even the uncaring masses do the same?

Be fully committed to embodying love
Just as the universe bends toward the incarnation of love.

Sermon

To forgive or not to forgive - that is the question.

Anyone who has had their trust betrayed knows this dilemma. If a stranger to us violates the code of common courtesy, cutting us off in traffic, we have little urge to

forgive and punish them with our horn. However, if one of our family members violates our confidence in them by not following through on their promises, the struggle can be much greater.

Yet if we are at all self reflective, we'll remember the times we have promoted our interests over those of our friends and relations to their detriment. Balancing care for self and care for others is what generates so much of the pain and suffering we experience trying to live a good life.

And forgiveness is the lubricant that helps us to live together in peace.

My proposition today is: forgiveness is built into our DNA. We need not be religious people to acquire the ability to forgive. We don't need to learn how to forgive through an educational process. What we can do, however, is learn how to cultivate the conditions in us and in our world to stimulate our capacity for forgiveness.

There is a strong argument to be made that forgiveness is a precondition for social behavior. To see how forgiveness supports social behavior, let's examine the behavior of guppies.

Guppies school and feed together. Sunfish like to eat guppies. To keep an eye out for Sunfish, the school will send out scouts. If they see one, they don't immediately know if the Sunfish is a danger or not. If the Sunfish isn't hungry, the group can ignore it. But, if it is, the school will want to avoid it. To assess the danger, the scouts, in pairs, approach the Sunfish in a ritual called "predator inspection."

The scouts have a special method to do this. First, one guppy inches forward, then the other one inches forward, taking turns back and forth. If the sunfish is hungry, it will strike and the two fish will scatter in different directions hoping for a quick escape. Having to select which one to chase slows the Sunfish down enough that both usually can get away. Whatever happens, the school will be alerted to the danger and have time to escape.

The guppies take turns approaching the sunfish, sharing the risk of getting eaten by the sunfish and forming the basis of their cooperation. In the turn taking, if one guppy gets scared and doesn't advance, leaving the other guppy in front, the lead guppy will swim back behind the laggard and not budge until he advances. If he does advance, the guppies resume turn taking. If one guppy gets cold fins and hangs back, the other punishes him. If the guppy resumes moving forward, the other forgives him and rejoins the effort. Even at this early stage of social evolution, revenge and forgiveness are at work. As one ascends the hierarchy of socialization in more complex life forms we see echoes of this behavior.

Game theorists wondered if this could be replicated in a mathematical model. What they discovered was the "tit-for-tat" theory. (McCullough p95-99) Much like the fish, the optimal solution begins with cooperation. If the other person also

cooperates with you, you continue cooperating. But if the other person takes revenge rather than cooperating, you also take revenge. If the other person decides to return to cooperating, you return to cooperating. The person who never takes revenge is destroyed by the revenge taking player. The revenge taking player eliminates the friendly opponents and is left with other nasty opponents to deal with, eventually ending in mutually assured destruction. Only the tit-for-tat strategy was the consistent winner.

But the tit-for-tat strategy has a built in flaw, if one player took revenge on another who was using the same strategy, then they would get locked in an endless revenge taking struggle. The game theorists realized a piece of the puzzle was missing from their theory, error. You and I could be deeply committed to cooperation with each other, but I may misinterpret your action as hostile when the action was meant to be cooperation. So the game theorists developed strategies that were tolerant to noise, say forgiving every third time. That worked better. A strategy that worked even better was realizing that if both sides took revenge, to return to cooperation, the "even-Steven" approach.

The second evolutionary factor that seems to be at work to support forgiveness is choosing *who* we cooperate with and forgive. The longer a history of cooperation one has with another player, the more effective adding tolerance of occasional errors to the forgiveness strategy which effectively eliminates the noise effect. But forgiveness is a much riskier strategy when there isn't much history with the other player. Throughout the natural world, there is far more cooperation and forgiveness in kinship relations than outside kinship with strangers, paralleling human tribal societies.

Those who study forgiveness and reconciliation in social animal species recognize it as almost a universal behavior. After experiencing conflict most social animals, particularly ones in kin relationships, will exhibit apologetic and forgiving behaviors. They believe the tension and discomfort of being in conflict over time is so unpleasant that social animals strive to reconcile once the heat of their limbic system driven passions have passed. Instinctively they realize that the value of their relationships for their survival surpasses the drive toward taking revenge. Their common vulnerabilities bind them together and drive them toward forgiveness.

A few months ago I was able to experience these biological drives first hand. A driver changed lanes in front of me cutting me off. I swerved to the right to avoid a collision and hit my front tire against the curb causing a flat. We both pulled over and the other driver was very upset. We inspected our cars and discovered that there was no contact between them. My reflexes had prevented that but my tire was still destroyed. She offered to pay for the damage. I thanked her and said I didn't want to take any money until I found out if there was more damage than the tire.

After I replaced the tire, I called her up with the amount of the repairs, about 150 dollars. She had since talked to her husband and her insurance broker. Both had told her she had no responsibility because our cars didn't touch. She refused to offer me any help in paying for the damage. I felt angry and wanted revenge. The money

wasn't that important. What mattered was her suggestion, placed in her head by her husband, that I was somehow scamming her by not taking her money immediately at the scene of the accident.

I hadn't gotten her address so I Googled her. I found a reference that she might be related to someone who had died on September 11th. I was fascinated to see how that changed how I felt about her and my willingness to forgive the incident.

Michael McCullough, in his book *Beyond Revenge*, pulls from the research on forgiveness three psychological conditions that activate the forgiveness instinct:

- 1) Careworthiness (people forgive transgressors whom they view as appropriate targets for kindness and compassion)
- 2) Expected Value (people forgive transgressors who, they think, might be valuable to them in the future) and
- 3) Safety (people forgive transgressors whom they perceive as being unwilling and unable to harm them again) (McCullough p147)

Clearly in my case, careworthiness and safety were operating as I let go of my need for revenge.

The problems of forgiveness do not arise when these three factors are operating. The problems arise when we are injured by someone we do not care for, do not value and perceive as a threat. President Bush's obsession with Iranian Nuclear threats is a powerful example. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan are another group many of us loathe.

The path to forgiveness and reconciliation is laid down through developing careworthiness, value, and harm reduction through promoting and maintaining friendly relations.

McCullough argues sending signals can do this (McCullough 162-171). One vitally important signal is offering apologies. Apologies are extremely effective ways to discourage revenge and encourage forgiveness. The forgiveness and reconciliation commission first used in South Africa was an incredibly powerful tool to help people drop their need for blood revenge. Another powerful method to ask for forgiveness is with self-abasing displays and gestures. Some evolutionists believe this may be the reason people blush. It is a visible sign of shame and embarrassment that reveals our inner landscape. Blushing is a visible confirmation that our apology is real. As Mark Twain wrote, "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to."

The final signal McCullough mentions is Compensation. Trying to undo the damage done causes the transgressor to experience pain along with the victim. The shared experience of suffering is a visible sign that the transgressor values the relationship. By the offering of compensation, the victim now experiences the relationship as having literal value again.

These strategies are also the basic elements of maintaining a healthy congregation. Whether we like it or not, we are regularly breeching and repairing relationships. We are in regular need for apologizing effectively, self-abasing displays and gestures and a variety of little compensations to keep our congregational family in good relations. If we are not skillful in cultivating a forgiving climate in our congregation, trouble cannot be far way.

Research in looking at what helps restore peace after civil wars has shown that four processes are key.

First countries that achieved lasting peace succeeded redefining the affected people's identities...By helping them return to the lives they led before they were drawn into the conflict...

Second... implement countless small actions (I'll call them signals) designed to announce and memorialize warring parties' desires to establish new, better relations with each other.

Third, they orchestrate a process of public truth telling through which the warring factions can reach consensus about how to understand the injustices they've suffered and the harms they've perpetrated upon each other.

Fourth, they're able to enact a "justice short of revenge" in which retributive justice [can] neither be ignored or fully achieved. (McCullough p178-9)

Intentionally cultivating a forgiveness culture can have dramatic results as was discovered in the famous 1954 Oklahoma Robbers Cave State Park experiment (McCullough p193-4). Twenty-two twelve year old boys were invited for a summer camp experience by social psychologist Muzafer Sherif. He divided the boys into two camps of eleven without knowledge of the other group. The two groups bonded separately in isolation for a week. Each developed a name for themselves, the Rattlers and the Eagles. Then the two groups were brought together. The Eagles and the Rattlers were suspicious of each other and mildly aggressive. The researchers fanned these flames by having the groups compete against each other. The competition was intense and quickly got nasty. Things quickly deteriorated into conflict and fights between the two groups. Soon each group was carrying bats and socks full of rocks ready to make war on each other.

Then the experimentalists began to stage some emergencies that required everyone to cooperate to solve problems including a break in pipes that supplied water to the camp, raising money to rent a film everyone wanted to see, and fixing a stalled truck to go get food for lunch. In only a few days of these cooperative projects, the animosities started getting put aside. By the end of the next week, their former identities had ceased to hold them and matter very much. When they were ready to head home, everyone sang "Oklahoma" in unison together.

Whether or not God ordains the laws for how we should get along, we have those laws written into our DNA. Forgiveness is deeply programmed into human nature ... as is the desire for revenge. Knowing when these parts of our personalities are active and knowing how to voluntarily engage forgiveness and disengage revenge, will go a long way toward helping us learn how to love our neighbor better.

And that will make all the difference.

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References:

McCullough, Michael E., *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, c 2008