

Forgiving Helens

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Forgiveness is the like the linger scent of divinity in life...and what grows from it can be like heaven here on earth.

Brokenhearted from and unrequited love, I took pen to paper (back in my more self-righteous song-writing days). I wanted to write something lovely and spiteful to make my lover miss me and return to the relationship...which did not work. I had not done my work. I was hurting inside, hoping that romance would help me to avoid that pain...help me to avoid the harder surfaces and the sharper edges of life that had caused that pain. I wanted to write something beautiful...as if to prove my own self-worth. I struggle with that sometimes. We all struggle with that sometimes. And when we can prove to one another that we are

beautiful (and when we can prove this to ourselves), redemption and grace seem possible. Maybe even near at hand.

So, I sat down to write the best words that I could write and I poured what beauty I could into the words but not the meaning. I was jealous at the time of what seemed like her ability to move on from me. I was young. Still in my twenties. I couldn't get but so far beyond myself. I had no idea what she was going through. I just wrote from my perspective...self-righteously...and then I reproduced the issues that she and I had struggled with in relationship after relationship until I healed my heart...and I couldn't heal my heart without forgiveness.

In my late twenties, I wrote a song that I called Lightly Upon the Sky and I thought that it was very beautiful. To her, I wrote,

...when you go walking so lightly
when clouds seem like the first footsteps of an angel in the blue
and when down below my thoughts are heavy

somehow i knew you wouldn't want to be
on the other side of the sky
so i did my best to close the distances between you and i

but, good God, throw the light on me
i never thought i'd hunger for your higher heart
but in the end, i've been chasing for what scraps I could find
and begging on the poor man's line again

I could get the attention that I was needing...the affirmation and
the affection that I was desperate for. I wrote,

somehow i know you wouldn't want to see
the pattern that you'd leave behind you
and i knew you wouldn't want to be
part of our needing to resign
but hear me out a moment's time
and don't dare believe that you don't owe this much to me
does something of our love remain?
or does memory of it touch too painfully
when you go walking so lightly
when clouds seem like the first footsteps of an angel in the blue
and when down below my thoughts are heavy

because i could never follow you
although all along i would try
by tracing your travels ever so lightly upon the sky
and by damning everyone within the spell of my laughter
with these fairytales of you
oh, how my heart had been bleeding
in the days when i was needing to believe in them too

my secret is in the sand

and like the myth of the man in the moon
i share no deeper understanding
if you close your hand too soon
and when i said, "hold on to tomorrow"
i was newly heartfelt and born of an honest try
but i fell empty, breaking hollow
oh, my love, what strange and lasting blood shed strong
on your last good reasons why

but still you'll go walking so lightly
when clouds seem like the first footsteps of an angel
walking in the blue, blue sky

I still love the beauty of the song but I was so broken. I couldn't find the good way to forgiveness. Have you ever been there, in that kind of situation?

The first time I went to the Northwest, the first time I saw that famous mountain in Oregon with my own eyes, I was surprised. Mount St. Helens seemed almost calm...much more resolved than I thought she'd be, even after all of that time.

I drove across the United States for the first time in 1988. I first saw Mount St. Helens thirty-seven years ago. Forty-three

years ago, on the 18th of May in 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted in violence and catastrophe. She darkened the sky and took the lives of 57 people, including 83-year-old Harry R. Truman, not to be confused with Harry S. Truman, the 33rd president of the United States.

Mount St. Helens overwhelmed herself with her own force, with her own power. She stomped her feet in anger on the Earth until it quaked beneath them—5.1 on the Richter scale. Everyone around her was shaken. She threw three cubic kilometers of Earth into the heavens. She heaved lava down her body, the mountainside, molten...like an earthen tidal wave. What remained of her peak, of her summit after the eruption, was 1,300 feet lower than it had been the day before. She made a mile wide crater in a matter of minutes. She sent a vertical plume of ash 16 miles into sky. And I thought to myself...reflecting honestly, I've had days like that.

There have been times in my life when I have been so caught up in the tensions of life that I, too, have stomped my feet and I, too, have quaked the Earth and I, too, have darkened the sky for those around me in terrible ways. And, yet, there she was before me. Mount St. Helens in all her glory...just as peaceful as a sleeping baby-child. She was calm...much more at peace than I imagined she'd be. And how quickly the life returned to her, after she'd scorched the earth. Of course, it did. For she had found an honest way to the gifts of forgiveness—forgiveness, being the precious agreement that we make with and within ourselves to see the world as it actually is...with no violence, no anger, no wayward self-righteousness standing in our way.

Mount St. Helens found her way to forgiveness. What would it mean if you and I were to do the same. Years later, when I was in my late-thirties, I took a pen to paper once again. I was ten years more mature. I knew more about my spirit. I knew more about what I believed. I knew that I believed in something that was

absolutely strong, mountainously strong. I knew that I believed in something that was unceasingly powerful, something that resides within the soul of each and every one of us. I believed then in that great mountain that erupted all those years ago. I still believe in that mountain. I believe that she works for us or against.

[singing] I still believe in a mountainous volcano
That lost itself in its own violent rage
And I believe in looking out up into the open depths of my own soul
And in flying with both feet in Portland

In the song, I confessed that...

I don't believe in angels
I'm too busy falling from the heavens myself
Tripping on my own wings
Tripping on my own wings
And I don't believe in miracles
Not when there's still this much going wrong with the world
Eyes on the mirror of yesterday

And I confessed that...

And I don't believe that Jesus
would be very pleased with how I keep falling down,
would be very pleased about these tears in my heart
and how I can't quite keep my feet on the ground

But I still believe in a mountainous volcano
that lost itself in its own violent rage
and I believe in walking out up into the open depths of my own soul
and in flying with both feet in Portland

Joanne Boyle picked out the picture on the cover of your Orders of Service. I never would have chosen that image. As soon as she suggested it, I thought it was perfect. It's a perfect example of what can happen to us when we fall shy of forgiveness. As the song concluded, I admitted that...

I don't believe in violence
Or in the sorrows that I keep on the shelf
Or in the impossible angers that I fire at you
Or in the invisible arrows that I aim at myself

But I do believe in a mountainous volcano
that lost itself in its own violent rage
and I believe in walking out up into the open depths of my own soul
and in flying with both feet in Portland

What happens to us when we fall shy of forgiveness? If the picture on the Order of Service is any indication, it isn't anything good. Failing forgiveness, we become explosive...and we erupt in

violence and catastrophe. We darken the sky. We overwhelm ourselves with the force of our own rage. We angrily stomp our feet until the Earth quakes beneath them, until we have crumbled houses and shaken the bones of those we love. Finding forgiveness, all of these things change.

There's a blues musician—a singer and a wonderful guitarist by the name of John Mayer—who writes,

Gravity is working against me
And gravity wants to bring me down
Oh, I'll never know what makes this man,
with all the love that his heart can stand
Dream of ways to throw it all away
Oh, gravity is working against me
And gravity wants to bring me down

What's the opposite? What is the opposite of gravity?

In a book entitled *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil shares that,

ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to [the laws of] gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Grace is the opposite of gravity. It is the denier of gravity. It is defier of gravity and forgiveness is its key. Forgiveness is the like the linger scent of divinity in life...and what grows from our forgiveness can be just like heaven here on earth.

Sometimes, it seems to me that the more traditional, Christian faiths have an easier time with forgiveness. It is the very essence of Jesus and his journey. "Forgive them, Father. They know not what they do." I don't know if it's actually any easier for them than it is for us but forgiveness is built into their tradition so explicitly. It is enstructured in Christianity...less so in Unitarian Universalism...the way we practice Unitarian Universalism, that is.

Rev. Scotty McLennan is a leading theologian in our movement. He is a minister, a lawyer and an educator currently working at Stanford University. For fourteen years, he was the Chaplain at Tufts University. That was where I met him. I met him forty years ago, when I was eighteen. We all thought that he was the coolest because he was a Doonesbury cartoon character...or

half of one. Gary Trudeau's Pulitzer Prize-winning comic strip featured a character named Rev. Scott Sloan. Scotty's mentor was Rev. William Sloane Coffin. Trudeau's character took 'Scott' from Scotty McLennan and 'Sloan' from William Sloane Coffin and borrowed the title Reverend from them both. Scotty McLennan is a Unitarian Universalist. He's an excellent writer. In 1999, he wrote *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning*. And that's his *Doonesbury* likeness, right there on the cover. In 2001, he wrote *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*. In 2009, he wrote *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All* and in 2016 he wrote this: *Christ for Unitarian Universalists: A New Dialogue with Traditional Christianity*. From the onset, he made his intentions quite clear. His Introduction reads:

Why in the world a book on Christ for Unitarian Universalists? Less than 20 percent of us identify as Christians. But more than 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian, and we UUs are only 0.3 percent of America at best. So, primarily, this is a book to help us talk intelligently about Christ with our Christian friends.

Scotty explains that historically, Unitarian Universalists used to be in close dialogue with mainstream Christianity. Not so much anymore and I don't believe that we are the better for that.

Scotty asks again,

Why in the world a book on Christ for Unitarian Universalists, when we virtually never use that title for the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth?

He reminds us that most of his faithful followers...

... refer to themselves and others who stand in the tradition of Jesus as Christians, not Jesusians. Why? Because they tend to be less interested in the Jesus of history than in the Christ of their present faith. Jesus lives with them in their daily lives now as the Christ. Christ is an honorific title that technically means "the anointed one" of God. For most Christians, Jesus is the post-Easter Christ, the resurrected Christ, who is actually with them now in real time—who companions them and comforts them and challenges them in their daily lives—not just a prophet and teacher of first-century Israel.

Like I said, Scotty is an excellent writer, especially when he writes about forgiveness. He does that powerfully...by way of a Jewish man named Simon Weisenthal.

Simon Wiesenthal was a Holocaust survivor. He died in 2005.

During his time in a concentration camp in Poland,

...he was taken to the hospital room of a dying twenty-one-year-old SS officer. This Nazi wanted to confess to a Jew, a wartime atrocity he'd committed a year before. He explained that he wouldn't be able to die in peace if he couldn't repent and receive forgiveness from a Jew.

What would you do if such a gesture of forgiveness were asked of you? Would you forgive the Nazi on his deathbed in the hospital? I suppose there are arguments either way, the most salient one being have the preconditions for forgiveness been met—namely, is the forgiving party at further risk from injury.

The way I understand it, the turning of the other cheek is a strategy of compassion, not an immutable law. It is a gesture undertaken in order to reveal to the aggressor the error of their way. If the aggressor is unrepentant and still at large and still dangerous, we are not yet within the reach of the blessing of forgiveness. A poet writes,

There are rifles buried in the countryside by the rising of the moon,
may they lie there, long forgotten, until they rust away into the
ground

Who will bend this ancient hatred and will the killing to an end?
Who will swallow long injustice and take the devil for a country man?
Who will say "this far no further, oh lord, if I die today?"

Send no weapons no more money. Send no vengeance across the
seas,

just the blessing of forgiveness for my new countryman and me.
Missing brothers, martyred fellows, silent children in the ground.
Could we but hear them and would they not tell us, "It's time to lay
God's rifle down."

Who will say, "this far, no further," oh Lord, if I die today?

This far, no further... These are words that 21st-century UU's may
have forgotten over the years...for they were written by a 19-
century Unitarian minister named James Russell Lowell. He
reminding us of the possibility of excellence when he wrote,

It is mediocrity which makes laws and sets mantraps and spring-guns
in the realm of free song, saying thus far shalt thou go and no further.

This far, no further... James Russell Lowell is best remembered
for writing,

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
Twixt that darkness and that light.
4 Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong:
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above His own.

He is so remembered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King who
closed perhaps his most famous speech by saying...

We shall overcome because Carlyle is right, "No lie can live forever."
We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth
crushed to earth will rise again."
We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right:
Truth forever on the scaffold,
wrong forever on the throne,
yet that scaffold sways the future
and behind the dim unknown
standeth God within the shadows

keeping watch above his own.

Deep in my heart, I do believe. May we remember James Russell Lowell...for the beauty of his words within the limit of his language and for the sacred protection he tried to offer to us.

These words are in our hymnal. There is *Singing the Living Tradition* but they've been amended. They've been improved upon and adjusted for better correctness. Muted, one might say. Softened and worn down at the edges...but its soul is still intact. Its powers of redemption are still secure, making possible the blessing of forgiveness.

Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide,
in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side:

What will be your decision if life choices are ever made this stark?
Which way will you choose? The choice is obvious but too often,
it can be so much harder to make than we realize...if we've chosen
away from real forgiveness.

So, I ask you once again. Would you forgive the Nazi on his deathbed in the hospital? Do you know what Simon Wiesenthal chose to do? [Simon] “Wiesenthal didn't condemn [the young Nazi]. He simply chose to listen, to remain silent, and then to leave the room.” He wondered if he'd done the right thing. His wonder provoked responses from Robert McAfee Brown, who...served as the chaplain at Stanford University...and from the child psychiatrist and Christian author Robert Coles...and from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa...and from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and his daughter, Susannah Heschel, a professor at Dartmouth...and from Rabbi Harold Kushner and from the Dalai Lama and from the convicted Nazi war criminal Albert Speer and from more than forty other people. It was a complicated, unreal question. What real answer sets us free?

I didn't know. So, I turned to a more contemporary example. I started reading a brand new book on the subject. I started reading *Forgiveness—An Alternative Account* by professor at

Harvard Divinity School, Matthew Ichihashi Potts. He begins his books as follows:

On June 17, 2015, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist named Dylann Roof walked into historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and joined thirteen others for the Wednesday evening Bible study. He sat next to the pastor, Clementa Pinckney, and listened for a while and then bickered with the group over their interpretation of scripture. When the congregants bowed their heads and began to pray at the close of the study, Roof rose, withdrew a concealed handgun, and began murdering the people who had welcomed him into their spiritual home. He killed nine members of the congregation and was quickly arrested. At his arraignment, several (but not all) of the victims' surviving family members offered forgiveness to Roof through a closed-circuit television feed to the jail where he had been remanded. "I forgive you," Nadine Collier, daughter of seventy-year-old Ethel Lance, said through tears. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never ever hold her again. But I forgive you." Bethane Middleton-Brown, sister of the slain DePayne Middleton-Doctor, said to Roof, "I acknowledge that I am very angry. But ... [we] have no room for hating. So, we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul." Wanda Simmons, the granddaughter of victim Daniel Simmons, also spoke directly to Roof, saying, "Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone's plea for your soul, is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. So hate won't win."

Maybe this is the powerful blessing that causes the deepest soul to wonder. Forgiveness continues...

Observing these public acts of forgiveness during an interview, the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates wondered aloud, "Is that real? I question the realness of that.

Ta-Nehisi Coates found this gesture unbelievable...but yet, it is humanly possible to love beyond belief.

So, what say you, friends? What is it that you believe? How is it that you will choose to engage the blessing of forgiveness? I think that starting small is the key. It is not wise to start by forgiving the mountainous volcano on our first attempt.

Forgiveness is a practice. It requires great effort and training. Few of us can run the marathon without months of preparation. We have to put in the time, getting ourselves good and ready for big things...and we can do big things. Forgiveness is big and it happens in its own time.

In young love, we find forgiveness in order to heal the broken heart. At the foot of Mount St. Helens, we find forgiveness...in

the flowers that grow in the wake of catastrophe, in the peace that calls us on. We find forgiveness— forgiveness, being the agreement that we make with ourselves to see the world as it actually is. We find forgiveness so we don't erupt like Helens did. We find forgiveness so hate won't win. We find forgiveness to defy an ancient gravity that always tries to bring us down. As Simone Weil reminds us,

ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to [the laws of] gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Grace is the opposite of gravity. It is the denier and the defier of gravity and forgiveness is the redemptive key that says this far and no further. And this sacred line we draw is the lingering scent of divinity...and what grows from this line is heaven here on earth.

The song continued. I further confessed that...

I don't believe in cocaine
Or in any serum I can melt in a spoon
Tripping on my own wings...
Tripping on my own wings...
And I don't believe in bad dreams
 not when my youngest daughter lay asleep in my arms
Rising like this days youngest light

As you know, I do not have a daughter of my own but I hold a sacred place for her in my prayer with God, a place within which all things are possible.