



When Life Unravels

The universe does not judge us;
It only provides consequences and lessons,
And opportunities to balance and learn
Through the law of cause and effect.
Compassion is the recognition that
We are each doing the best we can
Within the limits
Of our current beliefs and capacities.
That I feed the hungry,
Forgive an insult, and love my enemy—
These are great virtues.
But what if I should discover
That the poorest of the beggars
And most impudent of offenders
Are all within me,
And that I stand in need
Of the alms of my own kindness;
That I myself am the enemy
Who must be loved—
What then?
C.G. Jung

Richard Bach's, "Illusions" was published in 1977, the same year as my first divorce. Little did I know then that one of my all-time favorite quotes from that book, "You teach best what you most need to learn," would so embody my calling. It's not surprising, though. Concepts reverberate like church bells in my body for reasons that eventually reveal themselves. This particular one captured my essence.

I have been both a deeply flawed wife and an equally flawed mother. One abiding obsession—my insatiable appetite to know myself—has been key to my relentless drive to autopsy my failures. Facing and accepting my own acts of self-sabotage provided a road map for the course corrections necessary for my growth. Self-examination and the acceptance of my own culpability ultimately put an end to staunchly defending my victim status.

Life has given me a smorgasbord of opportunities from which to learn forgiveness, compassion, and empathy, traits not role-modeled in my upbringing. My brother's preferred status based solely on the basis of his gender infuriated me. I toted that baggage for decades. Each betrayal felt cruel, discriminatory, and unfair, until, in my late thirties, I was led to the teachings of Caroline Myss and learned a new way to view my life.



“Woundology,” a concept/word Myss coined, is the practice of defining ourselves by the terrible things that have befallen us, and using those wounds to control situations and people. Savvy woundologists are masters at leveraging their wounds into privilege. They wear their victim status like a Purple Heart. Myss’ audio cassette series, “Why People Don’t Heal and How They Can,” mesmerized me, and provided a mirror in which I first glimpsed my own behavior. Sadly, it did not lead to instantaneous healing.

Subsequently Sacred Contracts taught me that self-righteousness is merely ego in denial of its own shortcomings. Judging others keeps the focus off our own Achilles Heel. It’s a long journey from making a case in defense of our shortcomings to taking responsibility for them. That is the work of change. Trudging through the muck and mire of self-delusion gives us the muscles to rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

But what we also need when life unravels is a safe community where we can stand, naked and vulnerable, fearful, yet hopeful, a community that stands ready to lovingly hold us as we redeem ourselves and dare to risk again. Sadly, our sins are more often met with criticism, judgment, ostracism, and abandonment.

The Bible is full of flawed heroes who teach us about the power of redemption and of not turning on those who commit seemingly unpardonable acts.

One of the most blatant is King David. He coveted Bathsheba, whose husband, Uriah the Hittite, was one of the king’s officers. After Bathsheba became pregnant with King David’s child, the king sent Uriah to the front lines, thus ensuring his death. His true agenda was to have Bathsheba for himself. David committed adultery and murder, breaking not one, but two of the Ten Commandments.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David, who shared a parable with the King that paralleled David’s transgression. Decreeing the punishment for the perpetrator in Nathan’s story, David, unwittingly, incriminated himself.

God permitted David to live. For the rest of his days, David knew he was alive because of God’s mercy. However, there were heavy consequences for his adulterous sin—the death of the love child conceived with another man’s wife. His son, Absalom, turned on him as well.

Yet, David was not dethroned, and Bathsheba gave birth to their son, Solomon, revered for his wisdom and for building the Temple in Jerusalem. If God had chosen to exile David or punish *him* by death, one of our Biblical giants might never have been born.

Why would God let David remain king? After all, he broke two of the Ten Commandments. It’s not logical. But God isn’t logical any more than forgiveness is. Forgiveness comes from the



heart, where compassion opens the door to atonement, rehabilitation, healing, and an opportunity for self-forgiveness.

Where to best achieve that? Certainly not in some isolated outpost, but in the same place the transgressions occurred. Where else but the scene of the “crime” does the *potential* exist for a healthy interchange of disparate viewpoints, as well as an opportunity to autopsy the circumstances and assess the situation without blame? A supportive environment is imperative. A wisely facilitated group provides a context where human failings are not grounds for excoriation. Instead, groups large and small can be crucibles of change where righteous indignation, judgment and blame are left at the door along with an expectation of perfectionism. No one is perfect. No one will ever be perfect.

Until we recognize that the responsibility for failure is systemic, not individual, and shift our focus to remediation, we are doomed to remain rooted in a culture that demonizes one while idealizing another. All of us are subject to falling. It’s time we realize, “There but for the grace of God, go I.”

After my third divorce, I vowed never to marry again. In conversations with myself, however, I created a list of theoretical ground rules for a healthy marriage, only to discover when I actually did remarry, my rigid rules went out the window.

Relationships are messy. Flexibility, empathy, and unconditionality are essential to navigating conflict, when feelings often override rationality and logic. Without a relationship, growth is only speculative.

The same is true for parenting. Without seeing myself through my children’s eyes and listening to their feedback, though it has been excruciating, I would have no way of knowing if I had learned anything.

As author, Ann Lamott writes, “Out of wreckage something surprising will arise.” It’s another way of saying, “There’s always a gift in the shit.”

Psalms are David teaching best what he most needed to learn. I suspect the best teachers of ethics are those with ethical lapses. Without doubt, sober alcoholics make the best substance abuse counselors. Psychologists and spiritual directors who have made sense of their wounds are the best healers. Cyber security firms use convicted hackers as consultants. Convicted bank robbers consult on bank security. Learning from the myriad of mistakes I made in three marriages readied me for a great fourth one. It further enables me to use what I learned to help others. To show someone a way back, you must know the route firsthand.



God does not turn his back on the fallen nor does God espouse our doing so. God presents opportunities for redemption. Fallen heroes in the Old Testament, and there are many, demonstrate time after time that God does not make pariahs out of the wayward. On Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, we are ushered through the ways in which we can atone for missing the mark.

“We are all transgressors, all exiled from the Highest we know, all in need of the healing of forgiveness and reconciliation. For what we have done, for what we may yet do, we ask pardon; for rash words, broken pledges, insincere assurances, and foolish promises, may we find forgiveness,” states the liturgy.*

“Do not cast me away from Your presence, do not remove Your holy spirit from me. Let me know again the joy of Your help, and keep alive in me a generous spirit. THEN WILL I TEACH TRANSGRESSORS YOUR WAY, AND CAUSE SINNERS TO RETURN TO YOU.”*

Does that not imply the adage, “You teach best what you most need to learn?”

The Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) services also contain a passage that claims to foretell each individual’s destiny, who shall live and who shall die that year, and how. However, “Repentance, Prayer, and Charity temper Judgment’s severe decree,”* meaning people can change their destiny through atoning for their sins. Perhaps charity is teaching what we have learned through redemption.

So what does forgiveness look like? What does it achieve, and why is it so fundamental to moving forward?

That is a topic for another blog.

*Gates of Repentance: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe. New York. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1984.