

THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS (AND IT MAY NOT BE
WHAT YOU THINK)

BUC, November 14, 2010

“I’ll always wish you were different.”

And with these words, my father and I parted at the airport, he to return home to Texas, I to resume my life in Minnesota, both of us wounded and angry after a difficult visit, perhaps the most difficult time we had ever shared.

My father had flown into town ostensibly to give me support and perhaps some financial assistance during a time when I was struggling with the complexities of a custody lawsuit. The real reason for the visit, as I learned that evening when we settled down to talk after dinner, was to confront me about rumors and hints my father had heard from my sister, a well-meaning friend, my indiscreet former husband. The clues seemed to point to an unthinkable possibility, and he had to know. So my father asked, point-blank, “Are you a homosexual?” And though I wanted desperately to lie, I answered, point-blank, “Yes.”

“I’ll always wish you were different.”

Almost from the outset, it seems, I had not been the sort of daughter my parents envisioned. As young adults from small Texas towns, they looked

forward to a daughter who would follow the easy, traditional path of all the small town girls they had ever seen, a daughter who would play with dolls, carry herself daintily through the world, defer to the superior male, cheerlead for the high school football team, marry early and have many children and be a good cook.

What my parents got, instead, was a daughter who liked academics, preferred horses to dolls, sassed every superior male in sight, mocked cheerleaders and joined the journalism club, announced plans to become an attorney and work for the American Civil Liberties Union, eat only take-out food (because I would be too busy transforming the world to cook), a daughter who did marry and have a child, only to divorce and finally, heartbreakingly, disclose that she was gay.

“I’ll always wish you were different.”

Though I stalked off in silence after my father admitted his wish, I heard myself inside, responding bitterly, “Well, Dad, I guess I can say the same about you: I’ll always wish *you* were different!” For I, too, shared my parents’ dismayed discovery that I had not been granted the sort of father I longed for. I wanted a father like those I saw on television shows, a *Father Knows Best* father who was slightly befuddled by the females around him but well-meaning and patient, a father like my friends seemed to have who

was witty and self-assured and interested in my opinions, a father who doted on me because that was how fathers should feel about their little girls.

What life had given me instead, I believed, was an impatient, intolerant, controlling father, a father who was neither witty nor self-assured, a father quick to anger and slow to forgive, who seemed to have no curiosity about my opinions, who preferred discipline to doting and never saw a daughter as anything special and who clearly could not be a father to a daughter who was gay.

The calendar has brought us once more to the holiday season, with Thanksgiving on the horizon and Hanukkah, Christmas, and New Year's not far behind. For all the pleasures these holiday times bring, they also significantly ramp up the stress level for many because they require us, whether we like it or not, to focus intensely on the quality of our relationships. Who gets invited to holiday dinners? Who gets presents from us, what kind of presents, how much do we spend on this person, that person? Driving all these complicated choices are a swirl of traditions and obligations and emotions, so overwhelming that it is no wonder statistics show more fights break out even among normally peaceful people at holiday times than any other.

Luckily for us, we have no shortage of resources to help us navigate the turbulent waters of relationships: books, scientific studies, popular magazines, counselors, ministers, scriptures, gurus, well-meaning neighbors, in-laws, friends, all are more than willing to weigh in with advice on how to keep our relationships happy, exciting, sexy, satisfying, tranquil, spiritual, efficient, whatever we want them to be. And still, after all that advice, an argument will inevitably break out around the Thanksgiving dinner table, around the Christmas tree, around the congregation, around the workplace, in the bedroom at night and at the breakfast table in the morning, frustrating and hurting us so that we launch out once more in search of the key to avoiding such misery.

For most of my adult life, I have heard that the key to successful relationship of any kind, whether the relationship is one of marriage or partnership or friendship or work or pastoral or congregational, is communication. People who are in relationship must communicate with one another if the relationship is to survive and flourish. A wise piece of advice, this urging us to communicate with one another. Communication means the parties in a relationship are in touch with one another, are keeping up with one another, are exchanging vital information that is needed to maintain the relationship. Persons in relationship really should tell each other how they

are feeling, especially how they are feeling about the relationship itself. And though often forgotten, communication does not just mean speaking, but also means listening to what the other has to say.

But there is communication, and there is communication, and not all kinds of communication are helpful. Just this past week, when more communication was provided in response to the ongoing questions about this church's music staff, some of you found the latest information helpful, some shrugged and said, "whatever," and some found it about as helpful as a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. Simply communicating is not enough, and even the most communicative of relationships can fail. No matter how earnestly the people in relationship, spouses and partners, pastors and congregations, co-workers and neighbors and friends, leaders and the people they lead communicate, talk and listen and talk further and listen more, relationships may still fall apart. So while communication is crucial, it is not sufficient to maintain a relationship; something else is needed, something more foundational must be present for a relationship to stay intact and thrive.

Back in the days when churches still talked of sin, and today in those traditions that still talk of sin, the talk also included the notion of forgiveness. They were linked concepts, so that when sin was tabled, forgiveness got lost as well. This trend parallels the trend in our culture

toward an ever greater insistence on individual rights, on retribution for wrongs, on standing up for oneself, on not allowing oneself to be pushed around or taken advantage of, and also on declining to take responsibility for mistakes and instead blaming one's screwups on others or forces beyond control. And perhaps setting consideration of forgiveness aside for a time has been good, since forgiveness tended to be misunderstood, in a formulaic way as being measured out against specific sins, or by being associated with forgetting, as in the phrase "forgive and forget." Such misunderstandings of forgiveness develop because we want to make it easy and manageable-- forgiveness is never formulaic, it is something we usually fail at, and it requires an ongoing willingness to admit we are as flawed as anyone else, as prone to cause hurt as anyone else, as imperfect as anyone else.

One afternoon, according to an old Sufi tale, Nasruddin and his friend were sitting in a café, drinking tea, and talking about life and love. The friend wondered why Nasruddin never married, to which Nasruddin replied, "I spent my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo, I met a beautiful and intelligent woman, with eyes like dark olives, but she was unkind. Then in Baghdad, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous soul, but we had no interest in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there would always be something missing. Then one day, I met her. She

was beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had everything in common. In fact, she was perfect. “Well,” said Nasruddin’s friend, “what happened? Why didn’t you marry her?” Nasruddin sipped his tea reflectively. “It is a sad thing,” he replied, “but she was looking for the perfect man.” (from *Spiritual Literacy*, pp. 430-31)

Forgiveness has its roots in my willingness to admit that I, like everyone else, like the parent or community or co-worker or church I feel wronged by, I, too, am flawed. Beginning with this recognition, forgiveness moves into a second willingness which is the willingness to let the other—parent, community, co-worker, church—*not* be who or what I think they should be. My father chose words wishing for difference, but what he really meant is that he wished for an absence of difference, for sameness. Sameness is easier to deal with, more comfortable to be around, less challenging than difference—a fact that many of you know too well, having discovered yourselves to be individuals often labeled different, different in your values, your spiritual perspective, your commitments, than those who surround you. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition honors difference by setting a premium on individual autonomy and refusing to impose any sort of creed that might encourage sameness of belief, but it does not do so well in teaching us how to bind our differences together in spiritual community. If we are to stay in

relationship with one another despite our differences, we will be challenged often to practice forgiveness. If I am to forgive you, if you are to forgive me, each of us must set aside expectations, our sense that we know exactly what the other should be doing, how they should look and talk and act, what they should aspire to, where they should be headed with their life.

Forgiveness requires dealing with the other just as they are, not as who or what we want them to be.

I am willing to admit my own limitations; I am willing to let you be who you are instead of insisting that you be who I want you to be. The third willingness upon which forgiveness depends is a willingness to let go of the past. This piece of forgiveness is often misunderstood, summed up in the absolutely incorrect notion of “forgive and forget.” Not only is forgiveness not about forgetting, it actually moves in the opposite direction, towards remembering. Real forgiveness, as opposed to a shallow dismissal that says, “Oh, it wasn’t that bad, the hurt you inflicted,” genuine forgiveness requires remembering, in excruciating detail, the wrong, the betrayal, the pain the other brought. My father and I refused to speak to one another for a very long time, instead spending that time reviewing the deep disappointments the other had brought us. To remember how badly I was hurt, and then, only

then to forgive: that is the step that makes forgiveness perhaps the most difficult part of spiritual maturity, the part we so often fail at.

But fail or not, we are urged to try. Unforgiven and unforgiving of others, we stay caught by past actions and experiences, unable to move on, closed out of the present and all its possibilities. Forgiven and forgiving of others, I remain in relationship.

“I’ll always wish you were different.”

In time, my father and I worked our way back from estrangement to a comfortable and carefully circumscribed relationship. There is much between us that remains unsaid; we know one another’s limits, and do not press against them. My partner Jean is welcome in my parents’ home; I sometimes remark, not entirely joking, that they almost seem to like her better than me.

These days, I understand my father’s wish for me to be different in another way, as the wish of any parent that a child would have an easy time of it in life, would not have to experience pain or suffer because of who he or she is. I hold the same wish for my son whenever I see him heading down a path where he is likely to find heartbreak. My father could see that my difference, so unacceptable to him, would also be unacceptable to others who might not let me off with just a wish for sameness, who might well try

to enforce sameness on me by cruel means. Recognizing the real love that lay behind the hurtful statements, we have been able to work towards a measure of forgiveness of each other.

In the best of all worlds—which is what our spiritual path challenges us to create—we would not merely wish for difference but come to cherish it, as the element of experience that brings us richness, mystery, compassion. I do not know whether my father and I will reach the place where we cherish our differences in the lifetime remaining for us, but perhaps we can move in that direction. I do not know whether in our families and churches, in our communities and nation, in our world, we can learn to cherish our many differences—not just tolerate or give lip service to, but actually cherish them—but we can keep trying. We can commit ourselves to the difficult discipline of forgiveness, practicing it in every encounter that challenges us once more to listen, to forgo insisting on our own version of the other, to let the past be past, and to recognize with humility how very much forgiveness we need from all those around us as flawed, imperfect human beings.

Once in Minnesota, I had been visiting a friend and she was seeing me to the door when we heard a loud noise outside. The winter day had brought some ice, and we discovered that a car had skidded off the street, plowed through my friend's hedge, and rolled to a halt in the middle of her yard.

We walked over to see if the driver was all right. As she climbed from her car, she apologized profusely and begged, "Please, I don't want to get in a legal fight over this." My friend reassured her that they would find a way to work it out (adapted from Christina Baldwin).

We will not be truly free, and our relationships will not last, until we give up falling into cycles of prosecution and victimization, insisting that a spouse or partner or friend or co-worker or minister or Board or church or community or political leader must be one particular way, a certain kind of perfection. None of us, not one of us, is innocent, and we waste precious time trying to maintain the illusion of righteousness. We need to move on and replant the hedge.