

When Forgiveness Calls

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 20, 2026

I think it is safe to assume that disagreements with our partners are inevitable. We cannot always bring our best selves to one another. We cannot repress annoyance. We can ultimately be stubborn that the other is fundamentally wrong in their ideas or actions. I know I have experienced this with my husband – disagreements that can punctuate our time together with moments of tension and discomfort. So, what can repair these inevitable rifts? Today I offer – the gift of forgiveness. And before delving into insights and reflections, I'd like to share a few of my own shortcomings when it comes to forgiveness—those inevitable moments that follow a disagreement: holding on to my mistakes in perpetuity – ruminating and holding tight to guilt. Other times, I find myself repeating the same mistake the next time I am approached with a similar situation – it feels as if I am being insincere. When we rush the process, we miss the deeper work of healing and reconciliation. So, let's slow down and consider what forgiveness truly asks of us.

I feel every conversation on forgiveness needs a caveat. There are those among us who have faced trauma. What does forgiveness mean here? It does not erase the harm done and it does not call for any sort of reconciliation. But if we can release ourselves from pain and tumult, we can find a sense of freedom.

We have all been wronged. We have been cheated on. We have been lied to. We have been accused of something we did not do. And we have all wronged another. When we find ourselves holding animosity toward someone, it can be helpful to remember that we, too, have caused harm and needed forgiveness. We yell. We blame. We judge. We gossip. If we are to find healing from the mistakes we all make, we must be intentional. In Judaism, which we are going to explore later today, there is a trajectory: acknowledge what you have done wrong, seek forgiveness, change your ways, and do not repeat the mistake. Can we embody this?

Let us collectively acknowledge what I must personally acknowledge – that woes and brokenness are amplified when we hold on. And on. It's a past that cannot be erased, offers

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith September 2026

Christian theologian Lewis B. Smedes. Holding on heals nothing. We cannot undo what we have done. Instead, we are offered an opportunity to remember these misdeeds differently¹ – holding on not only the harm that was done, but also the possibility of reconciliation. Initially, we remember these misdeeds with animosity or anger or judgement. Yet, with rebuilding trust, we transform these memories into those of remembering profound restoration, healing, deep compassion, and a unique opportunity to express love. Perhaps, in a moment of frustration, we yell at a sibling. We may initially ruminate on the hurt that we caused in that moment. But if we acknowledge what happened and make amends, and perhaps we then do something enjoyable together, the memory can become something more than the hurt—it can become a memory of repair, connection, and gratitude. We do not dwell, but act. Rather than remaining captive to our own wrongdoing, we rewrite the narratives we carry with us

So, there's a tension. We may think of apologies as the ending of a situation. I'm sorry I raised my voice. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. We wash our hands, proclaim "I'm done!" and move on. Author Brene Brown spoke that, instead, apology is but the beginning of a process.² The beginning of building trust. Trust is not redeemed by a simple "I'm sorry," or "I won't do this again" - it is redeemed by what happens afterwards. Trust is about closing the deep chasm between us that our words and actions have created one act at a time. It's about action, embodying our better selves, showing that we keep from repeating our same misdeeds. An apology is meant to move us closer over time. Rebuilding a relationship with intention strengthens the bond between us. Only then – only with closing the gap – can true change and reconciliation occur.

Cole Arthur Riley wrote a reflection highlighting the theme of forgiveness in her memoir. Riley shares a narrative about her grandmother, and the slow, unexpected, and intentional way she found forgiveness. Riley writes, "Forgiveness came to her, not in a dramatic flourish or sudden comprehension, rather it grew on her as slowly and fatefully as the fingernails crowning her

¹ *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* by Lewis B. Smedes

² "The 5 Apologies That Never Heal: How to Say Sorry the Right Way" by Brene Brown

hands.”³ Forgiveness reaches us in its own time. We do not rest our head on a pillow at night in pain and arise the next morning reconciled. It is a process, and one we sometimes might not even realize. Do we note the process of hair growing, of fingernails growing, or do we simply notice, after a time, that the change has occurred? This revelation, when it comes, can guide us toward an authentic apology—and, likewise, toward knowing how to receive one. There is no need to rush. Authenticity and discernment ask us to pause, listen deeply, and recognize what is needed. We’ll allow ourselves to move forward in our own time, when the time is right for us. We learn that an apology can bring us closer to a new beginning, yet we learn that this process is slow, perhaps even imperceptible. And perhaps, in this process, we learn compassion—compassion for ourselves and for one another.

bell hooks, a philosopher, educator, author, and social critic speaks of the inevitable overlap between forgiveness and compassion. It is this duality: holding people accountable for the harm they have caused while, at the same time, acknowledging their capacity for remorse, growth, and change — honoring their inherent dignity and worthiness. It is holding someone accountable while remembering that they are more than their mistakes. We can remember that people are not beyond transformation. In fact, many may be ready and willing to change. If we remain rigid in our anger, we can’t connect with another flawed human.⁴ Think, perhaps, of the misdeeds with your parents. As a child or an adolescent, we may see a frustration or anger that rightfully upset or wounded us. At this young age, we do not appreciate the impact of our own parent’s history on their present selves. We grow up and see how difficult parenting truly is. Can we lift some of this animosity, and instead offer compassion?

I’d like to tell a story that was shared with me, and I’ve been given permission to share it with all of you. A woman I know who we will call Amy had a best friend. This friend was perpetually busy – balancing kids, work, hobbies. They loved each other deeply, but Amy’s friend repeatedly got overwhelmed, distracted, and canceled plans. Recently, Amy faced a health

³ *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* by Cole Arthur Riley

⁴ Quote from a 1998 public conversation she shared with poet [Maya Angelou](#).

crisis, and needed her friend, who was unable to show up with support and compassion. Amy, in deep pain, retreated from this friendship. Eventually her friend noticed. She tried to offer excuses, and rationalize, but that did not help. Finally, however, possibility opened. Instead of trying to rationalize, her friend reached out and authentically admitted the mistake. It didn't take away the poignant pain, but, rather, lessened the anger Amy was harboring. Amy recovered from her health crisis and the relationship – with intention – changed. She held her dear friend's hand, went out for lunch, and this kept her head from spinning. Pieces of this are universal – even the people we trust the most in the world will ultimately disappoint us and upset us – usually in unintentional ways. If we don't run away, or try to create further hurt in response, our relationship can be reconciled – we open our hearts to love. Let's follow what unfolded after this transgression. First came an acknowledgment of the harm. Then came the intentional act of seeking forgiveness, followed by a commitment to change. This is the work of repair.

I want to use this story as an introduction to the realm of faith and forgiveness. Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Gretchen Haley offered a beautiful reflection on our faith that we heard earlier. I offer this, quote, "Our covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promises, but also when we break those promises."⁵ We all make promises, and we do so often. I promise never to lie again. I promise to check my anger. I promise to be a better father. These promises speak to our humanity as we try to align our actions with our values, wants, and needs. Yet our promises do not confirm nor establish our humanity. It is more than this. It is when we break these promises that our humanity becomes apparent – revealing the universal truth of our imperfection. And it is when we choose to take the step toward reconnection, beginning anew, and repairing our relationships, that we embody the possibility of forgiveness.

Rev. Haley continues. Our humanity is cultivated by seeing worth and dignity in each soul we encounter—even when we are met with anger or judgement. We do this even when we disagree. Even when we annoy one another. Even when we do not understand one another.

⁵ "Promising Creatures" by Rev. Gretchen Haley

This turning back toward one another is part of what makes us human. We will be disappointed, as Amy was—let down by those we love most, trust most, and confide in. Our siblings, friends, partners, parents, even our church community. And just as Amy, we do not have to close ourselves off, run away from one another, or retaliate with further pain. Through heartbreak, we come to understand the need to keep choosing relationships—to grow, to love, and to change together.⁶ We repair what has been broken between us, we are at the same time participating in the repair of our broken world. This is what makes us human. This is what makes us a people of faith. This binds us in covenant. This ties us to the spiritual practice of forgiveness.

I want our reflection to culminate in the Jewish observance of Yom Kippur, which begins today at sundown - a 24 hour fast, a day of atonement. I begin with a reflection by Rabbi Elliott Karstadt. He contemplates the Hebrew word t'shuvah, an act of repentance and returning. In the Jewish tradition, this is a turning away from destructive ways and a turning back toward what is good. This is not a practice of simply saying "I'm sorry" and asking for forgiveness. It's about repentance. Repentance is not simply a resolve to be a better person – but turning back towards one's values, one's better self, one's relationships, towards all that is sacred. We do deep soul work – examining why we get angry and putting what we've learned into practice. We offer ourselves the possibility of a different way of being, knowing that we can choose not to follow the same trajectory again. I highlight this for myself: a crucial part of repentance is vowing not to make the same mistake again – exactly what I struggle with in the disagreements with my partner. Can I, personally, embody this? Repentance is not about becoming a new person. It's about returning to who we truly are at our core, as our faith might say – to that own dignity we each hold within. We transgress from this when we lie, cheat, steal. Repentance is not an easy journey but a necessary journey, a journey that leads us towards a fuller life and a life of deeper meaning. Rabbi Karstadt writes, "Although it may sometimes be too late to say, 'I'm sorry' and receive forgiveness, it's never too late to change our own ways; to turn away."⁷ Louis Newman, in his reflection of repentance, suggests that we can find those pieces of

⁶ "Promising Creatures" by Rev. Gretchen Haley

⁷ "Sorry, Not Sorry" by Rabbi Elliott Karstadt

ourselves – the jealous me, the angry me, the confused me – and transform ourselves. We are not our worst mistakes – we are not our infidelity, we are not our anger, we are not our judgements. We are our love. Our compassion. Our honesty. Our humor. Our wrongdoing is real and must be confronted, but it is not the entirety of who we are—and repentance invites us to live more fully into the gifts, virtues, and values we want to embody.⁸

So, I invite us to go forth. Embody this idea of forgiveness and repentance; let it change your days. Be not encumbered, but freed. Carry not disdain but compassion. Our faith invites us – connect to your own humanity. Jewish wisdom offers us this invitation – repent. Return. You have been wronged, we all have been wronged. You have wronged another, we have all wronged another. Connect to who you are and make amends. Let go, dear one. Apologize. Let the process take its time. We are not our worst selves - so embody what is true. Compassion. Love. Empathy. Go forth—let the power of forgiveness inspire a better today and a more beautiful tomorrow.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸ “The Refreshing Practice of Repentance,” *On Being* Louis Newman