

## **The Fine Arts of Apology and Forgiveness**

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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*In large ways and small, we are constantly tripping over ourselves, and each other. How might we imagine a practice that lets us move forward without the burdens that cause our falls?*

### **Opening Words**

#### **Do Not Fail to Notice**

*Rev. Gretchen Haley*

Do not fail to be surprised  
By the catching of your breath  
The quickening of your heart  
The fullness of your eyes  
Wide and suddenly awake  
With awe  
Here is a place filled with wonder  
That still there might be  
Something new  
born today  
That we might be born anew  
today  
Do not fail to notice  
The changing  
The life full and abundant  
Already beginning  
By our coming together  
Already possible  
By the promises we make  
To give, to receive, to become  
more together,  
and to forgive: again, and again  
the falling short  
that is always/already here  
Here we find ourselves  
among the courageous

feeling ourselves  
Trying to become brave  
With each in, and out, of breath  
Each word, each pause, each song  
We give thanks,  
To be on this journey  
In this faith  
Together  
Come let us worship together

**First Story**    **“The Dervish in the Ditch”**    (Elisa Pearmain, *Doorways to the Soul*)

Once a Dervish holy man and his student were walking down a long, quiet road. Suddenly they saw dust rising in the distance. A fine carriage pulled by six horses approached at full gallop. The men soon realized that this carriage was not going to slow down or veer to avoid them. In fact, it was coming upon them at such speed that they had to throw themselves from the road, landing quite unceremoniously in a ditch. The two men got up as quickly as they could and looked back at the carriage as it sped by.

The student thought to curse, but not before the teacher ran after them calling: “May all of your deepest desires be satisfied!”

“Why would you wish something so good for those men?” the student asked. “They just forced us into the ditch, we could have been hurt.”

“Do you really think,” replied the teacher, “that if their deepest desires were satisfied, they would go around treating others as they treated us?”

**Reading**    **The Vacation**  
Wendell Berry

Once there was a man who filmed his vacation.  
He went flying down the river in his boat  
with his video camera to his eye, making  
a moving picture of the moving river  
upon which his sleek boat moved swiftly  
toward the end of his vacation. He showed  
his vacation to his camera, which pictured it,  
preserving it forever: the river, the trees,  
the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat  
behind which he stood with his camera

preserving his vacation even as he was having it  
so that after he had had it he would still  
have it. It would be there. With a flick  
of a switch, there it would be. But he  
would not be in it. He would never be in it.

**Second Story Jesus' Purse** (Elisa Pearmain, *Doorways to the Soul*)

A Sufi writer once said of Jesus that sometimes people would make fun of him or curse him aloud, but he would always answer back with prayers in their names. On one such occasion his disciples asked him how he could not be angry and want to curse those people. They asked him how he could pray for those who had harmed him.

Jesus answered them by saying that he “could only spend of what he had in his purse.”

**Offertory** We Forgive Ourselves and Each Other; We Begin Again in Love

**Sermon The Fine Arts of Apology and Forgiveness**

Rev. Anne Bancroft

First, I'd like to draw your attention to the title of the sermon: the fine arts of apology and forgiveness.

Then, I'd like to tell you a story.

Once upon a time – I like to think it was long ago – I had an argument with my mother, first thing in the morning, about what I was wearing. Maybe that rings a bell for some of you? “You can't go to school looking like that!” she said. Well, at least that's what I remember. Maybe she said, “how about a clean shirt?” Ridiculous. I look fine. “No, really,” she said. “You can't go to school looking like that.” She had to be joking, I thought. I was, after all, 15 – or so, maybe 30. I'm sure I felt that mature. My favorite store at the time was the thrift shop on campus. They had great stuff for like 50 cents. Maybe you can imagine. I never wore shoes, if I could get away with it, and even then, if I wore them, they were what we called “slippers” – you know, flip-flops, like I have on the wall in my office.

Have you ever had an encounter like that? Maybe your story was not about clothes and slippers, but . . . about, you know . . . “I can do this.” “No, you can't.” It could be your mother setting the limits, or your spouse (we can buy this; no, we can't), or your boss (this would be good to try; no, it wouldn't). It kind of rankles, right? It sets you up to be cranky.

So, there was no getting out the door unless I changed, and I was . . . let's just say not happy. The way 15-year-olds (or so) can be not happy: indignant and insulted and obnoxious all at once, because when you're in that situation, that's ALL you can feel. Well, that's all I felt. Oh, and self-righteous. I felt that, too. Wronged, and self-righteous.

That part felt great, and . . . powerful. A purse full of self-righteous is pretty awesome, after all, don't you think?

Fast forward to the middle of the day . . . an all-school assembly. Oh, geez. Remember those? I'd rather have been in class. But there we were, my friends and I, slouching in our auditorium chairs, in the back, listening to the various awards being presented. Probably our feet were up on the back of the seats in front of us. We were that cool. I glanced around the room. Oh, no. My mother was there sitting with the head of the school. I slunk lower in my chair. And then, an elbow in my ribs from the friend to my left. "Get up – they called your name." Oh, geez. So that's what the clothes thing had been about . . .

So, I go up and get the award and sit back down. And the assembly keeps going, and going ... and because I was an entitled 15-year old who was still clutching her purse full of self-righteous, my friends and I left before the end. Well, most of us. We went to the cafeteria for rice and gravy, my personal favorite. 15 cents a scoop. And then one of my friends arrives and she's holding a flower lei in her hands and she comes over and puts it over my head, resting it on my shoulders and says, "This is from your mom. She didn't see you after the assembly. She asked me to bring it to you. She said congratulations."

I don't want to swear from the pulpit. I did that once, and it didn't go over well, but let's just say I was thinking something swear-like, and I was suddenly feeling quite miserable and small.

Because I knew in that moment that despite my cool purse full of righteous, I had really messed up. I knew – instantly and painfully – that I had hurt my mom terribly, that she had been excited and proud and made the time and effort to be present, and I had been self-absorbed and thoughtless, and I had that sinking feeling that none of us ever want to feel, that we just wish with all our might we could pretend wasn't the sinking feeling.

Wouldn't it be great if those things never happened? If we never messed up? Wouldn't it be great if we never did or said the wrong things? Wouldn't it be great if we were never thoughtless or . . . mistaken?

Because then we would never have to struggle with saying “I’m sorry.” We would never have to worry about how to apologize. Ever. That would be awesome.

But . . . it wouldn’t be real. It would feel like Wendell Berry’s video, and we wouldn’t be in it.

“In large ways and small,” I mentioned in the description of this sermon for the e-news, “we are constantly tripping over ourselves, and each other.” I didn’t mean literally tripping, of course, but metaphorically stumbling, despite our intentions otherwise. And in our stumbling, whatever the reason or experience, we hurt each other. We often hurt ourselves. The question is, what do we do about it? And, how do we seek repair?

Frank Laske loaned me a book this past week called *Why Won’t You Apologize?* by the respected relationship expert, Harriet Lerner. Wouldn’t it be great to be known as a relationship expert? (She wrote another book called *The Dance of Anger*, which might be next on my list since I think there are lots of things to be pretty angry about these days and I feel like dancing about it might be a better response than something more destructive.)

At any rate, I cruised through her book this week. She validated my own suspicions that the words “I’m sorry” are the two most important words in the English language. “Without the possibility of apology and repair, the inherently flawed experience of being human would feel impossibly tragic.”

The problem is, as I see it, we’re not very good at it, which is why I described it as a fine art. Fine arts take practice. Michelangelo did not paint the Sistine Chapel as his first creative expression. Keith Jarrett did not come out of the womb playing something as amazing as the Koln Concert. Somehow, a good apology can feel like it takes a long time to really know how to do well.

We know – often when we’re on the receiving end – what makes an apology feel useful, or not. Lerner has a great list of the ways we ruin apologies – she has done a lot of apology analysis.

I’ll give you two examples and let’s see if they feel familiar in any way.

The first is: I’m sorry, but. “I’m sorry, but you made me really mad that morning.” OR “I’m sorry, but you started it.”

“[This sneaky little add-on] almost always signals an excuse or cancels out the apology,” Lerner says.

Another example: (I love this one): I'm sorry you feel that way. Oh, please. It shifts the focus on the other person's behavior, as opposed to one's own, which is where the need for an apology originates.

We've got purses full of emotions we carry around, responses to however we are feeling. It's likely when we know we've stumbled that "vulnerable" is among them. And we know that when we're vulnerable, our defenses can be pretty high.

Similarly, when we have been stumbled on or into, vulnerability is right up there in our purses. Let's imagine we have been wronged – think of something that has happened to you, something someone may have said, or neglected to do – not a HUGE thing, but a small transgression.

In this case, *you* have borne the brunt of someone's else mistake: How THEN do we respond?

Think back to our story this morning. Can you imagine if someone were about to cut you off with their car, or come close enough to hitting you as you crossed the street, that your first reaction would be to shout out, "May all your deepest desires be satisfied!"

It's more likely we'd be yelling something to the effect of, "what's the matter with you?"

I wonder if the example that came to mind for you was not a random person but has more to do with a loved one. We're often most demanding, and most vulnerable, to those most important to us, right? We know that. It can make the "who's right, who's wrong" thing a bit more complicated. Who deserves the apology, and who will offer it?

Lerner shares a great banana story: "When Steve recently came home from our local co-op with five bananas, all at the same level of ripeness, I immediately confronted him. There are only two of us in this house, we're not huge banana eaters, neither of us makes banana bread, and I thought he should be down on his knees with remorse because we've talked about the 'banana thing' several times before."

Pause: Are you Lerner or her husband?

"I leapt from the facts (we'd have to gorge on bananas or at least three would end up in the compost bin) to below-the-belt tactics ("What kind of person doesn't care about letting food rot when people go hungry?") and concluded with that most supportive of all questions:

“What’s *wrong* with you?” I then demanded an apology, along with his word, written in stone, that the banana thing would never happen again. “I don’t want to hear about it,” Steve said with open irritation. “You do the shopping yourself if you’re going to criticize how I do it.” I argued back and then stomped off because, well, why am I suddenly the bad guy? After all, I would never buy five bananas at the same level of ripeness, which obviously makes me the better world citizen and more highly evolved human being.”

Apology and forgiveness are habits of the heart that require practice, and time, and attention. They challenge us to be our best selves, our most humble and empathic selves – and those are not always the things our purses are most full of.

There is no shame in mistakes – alas, there is no requirement for forgiveness.

I have used small mistake stories here: ignoring my mother, buying too many bananas. These are not hugely egregious – though I must say, left unattended, they could grow into much more impactful relational issues. It’s important to pay attention to the small stuff – who was it who wrote, “and it’s all small stuff.”

Sometimes mistakes, transgressions, are much larger. Sometimes we ourselves have done harm; other times great harm may have been done to us. It is important to remember that repair is not a straight line; it is not easy; and, sometimes forgiveness is not an option. Lerner puts it well when she says, “forgiveness . . . is not a cheap gift. . . . You are not a less loving or whole person if there are certain things you do not forgive, and certain people who you choose not to see. Perhaps you are even a stronger or more courageous person . . . even as you move on.”

Every now and then I hear about people insisting they are living an authentic life – they have purged every “crime and misdemeanor.” I don’t know . . . I think it’s more likely that most of us carry around a thing or two we have yet to apologize for, or things we have yet to forgive, and may never. I don’t think it makes us inauthentic . . . it just makes us human.

But these are arts worth practicing – and well worth paying attention to. We cannot carry quantities of hurt – our own or others’ – without turning to despair. So let us attend as best we are able.

It worries me that we have lost this habit of admission in our tradition, and with it, especially, the times to seek repair. Today, at least, let us acknowledge our errors and with as much love as we can muster, forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love.

So may it be –  
Amen.

**Closing Hymn** 95 There is More Love Somewhere

**Benediction**

Our own Parker reminds us of what our lives can be . . .

683 Be ours a religion which like sunshine goes everywhere;  
Its temple, all space;  
Its shrine, the good heart;  
Its creed, all truth;  
Its ritual, works of love;  
Its profession of faith, divine living.

May it be so for you and for those you love. Go in the peace of apology and forgiveness that sets you on the path to wholeness.

**Postlude**