

On Apology and Forgiveness

Rev Paul Beckel and Sky Hedman
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ buf.org
December 6, 2020

Welcome

We begin December with our theme of *Stillness*
Stillness is quiet, stillness is calm
Stillness sometimes rests on the surface, concealing tremendous energy below
Stillness sometimes goes to depths where loneliness, grievance, and spite cannot touch it
In times of distress, in times of rest, it is good to be able to gather in stillness.

Singing Together #1010 *Oh We Give Thanks*

Chalice Lighting

Covenant

Introduction

Today, we're going to take some time to reflect on apology and forgiveness. In case that feels a little heavy, I can let you know now that I'll also describe how offering a meaningful *blessing* to someone, or offering a genuine *compliment*, or even when you say thank you—whether you're saying 'thank you' to an individual, to a group, or to god, or saying thank you to nobody/nothing, but having some awareness of both what specifically you have experienced, and how it has affected you. Each of these involve a high level of awareness ... and not just good intentions, but the actual carrying out of an active response.

So, if we've ever done any of these things well ... well, we can take what we already know-how-to-do, apply it in these other situations, and continue on our path toward making apology, forgiveness, blessing, thanksgiving, and affirming the good in one another ... making these a permanent part of our consciousness, and our lives.

Also, today, Sky Hedman will reflect on the significance of an apology recently made to a black family by the Washington State Supreme Court / regarding an injustice that that institution perpetrated 60 years ago.

Meditation

Our meditation today concluded with this adaptation of the Lord's Prayer:

Spirit of love, here *in us*, and joining us to all that is,
We speak of you with reverence.
In your name we work for peace, and honor all creation,
This is *our* task and *our* opportunity on earth,
while the stars above obey the laws of the heavens.

May there be food for all so that none may go hungry,
When we have been unfair, unkind, or thoughtless,
May we have the courage to apologize,
And the wisdom to forgive when others hurt us.
Give us the strength to do what we feel is right
And to turn away from whatever harms us, or hurts others.
For the wonder, the beauty, and the goodness all around us,
we give praise and thanks.

Interlude

Reflections Sky Hedman

I am constantly being educated. November 24th, I opened up the *Seattle Times* and read that the Washington state Supreme Court had reversed a decision that it made sixty years ago. This story of racism's ongoing effect on a Seattle family moves me to tears.

Bernice Price is 90 years old now. She still lives in the Leschi neighborhood house in Seattle that she and her husband, Milton, Sr. bought in 1952. In 1957, she and Milton lost their three and a half year old son, Milton Junior, when he fell into a neighbor's swimming pool and drowned. The *Seattle Times* reports:

The day after their son died, Price and her husband called Evergreen Washelli Cemetery in North Seattle to make burial arrangements. She asked for a plot for Milton Jr. in a section of the cemetery for young children – 'Babyland.'

It was only when the family arrived at the cemetery the next day, that cemetery employees realized the family was Black. "Babyland" was only for whites.

The Price's legal fight to bury their son in Babyland started in King County Superior Court, where the Prices lost their suit, despite a state law, passed four years earlier, in 1953, which forbade cemeteries from denying burial based on race.

The Price family asked the judge to reconsider, but he turned them down. They then appealed to the state Supreme Court. They lost there, too. The justification given by the courts was the cemetery's "right of segregation." Here's a quote from then Justice Joseph A. Mallery to justify that decision:

"If Negro children were admitted, its white exclusiveness would be gone."

The Prices buried their son across town in another cemetery, but they did not forget this injustice.

Last month, the Washington Supreme Court sought to undo the damage it had done sixty years ago. "In a footnote [to a case that had nothing to do with cemeteries or segregation or civil rights], on page 13, the unanimous court wrote:

“We take this opportunity to overrule this court’s opinion in Price v. Evergreen Cemetery Co. of Seattle.”

There’s way more to this story about the Price family. If you haven’t read the article, you can follow this link: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattlenews/a-black-seattle-family-was-barred-from-burying-their-young-son-60-years-later-does-an-apology-help/> to read the whole story, including the fact that Milton Sr. was a police officer, only the second Black sergeant in the history of the Seattle Police Department.

In 1967, Milton, Sr. went to court to challenge being passed over for a promotion given to two white officers with less experience. He won his suit, but he chose to retire from the police force a year later in the face of ongoing racial harassment and hazing from his colleagues.

There’s more to the story about our current state Supreme Court. The 2020 court wrote this year about the cemetery case, “The 1960 decision, was both ‘incorrect and harmful’ and was a example of ‘the unfortunate role’ judges ‘have played in devaluing black lives.’”

The court admitted it was wrong. It did not, however, contact the Price family about the apology. The family found out about the reversal from a newspaper article, despite the fact that they lived in the same house, at the same address, as when they first tried to bury their child.

The current state Supreme Court spoke out against racism after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As well, it corrected a judgment from 1915, repudiating a case that rejected “the premise of Indian sovereignty.” Justice Raquel Montoya-Lewis, the court’s first Native American justice, said

“We cannot forget our own history, and we cannot change it. We can, however, forge a new path forward, committing to justice as we do so.”

The Seattle Times goes on to report, “For Bernice Price, the apology came a bit late. She still loves dancing, gospel music and Chinese food, but she struggles with dementia. It’s unclear what she understands of the court’s recent actions. Her husband, Milton V. Price Sr., died of cancer decades ago.”

The impact of this court case and racism on the extended family is heartbreakingly documented in the Seattle Times article, which I hope you will take time to read.

This brings me to some thoughts on Apologies, including apologies for someone else’s actions.

- It’s never too late for an apology. This apology may be too late for the parents in the Price family, but might not be too late for the siblings and extended family.
- At best, an apology is a desire to communicate.
- Apologies express empathy for someone else’s pain or loss.

- An apology reflects that I, the person apologizing, see and affirm the harm that was done.
- You, the person who was harmed or suffered a loss, may hear that I see and validate that harm or loss.
- Apologies are an opportunity to build bridges. At best, apologies can be healing.
- It may be too late for the people who suffered harm. They may not be around to hear our apology. They may not be interested in listening.
- I was not on that Supreme Court. I did not personally inflict pain on this family. But I am a part of the culture in which this happened and will continue to happen without our commitment to end racism.
- In this spirit, here is what I want to say:

“I apologize to the Prices that your family was harmed on so many levels by the racist actions of the cemetery employees, the courts, the police colleagues, and by those in the larger community who did not stand up with you.”

It’s never too late for us to expand our worldview, be educated, and to apologize.

Thank you.

Interlude *Turn Around – an original song by Lisa Heezen*

Reflections Paul Beckel

In her book, *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen Prejean writes:

Lloyd LeBlanc has told me that he would have been content with imprisonment for Patrick Sonnier. He went to the execution, he says, not for revenge, but hoping for an apology. Patrick Sonnier had not disappointed him. Before sitting in the electric chair he had said, “Mr. LeBlanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done,” and Lloyd LeBlanc had nodded his head, signalling a forgiveness he had already given. He says that when he arrived with sheriff’s deputies there in the cane field to identify his son, he had knelt by his boy...and prayed the Our Father. And when he came to the words: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” he had not halted or equivocated, and he said, “Whoever did this, I forgive them.”

But he acknowledges that it’s a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that well up, especially as he remembers David’s birthday year by year and loses him all over again: David at twenty, David at twenty-five, David getting married, David standing at the back door with his little ones clustered around his knees, grownup David, a man like himself, whom he will never know. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

You may or may not have had a burden like this in your life. But each of us have had—and may still have—significant burdens that are difficult to set down. That story involved both apology *and* forgiveness, interlaced. I'll talk a bit about each of these separately, today, before pulling them back together and mixing them with a handful of other paths to liberation that have similar requirements, and similar benefits.

These include: offering a blessing, saying thank you, praising, complimenting, or simply affirming the value of one another.

Here's a story about apology under more everyday circumstances:

A moment of touching souls occurred one day at a bus stop where a woman was sitting, engrossed in her newspaper, while a skateboarding teen whizzed back and forth – beautifully and very fast. He came by her once, he came by her twice. And he came by her a third time, nearly knocking the paper out of her hand. She glared up at him: “O why don't you grow up?!”

The skateboarder slipped halfway down the block and talked with his buddies. The woman followed him and called out. “Come here, I want to talk to you.” Reluctantly the boy shuffled over.

“Yeah?”

“I'm sorry,” she said, “What I meant to say was that I was afraid that I might get hurt. I apologize for what I did say.” Astonished, the boy's face lit up. “How cool!” he said.

[both of these stories are from Spiritual Literacy,
ed. By Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat]

Even tho this is a much lighter story, it took courage, goodwill, self-control, and a high level of self-awareness to find something deeper than her initial, understandable reaction. Sometimes it may seem like a violation of our dignity, even a violation of *justice*, to offer mercy. Sometimes we get caught up in who was at fault. I'm not saying that fault never matters, but our obsession with fault, our clinging to fault is going to create unnecessary, unhelpful burdens for ourselves.

Nor am I saying that no matter what happens, if someone is upset, then we should apologize. In our culture, women, in particular, are trained to apologize, to smooth things over. A simple rhetorical 'sorry' now and then is not a big deal, but apologizing habitually when you've been harmed, or apologizing for protecting yourself, or apologizing for being assertive ... could build rather than release the burden of resentment.

And even though we can get into helpful habits of apologizing, forgiving, thanking, blessing, et cetera, I'm not suggesting that it's uncomplicated. There are so many variables, and we need to, on one hand, be conscious of what we're experiencing and feeling, and at the same time not obsessed. Holding that consciousness lightly enough to let go.

So here's another tricky example: should we apologize for the wrongs of others? I read a story about Jerry Moegerle, who was a founder of Focus on the Family (a conservative advocacy group). Moegerle at one point publicly chastised the direction of the organization, and the larger movement for 'family values,' which, in his view, had become an instrument for dividing people along ideological grounds, instead of an instrument for supporting families.

Moegerle wrote that the rules of civility require that people of conscience apologize for bad behavior within their group, so he felt he could no longer stand idly by while James Dobson turned the organization into a megaphone for hateful, anti-gay, anti-woman social policy.

What the skateboarder story and this Focus on the Family story have in common, I think, is a consciousness of both ourselves and others. Consciousness of what took place, *my part* in what took place, and the fact that there may be multiple interpretations of what took place. We need to be conscious of feelings, possibly mixed feelings, and maybe even an initial visceral reaction about how the *other* person *should* be feeling.

... to know these things well enough to articulate them to ourselves, and in some cases out loud to the other person or people involved,
... and yet not to dwell in these details
... certainly not to *relish* them.

In order to apologize to another person out loud or in writing, we need to not only be conscious, but to be specific. *This* is what I did, and *this* is how it harmed you (to the extent that we can know that). Sometimes we won't have an opportunity to communicate these things, or it will make things worse if we do, but it's still best to acknowledge specifics. (And as to the question of whether it will do more harm to directly apologize, that's a question of whether it's going to harm the other person, not whether it's going to be awkward and stressful for us.)

A complicating factor, of course, is sincerity. We have to do all of the above to convey sincerity. Even when we are sincere, if we don't communicate this effectively, a weak apology may be worse than none at all.

So don't feign sincerity. There may be cases where we have to agree to disagree. In which case it's still valuable to acknowledge what happened as you see it, and acknowledge the other person's feelings—saying explicitly that *this relationship* is important, and then doing what you can to preserve it. Which will not be by making an insincere apology.

I'm not going to go into detail, but another important aspect of apology is the difference between intention and impact. Regardless of our intentions, it's more important to acknowledge the impact, that is, what the other person has experienced. At the same time, however, this notion sometimes goes too far. There are certainly situations where another person experiences pain that we should not apologize for.

If I'm in a bike lane and someone in a car runs me off the road, and they want me to apologize because the event traumatized them, I'm not going to feel liberated by apologizing (regardless of whether the incident had a terrible impact on them and regardless of my intention). That's kind

of an extreme example, and usually these situations are murky. So, to be brief, we need to know that impact vs intention is worth paying close attention to, but it is not an absolute.

Finally, whether we've done all these things perfectly or imperfectly, a genuine apology has to include an act of repair. Again, we may not be able to do it directly because the person isn't around, or we'd cause more harm by continuing the engagement. So another alternate is to, in effect, pay it forward.

To fail to do so is a violation of the inherent worth and dignity of that person ... and even, I think, a violation of our own dignity as well.

==

If you weren't taking notes, not a problem. Google 'steps to apology' or 'steps to forgiveness,' you'll find 5 steps or 15 steps et cetera. I did a quick search and every variation I saw was consistent with what I've said so far, and generally with additional helpful detail.

I do not agree though with one aspect in many of these articles which, in my view, go too far in saying that we should apologize for everything under the sun. I think that's getting apology mixed up with forgiveness. But, as always, you need to think through these things, pray through these things, care through these things, for yourself.

==

Both apology and forgiveness are about liberation: Emotional liberation / spiritual liberation / social liberation. Liberation is a result of letting go of that which binds us ... that which keeps us from being fully responsible human beings.

Those of us who wish to be free, that is, those of us who wish to be responsible, must continue, and continue, and continue, on this course of liberation.

Each new day will bring new trials, new obstacles, new mistakes of our own, and new crimes and misdemeanors committed against us and against those we love. Another day will bring unavoidable opportunities to seek liberation—via the practice of Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the hard road to liberation. (As far as I know there is no easy road.) It is the way of letting go of the chains that hold us back, sapping our energy that could be used for more constructive purposes. Anne Lamott writes: "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

What should we forgive? Unfair treatment. Being used, and abused, and manipulated. Being unappreciated. Having others disappoint us. We should forgive mistakes and mistreatments small and large, harm done intentionally, carelessly, or unconsciously.

That may seem extreme, so I'll note that what it means to forgive will probably mean different things to different people in different circumstances. Perhaps it's comparable to the nature of Love: it's indefinable, but worth investigating and striving for nonetheless. I'll just say that I

suspect the father of the murdered child (in the story we began with today) has found some degree of liberation in his ongoing work of forgiveness.

We do not forgive anyone for their sake. They need to release their own chains. But we can forgive others for our own sakes, for the sake of freedom. We are going to bear the consequences of other people's behavior whether we forgive or not. Why add the extra burden of spite?

Forgiveness, in my opinion, can be harder than apology, but its place and its purpose is more straightforward. (There is one complicated example that I need to acknowledge but can't get into in this brief overview—and that is when abuse is ongoing. I should also clarify that I'm talking here about forgiveness as something that we do *within ourselves*. Expressing forgiveness to someone who has harmed us is another matter, and, I think, much less important.)

==

When we've been hurt, or offended, we carry that weight, night and day, until we choose to take it off. Which is not easy to do. It's easier to look at the chain and say, "I didn't put it there ... I can't take it off." Or, "What was done to me was truly horrible—there has to be a permanent record of it." And perhaps it was truly horrible. But there are better ways to make a permanent record of those offenses that truly need to be recorded.

Forgiveness goes against our sense of justice. If someone has wronged us, then we sense that there should be consequences. We don't want to let them off the hook. But to whatever extent they are on a hook, it is not the hook of our dreams—far away from us where they are tormented and come to profound realizations that they have wronged us. No, the only hook is the one we are holding ourselves. And we don't really have the other person on our hook anyway ... it's just their detestable image that's hooked in our mind. Our offender is probably off somewhere having a good time—entirely oblivious to us.

==

The steps to forgiveness – at a bare minimum include:

Beginning in humility. We hurt because we are human. We are made from the earth. Humility and human are from the same root word as humus.

Second, we need to acknowledge our resentments. Just like with apology, it's helpful to be specific: be aware of both what happened, and how you feel about what happened.

Writing all of this down can be helpful in order to become conscious of resentments we haven't wanted to acknowledge to ourselves. Also, our resentments may look different on paper than they do rattling around in our heads.

And, finally, it can be helpful to take some sort of *action*. Maybe a cleansing ritual. Maybe burning the paper we've written on. Another action would be to choose to trust—not necessarily in the same situation or with the same people ... but to choose, again, to trust. Of course whether it's with the same people or others, *the action that can help cement our forgiveness in a sense of*

freedom and security is to assertively clarify the terms on which we are going to extend our trust as we go forward.

...ideally with assertiveness but not defensiveness.

...and ideally without the illusion that we are never going to be hurt again.

==

This is going rather longer than I had anticipated, but since all of this has simply been a reminder of things that you've probably learned from positive or negative experience, if you think about it, you'll see how the same principles will apply to offering someone a blessing, or good wishes. It's going to be less meaningful, maybe even meaningless, if we're vague rather than specific ... if we're just throwing it out without some depth of consciousness of what it means to the other person ... and if we don't follow up by acting to make a blessing, or good wishes, come true.

I invite you to think on these things this week. Apply the same principles to saying thank you: awareness of specifically what you've received, acknowledging it, when possible, and saying to the other person how it has affected you. Similarly with a compliment. Vagueness and insincerity can do more harm than good.

But with deep consciousness, good intention, and concrete follow-up action, each of these are paths to liberation—not only for ourselves but for our community. Our lives are so intertwined that, whenever we act, there are both intended and unintended consequences. Even well-meaning acts can do harm. So community cannot exist without constant forgiveness.

To withhold apology, forgiveness, praise, blessings ... to withhold gratitude (this is speculation, so take this with you and think on it): when we withhold these things, are we living as if life is a zero-sum game? That is, that there is only so much (of whatever it is I might give) in the world so that *if I give to you then there will be less for me*? I doubt that such a thing would be conscious to us, but consider this week whether such a thought may reside unconsciously next to any resistance within yourself to give.

I would suggest the opposite: that rather than reducing what good, what beauty, what liberation, what love is available to us ... rather than reducing what is available ... when we say thank you, forgive, apologize, whenever we let go, and consciously give from our hearts ... it only makes more.