

When Repair Transforms

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 17, 2024

A father intended to end his busy day by reading the newspaper, the parable tells us. Yet his young son wanted to talk and play and exist restlessly. In the father's frustration, he ripped a page out of his newspaper – a picture of the world. He tore the image into pieces, gave the shredded paper to the young boy, and told him to piece the image back together. The boy set off to rebuild the world and returned shortly thereafter – surprising his father with his briefness. “How did you put the world together so quickly?” the father asked. “Easily” the boy responded. “There was a photo of a man on the back side of the page. Once I put the man back together, I put the world back together, too.” The wisdom here: When we repair a person, we help restore a broken world.¹

This pieced together face is the culmination of our journey today – a journey of interpersonal repentance and repair – of true apology and profound change offered person to person. It is a journey begun when one has initiated pain and concludes in the genuine transformation of the harm doer and the healing of the harmed. It is a victim-centered journey – where the injured party is the true and central focus. And, if done correctly, as mentioned, the harm doer yields personal transformation as this process unfolds, learning and growing and centering themselves in greater depth and self-awareness. Perhaps counterintuitively is this idea that the journey neither begins nor ends in apology; that the common phrase “I’m sorry” is both preceded and followed by other deep, internal, intentional work.

What is the work of repentance and repair? If we truly engage in this effort – in this transformative, healing process, we grapple with truths we may rather otherwise ignore. It is engaging with that painful reality that we have caused deep harm – We lied or cheated or acted in great anger. And it is an invitation to see ourselves as we truly are – not an idealistic image,

¹ “A Parable About Rebuilding or Repairing the World,” an interpretation of a traditional story by Jared Dees

nor one that is overcritical – but one of an imperfect reality. We see the suffering of another and through deep introspection ask, what role may I have played in this? And – amidst all of this – I will touch on this again – we reflect and begin to cultivate our own possibility, forming that person we have the potential to become – for if we engage whole heartedly, we are changed in the process. It is a spiritual journey just as it is a practical journey; begun from a deeply personal “accounting of the soul” – profound, intentional spiritual introspection. We can never undo the harm we have caused – it has left a permanent imprint on the history of all the parties involved. Yet what we can do is leave a subsequent mark in history of our response to this harm – with our ensuing decisions, with our resulting actions, with our newly developed commitment to healing. We can leave the pain and hurt unattended to, perpetuating even more damage, or we can engage in that deep, personal, intentional, spiritual work of repair. We write our own history. We heal ourselves and others. Let us explore a series of steps as presented by renowned Jewish philosopher Maimonides, as articulated by Danya Ruttenberg in her book “Repentance and Repair.”²

The first step on this journey of repair as offered by Maimonides is that critical action of naming and owning the harm we have caused. We own this harm – we feel it in our bodies and our spirits in our emotions in our bones. We see it reflected in the eyes of another, in their demeanor and their hurt response and their absence. And so, we name it. Not only to ourselves, not simply acknowledging this harm in a narrative to our own inner self, even if that act is healing, but verbally – out loud – to the one we have harmed, to others involved, however on the periphery. We own this harm we have caused – entirely, fully – comprehending and acknowledging that we have done wrong. To say, I lied. I cheated. I stole. I acted in great anger - those tender words our lips never want to speak but those words we need to articulate if we are to write our own history and repair the face that heals the world.³

² *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Danya Ruttenberg pgs. 43, 45-46

³ *Ibid* pgs. 26-32

Maimonides follows this with the need to start to change. There is a bridge we can construct connecting who we were with who we can be, traversing that chasm between the two. What do we need to do to avoid causing the same pain, the same heartbreak, and the same sorrow again? How can we connect to our inner spirit in a humble way and listen to the still, small voice within which always speaks the truth? It might be grappling with our inner selves and our impermanent imperfections by murmuring words of prayer or centering in meditation, it may be therapy or pastoral support or spiritual guidance. It is changing how one understands oneself or self-identifies. It is a commitment to work on the “virtue of humility,” to embody humbleness in the face of harm done. If we work to repair our own inner being – if we practice true repentance – if we work to repair that which allowed us to perpetrate harm, we can return to a similar circumstance and “naturally and organically, make a different choice.” The goal in this work is not simply to guide us in making amends, but to change who we are at our core. It is a crucial step on our journey towards becoming our best selves, towards sacred and holy internal repair and transformation. And it is a crucial step on repairing harm done.⁴

What follows this deep, spiritual grounding and introspection is that profoundly difficult yet necessary work of accepting the consequences of our actions – acknowledging righteous anger or intentional separation or distrust or lack of faith or of profound sadness held in the victim. In this moment, it is about the victim – it is victim centered – acknowledging these consequences and accepting them no matter how difficult it may feel. Sometimes it is asking – what do you need from me? What does this injured person truly need? And we are called to genuinely respond to this; to accept any consequences with humility and grace – to react with care and with intention. It is the genuine and in-depth work of compassion and repair. And only one who has grappled with inner change, humility, and genuine transformation is able to authentically and meaningfully accept this.⁵

⁴ *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Danya Ruttenberg pgs. 32-36

⁵ *Ibid* pgs. 36-41

Now we have reached a culmination of all our previous efforts – the apology. The genuine, heartfelt, authentic, apology. It is beyond that simple word, that often-empty phrase offered without any genuine preceding work, spoken without true commitment to change or inner transformation. Perhaps an argument coming to conclusion with this automatic and hasty response of “I’m sorry,” only to be repeated the very next day or week or month. And sometimes we feel we full heartedly believe our apology in the moment, but what is a true, lasting, genuine apology without this inner soul work? Without acknowledging the pain, working to change ourselves, and accepting those difficult consequences? Perhaps just as important – what is an authentic apology? It is an openness towards being extremely vulnerable, offering our raw hearts and souls to another, unaware of how it will be received. It requires true, deep, authentic, empathetic listening. What is their genuine response? What is their true harm felt? It offers sincere regret and profound sorrow for the harm one has caused. It is acknowledging that approaching the one who is harmed may fuel even more pain and accepting that and staying away. This is apology. These are the repairs of the spirit. “I am sorry,” we say, and truly mean it.⁶

Which leads to that profound transformation offered by Maimonides. What is critical beyond a genuine apology? It is that lasting, heartfelt, intentional change. When faced with a similar situation or opportunity, we instinctively make a better choice. By rewriting our history, we rewrite our future. When one truly understands the harm done and reorients who they are in the world, when they have changed in ways that truly matter, different choices will happen naturally. Truly and authentically facing the harm one has perpetrated becomes an “act of profound optimism.” It makes the harm we have done truly matter to us – the harm we have caused leaves a deep impact on our hearts and spirits and souls, and as such it becomes a chance for internal growth, for deep learning, and for profound transformation. It is a chance to become someone with greater compassion and empathy and insight and wisdom. It transforms our very beings as we piece together that paper face and as such help to make the world whole, for one act of healing ripples out and affects other lives in our midst. And yet we remember

⁶ *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Danya Ruttenberg pgs. 41-43

that it's not about personal closure and absolution - it's about healing the one who has been harmed. Our own growth is a beautiful bonus.⁷

I want to end this reflection with a note on forgiveness. We are not doing this work simply to receive forgiveness, for we may never be offered this gift – and it is a gift. We are doing this work to initiate healing, and forgiveness and healing are not synonymous. No one is entitled to absolution if they have not done this deep, introspective, transformative work. Even if they have done this work, even if they have changed and blossomed, they are not entitled to forgiveness. An apology does not erase the harm done. No matter what repair work we do, we cannot change what happened. That lasting imprint is there. What we can change is ourselves and our response. And yet I do want to highlight the healing power that forgiveness might offer the one who is harmed. Forgiveness never has to mean that what happened is ok. It can mean, I let it go. I no longer hold you to this. It can mean, I see that you have changed. Forgiveness is a chance to move on. It might not be offered to heal and absolve the other, but to free oneself from resentment and anger and even obsession, and in doing so to release and liberate oneself. Sometimes forgiveness is a gift to oneself that heals the wounds and should be gently offered as such.⁸

So, may we go forth in this world and heal. May we traverse that strenuous journey from harm done towards transformation, a path where pain inflicted culminates in greater compassion and empathy in the perpetrator, and deep healing in the one who was harmed. May we return to the world, not as perfect beings, but as imperfect beings who will make mistakes, yet own harm done. Flawed beings who will work to change. Humble beings who accept the consequences to our sometimes-detrimental actions. Repentant beings who offer sincere apology and remorse. May we return as reflective beings ready to be entirely transformed by the process of repair. We receive that shredded paper and meticulously piece it together once again to create a beautiful whole, healing the world in the process. We are not perfect, and we

⁷ *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Danya Ruttenberg pgs. 43-44

⁸ *Ibid* pgs. 185-186

cannot aspire to perfection, but we can aspire to genuinely heal when we have done wrong. May we always remember, the harm we have caused is of far greater importance than any guilt that we may feel. And may we also remember, we are blessed and imperfect beings navigating a rugged and sacred world. We will falter, yet we have it within us to transform and grow and love and heal. We can work – we are called – to repair those of whom we have harmed in this transient and blessed earthly realm – to heal those of whom we have injured. We are called. So may we work, beyond each transgression, beyond each wrongdoing, in genuine and transformational repentance and repair.

May it be so, and Amen