



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Where Do We Find Absolution?

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I began one of my sermons a few years ago by talking about an extraordinary visit I once had with a psychic. That seemed to work so I'm going to try it again. I felt like this woman gave me some very helpful information about my family. She said that people tend to inherit their parents' battles, who inherited the same kinds of battles from their parents and so on. Certain subconscious beliefs are passed down through the generations. She told me about one that my family had, that she thought went back many generations, and was on both sides of my family, both my mother's and my father's.

She said that we harbor a very, very subconscious belief - deep within ourselves - that we cannot be forgiven. This rang true to me as soon as she said it. It led me to wonder: well, what is it about ourselves that is so unforgiveable? Eventually I concluded that the source of our shame is not so relevant. All of us do things time and again that we're not proud of, that we experience shame over. If we believe we CAN be forgiven, over time we let go of those negative feelings about ourselves and are free to grow in character. What's at issue, the psychic was trying to point out to me, is how the belief that we cannot be forgiven affects how we live.

I bring up this personal family business because it's a good way to frame what's at the heart of the matter when we talk about absolution. For those of us not familiar with this term, to absolve means to pronounce clear of guilt or blame, and the noun absolution, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, is the formal remission of sin imparted by a priest. Neither of these things is at home within today's Unitarian Universalism, but we are familiar with the concept of forgiveness. I hold up my own family's stumbling block with forgiveness because the subconscious belief that one can't be forgiven is not unique.

A Catholic friend once said to me, after I whined about feeling guilty about something, that "you Unitarians have more guilt than Catholics!" She may be right. While religious liberals are proud of the fact that we reject the notion of original sin, this doesn't exempt us from experiencing the very human feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse. If we don't value ritualizing release from these, we may have a backlog of this stuff stored inside ourselves. Our spirits may be clogged with emotions that we are unwilling to acknowledge or experience. Here's a paradox: it's the feelings we most avoid feeling that have the greatest influence over our lives.

Beyond religious liberals, to be hard on oneself is an archetypal American trait, going back to the stringent standards of the Protestant work ethic that this country was built on, that still runs it. Our earliest ancestors on American soil had to work very hard - and to this day, I think we hold ourselves to very high standards of hard work and accomplishment. I for one hope it stays that way. It's a very prominent source of our identity; many of us depend on it to tell us who we are. I know I do.

But what if you think you aren't who you ought to be? What if you don't think you measure up to the high standards you set for yourself? It might lead you to think that there's something wrong with you, that you're not good enough; that there's something about you that can't be forgiven.

So when we talk about absolution, we're not just talking about forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of those loaded terms that can lose its integrity if it's given or received too easily. Before we can be forgiven, what is at stake is whether or not we believe we are WORTHY of that forgiveness. We can throw the word forgiveness around all we want, but what's really in question is whether or not we believe we DESERVE it. Underneath the fancy theological word *absolution*, and even underneath the more user-friendly word of forgiveness, is the very plain matter of self-worth.

Because we can't receive anything that we don't allow ourselves to receive. We are the gate-keepers of our own hearts. Things like love, compassion, and forgiveness - we only get as much of these things as we allow ourselves to, no matter how much is freely offered to us. Whatever we believe is true about ourselves

has a tremendous effect on who in fact we are. Thankfully we have more control over the beliefs we are conscious of. But what about the beliefs we don't even know we've already convinced ourselves of?

From thinking a lot about this matter of 'unforgiveableness' in my own family, I've come up with some observations of the consequences of it on our lives. It seems to go one of two ways. The first is that you try to make up for it. You go through life with this deep dent in your self-worth and constantly compensate. You over-achieve, you work too hard, you're rarely satisfied with what you do accomplish. You notice the flaws more than the victories. And what ends up happening is you do indeed accomplish a lot, and while you gain the respect and admiration of those around you, you have a hard time giving yourself the same credit. You think, well, I could have done this better . . . you end up doing so many different things all the time that there's never really a chance to breathe and just be.

The second way is to live life in fear. A self-fulfilling prophecy of penance unravels. You don't try for fear of failure. You get stuck in places you're unhappy in, but don't have the courage to get out of. Of course the resentment and anger builds up over time where you forget you're the person who made yourself angry in the first place - the anger spills over to those around you.

Perhaps what is most damaging about both of these mind-sets is that we are cut off from our spiritual selves. What is true for both of these is that we never believe we are good enough just as we are. *Just as I am without one plea . . .* there's a reason that hallmark song is so powerful when Christians are called to the altar at revivals. To be loved just as we are at all times is a spiritual revelation.

What is damaging about being cut off from our spiritual selves is that we cannot think of ourselves apart from the outside factors that define us - factors like career success, material wealth, our reputation, our family's reputation. We cannot think of ourselves beyond these things because WE DON'T KNOW WHO THAT PERSON IS. We are estranged from the part of us that makes us whole. Do you know who your spiritual self is?

I just came across a wonderful description of the spiritual self, in an interview with Elizabeth Taylor when she was 55. She said, "Somebody asked me once what quality it was in me that made me a survivor. I think it's my passion - for life, for people, for everything. I've always been very aware of the inner me, that has nothing to do with the physical me. It has to do with a connection with nature, God, your inner being - whatever you want to call it. It's about being in contact with yourself and allowing God to mold you."<sup>1</sup>

I think of my spiritual self as the child within me - that little girl who I think is good no matter what. It's the part of you that you can just be with and not judge - not hate and maybe not even love - but just know is good.

I've always loved the beginning of Genesis. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good . . . And God said, 'let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear' . . . and God saw that it was good . . . Then God said 'let the land produce vegetation' . . . And God saw that it was good . . . And God said 'let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years' . . . And God saw that it was good . . . And God saw that it was good" and on down through creation.

It's a beautiful beginning to the Bible because it says that life is from goodness. After 7 days of making everything, including humans, "God saw all that he had made, and it was VERY good." This story doesn't have to be true for it to be true - in the same way that there doesn't have to be a God to believe in God. All of us come from this - from this beginning, from this goodness.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Rolling Stone*, April 14, 2011.

I'm pretty sure this is close to what the early Universalists had in mind when they reclaimed the notion of universal salvation, the belief that everyone - no matter what - is saved. The modern translation is that we are held in love, and we return to love. AND - the reason this is so is because we are forgivable.

But what if being forgiven by God has no meaning for us? What if we don't believe in God? Confession usually strikes religious liberals as an easy out; you can even do "virtual confession" on-line nowadays at [www.confession-online.com](http://www.confession-online.com). Baptism might also seem like play-acting and superstitious. Recently I ran across a description of baptism, and I have to admit it really struck me. "For Baptists, the formal act of baptism is the closest thing they have to absolution. Baptists believe in Baptism by full immersion the way John the Baptist did it in the Bible. It is a public demonstration of faith. The old life of sin is washed away and a new life of faith emerges." I thought to myself, "Wow. What if it really was that simple?"

Again, it makes me wonder that such a ritual doesn't have to be true for it to be true. That's the power of ritual - we make a public statement, or perform a ritual in community with others, in order to affirm: this is who I am. This is what I believe is true about myself. Here is something that's so simple it's confusing: our beliefs say more about ourselves, than they do about the beliefs.

Perhaps religious liberals have a hard time with simple rituals because we don't want to admit that in fact it is that simple; it doesn't need to be complicated. Maybe all our high-brow talk and intellectualism is preventing us from admitting what is just simple and always true: that we're all children of God, children of the universe. That in the beginning it was good, and it's STILL good.

Like the Baptists, the early Unitarians believed that the grace and mercy of God was available to us without the mediation of a priest or minister, and eventually we felt that it was available to us without the need of a God. We trusted that we ourselves could choose the correct path in life. There's a phrase that sums up the early theology of our forebears pretty well, which you've heard before: 'the Universalists believed God was too good to damn them, and the Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned.'

So there are a few things that need to be in place in order for us to find a kind of UU version of absolution. First we need to believe that we need it, that it's good for us to seek it, from time to time. Like I said, I think we need it more than we think we do, much more than the Unitarian tradition has it. No we don't believe in original sin, but that don't mean we don't sin.

Once we believe we need absolution, then we need to make sure we are ready to receive it, that we believe we are worthy of it. It seems this will come easier to some than others.

It helps to become aware of what the recurring theme is of our life. It's like an entrenched script written on our souls that we find ourselves reading again and again. It creates the subconscious beliefs we don't even know we are convinced of. Likely it does go back many generations. Do you know what yours is? Because that seems to be the first step and only way to ensure that we get to write our OWN scripts, and not the scripts that were passed down to us. When that psychic told me what my family script was, I experienced disillusionment, which can be a jarring but beautiful thing. Disillusionment and absolution have the same Latin verb at root, *lucere*, to make light, to make clear, to make apparent.

When we seek absolution, we seek amends, we seek lightness, a release from the heaviness of guilt and remorse, which is a very *lonely* burden. So this final thing that has to be in place is very important, and it's what saves us from our isolation and reintroduces us to our spiritual selves. Powerful as we can be as individuals, no absolution can take place without the aid of another human being. Whether it's to make amends to another person, or to admit to another human being the nature of our wrongs, as they put it in 12-step language, this exchange between yourself and another has to take place.

We can't repair the relationship to our spiritual self alone - we need the help of others to do it. And it's give and take. Absolution is absolutely a mutual affair. As Father Boyle refers to in his writing, one way we find

absolution is by absolving others - he says, "the call is to allow the painful shame of others to have a purchase on our lives. Not to fix the pain but to feel it."<sup>2</sup> I want to challenge all of us today to consider: this is how we can experience the divine, this is how we can allow the divine to move in our lives - when we acknowledge that "divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty and all embarrassment into laughter."<sup>3</sup>

This is where we find absolution - when we reunite with the spiritual part of our world that makes us whole. This healing of relationship can only be done in community because the spiritual self does not exist in isolation - it is the part of us that connects to all of humanity - and it is "good." It's remembering this that reminds me that I am good - good enough, just as I am.

I come from love, I am held in love, and I return to love. That's the script I seek to follow. My soul re-writes and re-reads it all the time so I don't forget.

What re-writing do you need to do? Re-writing our scripts in life is how we let go, it's how we forgive. It's learning to love. We cannot love unless we have accepted forgiveness, and the deeper our experience of forgiveness is, the greater is our love.

So let us go seeking peace, and offering this love.

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<sup>2</sup> From one of the best books ever, *Tattoos on the Heart*, by Gregory Boyle, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Father Boyle, who quotes theologian Beldon Lane, p. 43.