

*...To Forgive, Divine*  
**February 4, 2018**  
**Rev. Leslie Kee**

When it comes to ‘being human’ there are several distinguishing features which have contributed to homo sapiens’ perch on top of the proverbial feeding chain. Many of us who consider ourselves intelligent, free-thinking, imaginative, and curious creatures like to spend significant amounts of time reading, thinking, talking, and doing many of these distinguishing features, for example: the very human ability to invent cool things like skyscrapers, suspension bridges, communication satellites, microwave ovens, and 3D printers. Or the very human ability to record and interpret our own experience of living, for example; beautiful paintings and artistic creations; buildings filled with great works of literature – histories, philosophies, poetry, and plays; and we can’t forget the explosion of selfie photographs, emails, and tweets filling up zillions of virtual storage units collectively called the cloud.

Humans also are very creative when it comes to the ability to figure out communal societies and how to live with each other inside of them – you know, red means stop;; the punishment should fit the crime; pay a fair price – don’t just take it; say please and thank you; and ask for and offer forgiveness.

Humanity should be proud of itself, we can do amazing things and, it’s safe to say, these features distinguish humans from our fellow members of the animal kingdom – in existential terms, we really are at the top of the feeding chain.

One of my favorite Disney movies is their cartoon version of *Tarzan* because it shows how, despite their human-like qualities, the gorilla family who rescues and raises the human baby, are still gorillas. When Tarzan comes of age and kills a leopard in defense of the family, he brings the carcass to Kerchek and then submits himself because Kerchek is the alpha male. Kerchek does not forgive Tarzan for stepping out of his place, but he also does not thank him for helping save the family. Anyone who watches Animal Planet knows these ancient instinctual behaviors are alive and well in the animal world.

We humans tend to fancy ourselves ‘enlightened creatures’ because we believe we have evolved out of such primal behaviors and tribal hierarchies designed to insure the survival of the fittest. Human brains have grown to the point where innovation is found at just about every point along the survival spectrum, for example; humanity’s complex systems of behavior management, accountability, and consequences ranging from capital punishment to community service to intensive psychoanalysis and behavior modification techniques.

We have created amazing scientific and educational tools to record, catalogue, analyze, and share all the working parts of the natural world, effectively laying the foundation for all scientific innovation.

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We have taught ourselves the complexities of the food chain and are in the process of maximizing its production and distribution capacity.

Humans have created awesome systems for sharing knowledge: public schools and colleges and universities in every corner of the world! We thrive on teaching ourselves about the past, the present, and the future of human thought, behavior, and possibility.

Along with all this amazing aptitude for producing and sharing new knowledge based on what we've learned, is one of the subtler features of what it means to be human: the ability to be self-aware. If we made a tally of all the cool stuff humans can do – those nifty characteristics which make us different than, for example gorillas, then what does this tally add up to? If we show some really smart gorillas an ATM, a microwave, a cell phone, or a book – what would the gorillas say, “So what?!” In other words, what does all this differentiation and accomplishment really mean?

For some of us, it means an uncomfortable awareness of the costs, for example; the mounds and mounds of garbage – plastic bottles, plastic bags, disposable but not biodegradable diapers, mountains of construction waste, oceans of toxic fluids and fumes, and the rapid disappearance of unspoiled, uncontaminated, dark, clear, quiet places.

There is a growing awareness that all this supped-up production and distribution of material commodities, is bringing out the worst in what it means to be human.

For others, being at the top of the animal kingdom, means unwavering loyalty to the benefits, for example: the absence of plagues and mass death, along with awe-inspiring surgeries and sophisticated medical care. It means world-wide trading of goods and services which enhance the standard of living and employment opportunities for millions of people. There is a well-earned pride, in how education, innovation, commerce, cultural and academic exchange bring out the best in what it means to be human.

For all our accomplishments and smarts though, humans frequently find ourselves tethered to ancient and ingrained behaviors. These knee-jerk reactions are most apparent during times of conflict, especially in America where competition is an active ingredient in all dimensions of our society. We have designed our society in ways that, too many times, compel us to surrender to an either-or proposition, to choose a side and hope for the best.

At one point along my life's journey, I realized I am someone who, many times, chaffs and gets aggravated when I find myself being compelled to make a choice between two options I disagree with. Eventually, I give in and choose and I have found there are a couple of ingredients which help lubricate the act of choosing between disagreeable alternatives. One of these existential lubricants is grace and the other is forgiveness. Obviously, grace and forgiveness are not products you can order on Amazon, instead they are some of those uniquely human capabilities each of us is born with. The ability to forgive is one of the most vital and effective ingredients in every healthy and thriving relationship.

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But, and there always is a but, the very wise man Mahatma Gandhi talked about forgiveness in a way that causes us to stop and think when he said, “*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.*”

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” What does this really mean? Is forgiveness only the purview of the strong? Because the need for forgiveness almost always arises out of conflict, and the most in-your-face conflicts are wars where, traditionally, whoever is the strongest wins. Conflicts have been resolved by violence and the spoils of victory have gone to the winners forever.

In this scenario, those who lose, for whatever reason, is because they were weak. It seems counterintuitive for those who have lost, to forgive those who are reaping the spoils of victory.

To better understand how the win/lose relationship-paradigm inhibits the creation of different conflict-resolution strategies, we can turn to current events. For example, the conflict over land use – specifically land use in Wyoming. When we are looking at an issue from an either/or perspective, the argument sounds like this:

On one hand, single-minded developers say to mine the earth, to log the timber, and to tap into and harness the waters is to create new wealth because value is added to each natural resource in the form of commodities and jobs. Humans have been transforming natural resources into commodities since the beginning of time and, frankly, the relationship has worked pretty well – gainful employment and creature comforts are good things!

On the other hand, single-minded environmentalists are saying enough is enough! Science has verified the fact there is only so much coal, oil and natural gas; only so much virgin forest; only so much fresh water, fertile soil and precious minerals; and there is a real limit to how much garbage and toxicity the earth can recycle, and how warmth our bubble of protective atmosphere can accommodate.

Many environmentalists want to preserve the few remaining acres which have not been paved over, mined, logged, and crisscrossed with dusty roads. Environmentalism contends human consumption has reached a point where there is more value in sustainable harvests, and in recycling and repurposing what is already in the system. Environmentalists contend things like hiking, fishing, camping, photography, climbing, rafting, mountain biking and just leaving it alone – all add value without costly and invasive sacrifice.

American history is filled with stories which show the consequences of living within a win/lose dichotomous paradigm. There is a chapter in Wyoming history, for example, which illustrates how cattlemen used violence and intimidation to maximize their control of the land and its natural resources. In so doing, they effectively ensured their alpha male status for generations to come. This winner-take-all philosophy is still alive and well in Wyoming: case in point, there are currently only 12 members of the minority party serving in the state legislature and of those 12 only 4 are female.

Wyoming's mentality of governance is still stuck in a dichotomous, us vs them, winner-take-all power vacuum.

In the big picture, what is humanity to do? Like it or not, humans are still falling back into their primitive instincts, of fighting it out – like the gorilla and the leopard, one fights to protect their family the other to feed their family.

So what does all this tallying up have to do with forgiveness? For me, the source of the problem is sometimes also the source of the solution. Humans have lived long enough and hopefully learned enough, to not be afraid of looking at our shared existence from a better perspective – a multi-dimensional view where there is room for new ways of being in relationship with each other and for planning for the future. No longer should *not being an absolutist* be a point of weakness – no matter which side of the stream you live on.

For those prefer not to take sides every time, self-awareness means that *finding ultimate meaning in life stems from the ability to grow and change*. Many of us work hard to not get stuck in the absolutism because to be stuck in these two-dimensional paradigms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is nothing short of self-defeating.

Many of us who have chosen to come into this place of comfort and possibility this very morning, agree the time has come to transform and change humanity's relationship with the natural world – that web of creation we respect and cherish. Even though life is framed by the absolute realities of birth and death, there is a great span of time and space between these two events and it is in this in-between space where all the cool stuff happens – the stuff of life.

One of the most important things to understand about life is that it is always in motion. One of my favorite ways to picture life is like it is a clean, crisp, fresh-water stream flowing down the side of a mountain.

Sometimes it flows peacefully over beds of smooth stones; or other times it tumbles over piles of shattered boulders, or the sparkling waters ripple gently between wide shores lined with meadows covered with wild flowers. And around the next bend, the stream conforms to the narrowing channel constrained by banks of deep layers of rich soil impacted between the tangled roots of the trees whose canopy sifts sunlight and moonlight while branches dance with the wind.

Sometimes the flowing water pauses in its journey as it pools behind a beaver dam. In economic terms, these pools have added value to the stream because they become a home for perhaps a family of beavers. Because the flowing water filters through the woven limbs and branches which span from bank to bank, the beaver dam is an example of the perfect relationship of capture and freedom, of contraction and expansion.

The tension between the forces of pushing out and holding in is perfect – while the pond doesn't stagnate and die it doesn't disintegrate and wash away either. This is a perfect example of a both/and paradigm, where reality, limits, and freedom all actually mean something and so work well together.

Homo sapiens have come to a place in our shared journey where we must stop and think about what's really going on.

Using the analogy of the mountain stream, some of us are happy with living lightly on one side of the bank, by sustainable harvesting and cleaning up after ourselves without the need to pave over and conquer the natural landscape.

On the other side of the bank, structures and institutions have been built in order to mass produce everything and then sell it, always charging what the market will bear. Unfortunately, the few who have amassed piles and piles of gold, have lost sight of one important fact: the earth and its resources do not belong to them – morally, the earth is not owned by anyone and its wealth should be shared by all living creatures.

For too long, creativity has been stymied because each side sits in judgement of the other. The time has come to change our dichotomous way of seeing each other, we must clear the way for fundamental change to happen: we must forgive each other.

For a long time now, I have thought one of the primary reasons America is in such a turmoil is because of humanity's relationship with the earth has to change. We have reached a point in our shared journey where we are causing the tear in our spiritual fabric to fester.

Since this is a spiritual crisis, it calls for a spiritual response. We must start by forgiving ourselves and each other, 'I forgive my own trespasses and forgive those who trespass against me.' On so many levels, through all the ages, true forgiveness is the only way healing can begin.

Because humans are, by our nature, creators and innovators, there is no reason we can't forge a new understanding of what it means to forgive each other. For me, it begins with the source of my existential chaffing: my difficulty in offering forgiveness when I believe those who I must forgive know exactly the harm they are doing, and keep doing it anyway.

Forgiveness is probably the most important ingredient in the elixir of life because each of us has ultimate control over our own capacity for forgiveness. Think about it, to withhold forgiveness is to create the conditions for toxicity and un-health, like building a dam that blocks the flow of fresh water eventually causing the pond to stagnate and die.

To freely ask for and offer forgiveness is to live from the most spiritually healthy and life-serving place anyone could ever wish for. There's a reason for the longevity of that old saying, *to err is human, to forgive divine*, which is why Gandhi's wisdom is so profound: "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."

Because humans start life with innate spiritual strength, just living our respective lives contributes to the spiritual health of the world right now. When we understand this, it is easier to believe everything is going to be ok.

As the wise Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us:

“Dear Mother Earth, You are the great Earth, you are Terra, you are Gaia; you are this infinitely beautiful blue planet....Even though we your children have made many mistakes, you always forgive us....

The Earth’s cycles of life and death are what conform our time, and the balance between physical, intellectual, and spiritual health is where we are always guided because all that must be forgiven is already forgiven.

May it Be So