

"THE PERFUME OF THE TRAMPLED FLOWER"  
by Geoffrey R Usher

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A puzzle. Within congregations that are supposed to be loving, caring, mutually supportive communities of like-minded people - especially in our liberal, tolerant Unitarian tradition - why is it that so often people remain unforgiving about some long past event, or remain unforgiving of the way that other members of the congregation reacted to that event?

why is it that the health of the whole congregation - the health and well-being of the whole church community - can become lost in petty arguing, lost in what seems to be a stubborn unwillingness to mend the rips in the fabric of community?

Betty Pingel tells of the woman who had bought a sheet - an ordinary bed-sheet - at an auction. The sheet had two holes which had been carefully mended. The mending must have taken a lot of time - perhaps hours. A new sheet can be bought quite cheaply at any large supermarket or shopping centre. Someone had taken the time and the care to mend the two holes in this sheet, bought at auction.

"Make do and mend" was a philosophy which developed during the Great Depression nearly a century ago, and was reinforced during the Second world war. I remember Doris - a member at Upper Chapel, Sheffield - who lived by this philosophy to the end of her life. It was so deeply ingrained in her that she could not change her ways even when there was no longer any need for this careful approach; even when she could easily afford to buy - and wear - new clothes to replace the patched, darned and re-darned clothes she usually wore, such as the blue gabardine coat which most members of the congregation knew.

It is an honourable philosophy, and a good warning against wastefulness, although it can be taken to extremes.

Most of us are no longer menders. Most of us are super-market shoppers who discard objects at the first sign of wear or disrepair. Mending takes time and skill. Mending involves personal attention. Mending is cherishing something. It is having what Martin Buber would call an "

To stay in a relationship is to be a mender. Couples who have lasting, happy marriages usually do so because they take seriously the marriage vow "to love and to cherish". There is an underlying commitment to cherish, to keep the relationship in good repair, not to throw it casually away.

We mend what we value. We value what we mend. Mending an object hallows it; mending gives people depth of character.

Within a congregation we need to be aware of our own personal beliefs and needs, and we need to be aware of the personal beliefs and needs of other people, and we need also to accept the fact and the reality of differing beliefs and needs if we are to create a worshipping community.

Not to honour the differences in a congregation often results in a rip in the fabric of community; it results in holes that need mending.

Insofar as the individual members of a church family value their community, they will become menders. We mend what we value. We value what we mend.

Think about that sheet with the two carefully mended holes. Why does it seem so hard to mend broken relationships? Why are we likely to choose to worry the holes, put our fingers in them, fidget with them and make them larger, instead of carefully mending them?

In so many areas of our lives, we discard things at the first sign that they may be getting worn, may be in disrepair. Too often people see divorce as the easier option - easier than the work of mending a marriage.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not against divorce. I do not believe that people should be shackled in a loveless marriage just because they are legally married. But it seems that, all too often, people seek a divorce as the first option, rather than as a last resort when all other efforts to restore the original good relationship have failed.

Does the "throw-away" society affect the way that we view our churches/chapels and our lives within them? Are we likely to look at the frayed edges and decide that we should discard the whole thing, rather than try to repair it, because that is what our consumerist society encourages us to do?

Can we all strive to become menders? Menders of our relationships, menders of the rips that sometimes occur in the fabric of our congregation? Wouldn't it be good if we

Mending is cherishing something. It is having an I-Thou relationship with something. It is like saying: "Object, you are mine, part of my world, so I'll fix you and not simply throw you away." We mend what we value. We value what we mend. Staying in a relationship is to be a mender and to hallow that which we mend.

Forgiveness has been described as "the perfume that the trampled flower casts upon the heel that crushes it."

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful tools for healing. It can free us from deep pain, both physical and emotional. That deep pain can include symptoms of long-standing anger, resentment, and bitterness.

If it can set us free, why do we find it so hard to do?  
why do we find it so hard to use forgiveness as a way of mending - mending relationships, mending the fabric of community?

One reason is that, all too often, people think that if we forgive someone for something they have done, somehow we are letting them get away with it; we are letting them off the hook. It is almost as though our animosity, our continuing non-forgiveness, is the punishment we impose on them for their wrong-doing. But animosity, hatred, non-forgiveness, is a punishment on ourselves. Continuing non-forgiveness not only hurts ourselves; it gradually destroys us, like a cancer within that is not dealt with.

In The Dance Between Joy and Pain, Mansukh Patel and Rita Goswami tell of Rabbi Gelberman, who lost his whole family during the Nazi holocaust. They quote his comment: "I cannot forgive Hitler in the name of my wife, child and parents, but I can choose to feel the joy they were cut off from and entitled to, instead of feeling anger and hostility."

So, it is not about deserving forgiveness, or not deserving it. The truth is: we ourselves deserve not to suffer from the painful and harmful effects of non-forgiveness.

Samuel Butler wrote:

"We all like to forgive and we all love best not those who offended us least, nor those who have done most for us, but those who make it most easy for us to forgive them."

Let us forgive our fears and our angers,  
knowing that they are tools of the  
soul, proclaiming that we have work  
to do. May we resolve to use them,  
Yes, to use them wisely.

Let us forgive our sorrows,  
knowing they are the tears of the soul,  
the soul that struggles with the harsh  
realities of our living,  
the cancers, the costs, the deaths and the  
dying, the brokenness and the breaking  
which visits us all, always not quite prepared.

Let us forgive our boisterous proclamations of  
happiness knowing they are the smiles of the  
soul,  
the soul that knows the birth of new life  
that springs from the breaking, the dying.

Let us forgive, and in forgiving let us find courage  
our own courage, the courage of my soul and your  
soul to be all that we are  
to embrace all that is our living  
to give all that is ours to give.

Let us forgive, and let us face the world in love."

Let us be like the trampled flower that casts upon the heel  
that crushes it its perfume of forgiveness.

Amen.

#### SOURCES

Betty L Pingel" First Days Record, November 1999

Olivia Holmes First Days Record, March 1998

Newsletter of Meadow Unitarian Chapel, Godalming, April 2000