

# The Resource We Never Noticed

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It has been quite a year. Last April first, I did a memorial service for the son of the president of the Church of the Desert, and then we went back to their house. After talking with some family members I turned to go back into the house from the patio and missed the two small steps down. I hit the pavement with my face. They picked me up and tended to the bleeding first, then put me in the car to go to the Eisenhower Hospital just five minutes away. A cat-scan of my neck showed that the two vertebrae closest to the brain were fractured. The surgeon was summoned and I was fitted with a collar which would be my most intimate companion for the next eight months. After three days in the hospital, I was moved to a nursing home. I remember thinking, "Hey, I visit these places; I don't patronize them!" A member of the church called me and said, "We would like to come and see you." "I'd love to see you," I responded, "but I warn you I am not a pretty picture." "But, Ken, you never were," she said. That's the kind of support from the congregation I like.....and am long used to.

Six hours of surgery in August put my neck together again, with a bit of bone from my hip, four titanium screws, and I think some Elmer's glue. About three months later, my surgeon inspected the x-ray, and he was very pleased that the screws were all in place,

and the whole thing had not fallen apart. And I was able to tell my friends that the surgeon had certified that I did not have a screw loose! How many of you have that reassurance?

With the collar off, I was able to drive again, and also able to fly to London to spend the Christmas holiday with Terry. When I returned home in mid-January I picked up life as usual, except that since my retirement in mid-June, I stay away from the church, except for Monday night bridge. I was able to negotiate that exception with my successor. So, on Monday evening, February 5, I was making my way to the Interstate to go to the church, driving along Vista Chino Road, where the speed limit is fifty miles an hour, when suddenly I hit something hard. The front hood crumpled up like a paper napkin; the air bags deployed (that's what air bags do) and the windshield was shattered, but in place. I just sat there, but I had my cell phone, so I tried to call my son, whom I had just left at home, but there was no answer. Then I called the church to tell them I would not be there for bridge that evening. The president, Shirley, answered and said that she and her husband would be right along. Then I called 911, but they had already been alerted. The ambulance came, and a young man named Justin took charge of me. He told me not to move my neck, and I told him I had already broken my neck, so he reiterated his instruction for me to stay still and not move and they would move me into the ambulance. I asked whether anyone else was hurt and was told, "We just need to take care of you now." Back to the emergency room at Eisenhower, it was déjà vu all over again. Shirley and her husband had gone to my condo and picked up my son, and they appeared at the busy emergency room. I was taken for a cat-scan of the neck first, then had a chest x-ray, it hurt when I coughed but those tests came out all right, and five hours after arriving there I walked out of the hospital and was taken home. I still did not know whether anyone else was hurt, and I had no idea how the accident happened. The most likely explanation, I thought, was that I must have had a blackout and run

into a car ahead of me that had stopped for the red light. I was not close to another car when suddenly I crashed into something. And with the hood crumpled up, I could not see the other car after the accident. So I went to bed that night wondering if I had caused this to happen, and still wondering what happened to the person or people in the other car. I had been asked whether I'd had anything to drink, and I told them that before supper I had one martini, which was a long-standing custom. Suppose someone else was hurt, worse than I was; how could I live with that knowledge? That had always seemed the worst thing that could happen: to be responsible for serious injury to someone else, some stranger. "OK, Reverend," the voice within me said: "how are you going to deal with that? What does a Unitarian Universalist have to fall back on in that situation?" At first, as I lay there, wanting to sleep, but tormented by a jumble of thoughts, I had no ready answer. Only gradually, did it become clear that what I was looking for was some idea of forgiveness, and I was finally able to sleep.

When I awoke, I wondered what was involved in self-forgiveness for a Unitarian Universalist if, indeed, I had caused great pain or injury to some other person or persons. What would I have to do, to go on living my life and still be the person I was? How would you handle that?

Of course, forgiveness is a great theme in most Christian religions, and it is usually, though not always, channeled through some idea of the atonement: Jesus sacrificed himself for our sins, and we are forgiven by our belief in him as our savior. I had long rejected that belief, even when I thought of myself as having some relation to that general Christian tradition. The other usual source of forgiveness in the Christian, and many other religions, is the belief in a personal God. Roman Catholics have the rite of confession, which involves telling a priest the sins which have been committed and asking for forgiveness, with the priest seen as the conduit to and from God. Jews have the annual observance of Yom Kippur,

the Day of Atonement, when all the misdeeds of the year are recollected and mediated through a pattern of fasting and prayer which has been passed down for centuries.

But there I was, having hit another car while I was going at least forty miles-per-hour. And there I was, in a skeptical religious tradition to which I had committed my life and my work, not knowing yet whether I was to find myself greatly in need of forgiveness, and it would have to begin with self-forgiveness. How would I do that? No one else could atone for me, so I would have to find a way to do that for myself. We are, after all, a do-it-yourself religion. I could not depend on the merciful spirit of some stranger who had been hurt in some way by my car, driven by me, to forgive me. That was my morning after the accident, and it was uncomfortable. There was a bit of feeling that my whole sense of who I was was hanging in the balance. What I was able to realize was that if any forgiveness was to be forthcoming, I needed to be part of a community in which forgiveness was a normal part of its life. I was able, that morning, to do one thing which helped: I called the police station. Was anyone else hurt in last night's accident on Vista Chino? The answer came back: no one but you was taken to the hospital. Great, great relief.

But there was still the puzzle and the anxiety about the accident itself. How did it happen? Did I have a blackout? How come I was totally alert and clear about the moment of impact, the gradual realization that this thing in front of me was an airbag, that it had hurt the back of my hand and my chest, and that the crumpled-up hood hid my view of whatever other car or cars was involved? If I had had a blackout, I would probably lose my license and not be able to drive.

I knew what I had to do: get medical help to determine what was going on with me. I was fortunate in getting a quick appointment with a neurologist. I told him what had happened, and we got off

to a somewhat shaky start, because when I told him I was on the way to church to play bridge, he said, “Playing bridge? In the house of God?” He arranged for me to have a series of tests and examinations, and I kept those appointments. But then, after four weeks, came my next deliverance: the police report. The insurance company had been slow about sending it to me. I went through the several pages of the standard form that answered my main question: the accident was caused by the woman who backed her car out of her driveway into the path of my car. That said to me that I did not have a blackout. It was dark, and I simply did not see this car until I crashed into it. Again, great relief.

But the questions about forgiveness did not go away. I always accepted the reality that we all need forgiveness, I knew that there were many times and ways in which I needed to be forgiven; I must have referred to that need in my preaching over the years, but I had never confronted it so directly in the context of my liberal faith. As I thought about it, I realized that we live in a world in which forgiveness is often in short supply. Think of the war in Iraq, and the people who are killing each other because they have not forgiven what happened fifteen centuries ago. Think of our domestic politics; not much forgiveness there. Think of all the family patterns in which bitterness festers and wells up in divorce, in abuse, in disappointment with parents or children. Some grudges are kept, and polished, and reviewed and put on display to continue to poison lives and relationships.

However, there are families that know how to forgive, that know how to teach it to their children, how to practice it and keep love alive, untainted by that bitterness of old slights and injuries. What is true of families is also true of churches. Some churches are not quite the Sunnis and the Shiites, but they can come close. I have been fortunate to have served churches for almost half a century that, almost without realizing it, were places of forgiveness. It was not in the liturgy, as you would find in the *Book of Common*

*Prayer* of the Episcopal Church: “we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have not done those things which we should have done. . .” It is not talked about very much in these terms, but when I think back over the years of my life at Cedar Lane, and all the struggles and issues we were dealing with: the uses of the building, and the keeping of the grounds, and who could speak for the church, and how we should raise the money to keep it all going, and where was the power, and what should we expect of the ministers and the rest of the staff and how do you survive all those board and committee meetings? What stays with me is a basic spirit that has a great deal of forgiveness in it, and that is one of the major reasons why people join Cedar Lane and let it become an important part of their lives. It is one aspect of a general atmosphere which encourages people to deal with what is going on in their lives, even to put their lives together again after great loss, or great guilt, or great emptiness. We do it here by ourselves, or we do it with others, because at Cedar Lane there is always someone to talk to. One woman said, “After my husband died, I didn’t know what I needed, but I came to this church and I never left.”

Of course I tried to think of a specific example of how that spirit manifested itself in this community of many diverse persons. One that occurred to me happened after the Cedar Lane trip to China. It had been planned for two years, and sixty persons had signed up to go and explore China for three weeks. And then, three months before we were to leave, Tianamen Square happened, and we pondered and discussed what we should do. That fall it became a very contentious issue in the church, and the board, by a very narrow vote, withdrew church sponsorship of the trip. Twenty-three people dropped out, but thirty-seven of us went to China and had a tremendous experience. After our return, when I preached a sermon about what we had seen and done, there was a long line to talk with me at the door. A certain lady who, with her husband, had felt we were making a mistake to go, came up to my

wife and said, in the wonderful Scottish accent she had preserved through all her years in America, “And give that stubborn husband of yours a hug for me.”

And is that part of what this church community means to you, what you have experienced here? In a world of violent passions and injustice, of torture and killing, and charges of dishonesty and corruption, we struggle to live as well as we can, to meet our obligations and get through the hard times. And sometimes we make human mistakes, we err.

It is good to have a place where we feel we belong and are accepted, and as we struggle to be ourselves and stand up for what is right, and try to have our way, a place where we are pretty sure that we will be forgiven. Surely that is divine. . . or as close to divinity as Unitarian Universalists are likely to get.