

# “Letting Go”

4/2/06

## Opening Words

In this time of growth and renewal, of Spring cleaning, some of us thought it would be good to look at the concept of forgiveness. Letting go of hurts and anger is a beneficial process. When we forgive others we help ourselves.

As Jack Kornfield says, Forgiveness simply says that we will not put someone out of our hearts. From the perspective of forgiveness, we recognize that we have all been wronged and we have all caused suffering to others. No one is exempt.

We want to be clear at the start here that we aren't saying that people shouldn't be held responsible for their actions. Repentance is an important part of the forgiveness process. Trying to forgive and forget can prevent true healing. Sometimes a hurt needs to be lived with for a long time before we can let it go, particularly if the person who hurt us refuses to acknowledge that he or she caused us pain. But what we want to talk about today is the individual process of forgiveness.

Holding on to our hurts only hurts us more. This morning we want to discuss ways that we can hold our hurts lightly, so that they stop hurting us so much. We want to suggest ways that we can process our hurts, and eventually let them go.

## Rocks – Concept from Congregational Fitness by Denise W. Goodman

When you came in this morning, there was probably a rock on your chair, or on a chair nearby. If you would, pick up your rock and hold it in the palm of your hand.

This rock represents a hurt that you are carrying. Some of us carry a lot of these rocks around all the time. Now I want you to close your hand tightly around the rock – cover it up. Often, we force ourselves into what we call closure of an issue. We close up our hurt, and hide it. The wound is invisible, but it still causes us pain. And the tighter we hold, the more it hurts.

Now consider an alternative to closure. Open your hand, and hold your rock lightly in your palm. You can look at it, touch it, gently turn it over. Notice the places on your rock that are sharp, and notice other places that are smooth. Holding it lightly, it no longer cuts into your palm. While carrying it may be a bit of a burden, it is no longer a source of unseen pain.

As I become familiar with my hurt, there may come a time when I can put it down for short periods of time – put it on a shelf and leave it where I can see it, and maybe even put it out of sight in a drawer for awhile. Eventually, I may even find that I can let it go – that it is no longer necessary to carry it or hold it or even see it.

### **Why Let Go?**

Why should we let go of hurts and grudges? It seems no more than right that we should keep on being angry at that man down the street who took it upon himself to criticize the way we kept our lawn, and convinced the neighbors to start a letter writing campaign, the woman on the committee who rolled her eyes and said, “Well I could have told you that idea would never work!”, the high school teacher who used you as a bad example in front of the whole class--- Let alone the person who stole our car, mugged our son or broke into our house. These people were at the very least insensitive and in some cases downright guilty of breaking a law.

In our head we know that forgiveness is supposed to be healing, but our gut still churns when we think about these incidents, and oh do we think about them. They come tiptoeing, or maybe even rushing out at night when we can't sleep, or maybe while we're waiting at a red light. These thoughts can turn us into victims—“The neighbors don't like me”, “I have bad ideas”, “Why did they pick *my* house to break into.”

In a recent Gallop poll survey 94% of Americans said they believed it was important to forgive. Unfortunately, only 48% said they were usually able to do so.

Grudges have been around forever but forgiveness has been a family matter, as in a mother saying “Now Helen tell Susie you forgive her for tearing up your picture,” or a religious matter as in the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, or in the Christian Scriptures where Jesus tells his questioner to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven.

In the last 20 years or so scientists have started taking a look at anger with others and what it does to the holder of the anger, in other words to any of us. They have started to quantify the power of forgiveness. Much of the research in this area is being done as part of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, headed by Dr. Fred Luskin and his colleagues in the school of medicine. It has generated a great deal of interest not only in the scientific community but in the media.

Several years ago ABC News reported, “...studies show that letting go of anger and resentment can reduce the severity of heart disease and in some cases even prolong the lives of cancer patients.”

In an interview, Dr. Luskin said, “Often when we're mad we don't realize the damage that's being done to our own physical well being. The rush of adrenaline is not good for the heart. Being angry or frustrated is bad for the immune system.” He went on to explain, “We teach people how to forgive and then we measure the changes. We have shown that whatever reduces anger, hurt, and depression can lower blood pressure and may make people more optimistic, energetic, physically vital, and even reduce the symptoms of stress — the backaches and things like that, not just the subjective experience of stress.”

But the Forgiveness Project does not work only with individuals. One of their studies dealt with forgiveness training for financial advisors and executives at American Express. Participants showed a 25% reduction in stress a 20% gain in positive emotion and ta da ta da an 18.3% increase in gross sales.

They have also worked with international groups such as Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland who had immediate family members murdered. They demonstrated progress even in these difficult situations.

Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet (wit vleet) and her colleagues at Hope College in Michigan have also studied forgiveness. She reports that their results powerfully showed that forgiveness was associated with a healthier profile of emotional and physiological reactions, compared to unforgiveness.

Dr. Mimi Guarneri, a practicing cardiologist and researcher in the relatively new field of psychoneuroimmunology or PNI, says, “We know that when we're angry our bodies are surging with stress hormones that raise our blood pressure and heart rate.” She says that through the use of the functional MRI scientists can now see in real time how the thought-emotion centers of the brain are inextricably linked to the rest of the body, including the heart. Dr Guarneri is also the author of a new book, The Heart Speaks, and the founder the Scripps Institute for Integrative Medicine in La Jolla, California. She says she studies the whole heart and talks about the layers that don't appear on an electrocardiogram or stress test—the mental heart, the emotional heart, the intelligent heart, the spiritual heart and the universal heart.

So why let go? Let go not only for the benefits that others might receive, but also for the sake of our own immune system, for the sake of our peace of mind and to set all of our hearts free.

### **Ways of Letting Go**

Most of us have experienced forgiving or being forgiven, so I invite you now, for just a moment, to remember such an experience. Take a deep breath, relax and remember a time when you forgave or were forgiven. What do you feel?

Perhaps a softening around the heart, perhaps a sense of relief, or something else, perhaps nothing.

Well, for those who felt something, you may be thinking now, yes, that is interesting, but how do I achieve that feeling intentionally, consciously if I have a disagreement with someone now? Do I simply declare, I'm going to let go of it? And, if I say that, why don't I feel much better?

There are probably many answers, but in my opinion, letting go, or forgiveness, is like most other skills we want to develop – we need to learn and practice, and these take time. So while forgiveness can arise spontaneously, it often needs to be developed.

Fred Luskin, whose work at Stanford University on forgiveness Helen described earlier, has developed a specific process for forgiveness. It begins with knowing how you feel about what happened and being able to talk about it, then telling a couple of trusted friends about your experience.

Luskin recommends you then make a commitment to do what you have to do to feel better. It is critical here to understand that your goal is **peace**; it is not necessarily reconciliation with the person who upset you or condoning their behavior.

Thus you recognize that your primary distress is coming from your hurt feelings, from the thoughts and physical upset you suffering right now, not from what offended you yesterday – or 10 years ago. Says Luskin. When you replay the offending action in your mind over and over, it is simply a thought – the actual behavior happened in the past.

To help with the process of stopping the endless repetition of blame, Luskin also recommends learning and applying a simple stress management technique to soothe your mind and body. This might be something as simple as taking five minutes of quiet before a meeting that you expect to be contentious.

Key to forgiveness is giving up false expectations, or “unenforceable rules,” as Luskin calls them – rules about how others—or yourself must behave. For example, while we might hope that our employer will respect our work or that drivers will be careful, we cannot make that happen. You can't change someone else; you can only change yourself. Giving up unenforceable rules frees you up to put your energy into looking for ways to get your positive goals met, to seek out new ways to get what you want --- instead of mentally replaying your hurt

Remember that a life well lived is the best revenge, Luskin says. Focus on the beauty, love and kindness around you instead of your wounded feelings. And finally, amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive.

So this is Fred Luskin's framework for forgiveness. As you can see, it is a completely secular and very practical approach to letting go. Many religious traditions incorporate forgiveness as a spiritual practice. In some forms of Buddhism, meditation practices on forgiveness function as a preparation for releasing barriers to kindness and compassion, to bring the spirit of forgiveness into the whole of life. From this perspective, forgiveness, is simply an act of the heart, a movement to let go of pain, resentment, and outrage.

I invite you now to explore a brief version of a forgiveness practice, drawn from the American Buddhist Jack Kornfield's book, *A Path With Heart*. It is a three-step process of first, forgiving ourselves for what we have done to ourselves, second—forgiving ourselves for what we have done to others, and then third, forgiving others for what they have done to us. This forgiveness practice is based on the premise that we have all made mistakes and brought pain to ourselves and others in our lives. Because of that we can forgive others.

I want to add that what we will do this morning is an introduction to a process that could take a much longer time.

So, begin by getting comfortable in your chair; allowing your eyes to close, if you choose, and your body and breath to be natural and easy, relaxed. Breathing gently into the area of your heart, let yourself feel all the barriers and holding that you have carried because you have not forgiven yourself or others.

Now, from the place of the heart, ask and offer forgiveness for yourself:

Remember one or two ways in which you have been unkind, abandoned, harmed or betrayed your own body and/or feelings, knowingly or unknowingly, out of pain, anger, fear, and confusion. Feel the sorrow you have carried from these actions, and sense that you can release these burdens. Say to yourself, I forgive myself, I forgive myself.

Now, remember a person whom you have harmed, betrayed, or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, out of fear, pain, anger and confusion. Feel your own sorrow and regret, and sense that you can release these burdens. Then picturing the person you have wounded, repeat, I ask your forgiveness, I ask your forgiveness.

Now extend forgiveness to someone who has hurt or harmed you. For today, I would not pick a person whose actions evoked a deep soul-wounding hurt, but rather someone with whom you have a small grievance— like a coworker who slighted you, or a friend who made an unexpected hurtful comment. Feel the sorrow you are carrying about this and sense that you can release this sorrow if your heart is ready.

Now say to yourself, I see that this person has hurt and harmed me out of confusion, fear, pain, and anger. To the extent I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. To those who have caused me harm, I offer you my forgiveness. I forgive you.

Be with the feelings of this practice for a moment. How does your heart feel? How does your body feel? And then come back to the room when you are ready.

So we began with ourselves, offered forgiveness for what we have done to ourselves and others, and then offered forgiveness to those who have hurt us. If you do this at home, let yourself gently repeat these three directions for forgiveness until you can feel a release in your heart. For some great pains, you may not feel a release but only the anger. Touch this softly, forgiving yourself in this as well. Forgiveness cannot be forced, and it can take time, so simply continue the practice and let it work gradually, for it can bring freedom.

### **Closing Words**

A story tells that two friends were walking through the desert. During some point of the journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other on in the face.

The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand:

Today my best friend slapped me in the face.

They kept on walking until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but his friend saved him. After he recovered from the near drowning, he wrote on a stone:

Today my best friend saved my life.

The friend who had slapped and saved his best friend asked him, "After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone. Why?" The other friend replied, "When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it."

Let us all learn to write our hurts in the sand.

Go in Peace.