

“Remember...that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.” Since the 6th century, these words, based on those spoken to Adam and Eve after their transgression in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:19), were the words traditionally spoken by the priest as he applied ashes to the forehead of a congregant on Ash Wednesday. Beginning in 1969, these words were replaced with Mark 1:15, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. It marks the beginning of the Lenten season for Christians. Traditionally the time from Ash Wednesday through Holy Thursday, when the last supper is celebrated, is a time of preparation, self-denial, penance and fasting. It is a time of cleansing one’s inner self in preparation for that which is to come.

It is patterned after Jesus entering the desert for 40 days of fasting, reflection and communion with God. This scene is depicted in the movie “The Last Temptation of Christ” as Jesus walking alone deep into the desert. Then he takes a rock and begins to draw a circle in the ground with himself inside. “I’m not going to leave this circle. I’m not going to leave here until you speak to me. No signs....Just speak to me in human words (The Last Temptation of Christ).” It was during this time of self-denial, a time of potential weakness that he was tempted by the Devil.

In antiquity, in a way eventually similar to Islam’s holy month of Ramadan, Christians during Lent would fast all day, not breaking that fast until after the sun had set. Over the years the observance of Lent has changed. Some Christians abstain from eating meat on Fridays, some still fast throughout the day on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some give up conveniences or abstain from eating certain extravagant foods during this time. Some abstain from nothing yet focus more intentionally on doing good works during this period.

Yet Lent is somewhat like the high holy days of the Judaic tradition, where in the ten days leading to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, one must reflect and practice repentance – Teshuvah.

Along the journey of life, we can’t escape our shadow – our shadow side. We can deny it by walking in darkness, refusing to walk in the light of day. Yet we know that as soon as we walk into the light, there it will be – our shadow side; our shadow side that begs forgiveness.

Why ask for forgiveness? We can’t change the things for which we need to be forgiven so why bother asking? Shouldn’t we just move on?

Most UUs believe in an interdependent web of all existence...and we are a part of that web. What we do effects everything else. Everything matters – our acts of transgression and our acts of repentance. We are the caretakers and co-creators of that interdependent web. That’s responsibility! What’s done is done? No, it is our duty to stop, return and repair the damage. And in repairing the damage, we, in some small way, repair everything else. Little things, small things...ripples in a pond.

I challenge you. Go home today. Sit someplace quietly. Draw a circle around yourself. Say, “I’m not going to leave this circle. I’m not going to leave here until you speak to me. No signs.... Just speak to me in human words.” Listen to the human words spoken from your shadow side –

from the deepest recesses of that part of you that you often choose to deny. What does your shadow side say to you?

Here's what my shadow side has said to me:

David, you've been complicit in the environmental degradation and unsustainability of the planet

David, you've been complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy; and for not using your privilege to advocate for those who haven't had the benefit of having that privilege.

David, you've been complicit in the blaming of others, for example law enforcement or military personnel, who've been put in untenable situations at the front lines of the mess created on your behalf.

David, you've been complicit in the erosion of our democracy and public institutions by not doing your civic duty.

David, you've been complicit in the erosion of our economy and the marginalization of future generations for not exercising your duty to battle income inequality

David, you've been complicit with our government's use of force; war, drone strikes, bombings. All in order to protect our "interests." You've been complicit in accepting that the ends can justify these means.

David, you've been complicit in the marginalization of third world countries by allowing others make my iPhones, clothing, without thought of the conditions under which those products are made. "Out of site. Out of mind."

David, you've been complicit in the lack of giving of time, talent and treasure to your church. You allowed others to carry the load for many years.

David, your relative privilege and comfort have and made it convenient for you look the other way in all these things.

Well...I was surprised how long my list was...and how fast it grew!!!

If you're surprised at your list or think your conscience is clear, I'm afraid to say that you likely haven't done enough reflection prior to this point in time.

Although our lists may be painfully long, if we seek repentance, forgiveness, teshuvah; we need to be gentle with ourselves and forgive ourselves...only if we commit to righting these wrongs.

Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said that "the arc of the moral universe is long...but it bends toward justice." Yet the arc of the moral universe is much longer than the arc of our lives. Our lives are but the blink of an eye in the larger scheme of things. Yet what might be the arc of your life? What is the journey of your life? What might it bend toward?

In this Lenten season, many might seek that the arc of their lives at this time bend toward repentance. I actually think it is unhealthy to simply bend, for example, toward repentance. For repentance is but part of a larger whole. I believe that repentance and forgiveness (of others) must go together.

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned the idea that “everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.” Likewise, regarding being forgiven and forgiving, “everybody wants to be forgiven but, sometimes, nobody truly wants to forgive.”

Let’s think about this. What does it mean for one to seek forgiveness yet lack the willingness to forgive? Is this the orientation of one who might say, “I need to have my burden lifted yet I’m ok with you carrying the guilt of your transgression for as long and as far as possible”? Is this the orientation of one who might only be interested in fixing his or her own little boat while having a “serves you right” attitude towards the leaking boats of others? Is this the orientation of one who is focusing on the me rather than the we?

Rather than looking at things as binaries, rather than looking at things dualistically or as being distinct conceptually; where we have repentance here and forgiveness there, etc. Taoism, for example, attempts to reach beyond dualistic, binary conceptualizations. It sees repentance and forgiveness as parts of the same thing – the yin and the yang of one thing. You can’t have one without the other. They go together...and more than that, Taoism would say that they are the same thing.

To me, if they are the same thing, and I believe they are, forgiveness for you is impossible if you don’t forgive. You don’t get to have forgiveness unless you forgive.

In our reading this morning, Gregory Bright realized that his inability to forgive the unjust system and people who had wrongly convicted and incarcerated him for 27 ½ years was eating away at his life. Again, he writes:

I didn't recognize it then, but my healing began at this lowest point, when my pain was absolute. Forgiveness began when pain was everything I looked at, everything I heard.... Forgiveness became a picture in my mind of a fork in the road with signs telling what lies ahead. One side said: everything is going to be the same. If I stayed in the mind frame of hatred, I'd experience nothing but confusion and violence. The other side said: Cleansing. Once I chose to walk that road of cleansing, I began dropping frustrations, and I felt that weight lifting. That's how forgiveness has been in my experience. Some relief came then. Some still comes now.

When I finally got out of bed after my mom died, a calm came over me. It was a pleasure to step beyond what was happening around me.

I couldn't change the things I had to forgive, but I could change if I forgave. To hold a grudge is self-destruction, but forgiveness is a strength. (Gregory Bright, The Sun, June 2015, p16).

Many of you are likely carrying some truly horrible, tragic things that have been done to you. We can simply assume that and know it to be the case. Physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Discrimination and violence. Injustice. Mr. Bright lost 27 ½ years in prison yet cleansing and forgiveness is the path he chose. It is important to note that he chose this path while still in prison, before he ever knew that he'd eventually be exonerated and released. Imagine that! To be there in prison knowing your innocence yet forgiving those who put you there. That is forgiveness!!!

The Taoist philosopher Lao-Tzu says, "If you blame someone else, there is no end to the blame. Therefore the Master fulfills her own obligations....She does what she needs to do and demands nothing from others. (Lao-Tzu, Tao de Ching, translation by Stephen Mitchell, 79),"

Can we forgive someone without expecting anything in return? Or is our forgiveness conditional? If your forgiveness is conditional, then it's not forgiveness but something else entirely...something worthy of further examination and reflection. Forgiveness with conditions isn't forgiveness....Simply put, forgiveness is forgiveness. No, forgiveness has to, has to, has to be unconditional. That's part of Mr. Bright's point. The path of cleansing is the path of surrender and submission. It was there that he found true unconditional forgiveness – forgiveness with no conditions. It was through that unconditional forgiveness that he felt the weight lifting, he felt that wave of calm and peace wash over him that allowed him to rise up and step beyond.

As you journey through life, may the arc of your life bend toward and surrender to repentance and unconditional forgiveness – one and the same thing. May it give you peace and allow you to rise up and step beyond.