

“The Power of Reconciliation” with Jim Verschueren
November 29, 2020

Welcome and Lighting of the Chalice/Candles - Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor and Melanie, Dan and Corey

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Today, my friends Jim Verschueren and storyteller Joanne Piazza bring us a service about the spiritual practice of reconciliation – about moving from brokenness to understanding and forgiveness. Jim is a long-time member of Portsmouth's South Church and has served on most every committee. His humanist faith has formed the core of his daily life, early on as a Peace Corps volunteer, then in a career in non-profit administration and during the loss of his first life partner, and now in retirement, an active volunteer.

Centering - “Kum Bah Yah” (African American spiritual)

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - “Come, Come, Whoever You Are”

A Time for All Ages - Joanne Piazza “Band-aids”

Recording - “Tiny Reconciliations” by Julie Dougherty

“When Bonds Break” - Jim Verschueren

We start with a basic definition: “Reconciliation is the act of bringing people together to be friendly again or coming to an agreement. An example of reconciliation is two siblings who mend their relationship after a period of fighting.”

How could something so simply defined be such a powerful concept? When I really listened to the words in “Tiny Reconciliations,” so many areas for reconciliation flooded into my mind and my heart. It’s one of those songs that made me cry. And it took me a while to identify the source of that tearful response. Clearly the word, even when preceded by “tiny,” packs a big punch.

In the seemingly simple example of a mended sibling relationship, the complexities abound. How long was that period of fighting? How intense? Over what kind of issue? Are we talking about children or adults? Whatever the answers to these questions, the need for reconciliation always comes from a place of brokenness. Something is no longer whole; it may be just cracked, split into pieces, or smashed to smithereens.

We experience brokenness in many contexts. I suggest that reconciling is a form of spiritual practice. For this Part I, I’ve chosen four stories of brokenness to consider:

Our Brokenness can be in relationship to another person.

For many years, long after our professional association ended, I was adamantly resentful of a former colleague. I felt she had betrayed our friendship through her dealings with me at work. When her name was mentioned, I would make some snarky remark and let it be known that I had no respect for her. It took me about a decade to realize that by holding on to this resentment I was only hurting myself.

Our Brokenness can be within ourselves.

When a loved one dies, a parent, a spouse, a beloved friend or relative, we are left with no opportunity for contrition, for receiving forgiveness, and we are hit hard. We are left with open wounds.

- Perhaps we didn't say "I love you" often enough.
- Perhaps there were hurtful words, not apologized for.
- Perhaps we are holding resentments we failed to express.
- Perhaps those big mistakes caused harm we could never repair.

In our grief we may fixate on what we could have done better, filled with hurt or bitterness, castigating ourselves for all we did or did not do.

Our brokenness can emanate from misunderstandings and faulty assumptions.

I am a child of the 60s, a first-wave baby-boomer whose life spans an arc of social change that disrupted established norms and exacerbated the normal tensions between generations. I am an only child of parents who divorced when I was in my early teens, leaving me in close relationship with a mother who was a force of nature.

During my college years the normal separation of sons from mothers was particularly traumatic. I came home from college every summer, and every summer I moved out and got my own apartment because of some fierce disagreement with my mother. In 1973 I met my future wife, Donna, and we moved in together – before we were married. When I casually told my mother, thinking it no big deal, she was morally outraged. She sent my father from Michigan to Washington, DC, to straighten me out. She didn't come to our wedding, cut off communication and, when we visited my father with our three-month-old first child, she refused to see us. That went on for 14 years.

Circumstances in the world can be a source of brokenness.

Our current politics, of course, come immediately to mind.

One example of the use of the word came from Merriam-Webster, citing its use on the web: "After election day celebrations ended, many wondered whether the political divide now runs too deep or there is room for reconciliation."

Indeed, we do wonder. Families are broken into camps. Friends have been lost, at least for the time being. Once candidate says he is fighting for the soul of the nation, with all that implies about his opponents. The other candidate says straight out that the opposition consists of horrible people who hate our country. We may fear or even have concluded that the gulf between ourselves and others is irreconcilable. To be continued....

Joys & Concerns - Sandra Carr

“Reverie” by Richard Strauss, played by Eve Goss

Hymn - “Spirit of Life”**Meditation/Prayer** Rev. Betsy

We give thanks.
 For slowing down
 For life itself - for ties that bind

We grieve at the soaring Covid numbers
 Over 200,000 new cases the other day
 We pray for wellness - stability - harmony

Too quiet in our houses
 Struggling to focus and stay positive
 Our rhythms off and the day long
 We pray for patience and equanimity
 May we be gentle with ourselves

We are grateful for beauty - light and trees and birds
 May we find new ways to live
 In a spirit of possibility
 Our hearts open to what we can be and do.

May those who suffer from ailments of body, heart and spirit
 be blessed with comfort and peace of mind
 May we reach out to each other

We hold our loved ones close
 With prayers for Ingrid, Josephine, Ann-Marie, Phyllis,
 and sweet memories for the family of Joan Sherman
 remembered for her wonderful energy and sense of fun

In the name of all that is good and true and holy. Amen.

[Respond to Joys and Concerns.]

Reading - “Reconciliation” by Julian Delia, read by Sandra Carr:

I want to apologise.
 Broken relationships, I shall eulogise.
 To those I know (or, knew);
 Forgive my absence when you needed a warm caress and a hug,
 But instead got frostbite, a torrent of snow or dew.

I am sorry for drawing a sword
 When you were hoping for an olive branch;
 I can be as thorny as an all-knowing lord.
 I wish my heart was limitless,
 And my kindness infinite –
 I dream of love that is fearless,
 And of joyousness completely exquisite.

Yet, that is not who I am –
 I can be a calm ocean or a tempest,
 A total commotion, or peacefully at rest.
 I can be enigmatic and reserved,
 Or, I can be charismatic, if the mood is reversed.
 We are not good or bad;
 We can be lewd and strikingly mad,
 Or cunningly shrewd, or maybe sad.

We are the yin and the yang;
 We all tend to sin, to our demons we hang.
 We are objects of pure fascination,
 In constant fluctuation,
 A recalcitrant reconciliation.
 So, I will say it one more time –
 Look into my eyes, see through my guise.
 I apologise to those who had no shoulder to cry on
 And sought mine, when I was not there.
 I hope you're fine, and that someone showered you with care.
 Finding peace when you feel like you are forever at war is difficult,
 But it's possible.

“Healing Wounds” - Jim Verschueren

I credit my Unitarian Universalist faith for how I have come to reconcile the hard things encountered over the years. We are imperfect creatures who are called to build a better world.

*Fault and folly will always be
 A part of human destiny*

These words from Julie's song are the mantra that I live by. Fault and folly are in all of us. It is the human condition. Forgiveness is the balm that allows us to exist, to know happiness and joy, even as flawed human beings in a complex and enigmatic world. We are not and never will be

without our own shortcomings, just like every other human being. As we learn to forgive others, we learn to forgive ourselves. As we forgive ourselves, we find it ever easier to forgive others. This is the spiritual practice. It is forgiveness that makes reconciliation possible.

So, what about those four stories of brokenness? What forms does reconciliation take?

Reconciling with Another Person

One principle that helps is this: the fault and folly are usually not one-sided.

I came to admit to myself that I surely had had a role in what had happened between my colleague and me, even if I could not see it clearly. I could imagine that the hurt went both ways. I wrote her a letter, saying that I was sorry that we had separated on such unhappy terms and that I wanted to apologize for my part in how that happened. She wrote a lovely letter back and that was the end of our conflict. We have not stayed in touch. Now, however, when I think of her, it is with a smile.

When we harbor anger and resentment—and withhold forgiveness—we hurt ourselves. Such negative emotions can rob us of happiness, restrict our lives, even make us miserable. When I came to understand that my righteous resentment was only hurting myself, it was possible to take an action – write that letter - and move to forgiveness.

Reconciling within Ourselves:

Our happiness in life requires that we be able to forgive ourselves. Just as it took a long time for me to acknowledge that the fault and folly with my colleague was not one-sided, it can take a long time for us to accept that we are so flawed as to have said hurtful things and made big mistakes.

Presiding at the memorial service for my wife, Donna, our friend the Rev. Frank Clarkson gave a message that I have taken to heart more times than I can count. He said:

I did not see Jim and Donna much after I learned about her diagnosis. I intended to, and I knew they had a steady stream of visitors. I kept them in my prayers, but I have to confess, I was busy, and I didn't show up like I could have. I tell you this because I suspect that some of you may be feeling the same thing, thinking "I could have done more." If so, please hear me. Right now, at this moment, I ask you to let go of any regret you have about what you did or did not do. *Do not live with your regrets, they are only love's way of acknowledging that we can never do enough for those we love.*

Do not live with your regrets. They are only love's way of acknowledging that we can never do enough for those we love.

Frank's counsel to those assembled has helped me to do what can be the hardest Forgiveness work of all. To forgive oneself.

Reconciling after Misunderstandings and Faulty Assumptions:

Those 14 years of non-communication from my mother did not come about just because Donna and I had moved in together and that I had made a faulty assumption about my mother's acceptance of evolving social norms. As is so often the case, the misunderstandings and faulty assumptions only led to actions that created more brokenness. Especially when there are unresolved past hurts and misunderstandings, the next time they occur, they can lead to responses that only make matters worse.

I did some nasty things, starting with the question of the wedding. I wrote her that she could only come to our wedding if she promised to behave herself, particularly with regard to telling my soon-to-be-in-laws about our living situation. She didn't come. I wish I could say that was the last, or even the worst, of my bad behavior.

It's enough to give you the picture.

When she did reach out 14 years later, came to visit, and at long last met her grandchildren, it was a somewhat hollow reconciliation, at least for me. I resolved to be on my best behavior henceforth, at all times. And I was, for all the years to come.

Several years later I learned what had really eaten at her around our wedding. She was hurt that I didn't respect her feelings enough to keep our living situation secret from her as we had done, so respectfully in her view, for Donna's parents. I had incorrectly assumed that she would value my honesty. Instead, "respecting" my in-laws - and not her - hurt her, and this escalated our brokenness. Though understanding came, our reconciliation never brought us back to where we once were.

Reconciling in Public Life:

Here is where Julie's words may well have the most to say to us:

*Tiny reconciliations, insignificant and yet
Tiny reconciliations may be all we ever get*

*Tiny reconciliations, insignificant and yet
Tiny reconciliations may be all we really need*

The tensions in our society have come much more to the fore in recent years. We see them more clearly, feel them more intensely. Given that fault and folly are part of our human condition, it is unlikely that we will resolve them. We can work on reconciling them. We can relearn how to talk to each other. We can restore the idea that opponent Americans are not American enemies. We can stop calling each other names. We can listen deeply to understand each other more fully.

As the initial dictionary definition suggests in a simple way, it might be possible for us to come together to be friendly, to reach agreement on how a functioning civil society operates. My guess is that if we are to succeed at this reconciliation, we will need both tiny reconciliations in our individual lives and large-scale reconciliations among those we choose to lead us. We have

all had a part in creating the brokenness we are experiencing. We will all need to do our parts to create reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

In the end, reconciliation almost always, maybe always, requires medicine. Band-aids are not enough. I believe that reconciliations are universally and continually required, with others and within ourselves. The more often and more willingly we embrace reconciliation as our goal, the easier and more ingrained it becomes. Reconciliation evolves into a spiritual practice. We let go of the hurts and resentments more readily, our lives are less encumbered, less restricted, and we are happier.

May it be so.

The Morning Offering - Sandra Carr

Anthem - "Love Will Guide Us"

Community Response

Call to mind a relationship in need of reconciling. It might be with a neighbor or a family member. Someone at work or a friend. It might be as simple as something needing to be cleared up. Or it might be more complicated. Stepping back from our personal narratives, we'll consider two questions together:

1. What one or two words describe what you feel as you think about this relationship?

Responses: hopeless regret - it feels lonely - cut off, guilty, unable to help - betrayal - I feel tight, tense, cut off, distant - sad and guilty - painful - sad there wasn't enough time together - sad and bereft - selfish - a lost - long spaces that are hard to cross - sad for the loss of easy connection - having to live with the pain of the other person never acknowledging the pain they caused - loss - incompetent - misunderstood - confused

2. If you were able to move past this brokenness, what would you imagine reconciling to feel like?

Responses: connected - relief - I did feel relief - peacefully empty - joy, and a sense of unsureness at the same time - gratified - relief from burden lifted - release for all parties - loss of alignment - recognition - I would feel as if I mattered - slouching toward Bethlehem

Hymn "When Our Heart Is In a Holy Place"

Extinguishing of the Chalices/Candles

Reminders

1. Call for volunteers to help with tech
2. Coffee Hour
3. Choir - Break-out group during coffee hour
4. Invitation to be in UUFES Directory

Benediction Jim Verschueren

Fault and Folly will always be ... a part of human destiny. May we recognize them in ourselves as readily as we do in others.

Postlude “Give Me Your Hand” (Irish air)

This service can be viewed until March 1, 2021 at:

<https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/YJjgu2gzE5WRQPvxDYpON1QkXKdOqrLPf10nqwdGZeleb3iNUVkiuWevEmlBgQ.mPqZQIg6jbs02TIB>

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