



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Courage to Let Go,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on November 16, 2014

Today’s message has us traveling through troubled waters, but stay with me. I assure you together we will arrive in gentler streams. Ten years ago after suffering from chronic poor health for many years my father committed suicide. At the time, I was a mother of two small children; Annie was three years old and Jack was eight months old. Losing dad devastated me while I was also suffering from postpartum depression. Not long before he took his life, he called me from his hospital room to say good bye. He was in the hospital for dehydration. During that call he told me he loved me and he thought I was a great mother. I hung up the phone, called my sister, and shared with her, “Dad just called me to say good bye.” We knew what might come, yet we felt powerless.

I want to talk about an essence of forgiveness: one where the dead can be forgiven and the living reap the reward of forgiveness. My favorite poet, Rumi wrote, “You’ve been sorry for too many years. Try something different. Surrender.” This brings to my mind the 1974 John Denver song, Sweet Surrender: “Lost and alone on some forgotten highway traveled by many, remembered by few.”¹ The song was not about suicide, but it was a song that brought me great comfort while I struggled to overcome my grief from my father’s death.

I was very fortunate at the time of my father’s death that my UU minister, a contemporary of my father, also grew up Catholic. I turned to him upon my father’s death, asking if he would help memorialize my father. Rev. Marcel Duhamel did more than that -you would have thought he was memorialized an old friend. When my brother began to collapse during the eulogy that same minister, far shorter than my brother, literally held my brother up as he wavered. I was fortunate that Marcel was there for me and my family as we went through the tender loss. He was there from the start of memorial planning, to the final burial prayers, and to many conversations with me that came afterwards.

We cannot go through grief alone. It’s too much for a solo sojourn. Some would say forgiveness is also like that- a journey better not taken alone. I was fortunate; I wasn’t alone because I had supportive professionals in my life to guide me and good friends who did not shy away from my broken heart. My father’s loss crushed me. I felt as though I was like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I was leaning because I was missing a part of my foundation.

There may be a few things you should know about my father and me before I continue this story of forgiveness. He was my Comforter. As a baby, I’m told, I cried a lot and he would walk me

¹ John Denver, “Sweet Surrender.” By John Denver. RCA, 1974.

around to sooth me. I was the youngest child, so during my teen years after the other children had flown the coop and my mother was busy working nights; my dad and I had a lot of quality time together. I was the first person to witness the first of his two major back to back heart attacks that resulted in him losing eighty percent of his heart. As a result, in 1988 he was number one east of the Mississippi River on the list to receive a heart transplant. He got the heart he needed, then later a new kidney, and even an aorta repair. He became what you could call a “Mass General Guinea Pig”. He lived 15 years post heart transparent where he lived life fully. He got divorced from my mother upon her request, he remarried, he walked me down the wedding aisle and danced a mean Twist with me during the traditional father-daughter dance, and he welcomed six grandchildren into this world. His was a full life for someone who died at the young age of sixty three.

So, you might conclude I am here to say that I needed to forgive my father for his suicide, but that is only partially true. I needed to forgive myself first before I could ever forgive him.

Why I say that is because I didn’t called 911 that night when he was having that first heart attack. I told my mother that he was sick, but she was talking on the phone and she waved me away so I returned to doing my homework knowing something was very wrong. When I got home from school the next day, I was greeted by my siblings who were waiting to take me to the hospital to visit dad.

Let’s not forget that phone call where he said good bye to me. I failed to stop him from killing himself. What kind of daughter was I? I needed to forgive myself for all I didn’t do for him. I needed the courage to let go of my own guilt and shame associated with his death.

Ten years ago I wish I had Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell’s book titled, *A Little Book On Forgiveness*, but ten years ago I didn’t even know who Marilyn Sewell was.² I was lost in the fog-filled land of grief, I was a leaning human tower of loss, and I was so overwhelmed by pain that I couldn’t answer the phone or get out of bed. I was broken and I’m not sure that any little book on forgiveness would have helped me.

Today, I know that Sewell’s little book on forgiveness offers fellow UU’s a theology of forgiveness. In her book she offers three steps for those who are ready to forgive. First, make the conscious decision that you want to forgive, you have to be ready. Second, admit that your own desire is not enough, and you cannot forgive without spiritual guidance. Third, find your own way to engage all that is Holy and listen. This engagement can be done through meditation, praying, journaling, walking, mindfulness, but it whatever it is- it must be practiced regularly.

In Sewell’s book she also offers five principles of forgiveness. They are...

1. Take responsibility for any part in the hurtful situation.
2. See people for who they are, not for who you would like them to be.
3. Realize that forgiveness is not about the other person, it’s about you.
4. Stay with yourself and your pain. Get under the anger to the hurt and then on down to the sadness and grief.

² Marilyn Sewell, *The Little Book On Forgiveness* (Portland, OR: Fuller Press, 2008-14).

5. Realize that forgiveness is too hard to do alone – go with intentionality, but depend on grace.³

Sewell claims, “Forgiving is difficult.” She suggests that when someone does something hurtful to us, it is natural to feel anger, to want to strike back, to want to hurt this person in return. Forgiveness is a spiritual response that requires both humility and relinquishment. She writes, “Pride steps in and says, ‘No, I’m not going to take that! No way!’ The judge in us comes forward and says, ‘Relinquishment? Ha! You owe me. Pay up.’” Sewell thinks forgiveness asks us to go beyond that understanding impulse to judge and punish. It is a softening and healing of the heart. It is a gift, not to the offending party, but to ourselves, as we become no longer willing to nurture the hurt and keep the anger alive.”⁴

Relinquish, surrender- this is what I needed to do? Is that what you would have done?

Sewell suggests that when I was ready, I needed to take responsibility for the part I played in my father’s death. I played the helpless victim who overlooked seeking help he needed during his first heart attack and received his call when he told me he loved me yet still I didn’t stop him from taking his life.

I needed to see my father as a man suffering from chronic poor health rather than the person I still wanted alive in order to be my personal comforter. I needed to realize that forgiveness was not about him, it was about me. Forgiveness was a gift that only I could give myself.

I needed to feel the pain of his loss. “No pain, no gain.” I needed to lean in to my vulnerability as author Dr. Brene Brown urges us to do in her book, *Daring Greatly*. Finally, I needed to realize forgiveness is a journey I should not travel alone. I needed to be intentional as I travelled on this voyage and depend on the grace surrounding me.

Sewell believes grace is looking for a way in and forgiveness is an act of grace. This looking in is a hopeful stance, believing redemption is possible. Isn’t that what we want to believe, that everyone can be saved? You can be saved, I can be saved, and even a person who takes their life can be saved. Redemption is at the heart of our theology; we all are loved, we all receive saving grace.

To me, this is what the song *Sweet Surrender* is all about. After John Denver sings about there being nothing behind me and nothing that ties me to something that might have been true yesterday, he acknowledges that tomorrow is open, right now it seems to be more than enough to just be here today. He doesn’t claim to know what the future is holding in store, he didn’t know where he was going, he wasn’t sure where he’d been. Then he sings, “There’s a spirit that guides me, a light that shines for me, my life is worth the livin’, I don’t need to see the end.” That’s when the chorus boldly comes in, “Sweet, sweet surrender, live, live without care, like a fish in the water, like a bird in the air.”⁵

We are called to surrender, relinquish, find our way in to forgiveness. We are called to gift ourselves forgiveness when we are ready and open to its potential. It’s the loving gift we deserve

³ Ibid, 11-29.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵ John Denver, “Sweet Surrender.” By John Denver. Back Home Again. RCA Records, 1974.

and the loving gift we share with the wider world. Forgiveness will always be needed in our world. Thus, the wider world needs us.

In time I came to forgive my father, but more importantly I forgave myself. It's the gift that keeps on giving because now I share my story with you and it is my hope that you will share your stories of forgiveness with me.

Ten years ago, I was fortunate for my minister, for my family and friends, for the professionals who encouraged me to get the best care and who encouraged me to fully feel the pain. Today, I am fortunate to have a faith that embraces forgiveness and believes that grace and redemption are always possible. I found the courage to let go. By letting go, I was forgiven and healed.

Blessed be, Amen.