



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Letting Go and Moving On”

© by Lee Cornell and Vivian Preston Sellers

Presentation delivered on

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.—Mahatma Gandhi

Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.—Louis B. Smedes

Choose, every day, to forgive yourself. You are human, flawed, and most of all, worthy of love.—Alison Malee

Reflection 1 by Lee Cornell: A reflection on a Taoist approach to forgiveness and letting go for the UU Fellowship of Athens, GA 2017 Burning Bowl service.

“Tao of Forgiveness” by Derek Lin (<http://www.taoism.net/living/2004/200409.htm>)

One day, the sage gave the disciple an empty sack and a basket of potatoes. “Think of all the people who have done or said something against you in the recent past, especially those you cannot forgive. For each of them, inscribe the name on a potato and put it in the sack.”

The disciple came up with quite a few names, and soon his sack was heavy with potatoes.

“Carry the sack with you wherever you go for a week,” said the sage. “We’ll talk after that.”

At first, the disciple thought nothing of it. Carrying the sack was not particularly difficult. But after a while, it became more of a burden. It sometimes got in the way, and it seemed to require more effort to carry as time went on, even though its weight remained the same.

After a few days, the sack began to smell. The carved potatoes gave off a ripe odor. Not only were they increasingly inconvenient to carry around, they were also becoming rather unpleasant.

Finally, the week was over. The sage summoned the disciple. “Any thoughts about all this?”

“Yes, Master,” the disciple replied. “When we are unable to forgive others, we carry negative feelings with us everywhere, much like these potatoes. That negativity becomes a burden to us and, after a while, it festers.”

“Yes, that is exactly what happens when one holds a grudge. So, how can we lighten the load?”

“We must strive to forgive.”

“Forgiving someone is the equivalent of removing the corresponding potato from the sack. How many of your transgressors are you able to forgive?”

“I’ve thought about it quite a bit, Master,” the disciple said. “It required much effort, but I have

decided to forgive all of them."

"Very well, we can remove all the potatoes. Were there any more people who transgressed against you this last week?"

The disciple thought for a while and admitted there were. Then he felt panic when he realized his empty sack was about to get filled up again.

"Master," he asked, "if we continue like this, wouldn't there always be potatoes in the sack week after week?"

"Yes, as long as people speak or act against you in some way, you will always have potatoes."

"But, Master, we can never control what others do. So what good is the Tao in this case?"

"We're not at the realm of the Tao yet. Everything we have talked about so far is the conventional approach to forgiveness. It is the same thing that many philosophies and most religions preach – we must constantly strive to forgive, for it is an important virtue. This is not the Tao because there is no striving in the Tao."

"Then what is the Tao, Master?"

"You can figure it out. If the potatoes are negative feelings, then what is the sack?"

"The sack is... that which allows me to hold on to the negativity. It is something within me that makes me dwell on feeling offended.... Ah, it is my inflated sense of self-importance."

"And what will happen if you let go of it?"

"Then... the things that people do or say against me no longer seem like such a major issue."

"In that case, you won't have any names to inscribe on potatoes. That means no more weight to carry around, and no more bad smells. The Tao of forgiveness is the conscious decision to not just to remove some potatoes... but to relinquish the entire sack."

The traditional approach to forgiveness, as the sage points out, is focused on striving. We strive to forgive the transgression. We strive to forgive the transgressor (even if it is yourself). But what if we could give up this continual striving? Now, I'm not saying that we will never be hurt or offended; disappointed or attacked. In the course of living, these transgressions—whether physical, verbal, or emotional—are inevitable.

What I think our story is trying to tell me is that rather than focusing on the act or the person, I should look to the sack as the source of my burden. In our story the disciple identifies the sack as his "inflated sense of self-importance," or, to use just one word, his ego.

Although it does not exist as a physical thing, we treat this sense of self as such, and our language is full of references to this assumption. We talk about how our pride is "hurt," having a "bruised" ego, or being "wounded to the core"—as if this intangible piece of who we are is part of the body, like a limb or an organ. I believe that this egoism is the source of the transgression and is the sack I use to carry around hurt feelings.

And yet this sense of self is nothing more than a construction of the mind. It springs from the false perception that I am separate and different from others. Or that the opinions of others are what give worth to my existence. That sense of separation and difference leads me to skewed comparisons, which may in turn lead me to a false conviction of superiority. When this elaborate illusion is under attack, the injuries to the ego seem quite real. But as soon as I see through the illusion, it fades away, and so do the damages against it. I know that who I truly am, the self that can be known only by me, has not been diminished.

This is the basis of the Tao approach to forgiveness.

Egoism is something we created for ourselves, so it is something we can dismiss with a not-so-simple decision. Without egoism there is nothing to bruise, hurt or wound. Without damages or injuries to the ego, pride or dignity...there is also nothing to forgive.

Does the injury hurt? Heck yeah! But by recognizing that the true self can never be hurt and it is only the false projections of the ego that are damaged, we can let go of the hurt, move to healing, and bypass the constant striving to forgive others. This is how the sage in our story transcends beyond the ordinary teachings of forgiveness.

I invite you to take a few moments in the silence that follows to think about your sack and the potatoes it contains. What potatoes can you let go of and remove from your sack? What “sense of self-importance” forms the fibers of your sack and was injured to put a potato into your sack? Can you let go of the sack and embrace the knowledge that your true self is untouchable?

During the silent and sung meditations, as you become aware of them, I invite you to use one of the slips of paper to record those things you wish to let go of whether they be a few potatoes or the whole sack. Later, during our Burning Bowl Ceremony, you will have the opportunity to put into physical action this internal act of letting go.

Reflection 2 by Vivian Preston Sellers: Moving On

Lee’s reflection on the Tao of Forgiveness says: *But by recognizing that the true self can never be hurt and it is only the false projections of the ego that are damaged, we can let go of the hurt, move to healing, and bypass the constant striving to forgive others. This is how the sage in our story transcends beyond the ordinary teachings of forgiveness.*

But I still carry my sack; I still have an ego that hurts. I don’t know that I’ll ever master what the Tao wants us to; I’m just trying to move forward each day with courage and compassion for myself and others. So, my reflection will center on the thoughts I have had based on events in my life, and the thoughts of others about moving on.

One of the beauties of the Internet is that one can find sage advice concerning just about any topic in a few keystrokes. So, when I googled “moving on” here’s some of what I got, and how I think it fits with what I’ve experienced.

Seneca stated millennia ago: “Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end.” In my life, this has been true. When a new life began after my divorce, I had to give up the idea that I had when the marriage began, that it was the beginning of a lifetime of being together as a family. I was forced to create a new life for myself and my children. I must admit that at the time I didn’t see it as much of a beginning but only as an ending of a dream I had, and an utter rejection of myself and the relationship. But because I had the opportunity to see that this ending was a possibility over the preceding months, I was able to tell my then 15-year-old son, when he asked me, “What’s going to happen to us now?” as we watched his dad drive away on a cold November morning, “We’re going to be fine. We’ll live here; you’ll still go to school where you do. Your dad just won’t be here.” And I was able to keep that promise.

Joseph Campbell said: “We must be willing to let go of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” When I sent my husband away on that morning, I had finally accepted that I had to let go of the life I had planned, and that I must find some way of living a new life,

with my children and eventually without them. I found my way back to teaching; figured out I should never have left; and found fulfillment and joy in being in a classroom with teenagers again. And now, living in Athens, surrounded by this wonderful community at UUFA and beyond, I know that this is the life that was waiting for me. I am free to be who I want to be.

In different language, Kylo Ren, in the latest *Star Wars* movie, agrees with Campbell when he says to Rey: “Let the past die; kill it if you have to. It’s the only way to be who you were meant to be.” Though I don’t think one has to kill the past, I do think we have to let go of the pain and anger attached to it in order to move forward. I knew I was accomplishing that when I could finally see in my marriage and former husband what I had learned and the good that had come out of that.

A couple of years after my divorce and the death of my mother six months later, I wrote a piece entitled “To Hell and Back” in which I described the darkness and terror of this period of my life. I think the key words are “and back” because I made the decision to move on, to come out of the darkness. And when I went to look for that piece, I could not find it. I’m assuming I threw it away during the downsizing to move to Athens; more proof to me that I have, indeed, moved on.

Moving on requires determination and conscious decisions; in the words of Teddy Roosevelt: “It is only through labor and painful effort, by grim energy and resolute courage, that we move on to better things.” I’m hoping for that, for myself and for all of us in 2018, that we use our energies and our courage to find the next ‘better thing’ in our lives.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion:

1. What did you write to let go? What plan do you have for accomplishing this?
2. What did you write to bring to you/to move toward? What plan do you have for accomplishing this?
3. For what do you need to forgive yourself? How can this happen?