

Acceptance: A Pathway to Peace

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
December 4, 2016
Molly Monahan and Paul Beckel

*I am a lover of what is,
not because I'm a spiritual person,
but because it hurts when I argue with reality.*

— Byron Katie, *Loving What Is:
Four Questions That Can Change Your Life*

*When we are no longer able to change a situation,
we are challenged to change ourselves.*

— Victor Frankl,
Holocaust survivor

WELCOME

Paul: Perhaps you're looking ahead to time with family over the holidays...but not in a good way, because you can already hear the inane, condescending or intolerant tones rippling through those conversations to come. Or perhaps you're looking back with indignation at some fresh humiliation from the festivities last week.

Molly: In the swirl of all of this, is it possible to nonjudgmentally accept what is—in this moment? To ground ourselves in what is, regardless of past or anticipated hurts?

Paul: Week after week we reaffirm our congregational covenant. We lift up an ideal of love which includes, I think, love of one another, love of ourselves, and even love of reality—as it is. And as we dive now into the challenges and the beauty of loving what is, we light our chalice to symbolize our promise to work together toward this goal.

GATHERING SONG *For the Beauty of the Earth* #21

CHILDREN'S FOCUS "Something from Nothing" Jewish Folktale

Summary: Josie's grandfather turns her ragged blanket into a coat...a shirt...and ever smaller items culminating in a button. And when the button is lost, Josie turns "nothing" into a story.

PRAYER

Chief Arvol Looking Horse has called for an Interfaith Day of Prayer today in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux people. He and thousands of water protectors gather today in North Dakota at the site where a pipeline carrying tar sands crude oil is scheduled to cross the Missouri River. The pipeline route was originally set to pass near the city of Bismarck. But that was seen as a

risk to human safety. So the route now runs under the longest river in North America, just upstream from Native lands.

So we invoke now the spirit, and the reality of all that has ever been, all that is, and all that yet may be. We invoke our past and our future, knowing that every now is a potential turning point. A moment in which the best of humanity and integrity may work through us to promote truth, beauty, and goodness.

Today people of many faith traditions / from across the county / stand together in North Dakota to gather strength from the water, earth, and sky...from each other...and from the spirit, and the reality, of all that has been, all that is, and all that yet may be.

They have gathered as a force of nonviolent resistance. They have gathered to protect the water that has in the past sustained countless generations of flora and fauna, including our human ancestors. They, and we, look within now, within ourselves and within our traditions, to find the strength, courage and wisdom that will be necessary to ensure healthy water, earth and sky for many generations to come.

May this moment of solidarity be a turning point — may the lessons, the aspirations, and the sacrifices of the ancestors flow on through each of us.

So now in the spirit of goodwill for all people, we stand in solidarity. With goodwill toward those who build and finance pipelines, goodwill toward law enforcement and protestors, goodwill toward consumers of fossil fuels, and toward the children of our children. May *they all* be filled with loving kindness. May *we* all be filled with loving kindness. So that we might see clearly, a vision of well-being and justice for all.

REFLECTIONS—Molly Monahan

Good morning! I am Molly Monahan. I am a lifelong Unitarian, and a member of BUF for over a decade. It is my privilege to stand before you this morning and I am grateful for the opportunity. I also want to say thank you to Paul Beckel, Barbara Davenport, and Tessie Mandeville for their encouragement of and assistance with my first sermon from this pulpit.

Forgiveness is something I've wrestled with throughout my life, as I trust many of you have, and though I don't presume to have all the answers, or to know your path, I'd like to share some of my thoughts and experiences on the topic and where my search for truth and meaning has led me.

I want to acknowledge that forgiveness is not an easy topic to discuss, nor to listen to, and I imagine it will bring up a lot of thoughts and feelings for everyone. That is okay and it is welcome. We want BUF to be a safe place to think and feel. I invite us all to open our hearts, minds, and spirits as we can.

So, I think we can all agree that the traditionally understood path of Forgiveness is a comparatively sane choice given the alternatives of bitterness, grief and despair. But today I am going to challenge you to consider a means to sidestep forgiveness which promises even better outcomes. That of Acceptance. The two words and concepts are often conflated and I hope to shine some light on my understanding of their differences, opening, if only a crack, an alternative route in YOUR quest for truth, to joy and ultimately Peace.

Let me get this “Sticking Point” out of the way, right now so you can hear me. Neither does Accepting nor Forgiving mean that you should stop being involved in some process that seeks accountability or restitution (as in a criminal case) or in efforts to achieve some resolution of a relationship. In Accepting experiences and/or others, we do not deny or condone the wrongdoing. Instead, we stop the flow of pain, reclaim hope, and commit ourselves to beginning anew.

I would postulate that Acceptance is the path back to the true self.

Let’s start with the basics: You simply cannot know. That may be a hard pill to swallow for us seekers of Truth, but trust me, that is a blessing.

Let’s go back over forty years ago, in my journey: I was very fortunate to be in a small seminar for a semester with the author of Dune, Frank Herbert, who taught me about not knowing. He drew a grid on the blackboard and asked us to imagine it extending to infinity in all directions. He then highlighted one tiny square. Each square is connected and each is distinct. We are each and all one of those squares. Everything that is, is one of those squares. Each square has a minute amount of certainty, of not only its own square, but all the others and how they interact. Herbert counseled that we all need to come to peace with the knowledge that we cannot know. We can glimpse into but not fully see the breadth of other squares. They are certainly there, almost universes unto themselves with their own versions of reality, their own truths. It took a while but I ‘got it’. I was able to accept and embrace my limits to understanding. Byron Katie said, “Not knowing is the way to understanding.”

You are all little universes whose surface I can only scratch. Instead of being fearful of that, I take comfort in that. “I don’t know” is a lot of freedom.

Our own Theodore Parker wrote: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight.”

Back in 1763 the Universalists bravely embraced the theology that we affirm the goodness and the blessing in every human life. I say bravely because at the time it was heretical removing the concept of original sin and a judging God from the equation.

If we start from that place that ‘where we are is a good place’, that our lives are bountiful and rich, then how can we judge all the details that brought us to this place as bad or good. How can we step far enough back from our tiny square within the humongous grid to see, how ‘good’ or

bad' ANYTHING ultimately is? You could drive yourself bonkers. The Buddha said that trying to work out the subtle and interconnected workings of Karma, (a word meaning both actions and results) would be enough to drive an ordinary person mad.

I propose the more gracious joyous path would be to divest ourselves of the judgments to begin with, the presumptions and simply accept.

Hymn #374

*Since what we choose is what we are
And what we love we yet shall be
The goal may ever shine afar —
The will to win it sets us free.*

Paul spoke last Sunday about practicing Thankfulness even within the struggles and challenges of our lives. I acknowledge that challenges are indeed wondrous gifts. I joke that it is not fair that I should be granted such a disproportionate amount of such gifts and that the powers that be need to work on their distribution methods.

This quote cracks me up! "In the garden of gentle sanity, May you be bombarded by coconuts of wakefulness"

But all joking aside, if I truly have the wisdom to recognize that all I judge to be negative that appears in my path is actually a conduit to the next "Now" the next perfect moment in my life, where is there room for judgement that would then logically follow with forgiveness? If you buy that concept you should be thanking your perceived transgressors as opposed to forgiving them. Forgiveness requires a judgement. Acceptance does not.

Whatever occurs—is part of the learning process. So, there is nothing to blame; everything is the path of righteousness

I would like to invite the Chalice choir to the dais. We will be singing two pieces today:

1) Beau Soir calls us to be fully present in the moment and cherish the now as it is fleeting.

A translation from the French:

*When streams turn pink in the setting sun,
And a slight shudder rushes through the wheat fields,
A plea for happiness seems to rise out of all things
And it climbs up towards the troubled heart.
A plea to relish the charm of life
While there is youth and the evening is fair,
For we pass away, as the wave passes:
The wave to the sea, we to the grave.*

2) The second piece, Blessed is the Virgin (Bogoroditse Devo) Rachmaninoff Vespers No. 6

The Russian version allows UUs to focus on the beauty of the piece and not get distracted by classical Ave Maria text. It is basically about Gratitude, on top of being just ridiculously beautiful.

REFLECTIONS, Cont.

“I am a lover of what is, not because I'm a spiritual person, but because it hurts when I argue with reality.” —Byron Katie.

If you are one who believes in a divine ‘grand plan’, how could a human being begin to presume to know the details of such a complex chess game? To forgive the sacrifice of a pawn to save the queen seems trivial and short sighted. I believe wisdom and peace lie in the acceptance of the inability to know, let alone understand, the infinite stream of events set in motion by seeming random events from the proverbial butterfly landing on a flower to the arrest of a protestor. How could I ever begin to understand how either event could ultimately be the precursor to a war, or to the canonization of a saint?

If y'all buy the premise, then where does that leave us? What do we ‘have’? Well to be perfectly honest, here and now is the only thing we have, and our own perceptions of it. “When we love, what is, it becomes so simple to live in the world”

I am suggesting you embrace your life's unwanted aspects as “raw material necessary for awakening genuine uncontrived compassion.”

“If we learn to open our hearts, anyone, including the people who drive us crazy, can be our teacher.”

A simplistic example without moral overtones would be when a lion picks off a weak baby wildebeest to feed her cubs. The cubs are thrilled, what a great thing this is! The mother wildebeest is not so pleased and as far as the baby wildebeest goes, this is horrific. Does the baby wildebeest need to forgive? (in that brief moment left to take any action?) Does the mother wildebeest harbor resentment and need to find grace through forgiveness?

And speaking of babies, here's an example most of us can relate to: The birth canal. What trauma! You were in a safe cozy place then someone or something pushed you out, squeezed your little head, plopped you into a cold glaring place, then cut your lifeline of sustenance. If you had had the wherewithal to contemplate the situation in traditional forgiveness terms, I would venture that at that very first moment of your life, you would have felt wronged. Sitting here together today, we have the luxury of perspective with this example.

Treat yourself to the gift of translating all your perceived wrongs and pains as journeys through birth canals, and have faith, because the final outcome where the pendulum swings back is not always going to be so obvious, and may never be known by you in your lifetime. Faith is realizing that in most instances we will never know.

Speaking of birth, my own mother was the inspiration behind all this inquiry. I struggled for decades with trying on the glove of Forgiveness in my quest to find peace with her. It never fit. But I found my way to Acceptance. My tortured past was my springboard to the me I know and love. It felt like forgiving would somehow diminish ME. Acceptance was the ticket.

I invite you to ask yourselves, who would I be without judgement? Who would I be without that thought?

Life is a big improv session. One of the first rules of improv is to learn the concept of “Yes Let’s” or YES AND” When one of your fellow players introduces a concept that wasn’t where you wanted to take the skit, but there it is, it is on the table and needs a reply...we Improvers apply Yes Let’s and do with it what we can. Can we not apply that to life?

So, my wasband dumped me. Hard. Forgive him? No need, it was an Event Horizon! You Quantum Physics geeks know what I mean. It was the structure which delineated, one space-time section from another.....

My point was my life took a turn and I love where it lead me. I am not suggesting it was easy, but I can distinctly recall the phone call (yes he dumped me on the phone) and in a split second I went from dutiful wife, to Banshee, to warrior woman. I share this because it was a gift I gave myself of acceptance. The moment when everything changed, I changed to adapt to my improv sketch of a life. Don’t get me wrong, I was a mess once I got off the phone...come on! But I was not stuck in a forgiveness model...I was not fighting reality. As Byron Katie says,” “Life is simple. Everything happens for you, not to you. Everything happens at exactly the right moment, neither too soon nor too late. You don't have to like it... it's just easier if you do.”

So forgiveness? No place. No need. Stepping back from the grid, I now see that the dissolution of my marriage led to my moving to Bellingham and ultimately to my being instrumental in managing the wonderful BUF addition building project...Y’all should send him a thank you note!

Indulge yourself with some of your own stories where you can recognize a joyous outcome from the comfort of your current perspective. They are elusive. For example:

If my first boyfriend hadn’t dumped me, (which at the time was the end of my teenage world) I would probably have ended up in a double wide with five kids and a substance abuse problem.

How can I curse that fender bender which set into motion other moments that I deeply appreciated? If we focus on the ‘rightness’ or the ‘wrongness’ of the event or the people involved, we are arguing with reality and ultimately causing ourselves more suffering.

Much has been said about the benefits to the forgiver of the act of forgiving. I receive immeasurable benefits from letting go of the presumption of knowing the rightness or the wrongness of any given situation or encounter and find a great sense of peace from that. What do I need to leave behind to be fully present here today?

I would like to try an experiment and invite the congregation to physically experience the difference between using the word forgive and accept. My friend Rob Eller-Isaacs wrote the responsive reading insert in your order of service called "A Litany of Atonement". To add a personal note, I first met Robbie when he was 12 and a guest in my home in Moline Illinois when he was traveling with the Chicago Children's Choir and performing at my church in Davenport Iowa. Many years later he and his wife Jan Eller officiated at my wedding to that guy I mentioned earlier.....but I digress.....

I changed the word Forgive in his text to Accept. I left it there with a strike through to aid in your experience of feeling the difference. See Forgive, but say Accept. Do you notice a difference?

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness,

We ~~forgive~~ ACCEPT ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

CLOSING

When we bravely affirm the goodness in every human life. If we start from that place 'where we are is a good place', that our lives are bountiful and rich, then how can we judge all the details that brought us to this place as bad or good. How can we step back from the colossal grid of all existence to see how, 'good' or bad' anything is? You could drive yourself mad.

I propose the more gracious and joyous path would be to divest ourselves of the judgments to begin with, the presumptions and simply accept.

In Accepting, we do not deny or condone the perceived offense. Instead, we stop the flow of pain, reclaim hope, and commit ourselves to beginning anew. I would postulate that Acceptance is the path back to the true self. Thank you.

REFLECTIONS—Paul Beckel

Ordinarily when I collaborate with others on the development of a sermon theme, each of us has something to say; our various reflections augment one another and provide different perspectives. Today it's going to be a little different in that I'd like to respond directly to what Molly has presented. First, quibbling a bit over words...and second, responding to her thesis with some of the emotional resistance that might be felt by anyone who is not a saint.

I'll be quick with the quibbling. I think Molly and I agree that there are distinct psychological states corresponding to what she calls forgiveness and acceptance. And we agree that they are not equally beneficial. One of these psychological states is more helpful than the other, more mature, more healthy. We even agree on *which* of these two is more better.

But in my mind these are state A and state B. If you call state A forgiveness and state B acceptance, then all blessings be upon you. If you call state A acceptance and state B forgiveness, then all blessings be upon you. Or maybe you find more resonance with other words like: understanding, mercy, empathy, tolerance ... Buddhists talk of non-attachment, Taoists talk about yielding, and Muslims talk of surrender to the will of Allah.

In order to think about this, pray about this, or examine our souls, it's crucial that we recognize how state A is different from state B, so that we can assess where we are at any given moment, and find energy and courage to press forward.

So I found the responsive reading we just did to be jarring—in a good way—not because I'm sold on the nomenclature, but precisely because the fluidity of these words makes it easy to forget that there is an important difference between letting the hurt go a little...and letting it go completely.

Which brings us to that small matter of emotional resistance.

When it is suggested that we could or even should let go of our hurts *completely*, it is entirely natural to respond:

- That's easy for you to say; you probably haven't been wronged the way I've been wronged.
- Or: That's easy to say when you've gotten your life back in order with no long term harm done ... or you've already experienced that magical serendipity of things turning out "better"...but you know, that doesn't happen for everyone.
- Or: These grand theories are fine when the harm you've experienced is at least a couple of minutes behind you. But don't ask me to forgive or accept or surrender to harm that is active in my life at this very moment, and likely to continue indefinitely.
- Or: Sure, that's ok for small and maybe even large wounds, but not for destroying lives, not for centuries of oppression, not for social problems that need our active intervention.
- Or: If we just accept everything, that's like saying that it's ok or that there shouldn't be consequences for wicked behavior. And before long the horrible becomes normal.
- Or: You do what you want but I'm not going to become a doormat.

- Or: Please stop telling me what I SHOULD feel...don't suggest that I'm weak if I can't just let things go.
- Or, finally, and best of all: Well sure this works for you because YOU are the one causing harm! Your theory is perfect because it lets you off the hook for what you've done to me.

All of these objections remind me of the arguments faced by the early Universalists when they began celebrating a God so loving as to never damn *anyone* to eternal torment—not even the most heinous sinner.

The story is told of Rev Hosea Ballou, one of our first Universalist preachers in the late 1700's. Ballou was out circuit riding—in those days the ministers would travel from town to town, and it was not unusual to run into preachers from other traditions along the way. One day Ballou was riding alongside a Baptist colleague who implored him: “Now how can you say that there is no hell? Doesn't this give you license to do anything? Sin extravagantly and without consequence? Why if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and leave you to die, and I'd still go to heaven.” Ballou simply responded: “If you were a Universalist, such an idea would never occur to you.”

The reality though, is that we are not such saints. As the leader of a congregation Ballou surely had no illusions about himself or his people. And yet he preached on, and more than two centuries later the Universalist ideals remain within our movement. Even though the notion of an afterlife is not a concern to many of us...even though the notion of an all-loving creator is not what grounds many of us, the Universalist *ideal of complete reconciliation* remains.

We use different words. We approach it from different paths, and at our own pace. So I encourage you now to wrestle with all you've heard today. Even if you continue to hold some of the reservations I've just mentioned, take a chance with maybe one smallish experience of hurt; see if you can reframe it in such a way that guides you along a path toward peace, freedom and universal love.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Wonders still the World shall Witness

#139

BENEDICTION

May I have courage to change the things I can, serenity to accept things I cannot change, and wisdom to know the difference.

CIRCLE 'ROUND FOR FREEDOM