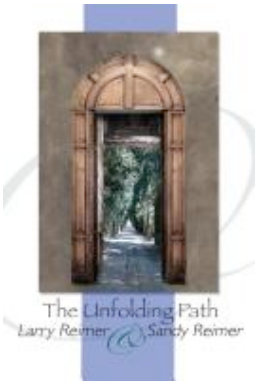
The Unfolding Path

Larry Reimer & Sandy Reimer



The Unfolding Path is a collection of sermons from the last four years of Revs Larry and Sandy Reimers' 38-year tenure at the United Church of Gainesville (UCC), a progressive, inclusive church in a university community. The formats of the sermons vary. Some are like fairy tales. One is all jokes. Another is based on a movie, and another rises from an Advent choir anthem. They typically challenge the conventional wisdom of the day.

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Enduring Refrains

In the Land of Mystery: This I Believe
October 18, 2009
Sandy Reimer

"This I Believe" – *belief statements of church members and scripture passages*

Leader - I believe that some common-thread artery pulses through each of us, connecting everyone, making us many aspects of some kind of sacred Oneness. ~*Joan Stevens*

Congregation – We who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are members of one another. *Romans 12: 5*

Leader - I believe that God is a caring God who provides support and strength during difficult times in our lives and helps us recognize peace and beauty around us and within us in ordinary times. ~ *Joanne Pohlman*

Congregation - God is our refuge and strength, our safety in times of trouble, whispering to the heart, "Be still and know that I am within you." ~ *Psalm 46*

Leader - I still believe in "God" in the sense that as a whole, all beings collectively contribute to a consciousness that serves a purpose beyond our immediate selves. When we recognize it, we are made more whole. ~ *Jamie Baldwin*

Congregation - God is joy and compassion, patience and unchanging love. ~ *Psalm 103*

Leader - I believe that God calls us—and receives us—in many ways and along many paths. ~ *Libby Dunn*

Congregation - Do not fear: I have called you by name, you are mine. *~ Isaiah 43: 1*

Leader - Taking on the mystery is acknowledging that we cannot name the mystery, though we try; we cannot claim the mystery, though we do. The mystery names and claims us, inviting us to take it upon ourselves, as if we were God's spies. *~Time to Live: Seven Tasks of Creative Aging, by Robert Raines.*

Our worship theme, "This I believe," is modeled after the NPR series of the same name, where people submit an essay affirming one of their pivotal beliefs and supporting that belief with a story. This is my story.

My extended family lineage includes no poets, no poetry readers, no one who went to plays or discussed novels, no one who read a literary magazine other than *Reader's Digest.* Everyone and everything was very linear, very literal, and very concrete. I was a pleaser, for sure, and in everyone's eyes – my parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents – I was a very good girl. I certainly was warm, friendly, and extraverted. And I had a natural ability to be concrete and organized, so I fit in most of the time.

But there was this other part of me that no one understood. If they had had the words, they probably would have said that I had a dreamy side, but that would have been a stretch for them to name. They would, however, have been right, for the part of me they didn't understand was a dreamer, a fledgling poet, one who loved words and phrases and ideas that transported me from the literal to the what-might-be, one who made connections with what couldn't be seen or heard or clearly defined. And that part of me bothered all my adult relatives.

I don't remember any nasty adjectives being flung at me, but I do remember being told again and again by aunts and

uncles and grandparents and parents: "You read too much." It's how they named what they didn't understand. Reading fed the dreamer in me. Reading allowed me to escape from the endless chit-chat of the women in my family and from the equally endless supposedly-good-natured banter that passed for connections among the men. Reading allowed me to escape to horizons beyond the corridors of my sheltered life.

An early awareness of this part of me came in the summer twilight hours when I was midway through mid-elementary school. My week-night bedtime remained the same year round, so when summer came with its long hours of daylight, going to bed at 8:00pm meant that it was still light out. I had a comfy double bed, a hand-me-down from my parents when they got a new bedroom set. One summer night, when I was an especially restless nine year old, I remember imagining that I was an acrobat in a circus. My parents caught me in mid-air bouncing up high on my bed, and trouble ensued. From then on, whenever I couldn't go to sleep, I'd creep quietly from my bed to my bedroom window which overlooked our back yard. I'd kneel on the rug, my elbows on the windowsill, my chin leaning on my arms, and I'd watch the night come. There was a huge old tree at the edge of our yard with a gigantic hole in the front that I thought must have been caused by a lightning strike years before. On those summer evenings, I'd see the owl perch on the branches of that tree, pronouncing the end of the day. I'd watch the fading colors of the sunset reflected back onto the leaves of the trees and on the walls of my playhouse. Sometimes I'd see a bunny hopping away into the woods behind our fence. I would sit at the window for what seemed like hours, only to scurry back into bed when I heard my parents come up the stairs.

On week-ends, my family went to my aunt and uncle's cottage in southern Maryland off the Potomac River. Often they had adult friends join them for the week-end, so, along

with my parents, the adult to child ratio could be as high as eight to two, the two being me and my brother, who was five years younger. When I needed to escape from all those adults, I'd just get out my book and read for as long as possible, until someone said, "Put that book down and come over here with us."

As I approached adolescence, I was allowed to walk down to the water and out on the dock by myself, so I'd take my book, especially in the late afternoon or early evening, and go to the end of the dock. I'd bring a cushion and sit flat on the weathered boards, with my back resting on the bench, out of everyone's sight. I'd always tell my parents that I was just sitting there reading, but often I wasn't. Mostly I would sit at the end of the dock and watch the water and the shifting light, and I'd just be. I'd be there and yet I'd also be somewhere else, somewhere both inside myself and all around me as well. I can still hear their voices calling me back in – *Sandra Lee* – when I'd been gone too long for their comfort. I wasn't lonely; I wasn't afraid; I wasn't bored; I wasn't acting out. I simply was at peace.

For a long time, I linked what I had felt as a child to the time of day: the twilight and the setting sun. Or I linked what I had felt as a young teenager to nature: the world of the water and waves and wind. Or I linked what I had felt when I was older to my need for a little distance from these caring, omnipresent adults in my life: time alone drifting into another world of awareness.

When I was a senior in high school, I stumbled into that same space in a very different place: at my church, a building with many additions and adjoining wings. That cold winter night, it was already dark after our youth group meeting ended, and the quickest way to get from our youth room to my family car in the parking lot was through the Sanctuary. I walked into the complete darkness of that church Sanctuary, a

place I had never been other than in the light of Sunday mornings in the midst of the crowded congregation or as part of the youth choir on busy Christmas Eves. I stopped on this night, sat down, all alone in that vast silent space. There was a streetlight outside shining a little bit of light through the stained glass windows on one side of the pews and shining as well through the stained glass circular rose window over the altar. I was transported. Here was the twilight, here was the water, here was the wind, here was the poetry and the peace, and the solitude. It all came together in that moment, and it was God.

This I believe: I believe in God. I believe in God's presence in my life. I believe in God's presence in our lives. I believe in God's presence in creation. Yet, if you think for a moment that I can paint concrete images of God in words or creeds or drawings, I cannot. I do, however, believe in God. Since I was a child, I've been at times in the presence of that Presence, a Presence both within me and beyond me, a Holy Presence of peace and love and stillness, a presence of poetry and music and mystery, a Presence that has touched my soul and shaped my life.

The God part that has been more clearly visible and describable to me is the God I see in action: the God I see in every kindness, in every moment of service, in every welcome of inclusion and understanding, in every miracle of forgiveness, in every unexpected healing and reconciliation. And for a long time, throughout my 20s and 30s and into my 40s, that was the God I knew best and lived with and lived for. I have not forsaken, nor will I ever forsake, that God of service and action. Yet I have in this later chapter of my life also reunited with the God of my childhood and adolescence, the God of Presence in whom I can rest.

This other side of God, like that dreamer part of me, dwells in the land of mystery, not in the land of magic, but in the land

of mystery, where what is cannot be easily explained, yet is always a gift, always grace. I know this side of God in the simple ways of my childhood: at sunrise and twilight, as I sit on the dock and watch the waters and the moon. I know this God again in the quiet of this Sanctuary and other sacred places, and as I navigate the rough waves of painful and difficult and frightening times in my life. I know this presence of God in the midst of tears and grief; I know this presence of God in the midst of joy and gratitude. I know this presence of God, as the prophet Elijah experienced it, in the still small voice inside that Mystery that we cannot find words for, that we cannot fully name ourselves. Instead, as Robert Raines reminds us, it is the Mystery that names us and claims us. "Do not fear," says Isaiah, "I have called you by name and you are mine." Our call is to be open, our call is to find those places and those ways which open us to that Mystery and allow us to be in and with that Holy Presence.

I believe in God, and that belief is the rock, the foundation, the wings, and the promise of my life.

I begin our time of prayer with a story about a little boy at the children's story in a church. The minister was talking about God and where to look for God. The little boy said "I find God when I'm walking in the woods." The minister responded saying, "You don't have to go to the woods to find God, because God is the same everywhere." And the little boy said, "But I'm not the same everywhere."

Let us pray: As we breathe in and out slowly, we name silently those places where we feel closest to you. We remember those places and times when we have felt surrounded by or in touch with the Holy, with your Spirit.

We are not the same everywhere, God, so open our souls, we pray, open our hearts, open the schedules of our days and of our weeks and months, to seek those times and those places where we are receptive, where we can hear the melody

or the touch of your still small voice within and around us. And, let us not sink into the swamp of rigidity, even about what is sacred, so that we may also recognize your holy presence in what is new and surprising.

For all the ways and times your Spirit moves within us and among us - in the stories of our lives, in sacred places, in the hands and hearts of others, and in service to this world - we give thanks. Blessed be. Amen.

The Final Answer To the Question of Evil
And What If This IS the Best of All Possible Worlds?
Larry Reimer
March 6, 2011

Judges 9:8-15
Deuteronomy 30:19

We are part owners of a place on Lake Santa Fe a half hour from our home, our share purchased with an inheritance we received from my mother's estate. It's a beautiful escape, a little house up on stilts surrounded by cypress trees. We spent last weekend there.

While the lot is beautiful with spreading live oak trees and many old growth azaleas whose blooms are so bright they make your eyes hurt, it is also full of entangling vines – prickly vines, deeply rooted, thorny, bramble, briar vines. Last weekend, we engaged in our annual vinectomy. I love the satisfaction of getting hold of a solid vine, tracing it down to its source, following it under the azaleas until I get to its giant tumorous source, and ripping it out of the ground with a cheer of triumph.

Vine pulling always makes me think of a bible study I attended when I was in high school at the First Congregational Church in River Edge, New Jersey. The visiting leader shared what is the oldest parable in the bible, the story of how the thorny bramble vine became king of the forest. I have hunted for that story ever since that day. This week thanks to an extra measure of motivation and the gift of Google, I found it for this sermon. It's from the book of Judges, the seventh book in the bible.

Here's the setting. Gideon, a noble leader who had ruled over Israel for a good long time had died of old age. There was a mess in the succession. The Israelites woke up one day

wondering how in the world they wound up with the miserable Abimelech as their leader. Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's seventy sons, told this parable, believed to be the oldest in the bible.

The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree, "Reign over us." The olive tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us." But the fig tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us."

But the vine said to them, "Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the bramble, "You come reign over us."

And the bramble said to the trees, "If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon." ~Judges 9:8-15

The point of the story is that when we wonder why the leaders of our institutions are like bramble vines that scratch and entangle everything around them, it's because none of the rest of us will take those leadership positions.

Whether it's national, state, county, city, or even the university, if we wonder how we wound up with the leaders we have, it's because we, like the olive, fig, and even grape, felt we had more important things to do than take on the leadership in the communities in which we live and work. We get the leaders we deserve because we think we are too busy or important to do the work of leadership ourselves. (The only

place where this isn't true is this church, where the best people always say yes when asked to serve, including your ministerial staff.)

I always think of that story when I pull vines. I'm going to get back to it later.

Meanwhile, Sandy and I finished our day of labor. I basked in the gift of being outside and being healthy enough to do yard work. We had loaded a borrowed utility trailer to the limit, and I, filthy, and exhausted, drove it to the Alachua County dump about 3:15 that Thursday afternoon.

At the dump, I backed up to the mountain of yard waste, turned off the ignition, pulled out my car keys and thought, "I don't want to take these keys with me. What if they fell out of my pocket and got lost in all this trash?" Then, in a moment that will live in the Reimer annals of infamy, I pushed the electronic door button that I thought **unlocked** the car (this is a new car for us), got out and swung the door shut with keys and my cell phone on the front seat. With a sickening thud, the door locked.

And there stood I, dumbfounded at the dump.

It all worked out, and I'll explain how later. But before a rescue could be organized, I had an hour and a half to sit in the back of a trailer I had emptied by hand (the rake and pitchfork were also in the car) thinking about how I would preach a sermon on the two final questions of the Burning Questions series, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and the parallel question "Is this the best of all possible worlds?"

Whenever we invite questions of faith, "Why do bad things happen to good people? Or why is there evil?" keeps popping up.

The problem of evil is known as "Theodicy," the question of how a good God could allow such terrible things as happen in this world to occur. There is a line in Archibald MacLeish's play

"JB" based on the life of Job, which captures the problem. "If God is God, He is not good. If God is good, He is not God. Take the even, take the odd."

The point is that if God is all powerful and allows such evil as we encounter in this world, then God could not be good. Or if on the other hand, God can't stop the evil in the world because God just doesn't have the power to do so, then God can't truly be God as we understand an all-powerful God to be.

As I've said before, I believe in pan<u>en</u>theism. Theism sees God standing outside the world. Pantheism sees God in and defined by all things, totally present in everything in the world. Pan**en**theism sees God as in and present in all things, but not confined to or defined by the things of the world. God is neither a puppeteer ruler outside the world, nor is God completely defined by being the spirit in the trees, the earth, the skies and seas. Panentheism, at the heart of all Celtic spirituality, says that God is in the world but more than the world.

Panentheism says that God does not cause the cancer, nor the war, nor the hurricane. At the same time, God's face is never absent from us in the cancer, nor the war, nor the hurricane. God is always with us, pulling us toward our wholeness and healing in whatever way possible that does not destroy the freedom of our humanity or of nature.

Part of the meaning of resurrection is that God does not bring goodness and healing because of the evil and suffering, but in spite of it. The evil of this world never has the last word. The light shines in the darkness. Even if the only healing left is life eternal, it always triumphs.

The best summary I can think of how God works in suffering is this. When Rev. William Sloane Coffin's son died in a car crash and a well-meaning sympathizer said, "Sometimes I just don't understand God's will," Coffin in the anger of his grief thundered back, "You bet your life you don't understand

God's will. Do you think it was God's will that my son Alex had one too many beers when he got into that car? Do you think it was God's will that Alex's car was missing a windshield wiper, that the guard rail was broken on that road that night and the street light was burned out? No," said Coffin, "I believe that when Alex took that turn too fast and his car sank into Boston Harbor, God's heart was the first to break." ~*"Alex's Death", Sermons from Riverside Church*

That's my final answer to the question of evil. God does not make bad things happen to teach us a lesson or show us a greater good. God's heart breaks as our hearts break, and God then works to heal broken hearts and broken lives.

But there is never actually a final answer to why there is evil in the world. It is always an ongoing question for the person of faith. I believe in God who is good, but not all powerful, who created a world in which we and nature have the freedom to destroy ourselves and each other, and God who nevertheless remains present and creating among and with us. Yet the question of why terrible things happen in a world lovingly created by God can never be completely answered.

On the other hand, we tend not to ask the question which the absolute denial of God can never answer, "Why is there good in the world?" If there is no God, why is there such overwhelming beauty around us? Why do we love and give to one another against all odds? Why is the community of faith so beautiful as to call us to it?

And this leads me to end this sermon with a brief answer to the question, "Is this truly the best of all possible worlds?"

In 1759, the French writer Voltaire wrote the novel *Candide*, basically to shred the idea that this was the best of all possible worlds. I remember reading *Candide* in my college Literary Foundations class and loving its harsh anti-sentimental satire because, well, I was a college sophomore. The main

character, Candide, goes on a journey where he witnesses or experiences whippings, unjust executions, epidemic disease and a massive earthquake. He continues to insist that "everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." When he tries to save an Anabaptist, someone who believes in baptism by full immersion, from drowning in the Bay of Lisbon, his mentor, Dr. Pangloss, explains that this bay was created expressly for the Anabaptist to drown in.

Meanwhile, the idea that this is the best of all possible worlds was developed a century earlier by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Rationally, Leibniz said, there would be no world if God did not choose to create a world. God therefore must have formed the best possible world, for how could God have created anything less?

Leibniz never argued that there was no evil in the world as Voltaire suggested. Leibniz simply said that to have created the world any other way it would have had even more evil in it.

Leibniz believed that there is some deep and sufficient reason behind everything that is. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, in their book *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes* explain this by saying that the reason it rains more in Seattle than it does in Albuquerque is because conditions A B, and C make it impossible for it to be any other way. Leibniz would argue that everything fits together, and if it were different, this would not be a "uni" verse. The diversity of our creation is what holds it together. Cathcart and Klein summarize this by saying, "The optimist believes this is the best of all possible worlds. The pessimist fears this is so." *~Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein, Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar, 2007, p. 19*

Which takes me back to 4:30, Thursday, February 24, sitting in an empty yard waste trailer behind a locked car in a dump that will close at 5 pm with Sandy at our lake house with

no car to come and rescue me, as I wondered: Could this be the best of all possible worlds?

Consider the options. Should God have created a world in which I had no freedom to make the bad decision to throw my keys on the console of my car? Should God have created a world where Hondas had the same locks as my old Ford so I wouldn't have pushed "lock" instead of "unlock" on the door armrest? Should God have created a world where all the good trees in the forest never let the thorny vines overtake the azaleas, so I Sandy and I would not have had to spend a day clearing them out?

What would a world look like where all our needs were taken care of, all decisions, stupid or smart, were taken from us, and where no vines with thorns ever entered a realm where they weren't wanted?

With this in mind, I finish my story of the dump. About 15 minutes after I locked myself out of my car, a guy in a pickup truck pulled alongside of me, and he loaned me his cell phone. Sandy by the way had just gotten a new cell phone and I didn't know her new number. So I called Lisa at the church office. Lisa called Sandy. Sandy sat down to figure out what to do, without a car, in Melrose.

At 4:30 a silver Prius pulled into my particular section of the dump, driven by church member and Lake Santa Fe neighbor Ron Haase. Sandy was in the back seat. The only people Sandy knew to call in Melrose were Ron and Janet Haase. Sandy had asked them if she could borrow their car for a rescue. They went one better. They were just about to drive to Gainesville to attend a Gator baseball game, and they'd drop her off at the dump. They greeted me joyfully, with no blame of finger pointing about what I should have done with my keys in the first place.

I was saved.

This is all small change in terms of the world's tragedies and triumphs, but it was a nice microcosm of them both.

In this world I had the freedom to make the unfortunate decision by which I locked myself outside my car. In this same world, a stranger came by who offered me a phone. In this world I had a church, and angels - Lisa, Sandy and the Haases who had a car. And all of them had enough care and compassion to come help me.

My final word is that evil will always happen. It will rock us. Good will always happen, it will astound us. As Deuteronomy 30:19 forever reminds me, God says, "I have put before you life and death, blessings and curses, therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live."

Prayer –

O God we bring the daily questions of everyday living. Are we loved? Are we loving? Will you fix what is broken in my life?

We bring our wishes that we could fix the pain in our friends and loved ones, so they could hurt less.

We hear your answer of yes from within, not so much to the specific questions, but as a path. We hear you say, "*Choose life and trust. Grow in service and love. Be thankful for the gift. Dare to risk. Suffer well. Bless the world with laughter and tears. Know not what I am or who I am but that I am and I am with you."*

Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife
Larry Reimer
April 22, 2010

~Revelation 21:1-6

Think of how different all our visions of heaven are. I read about heaven all summer, and I'll be sharing thoughts from three books and of course my own thoughts as well. Lisa Miller, in her new book, *Heaven – Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (as you can see, she stole my sermon title!) says that according to the 2007 Gallup poll, 81 percent of Americans believe in heaven, and it seems that there are about as many ideas on heaven as there are people with ideas. She believes that the less that ministers preach and speak about life after death, the more popular books and opinions of varying quality spring up. Evidently, ministers don't preach much on heaven these days.

To counter the spread of even more tacky, whacky, and mediocre books, articles and ideas on heaven, we have this new worship theme of "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Not Necessarily in that Order."

Using Lisa Miller's book, I'm going to start with something of a survey, a kind of history of heaven 101. Once upon a biblical time there was not really a concept of heaven and hell as places where we all go after we die. In early bible times, it was thought that the earth was flat, surrounded by water above and below. Covering the earth was the dome of the sky. When it rained, that dome opened up letting the water in. Springs were the result of that water under the earth breaking through the earth's crust. If you read the account of the great flood in Genesis, you'll see this point of view. It begins by saying that the great deep burst forth from below and the windows of the heavens were opened.

The firmament above was heaven, and only God lived in heaven, with perhaps some angels. The concept of heaven as a place where people went when they died didn't begin until about two hundred years before the Common Era, the time of Christ, in late biblical Judaism.

By the time of Jesus, the nature of heaven was a matter of significant debate in Judaism. The Sadducees, for example, didn't believe in it and asked Jesus the quite rational question of whom you would be married to in heaven if you had been married to more than one person on earth. Jesus responded that in heaven you'd be like the angels who didn't marry. I doubt if this impressed the Sadducees who didn't believe in angels either, but that's a sign of the conundrums that heaven causes.

Hell is first referred to in Judaism as Gehenna, the name of the garbage dump outside the city that was always on fire.

Hell as a place of eternal punishment developed with clarity during the Middle Ages when the church, in alliance with Kings and Emperors, needed to keep the population in line. Thus medieval cathedrals are filled with paintings of the sufferings and torments of hell which have little biblical basis.

Visions of eternity change with the human conditions of different eras. For example, during the American Civil war, 620,000 young men died, two percent of the American population. At the time most preachers were offering heaven as a bright, beautiful, and brilliantly lit place, but not one with much human contact. This gave little comfort to those many people who had lost their loved ones in the war. The popular writer, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published her vision of heaven, *Gates Ajar* , which describes heaven as a place of utter beauty where most importantly we join our loved ones in wonderful meals and candlelight conversations. It was a best seller surpassed only by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Bible.

This notion of heaven as a place of reunion was reinforced at that same time with writings of an eighteenth century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. He believed that in death people were sorted not according to good and evil, but according to common interests. Swedenborg has been called the Oprah of his time. He believed that in heaven people lived together in large, like-minded communities in a place resembling a better earth.

An actual denomination called Swedenborgians still exists today as a branch of guess what denomination? The United Church of Christ.

The Universalists developed a third new view of heaven out of the Civil War. They believed that everyone attained heaven in the end, rejecting the notion preached at many revivals that salvation was for Christians only.

Following all these pleasantly personal visions of heaven is kind of rational, questioning, contemporary Christianity represented in our time by one of my favorite writers, Bishop John Shelby Spong in his newest book, *Eternal Life: A New Vision – Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*.

Spong doesn't believe in what he calls an "invasive deity," a God above us, up in heaven, pulling the strings of our lives, intervening with miracles to upset the natural workings of science. Spong sees Christianity to be about Jesus as a fully human one in whom God is present and visible, a symbol of God within and among us.

Spong believes in Jesus, not as one who was raised from the dead by the intervention of an external supernatural being, but rather as one who was transformed so greatly in this life that he transcended all divisions between people and time. Resurrection for Spong is entering this transformative consciousness of Jesus and walking with him into the timelessness of God. Spong believes that when we die we do

live again. He believes we catch glimpses of eternity when we love wonderfully and wastefully in this world.

I think that this is something of what the writer of the book of Revelation speaks about with his promise of a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

Rather than thinking of all these changing stories as inconsistent and contradictory, I see them as examples of that slogan of our denomination: God is still speaking. Each generation discovers new dimensions of heaven's truth.

Remember when Rev. Jerry Falwell maintained that the famous Teletubby, Tinky Winky was recruiting children to be gay. After all, Falwell figured, if the name Tinky Winky wasn't enough he was purple (a gay color), had a triangular antenna (the triangle is a symbol of gay pride), and carried a magic bag (read purse!). After Falwell died, Daryl Cagle created a wonderful cartoon in which Falwell gets to the gates of heaven and discovers that the divine judge is not St. Peter, but you guessed it, Tinky Winky. The caption is, "Uh Oh."

That's a new heaven, one reflecting a new consciousness on earth, a consciousness that God's love expands beyond what we knew a generation, a century, an epoch ago. But notice again that this cartoon still fits the old stereotype of heaven in the clouds with a judge at the gate.

Which brings me to the third book, this one given to me by UCG member Richard Elkins, *Sum - Forty Tales from the Afterlives* by David Eagleman. It's a little book, just over 100 pages long. Each tale is a creative fable of heaven, which turns out to have something of an inherent contradiction. Here's my favorite because it's closest to my vision of heaven.

In this story of heaven, called "Egalitaire" which stands for equality, God in originally creating heaven got it wrong. She gave in to the peer pressure of other gods and set up a binary division of people into good and evil. God soon realized that people weren't just plain good or evil, as she thought when

she was younger. She tried very hard to come up with complex formulas that fairly weighted good against evil. She even tried a computer program. But eventually she realized that people were multi-dimensional, and she couldn't live with the rigidity of her youthful choices.

She was miserable and couldn't come up with a solution until in a moment of desperation she granted every single person a place in heaven, since every one had something good inside.

She fired the devil and closed down hell. Everyone righteous or not so much got equal time with her. The most important thing to her was that everyone be treated equally, an idea that never came true on earth.

Well the communists got irritated because God achieved the perfect society they wanted to create without God. The meritocrats, folks who believed only people who studied and worked hard deserved good things, were annoyed that since there were no incentives to work hard they were stuck with a bunch of pinkos. The conservatives had no poor people to disparage, and the liberals had no downtrodden to promote. God then weeps because the only thing everyone can agree on is that they're all in hell.

My own favorite view of eternity, which you can read in detail in our previous book, *The Long Winding Journey Home,* (Outskirts Press, 2008 p. 465), is that there is one place where we all go. It's like a classical music concert, which for some would be heaven, others hell, and others a place of learning. But instead of music, the concert is a community where love rules, people are kind and forgiving, and good truly does overcome evil. For people who dedicated their lives to cheating, lying and bullying, this is hell. For those who truly loved on earth, it is heaven. For most of us it would be something of a continued growth experience.

Stories of heaven reflect the ways God is still speaking in our lives, and I think they are best left as stories to dream on rather than blueprints to argue about. In times when people struggle and are poor, they look to heaven as a place of comfort and wealth. In our era of abundance, we look for deeper relationships, or perhaps free time. New heavens reflect the new earths we long to co create with God.

I love the quote from the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The main character in the novel is an aging minister in conversation with his good friend Boughton, also a minister, who answers the question of what is heaven. He says, "Mainly I just think about the splendors of the world and multiply by two. I'd multiply by ten or twelve if I had the energy. But two is much more than sufficient for my purposes."

My favorite and sweetest story of heaven comes from my mother-in-law, Evelyn Sebastian. She died in 2013 at the age of 93. When she was eighty five, we brought her to our house on Lake Santa Fe. It was a pleasant October Sunday afternoon. We had take-out Chinese food, her favorite. We were sitting on an upstairs screen porch, which she loved because she was off the ground and the bugs were screened out. The porch looked out on a stand of cypress trees onto the lake. It was fall, the air was perfect and the setting sun behind us turned everything golden. And of course her daughter, Sandy, was there, whom she also loved.

Evelyn looked out and around and said, "I hope heaven is as good as this."

And the writer of Revelation said, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first earth had passed away…"

Resources for Going Deeper:

- Lisa Miller*, Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With the Afterlife*

- John Shelby Spong, *Eternal Life: A New Vision – Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*
- David Eagleman, *Sum - Forty Tales from the Afterlives*

Forgiveness: The Freedom to Be at Peace
Sandy Reimer
January 12, 2008

Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap: for the measure you give will be the measure you receive. *~Luke 6:37*

At that point, Peter asked Jesus, "How many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven."
~Matthew 18:22

Jews and Arabs hating each other, whites and blacks, Christians and Muslims, left and right – there is no reason or dignity to any of it. Every chronic hatred began when someone attacked, someone suffered, and no one forgave. Then these examples are multiplied and unwisely taught, down through the generations, falsely ennobled in lies and in tales of crusades, uprisings, and martyrdom. But the cycle of vengeance will never solve itself. Someone has to step outside of the cycle and courageously say, "I will take no pride in my tradition as long as it teaches revenge instead of forgiveness."
~D. Patrick Miller, in A Little Book of Forgiveness

Out of the depths, God, I call to you:
Let me feel your presence, even in this darkness.
Take away my affliction or give me the strength to endure.
If all our mistakes were indelible, which of us could survive?
But you have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves.
And that is the wonder and the dread. *~Psalm 130 as translated by Norman Fischer*

At the end of each summer, we have a worship service called "Ask the Pastor." Members of the congregation write down questions they have about spirituality, faith and the church, and Larry and I take turns answering as many of these questions as we can in twenty minutes. Every time we have the "Ask the Pastor" service, without fail, there are several questions about forgiveness, which tells me that this is an issue we carry in our minds and in our hearts.

At a continuing education event I attended several years ago, Bruce Epperly, a Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, began his presentation on Spiritual Practice and Healing with this statement, "Any credible theology must address issues of healing and forgiveness." I wrote those words in my notebook like good students do. I also apparently copied them onto a small scrap of paper with bright red ink and that scrap of paper fell out of an older folder I opened this week as I was looking for something else. It's a good statement, not only about theology, but also about churches and spirituality. So our theme this month is "The Mending Circle," and today we're going to address some of the issues of forgiveness.

Pay attention to what comes to your mind first when you hear that word forgiveness. Often we immediately think of the most difficult interaction we've ever had in forgiving someone else or in being forgiven or in forgiving ourselves. Often, when we hear the word forgiveness, we picture the one person, the one situation, in our lives where forgiveness seems impossible.

So I invite you to forget about the hardest cases of forgiveness in your life and focus for a moment instead on the good experiences you have had with forgiveness. Remember a wonderful moment when someone graciously forgave you for something you did. Think of a time when someone said to you, "I'm sorry," and you responded with kindness and understanding. Think of the people you love who forgive you

often and well. Keep those memories and those people in mind as we explore forgiveness as a spiritual practice.

Forgiveness is a deeply-held religious value in Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, yet as C.S. Lewis said, "Everyone believes in forgiveness until he has something he needs to forgive." Genuine forgiveness can be astonishingly difficult, because it takes place in the context of pain, whether it be forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, or divine forgiveness.

This morning, I want to share with you some things I have learned about forgiveness. At the end of this sermon is a section called "Going Deeper" where I've listed resources that have been helpful to me. While I have drawn on these resources throughout this sermon, I'm not going to cite them individually.

I also believe that any credible discussion about forgiveness needs a prelude about what forgiveness is **not**. Forgiveness is **not** about tolerating unacceptable behavior, such as abuse of any kind, be it incest or rape, violence or murder. Forgiveness does not mean that I need to stay in a relationship or in a situation where I or someone else will be physically or emotionally battered. While forgiveness **is** about relinquishing our resentment and our revenge, forgiveness is **not** about relinquishing our ethics.

That said, here are fourteen things I have learned about forgiveness:

1) Forgiveness is a process of intention that happens over time. Only I, the person directly involved, can determine the time frame. Healing follows its own order and timing. What is important is my intention to forgive or to seek forgiveness.

2) Forgiveness can be practiced. It is important to start with easier situations or people, not the most difficult ones. Forgiveness when practiced becomes a way of life, a way of seeing yourself, and others, and the world through different

eyes, knowing that we are all human, and therefore we are all in need, at times, of forgiveness.

3) Forgiveness is the oil for the engine of life. As an engine cannot run without oil because its parts will grind upon one another and destroy the machine, so human relationships cannot survive without the oil of forgiveness. Forgiveness reduces the friction that builds up between us, and it heals the places where we get burned by one another.

We all know how easily, often inadvertently, and sometimes inevitably, we hurt one another in the daily moments of our lives. I'm sure you can think of a recent example in your life. In the ordinary ebb and flow of life's routines – in marriages and families, in friendships, in spiritual community, at work and play – *"I'm sorry"* is the password that releases the oil, the balm, of forgiveness. If things are more tense, words like *"I'm truly sorry"* – *"I've learned that…* – *"are you ok?"* – *"are we ok?"* – *"where can we go from here?"* are good words to use.

4) Forgiveness needs to happen between the affected people in a specific situation. While the sit-com *Seinfeld* celebrates the holiday of Festivus with an annual *Airing of Grievances* in which each person tells everyone else all the ways they have disappointed him or her over the past year, I don't recommend that, especially not in a group. Forgiveness is about one person apologizing, without a lot of defensive excuses, with the expectation that the other person will listen and accept the apology, and that together they will then find ways to move on. To forgive is to give oneself, and others, permission to change, permission to go toward the future.

5) What has long been acknowledged in spiritual practice about forgiveness is now being confirmed in the fields of health and medicine. Being a forgiving person actually helps you be healthier and live longer. Psychologist Loren

Toussaint's national survey in 2001 found that people who could forgive others had a better overall mental and physical health than people who did not forgive. And that correlation only increases as people age.

6) Do not forgive someone with the idea that you are doing them a favor; instead realize that you are healing yourself. To refuse to forgive someone is often called nursing a grudge. It is like feeding our hatred from the very milk of our well-being. It is like drinking a cup of poison and then being surprised that it kills you rather than the person you are angry with. Or, as Buddhism teaches, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intention of throwing it at someone else and discovering that you are the one who gets burned."

7) Cardiologist Douglas Russell, in his research, has found that the inability to forgive oneself is even more toxic to your health than hanging onto anger against someone else. Sometimes forgiving myself can be harder than forgiving someone else. I grew up being told that *Sorry doesn't help*. I heard those words whenever I broke something, spilled something, or did something wrong. Well, my friends, if sorry doesn't help in these situations, what does? So I became, as much as possible, a very, very good little girl. The cost was that I lived in fear of doing something wrong, which meant that I didn't take risks, I narrowed my world, I covered up a lot, and when I made a mistake, I didn't know how to forgive myself.

I was fortunate when I married Larry, because he is a man who doesn't need to find blame, or to hold onto anger, or to turn down apologies. It took me a long time to learn that I could count on that, and over time, that acceptance has given me permission to forgive myself more often. It doesn't mean I don't acknowledge my flaws and failures. It does mean that instead of beating myself up about them, I pay attention to

what they can tell me about myself and about the places where I still need to heal and to change.

8) What about the times when life raises the bar on forgiveness? How do I forgive someone who has done real harm to me? How do I forgive someone who will never apologize? How do I move on when someone will not forgive me? And, when I have done something truly awful, how do I forgive myself then?

I have been in each of these places, learning how to forgive my father even after he died, dealing with the end of a friendship where there is nothing I can do to bridge the rift, having done things myself that have caused pain to my children. In these difficult situations, where someone will not forgive me, or someone will not apologize to me, or someone has done me such harm that I cannot directly engage them, one thing I can do is create my own reconciliation process, remembering that forgiveness is ultimately about the healing of my own heart. If I truly want to heal this hurt, this pain, this shame, I can work with the situation by acknowledging what happened, reviewing it fully in detail, perhaps with a trusted friend or counselor or spiritual director.

9) If the forgiveness needed is in the context of a close relationship, then acknowledging my part in the situation is crucial. I've seen people go through divorces, even in the most difficult of circumstances and betrayals, who are able to get through the divorce and afterwards move on, because they could acknowledge not only what had happened to them and also acknowledge their own flaws, their own part in the situation. That acknowledgement allowed them to learn and grow from the whole experience. On the other hand, I've seen other people who during, and for years after, their divorce, remained locked in bitterness and recriminations, because they

could not acknowledge their own part in the failure of the marriage.

10) After you have acknowledged what has happened, then picture silently what is to be forgiven and hold it in light – no words – just light. Do just that, over and again. Then, when you are ready, add the words "I release you – I release this situation - from the grip of my pain, from my sadness, from my condemnation." Repeat this image and repeat these words, no matter how hard it seems. Say them again and again until they become true, until you are able to release the person, to release the grievance, to release yourself, whether that takes weeks or months or years. The Buddhist practice of *Tonglen* is very similar to this; I recommend Pema Chodron as an excellent resource.

11) Sometimes, in difficult situations of remorse, there may be a need for penance or for restitution. I was moved by Michael Broas, a Vietnam vet, who gave a seminar here on his return to Vietnam this fall. He went there with four other Vietnam vets. Each of them had done things they deeply regretted, things that hurt and killed many people. As they went back to the very places of harm, they expressed their sorrow, their remorse, to Vietnamese children and adults, to Vietnamese monks, to victims of Agent Orange. It was a journey of repentance and healing, as these Vietnamese people accepted the soldiers' apologies with a gracious kindness and generosity, telling these American veterans to return to their homes and live their lives well.

12) Finally, in those times when we run into a concrete wall where human forgiveness does not seem possible or enough, never underestimate the power of the Divine. Instead of assuming that God cannot forgive, ask for forgiveness. Instead of assuming that prayer cannot help, pray and meditate,

asking for healing and transformation. There are times when we cannot forgive or heal alone by our own power or by our own actions. In those times, we may need that ancient ritual of confession, of lifting up of our grudges and our failures to God and of seeking pardon.

13) I love the translation of Psalm 130. I read it often when I need to forgive or be forgiven. "Out of the depths, God, I call to you. Let me feel your presence, even in this darkness. If all our mistakes were indelible, which of us could survive? But You have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves."

14) And then there is that one extra line, by Norman Fischer, from his book *A Zen-Inspired Translation of the Psalms.* "You have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves ….. and that is the wonder …… and the dread." What an interesting twist! The wonder of forgiveness is evident, but what is the dread? Why would I dread being forgiven? Perhaps it is because there is a hidden cost of forgiveness. If I truly forgive someone else, I have to give up my grievance; I have to let go of my old strangely comforting stories about how I was wronged and how I suffered. If I am truly forgiven, I have to live with a new freedom as well as a new responsibility to change, to become the person I am called and meant to be. Ultimately, forgiveness can call forth change beyond our imagining, for it means letting go of what has bound us, letting go of what is in the past and limiting, soaring instead into the light.

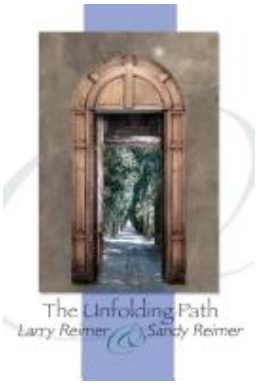
Jack Kornfield, reminds us, in his book *A Path With Heart*, that " Forgiveness is a process that … is fundamentally for your own sake, a way to carry the pain of the past no longer. The fate of the person who harmed you, whether they be alive or dead, does not matter nearly as much as what you carry in

your own heart. And, if the forgiveness is for yourself, for your own guilt, for the harm you have done to yourself or to another, the process is the same. You will come to realize that you can carry it no longer."

Take this forgiveness seriously and "you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that never goes dry. You shall rebuild what has long been in ruins and be known as the people who restored what was lost." *~adapted from Isaiah 58: 11-12*

RESOURCES FOR GOING DEEPER:

- Marc Ian Barasch, Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness, specifically the chapter on "The Elixir of Forgiveness"
- Pema Chodron, The Places that Scare You and When Things Fall Apart
- Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart
- Tehila Lieberman, "The Way Back," in A Woman's Path
- D. Patrick Miller, A Little Book of Forgiveness: Challenges and Meditations for Anyone with Something to Forgive
- Flora Slosson Wuellner, Release, specifically the chapter on Spiritual Recovery, Restoration and Renewal



The Unfolding Path is a collection of sermons from the last four years of Revs Larry and Sandy Reimers' 38-year tenure at the United Church of Gainesville (UCC), a progressive, inclusive church in a university community. The formats of the sermons vary. Some are like fairy tales. One is all jokes. Another is based on a movie, and another rises from an Advent choir anthem. They typically challenge the conventional wisdom of the day.

The Unfolding Path