

The Power of Forgiveness

One of the things that often happens and has unfolded here at ULV multiple times after a minister leaves is a forgiveness ritual. If you feel it is appropriate, I encourage you to engage that practice again after I'm gone. But it feels awkward to do it without the minister being involved. Maybe if there is a lot of energy it could be necessary to separate the congregation and the minister, but I want to try something different. I had planned this before the distancing of COVID 19 but I want to engage the process anyway. The video will be available on our Facebook page, so please share with folks who may need to hear my apology. Hearing the minister apologize is one of the elements missing in the "after the fact" ritual. This ritual is based on the Hawaiian forgiveness practice that involves 4 phrases. I've seen them in different order. The slide I posted in the Wednesday email and on Facebook has the order I am going to use. I will not be using some of the traditional language because it is not in alignment with Unity principles. I hope I have still been able to capture the essence of the process bringing it into alignment with our basic beliefs. I hope this process will be beneficial for you, even if the forgiveness work you want to do is not with me. I really hope the process is beneficial in allowing you to forgive me.

We are all unskillful in various ways. We are all spiritual beings in a human experience and one of the ways we experience our humanity is slipping out of our healthy, higher self consciousness and into the reactionary, ego thinking self. Ministers are not exceptions to the rule. Parents, teachers, siblings, friends are not exceptions to the rule. Others might like to hold that expectation of exceptions and measure behavior with that standard but the earthly experience is ministers and everyone else are human. I am not delusional and I understand that there are times, many, that my best efforts are unskillful and are perceived by others as hurtful or painful. The tricky part of apologies is both knowing what we've done has been received as hurtful and not becoming defensive when we don't perceive what we've said or done as not our best self. Many people don't forgive because they haven't received an apology from the wrong-doer. Many apologies are withheld because no one knows the wrong to be righted.

I apologize to anyone and everyone who has perceived something I've said or done as hurtful or painful. I apologize if something I've said or done has triggered you to feel less than whole and worthy. I apologize with my whole heart for apologies you have not heard before related to my unskillful expressions.

I also apologize for the times I have allowed the unskillful expressions of others to trigger pain; cause me to question my worthiness and plant seeds of resentment which can grow.

Just as my highest self never wants to cause injury, I know none of your highest selves want to cause injury. In our humanity, we get caught up in our unskillfulness. We allow pain and resentment to create separation among us. I apologize for my role in causing resentment in others and for my role in allowing resentment to grow in me.

This is my sincere apology. You may want to imagine that someone you are waiting for an apology from was able to offer a similar apology.

If you have paper and pen, you may also want to write down what pain, hurt and questioning has been triggered in you—either by my unskillful acts or those of someone you are working on forgiving. Write down the unskillful acts that you are focused on. Allow this to flow out of you, like a river of pain being drained from the deepest part of us. Don't judge what you write. You will probably want to take more time in the process than we use this morning and that is fine. If you need someone to hear what you wrote, please find someone safe to read it to. Just also be clear, this process is really about me being willing to apologize. Or it can be about you being willing to apologize. The process is about confronting ourselves, not others. The process is not about confronting others and saying, "You need to apologize". We begin the process with ourselves. And I want you to have an opportunity to clear out anything related to me.

If the acts you write down are mine, I apologize for all of them. I understand that I have caused pain and I sincerely desire that your pain be alleviated. I desire my pain be alleviated. The only sure path I know to that relief is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is not pretending something didn't happen or that we are ok with boundaries crossed and unhealthy behavior. Forgiveness is letting go of the story we just wrote down that keeps us bound to the pain and hurt and unworthiness. Forgiveness is acknowledging that beyond the unskillfulness of our humanity is the heart of our divinity.

The traditional language is "Please forgive me." However, that traps me in a situation beyond my control. I can't control whether or not you choose to forgive. So my language is "I pray you forgive me." I affirm you choose to forgive me and anyone else that will free you from being bound to a story of pain, hurt and unworthiness. I forgive myself for the unskillful responses that allowed me to let pain, hurt and unworthiness which I felt to grow into barriers and separation in my mind. In forgiveness we look at the story we have written about the pain, about the unhealthy acts and how that has affected us. We have to choose whether holding on to the story is more important than growing into the freedom of our higher self.

None of the stories I can write about hurt and pain is more important than being able to connect to each other in our divinity, without barriers and without separation.

I forgive myself for writing the story and holding it for however long I believed that story about humanity was more important than experiencing more of my divinity. If you are holding onto a story about me, I pray you are able to forgive and let go of the pain.

Thank you. We don't thank each other for the acts themselves, which we perceived as painful, so much as we are grateful to each other for being in the relationship laboratory together. In the Brene Brown podcast we listened to about grief, we made a distinction about not being grateful for the death or the loss but finding meaning in the life that preceded it. In this case, we are grateful for what unfolds after the act. Even if, as my friend Kelley Hunt says, "We take the long way home" to finding gratitude after the act.

In the relationship laboratory, people who have challenged me and hurt me have allowed me to find my own strength and allowed me to grow. In difficult relationships, I have gained skills that have made new relationships healthier and easier. When others may not acknowledge our worth, we are forced to evaluate whether we see ourselves as worthy. Over eleven years in ministry, we have been in this relationship laboratory together. As I apologize for unskillful acts, I am grateful for the opportunity to grow together. I pray that not only have you gained skills being patient with me in our time together but that together we have shaped a welcoming spiritual community. I pray new light has come in through the cracks that appeared when we struggled.

In forgiveness work, I have experienced gratitude as really the biggest test in letting go. Even more difficult than letting go of our story is finding gratitude for the experience. I have never been raped. I have never lost a loved one to homicide. But I have been abused as a child. No one can condone any of those behaviors and no one should. Those experiences cannot be erased from our memories and we may always carry scars in our reactions and thoughts. Until I could really discern the strength, resilience and self-confidence I developed as the result of abuse, I could not let go of the story I wrote and told for years and forgive my abuser. Until I forgave, I also could not be free from the grip of pain. Until I was grateful, I wasn't free to truly be me. I remained a victim.

I pray that as you use this process for your own work, you will be able to say Thank You as you forgive and pray that others forgive you. I pray that your apology can be sincere to others and to yourself. It is so easy to judge ourselves. I believe part of our resistance to offering an apology to others is the shame we've been taught to feel. We are told that if I have harmed others, I must be a bad person. In reality, if I have harmed others, I must be human.

Offering an apology, I must be self-aware and engaged in becoming more skillful because I can now recognize my unskillfulness. Becoming willing to engage forgiveness is a sign of spiritual maturation.

Our final thought is I Love You. This is our return to our true nature. Because I love each and every one who is now in our community and has ever been in our community, I **willingly** offer an apology for any of my unskillful acts. I enthusiastically pray for your ability to forgive me as I pray for my ability to forgive myself and others. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for our eleven year adventure in ministry, in relationships, in learning and growing together. If we could only center ourselves more firmly, more often in the certainty of Love as our true nature, we might have less to apologize for and less to forgive. Still, our path on earth is one of skill building and learning so we continue to be grateful for the opportunities that allow us to grow into a fuller expression of the love that we are.

One calendar page this week on my Mary Englebreit calendar said, “Heal the past, live in the present and dream the future.” I believe the power of forgiveness heals the past, frees us to live fully in the present and expands our vision of the future.

Using these four phrases is an interesting meditation and journaling exercise. What do I have to apologize for? If we engage in a lot of self-judgment, we may not enjoy this contemplation. Or we may go to the other extreme and apologize for many things that do not really negatively impact others. How many times do you say, “I’m sorry”? Fillmore would say this is an important misuse of the “I AM” statement. Try to open yourself. With empathy, explore your own difficulty in apologizing as you consider an apology you’ve been waiting for. Explore your constant apologizing which can blind you to a deeper look at what you might truly need to apologize for. Understand that praying for others to forgive us can be sincere without binding ourselves to the outcome of the choices of others. It can be an opportunity to examine our willingness to forgive others. “As you forgive, so you will be forgiven” is not so much a threat as an assessment of our progress. Are we truly grateful for the challenging situations in life that are most often the source of our spiritual growth? Finally, who are the people we still have trouble saying “I love you” to? What will it take for us to be able to live more fully in our true nature?

I hope this was a helpful process, both in bringing a healthy closure to my time in the ministry of Unity of Lehigh Valley and in giving you tools to heal more of your past. As I said in the sermon, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the time I’ve spent here and I sincerely love each and every one of you.