

FORGIVENESS, GIVING AND RECEIVING: THE HARDEST THING WE MUST DO

September 9, 2012

How many of you watched a telecast of the Democratic convention Thursday evening? If so, did you happen to see and hear John Lewis? He spoke before the 9:00 p.m. hour. I saw him on MSNBC.

John Lewis is one of a dwindling cadre of authentic heroes of the Civil Rights movement. An African American, he moved from challenging segregation to United States Representative from the state of Georgia. I was familiar with his story. I almost did not pay attention to his speech, since I was sure I had already heard everything he had to say. I am glad I thought better of that impulse.

John Lewis was one of the original bus riders who rode into North Carolina. It was not far from the convention hall where he and a colleague were beaten brutally when they tried to enter a *whites only* waiting room. When the police showed up after allowing the white men plenty of time for their brutality, they asked Lewis and his friend if they wanted to press charges. They said *no*.

This much of the story I had heard several times. Then Lewis continued. He said, “Last year a fellow over here by Red Hill (N.C.) came to see me in my office in Washington. He told me that he was one of the men who beat me. He said his conscience had been bothering him for some time. He asked for my . I said I forgave him, and we hugged and cried together.”

It took 50 years, but that man finally grew brave enough to listen to his conscience and ask for forgiveness. It took 50 years, but John Lewis granted forgiveness to his assailant. And they wept together.

We liberal religionists do not have an extensive literature on forgiveness. Later this month, Dawn will be sharing some sermons written by Unitarian Universalists that are drawn from the Jewish tradition. I think one of the reasons many of us have difficulty thinking and writing about forgiveness is that those of us who grew up in the Christian tradition are only familiar with that model. And we reject cheap grace.

That is, we reject the idea that we should and must move too quickly to asking for forgiveness, and then granting it when asked. Small infractions—“O my gosh, I forgot your birthday! I am so sorry!”—can be forgiven quickly. However, the big stuff may need a long time—even 50 years.

I'm going to share a story from my life that you have not heard. I think it's because it took a long time to come to terms with it. To do so, I must remind you of its context; because it happened following the murder of my daughter and death of my husband due to vehicular homicide. I would not inflict those difficult memories on you if they were not necessary to the main story.

When I married John Kratochvil, we had a blended family. My youngest, Stacy, was still living at home, and his middle, Andrew, lived with us. Andrew had his father's easy-going manner of relating to the world. He was very likeable, an avid skateboarder, and reluctant scholar. He was a talented photographer, and played drums and sang in a band. He graduated from high school and attended a college. He was popular, and could always find a party.

It was the late 80s, and *weed* was often involved. While he was still in high school we got a call one night to please come and bail him out of jail. It seems he was heading to the party of the night, when he noticed that there were three (3!) police cars with flashing lights sitting in front. He entered the house with the ½ oz. of Mary Jane still in his pocket. When we asked him why he went in, he said he wondered what was going on, and forgot about the contents of his pocket.

After John was killed our family was broken up. Stacy was in college, I was preparing for theological school, and Andrew, who was already living independently, decided to move to Austin, Texas, where the music scene was legendary.

John's family carried the gene that causes bi-polar disease due to a lack of lithium. His sister has taken lithium for many, many years. His older son was on lithium following a suicide attempt. This variety of bi-polar disease strikes young adults. It struck Andrew while he was living in Austin. He was seeing a doctor, but not taking his medication faithfully. He refused to move to his mother's or grandparents' location.

One day he pawned his photography equipment to purchase a gun and ammunition, drove out to a lovely lake, put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

I received the news while on internship in Rochester, New York. I flew back to Missouri where my wonderful in-laws took charge of arranging to bury him next to his father. Stacy also flew in for the funeral of her brother. I was glad that she was there. Somehow it was easier. We stalked around the funeral home critiquing its overdone decorations.

We commiserated later about the Baptist service that Andrew would have disdained—he had known only Unitarian Universalism. In a word, we were angry.

We both loved my parents-in-law deeply and would never have hurt their feelings. So our displeasure was only shared with each other.

It was not until later, much later, that I understood that it was not the funeral home, nor the really very good Baptist minister that angered us. We were angry with Andrew. And, how can you be angry with someone who was in so much existential pain that he killed himself? So we concentrated on décor and preaching style.

It was not until later that I understood that I was furious that Andrew caused even more pain to a family that was almost beyond endurance. “How could you?” a small voice inside kept asking. And, “I will never forgive you for this.”

And there it is. The really big one. Anger, no fury, at a suffering young man who could bear no more pain, and decided to remove the pain and himself from the world.

It has taken a very long time to process this pain and anger. Actually, I forgave Andrew fairly quickly. But it’s been twenty years, and I’m just getting to where I can talk about this tragedy. What took so long was forgiving myself .

How do we forgive ourselves for our mistakes—no, mistakes are easy. How do we forgive ourselves for sin?

Now, we don’t talk a lot about sin in this congregation, but please bear with me. The word *sin* derives from an old archery term. It means *to fall short of the mark*. Boy, howdy, did I fall short of the mark. And there have been other marks that I did not reach. I’ll bet at least some of you may have fallen short of the mark occasionally. So, when I talk about *sin*, that’s the kind of sin I’m talking about—falling short of the mark.

This is why I titled the sermon as I did. Giving and receiving forgiveness is the hardest thing we must do. I forgave Andrew as soon as the pain eased a bit. Granting forgiveness was done. But I needed to forgive myself, and that was more difficult. First I had to admit that I had sinned, fallen short of the mark. Only after that could I work on forgiveness for myself.

And if someone else had tried to forgive me, maybe Andrew’s birth mother, I’m not sure I could have received it. Fortunately, when Stacy and I were stalking around the funeral home, we were careful not to talk to other family members.

Let us return to our discussion of sin. Many of us come from Christian backgrounds, and our understanding of sin was shaped within that context. Even if we were not active in churches, our society is so steeped in Christian culture that we absorb its mores. Thus our understanding of sin was shaped by the ten commandments, especially that one that talks about coveting our neighbor’s wife. Somehow that commandment got stretched to include all manner of sexual behaviors, yearnings, and even thoughts.

When we shed Christianity for this liberal religion, we shed our adherence to the value system that so denigrated sexual behavior.

Sin included other things also, like stealing, and drinking too much or at all, and lots of other behaviors that included things we no longer consider bad, (like dancing) and ignored things that we now consider reprehensible (like torture.)

However, I think that if we use that original definition of sin, *falling short of the mark*, we can begin to make sense out of sin and the need for forgiveness.

All of us are going to fall short of the mark someday somehow; and we will need forgiveness. And, since there really is a great deal of this kind of sinning going on, we all need to do quite a bit of forgiving.

I'm not sure how much practice we've had with this forgiveness thing. Maybe we practice with the little things, "I'm sorry I'm late for dinner." "That's okay." And we move up to, "I'm sorry I said that very hurtful thing." "I'm sorry you did also. I can't forget it, but I can continue our relationship."

Then when the really big thing happens, we end up hugging the man who beat us and weeping together. Or, even more difficult, the mother of the man who killed our daughter says "I'm so sorry." And we hug and weep. If it takes 20 or 50 years, well, maybe that's what was needed.

Let me suggest that we need to become aware of the times we fall short of the mark, and practice asking forgiveness. Then, if and when a big thing happens, we have some idea of what is needed.

The world is a little kinder and warmer when forgiveness is practiced. Our communities operate more smoothly when people recognize and acknowledge they have fallen short of the mark. Families build more trusting relationships when "I'm sorry" is part of the dialog. And we will be at peace with ourselves when we can forgive ourselves for sinning, even if it takes a very long time.

Let us work toward peace, trust, and kindness.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.