

Complete Psychic Change

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My thoughts and actions were written down before me with a thoroughness and honesty that only the desperate will seek. The thing that hit me the hardest as I reviewed the many columns and pages was that I had given a tremendous amount of power to a lot of people over the course of my life. Far too often, I had allowed others to determine how I felt about myself, and the world around me. The level of disempowerment in my own life astounded me. Perhaps this shouldn't have astounded me as much as it did, but it did.

Little did I know when I first undertook this searching and fearless moral inventory, the critical "fourth step" of any twelve-step program, that it laid the groundwork for a complete psychic change. Never before had I experienced such a practical, spiritual, and transformative way to evaluate my life. My list included family members, old bosses, and friends. With each and every one of them, I looked at what happened between us, how it had impacted me, *my* part in it, and I made amends with them.

I am one of the lucky ones. I had the level of desperation required to do this work. I had to if I were to heal my addictions. All of them, be they to food, alcohol, or busyness. I had to find a way to live in peace with myself and others. This inventory was the tool offered to me, and I am forever grateful that I accepted it.

Not only did it give me a way to forgive, and ultimately to reconcile with myself and others; but it changed my world view. From a person who experienced the world through the lens of a victim, I have evolved into the person I am today who understands and owns my part in things. Certainly not perfectly, but to the best of my ability. That shift from victim to empowerment changed my life in ways that will forever bear fruit. Not the least of which is that I pursued my calling to ministry and am standing here in front of you today.

James Luther Adams, a theologian to whom I often turn, addressed the issues of sin and forgiveness. He was a believer in the power of conversion. Reflecting upon his time spent in Germany during WWII, he wrote:

"To be involved with other people...so that one exposes the evils of society...requires something like conversion, something more than an attitude. It requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been."

A reformed Baptist, turned atheist and ultimately Unitarian, a "liberal Christian" as he described himself, Adams understood the relationship to such conversion and indeed to any genuine existence, to be a creative exchange between God and humans.

In his sermon "God is Love," Adams wrote on the importance of forgiveness, both of ourselves and others. He classified this need as a prerequisite to experiencing *caritas*, one of the three Greek words for love. This love – where we love not for romance, or friendship, but instead for all who share life – is where Adams says we are called to "love our enemies as ourselves." He

acknowledged the challenges of loving oneself, which I believe by necessity includes forgiving oneself, in the following, “One who thinks it is easier to do so...” (Loving oneself) “...wills to ignore the war within one’s own cave.”

As I read those words, I have to believe that Adams understood the anguish of unresolved pain. “...wills to ignore the war within one’s own cave.”

More than anything else, unresolved pain blocks us from being our best self. When we live in such a state we live with resentment and hurt. There are four basic ways to manage such feelings. A person can be the victim, like I was for so many years, turning the pain against oneself. This leaves a person unable to claim basic human rights of self-dignity and self-empowerment. Trapped in a life based on fear, one is unable to be fully available to serve others.

The opposite of this is the person who, rather than internalizing the pain, takes their resentments out on the world and those around them. “It is their fault. She did this to me. If only, they would...” Living in a world of blame and finger pointing is equally as disempowering as being as the prism of a victim. It distances one from intimacy. Intimacy with oneself, others, and the Holy.

Alternatively, one can choose not to feel resentment ... or anything, for that matter. The ways to suppress feelings are bountiful, though all of a finite duration. Drinking, smoking, shopping, sex. When done to excess, all of these may work. For a while. For the lucky ones, at some point, these things stop working and one is pushed again toward resolution of their pain. For the unfortunate, such suppression takes life away from them, figuratively and too often literally.

None of these approaches allow us to be agents of love. All of them rob us of precious emotional and psychic energy. Energy that could be used to further peace, helping others and ourselves. There is another way – a fourth way: that of genuine reconciliation and of forgiveness. The words “reconciliation and forgiveness” have become almost cliché. This is tragic, for they offer a pathway to transformation. The more trauma that our world and its people experience, the more such transformation is essential.

The inventory alone did not bring about my complete psychic change, nor was it the only tool of forgiveness. It was one of a series of actions and new outlooks that I undertook. I had a lot of feelings that had been buried for years under resentment and fear, and I did not have the tools necessary to process them. It was hard work. It was spiritual work. It comes with the territory of genuine reconciliation.

We know that other faith traditions offer tools for reconciliation and forgiveness. None of them are perfect, but their desired ends are mighty. As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t do so well in teaching tools for forgiveness and reconciliation. It is not an intellectual exercise. It requires self-searching, openness to grace and a willingness to change, and it cannot be done alone.

It is also not a once and done thing. James Luther Adams reminds us that perfection is not our goal, but honest self-appraisal is essential. He understood this work to be that of a lifetime. A genuine lifetime.

We are called to model and offer spiritual tools in our UU faith that can lead to reconciliation and transformation. Forgiveness of ourselves and others that leads to genuine resolution of pain and resentment, and subsequently frees us all to be the agents of peace and love that this hurting world so desperately needs.

Amen and Blessed Be.