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## Cultivating Grace: Confession and Forgiveness

### Confession

A half dozen years before her death, my mother moved from New York City to the Massachusetts town where I ministered. She rented an apartment in a house a half a mile from us. She joined my church. She arranged to spend every Tuesday with our son, Nathan, as they explored the creek for bugs, wrote short stories, painted pictures, ate ice cream, and in other ways let her be a kind, wise, indulgent grandmother.

When she got cancer, I was front line support. When she released her last breath, I was sitting at her bedside. She wanted me to lead her memorial service. So I did.

After the service was over and I'd driven the last relative to the airport, I came home and sat in the family room. The previous months had been busy logistically and emotionally. Now I had nothing to do. I was at a loss.

She had wanted us to have her color TV since ours was a small black and white. Thinking of nothing better to do, I drove to her apartment to get it.

Walking into her kitchen I was hit with every unkind thing I had ever done or said to her. It was a physical, mental and emotional blow.

For example, I remembered one afternoon I had been worried about my upcoming sermon. But I couldn't work on it because Nathan was home and too young to be left alone.

I saw my mother walking up the sidewalk. Her eyes were down, her shoulders drooped, her gait was melancholic.

When she walked into the house, I pretended not to notice her mood. Before she could speak I said, "I'm glad you're here. I need to work on a sermon. Can you watch Nathan?"

Her eyes looked hesitant. But she was my mother. So she said, "yes." I scurried up to my office in the attic.

I wasn't crude or abusive or mean. I wasn't kind either. I was purposely unmindful.

Now, standing alone in her empty apartment, there were hundreds – maybe thousands – of such moments flashing through my memory: the times I'd been neglectful, selfish, or taken advantage of her, hit me so hard my balance wavered.

That's when I truly began to mourn her death. It felt awful. I had no way to make amends. And I couldn't push them out of my mind. I had to live with the ugliness of what I'd rationalized away over and over.

### Journal Confirmation

My mother had been a writer. She'd kept journals. She wanted my sister Stephanie to have them. My mother had one daughter and four sons. So Stephanie divided the journals into five groups – one for each of us. I got the ones from her New England years.

Paging through them I found an entry: "I'm lonely and discouraged. I went to talk with Doug. He was busy, as usual. He had no time for me. He asked me to look after Nathan so he could work.

"I was angry and upset though I didn't say anything. I do love Nathan so much. But I really wanted to talk to an adult. I left feeling empty."

### *Heart Barnacles*

We've all done bad things. By "bad" I mean violated our own personal values. Probably some of us have committed felonies. Probably most of us have broken laws. And all of us have acted contrary to our own ideals.

Perhaps we have turned aside from someone in need, expressed anger at someone who was innocent, been too busy to reach out to someone in trouble, ignored the lonely, avoided the anxious, dissembled, misrepresented the truth. From time to time all of us betray our sense of what's right.

As a result, our heart feels bad. We may brush the feelings aside, rationalize, blame others, or try to wipe them out of our memory. But deep inside they encrust our heart like barnacles on the hull of a boat.

### *Social Creatures*

What can we do about this?

We are social creatures. Half the evolution of the human brain took place in ancestors dependent on their clan or tribe for survival. The need for connection with others has been bred into us by millions of years of natural selection.

So in most spiritual traditions, one step toward cleaning the barnacles off our hearts is to tell someone about our misdeeds: to confess the times we've

missed the mark so they aren't a secrete separating us from the community.

However we Unitarian Universalists don't have a tradition of confession. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We value the goodness in everyone. "How could anyone ever tell you that you're anything less than beautiful?" Confession seems to fall outside our religious framework.

Yet all of us have done things unworthy of our inherent dignity and goodness. Right?

This morning I want to suggest there is no contradiction between inner goodness and the reality that we do bad things. Misdeeds don't poison our core. Rather they encrust our inner beauty and block our light from shining forth.

So this morning I'd like to explore confession as a way to break up the subtle armor encasing our hearts and dissolve the clouds shadowing our souls.

Originally I was going to talk only about forgiveness. But without confession, forgiveness has little power.

When we do confess, we often do so to get forgiveness in return. It's like a monetary exchange: I'll give you confession if you'll give me forgiveness. If we confess and aren't forgiven, we may feel cheated: "That was part of the bargain." We want to take the confession back.

But fully acknowledging a mistake can be cleansing in and of itself. I don't want to shortchange its power.

### *One on One Confession*

So before exploring forgiveness, let's practice confession. Here's an exercise:

In a moment I'll invite you to turn to someone near you and share something you don't feel good about. It might be

something you said or did, or something you neglected to say or do. It may have been intentional or accidental or the result of misunderstanding or the an emotional moment. The only criterion is that it's something you judge unworthy of your highest values.

In this spiritual exercise we'll have a confessee and a confessor: one who makes a confession and one who listens to a confession. After a few minutes we'll shift roles.

When you are confessing, remember this is an exercise – trying something on. You don't have to share the most terrible things you've done in your life. We're adults and can share as much or as little as we like. All I'm asking is that you get your toes wet.

When you are listening, your job is only to listen. You don't have to fix them or even forgive them. That's not your role. Your role is to be present with a kind, open heart and to trust that that is enough.

I want us to explore the power of simply describing a misdeed to a kind witness and not mix confessing with forgiving.

If this isn't what you came for this morning or you'd rather reflect quietly, that's fine. Just close your eyes in contemplation and those around you will let you be.

If you'd like to participate but everyone around you is in a pair, join a pair and make it a threesome. They'll welcome you.

We're only taking three or four minutes, so don't feel you have to give the whole background. Be sure to leave enough time for each to speak.

Please begin.

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## *Collective Confession*

There are some cards in your order of service. I invite you to put a word or short phrase on it that points to something you've done that feels wrong to you. You don't have to sign it. We'll collect them during the offering.

After the offering, I'll read a few out loud. If yours is read, you'll be the only one who knows it was you. I won't read them all: just a sampling.

After the service Roger and I both will read all of them and take them into our hearts. Then we'll place them in a sacred flame (probably my backyard grill) to be transformed and released.

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## *Forgiveness*

After my mother died, I carried a cloud of remorse and guilt. Outwardly I looked normal. But inwardly darkness pulled my spirits down. I tried to ignore it. I hoped it would go away. It didn't.

After several months it was clear that denial wasn't working. I needed a different strategy.

The Tibetan saint Jetsun Milarepa lived alone in a cave for years. Demons visited him. Rather than shut them out, he invited them in for tea.

I didn't have a cave. But I had built an office into the attic of our old Colonial house. So I cleared my calendar and retreated upstairs. Rather than close the demons out, I was going to invite them in for tea. I was going to open myself and get to know them from the inside.

It's difficult to describe what happened except to say that after several hours of meditation it was as if I was inside the consciousness that had been my mother's. I could feel her heart and mind. It was as if I was looking look

out through her eyes at me being insensitive, thoughtless, and self-absorbed.

I could feel how deeply it hurt her. Yet it wasn't as deep as I'd imagined. It didn't actually damage her. Her heart was bigger than I'd given her credit for.

Yes, she'd felt pain. She'd felt more anger and upset than she had told me. But she carried no resentment, grudges, or disappointment. She understood the stresses, confusion, and flaws in me. But her love was bigger than that. She was okay. She always had been.

With this realization, the dark cloud began to thin out.

I still mourned her death. Years later I still had those misty-eyed moments of missing her deeply. But they felt like wholesome sorrow rather than foreboding guilt.

### *Feeling of Forgiveness*

That's what forgiveness feels like. It begins by being fully seen. Our faults are viewed with clear eyes: there's no hedging the truth. And at the same time we're held in a larger kindness that knows we're only human: we get confused, we make mistakes, we don't always understand what's going on.

To feel forgiven is to know that we're known as we are and there are no grudges, no holding back, no pushing away. We soften into the poignancy of our lives and know it's okay.

To be clear, that day in the attic, it didn't feel like my mother forgave me. I just realized she had never condemned me. And she was okay despite my lapses.

With this I could begin to forgive myself. We're our most severe judges. I still feel remorse and regret for some things I did. They're humbling to remember. But I don't push them away.

They aren't a stone on my heart any more.

That's what forgiveness feels like.

### *Caveat*

I hope it's clear that just because we forgive someone doesn't mean that what they did was okay, that we now see them as a saint, or that the relationship has to return to what it was.

Sometimes the relationship is restored, as with my mother. But sometimes it changes.

I had a girlfriend during my sophomore and junior college years. I painted a landscape on raw linen, framed it, and gave it to her. The gift came from a sweet and tender place in me. She knew it and was deeply touched.

Several months later we had a fight. In a fit of anger she cut the painting into pieces. I was stunned. The painting had nothing to do with our argument. She was just looking for a way to hurt me as deeply as she could. I'd never seen that level of emotional violence in her.

She was genuinely sorrowful for what she'd done. We made up.

But now I could see a sadistic potential in her. It wasn't surprising given her background. I had known it was there but had pushed it aside in a romantic haze. Now I could no longer pretend it wasn't there.

After that, we gradually drifted apart. We ended amicably. I'm still fond of her. But I didn't want a primary relationship with someone who could be so vicious in a difficult moment.

I genuinely forgave her. She was who she was. But she wasn't who I had hoped she was. So the relationship changed.

Just because we forgive someone doesn't mean that what they did was okay or that the relationship is unchanged. Forgiveness does mean that we can let the past be in the past, see the present more clearly, and let life flow on in a wiser direction.

### *Practice*

I'd like to condense all this into a simple practice we can do quietly with our eyes closed or actively as we move through the day. It starts with forgiving ourselves using simple phrases. To create these phrase consider:

1. Not fully understanding a situation is the most common source of mistakes. We act out of partial ignorance. Or we're blinded by emotion.

2. Remorse and guilt are stronger when we harm someone or ourselves than when no harm results.

3. Our inner critic is the most unrelenting when our behavior violates our values.

These considerations lead to four forgiveness phrases:<sup>1</sup>

*I forgive myself for not understanding.*

*I forgive myself for making mistakes.*

*I forgive myself for hurting myself or others.*

*I forgive myself for not following my deepest values.*

You begin by sitting quietly with closed eyes and saying your version of one of these phrases. I like to begin with: "I forgive myself for not understanding."

Choose a phrase or two that pull you. Keep repeating it slowly until it becomes real. As you feel the forgiveness, let it radiate from your

heart as a soft, kind acceptance. Let it surround you.

The mind may wander off on all kinds of errands. Often we resist forgiving ourselves. So if the mind wanders to blame or distractions, just relax and smile. Gently come back and repeat a phrase.

Depending on the situation, the mind may naturally go to the person who hurt you or made you angry or who left you. If this happens you can shift the focus to them:

*I forgive you for not understanding.*

*I forgive you for making mistakes.*

*I forgive you for hurting me or others.*

*I forgive you for not following my deepest values.*

In your mind's eye look directly into their eyes and really forgive them. It's best not to get involved in storylines. Just use the phrases.

Sometimes things may turn around so that you're looking into their eyes and asking for their forgiveness:

*Please forgive me for not understanding.*

*Please forgive me for making mistakes.*

*Please forgive me for hurting you.*

Keep asking until you can hear them forgive you.

### *Forgiveness*

Let's practice for a few minutes with one phrase. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes if you like.

Be aware of something you regret. Then repeat whatever phrase draws you. If you're not sure, I recommend using:

*I forgive myself for not understanding.*

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<sup>1</sup> These phrase and practice are adapted from one of my teachers, Bhante Vimalaramsi. I'm grateful to him them.

*Hymn 1057*

*Go Lifted Up*

*Closing*

If we put a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water, the water is so bitter we can barely drink it. If we put the same teaspoon into a ten-gallon cistern, we can barely taste the salt.

Life has its salt. All our lives have their mistakes. Confession and forgiveness don't get rid of them. They don't erase misdeeds from memory. But they loosen our grip on our flaws by making our container larger. The larger our container, the more receptive we are to the grace that surrounds us.