

## Repentance and Repair

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

February 25, 2024

Every year, at our denomination's general assembly, a "common read" is announced; a book that thousands of UUs take up together for collective learning and reflection. Past years' selections have included *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, *Breathe* by Imani Perry, *The Third Reconstruction* by William Barber, and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, just to name a few titles that you might recognize.

This sermon is, I hope, a tantalizing preview for many of you for this year's common read: *Repentance and Repair*, by Danya Ruttenberg. It really is such a good book. It's one of those books that can be a game changer in a person's life. Or even a culture shifter. One of *those* books. Ruttenberg is a rabbi and the author of several books. One of them is entitled *Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting*. Which I think gives you a sense of how down to earth her writing is. (All the way down. But it's also in conversation with some really good, really ancient wisdom).

*Repentance and Repair* was published by the UUA's publishing house, Beacon Press, and won the National Jewish Book award.

It's starting place (and ours) is: we all mess up sometimes. We say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing. Out of ignorance, or selfishness, or a lack of problem-solving skills. Out of entitlement, impatience, or anger; or because we feel tired, overwhelmed, depleted, defensive, hangry, or just under resourced on the inside. Sometimes we do harm because we ourselves have been harmed. And, as Ruttenberg puts it, sometimes we do harm "out of a perspective that has been poisoned by the normalization of ideas that are racist, ableist, transphobic, fatphobic." We talk about that kind of thing a lot here at First Unitarian.

We do harm when we don't mean to, and we feel bad about it. We do harm when we do mean to, and then we regret it, because it's not how we want to be in the world, and we do care about other people.

How do we build a bridge back into right relationship, with another person, or with a community, and especially with ourselves, when we have caused harm?

It's one of life's most important questions. It takes on even more weight when we have set high aspirations for ourselves and for each other. Here at church, for example, where we aspire to be a community that affirms love, compassion, justice, and equity. That honors the inherent worth and dignity of every person and respects the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. These are high values. In fact, no one can do them perfectly 100% the time.

Are we setting ourselves up for failure? I don't see it that way. No, we're setting ourselves up to live the best we can. To be led by our highest values. That doesn't mean not messing up. It means turning back to our aspirations and values when we do mess up. It means doing the hard work of repair.

But how to do repair is not always clear. We've all had the experience of offering and of receiving apologies that fell short, haven't we. And we've seen them! We saw some especially ineffective apologies during the "Me, Too" movement. Some of them seemed to have been written by a publicist for Instagram and designed to avoid actually accepting responsibility. Like, *I didn't harass and assault you when I harassed and assaulted you but, hey, I'm sorry you're all worked up about it.*

Danya Ruttenberg offers a framework that comes from the doctor, philosopher, and scholar of Jewish law, Maimonides. Maimonides was born in the year 1135, in what is now Spain. At that time, that area was ruled by a Muslim empire. When Maimonides was 13 a new Muslim caliphate took over, and it became unsafe in his hometown for Jews. So, he and his family escaped. He lived in Morocco and Palestine before settling in Egypt in 1168, when he was 32. By this time, he was already well known for his writing and teaching about the Mishnah, ancient wisdom texts in Judaism that date back to 200 C.E. He went on to become a leader of the Jewish community in Egypt as well as physician to the sultan of Egypt and Syria, Saladin. When Maimonides died in the year 1204, he had become famous in medicine, philosophy, and Jewish law. What a life! Such a worldly one.

One of his greatest contributions was to write about Jewish law in such a way that everyday Jews, not just scholars, would know how to follow it. That's tricky because Jewish law is written in the Talmud not as a set of bullet points but in the form of a long, winding conversation that developed over many years and involved many scholars putting it into conversation with real life questions. Jewish scholars still discuss and debate it today. It contains stories and arguments, tributes, disses, and jokes. And some real gems for humankind. That's what Maimonides helped lift up. And that's what Danya Ruttenberg's book is about- one of those gems. Which is instructions for how to make amends when we have done harm.

The instructions create a path that can be applied in many contexts, from small to very large scale. It applies interpersonally (from one person to another) and to harm done within a whole community, and even to situations of collective trauma suffered and passed down along generations.

So, I've avoided saying the word repentance again for about five minutes now. It's not a UU sounding word. "Repent" has been used by some religious people, not all, but some very loud ones, as a cudgel. A way to religiously whack at people. Repent! Repent! And UUs are, like, so allergic to that. Especially if we have been told that we need to repent, essentially, for who we are. Gay. Atheist. Trans. A loose woman. Whatever. I get it. That is some bleepity bleeping nonsense. You're fine. I love you.

But listen to what repent really means. This is from the Oxford English Dictionary. Repent: To review one's actions and feel contrition or regret for something one has done or omitted to do; Or: to (esp. in religious contexts) acknowledge the [wrongness] of one's past action or conduct by showing sincere remorse and undertaking to reform in the future.

The dictionary uses "sinfulness" instead of "wrongness" because of the "especially in religious contexts," but wrongness, falling short, screwing up. That's what we're talking about. In fact, three of the five steps Maimonides outlines- acknowledgement, apology, and change, are sitting

in plain view right there in the OED. And although it is unlike other religious contexts, this is in fact a religious context. So, let's walk through the path Maimonides lays out.

What do if we have done harm and we, yes, repent, and want to make repair?

Step 1 is to acknowledge the harm you have done.

When you mess up, when you do the wrong thing, name it and own it.

It sounds straightforward, but this step requires a couple of key things. First, in order to acknowledge the harm we've done, we've got to understand what it was. Sometimes that's actually kind of challenging. We may be informed that we've done something wrong, but we may not understand what the big deal is, right? Then we have to do the work of getting curious and listening, of reflecting and if necessary, seeking out more education, so we can get to the point of being able to acknowledge the harm.

Another challenge is that acknowledging we've done harm can sometimes make us vulnerable to undesirable consequences. Think of the healthcare provider who accidentally harms a patient, and the pressure they may face from their employer and insurance company to not admit fault. So, it's not always as straightforward as it seems.

Another challenge is that we have to get past our own defenses when we acknowledge we've done harm.

It's tempting, even if we are able and willing to acknowledge the harm, to water it down by giving a bunch of reasons for what we did. There are always reasons, right? This isn't very satisfying for the person you've harmed. It sounds like trying to minimize things.

We feel bad when we do bad. We are afraid others will think we *are* bad. Or maybe we wonder if we are bad. We may feel shame, and that is very uncomfortable. But "I did something bad" is not the same as "I am bad." Shame begins with "I am bad," and it doesn't usually lead us anywhere good. Repentance and repair begin with "I did something bad." That's a more fruitful direction and that's the direction we want to go.

So, Step 1: Acknowledging harm.

Step 2: Starting to change. If we own up to doing something bad, but we keep behaving the same way, then our acknowledgement doesn't mean much, does it. In fact, it's kind of an insult, because now it's clear that you know what you're doing! Ruttenberg gives a large-scale example. In 2011, the Canadian government issued a formal apology to indigenous populations for the horrific abuses the government perpetrated on them. Separating families, indoctrinating children so they would lose their culture, committing child abuse against those children, and worse. The government acknowledged this, and created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which generated calls to action that constituted a kind of reparations.

Good. Except during the same time, the same government was intentionally pushing to take over indigenous treaty land to develop oil and gas pipelines and exclude indigenous people in process because, they said, seeking the consent of indigenous people created "investment uncertainty."

What use was that apology if the government was still violating the rights of indigenous people? That story makes me feel kind of sick.

To be truly on the path of repentance and repair, we must begin to change. In our personal lives that might look like giving up drinking, going to therapy, educating ourselves, or things like that.

That's step two. Start to change.

Step 3: Restitution and accepting consequences. Twenty years ago, my four-year-old son broke his older sister's "Polly Pocket" doll. He owned up to it, but she insisted, for years, that he owed her another one. Maybe she still thinks so now. I don't know. Her seven-year-old self wasn't wrong though. If we own up to doing something bad, but we don't do anything about it, even if we've changed and will never break a "Polly Pocket" doll it again, we haven't quite made amends yet, have we?

Often, making restitution involves asking the victim of the harm what is needed, or what would feel healing. "One does not make amends *at* the person harmed, but *to* them," says Ruttenberg.

Consequences may look like you're not invited to play with your sister's doll for a while, and you don't make a big deal out of it or start a pressure campaign. Or, say, a person misconducts in their job. They may have to accept the consequence of not being able to do that job anymore, or of having to work very hard to rebuild trust. Accepting the consequence means not demanding, cajoling, or loudly complaining about it. It means doing the real work of repentance and repair.

Step 4. Apologize. Step 4? Wait a second, shouldn't an apology have come right away? First thing? Well, sometimes. But here's the thing: if we rush to apologize before we have adequately acknowledged the harm, or worse before we understand it, and if we apologize but aren't planning to change anything in the future, the apology may actually make things worse. It is possible for a person to quickly realize what they've done, to instantly learn from it, and to issue a real apology. But we have to watch out for the temptation to apologize just to get out of our own discomfort, or get someone to stop being mad at us, or avoid being inconvenienced.

And finally, step 5. Make different choices when faced with similar circumstances in the future. And friends, this will only happen if we've done the deep work of repentance and repair. If we have learned and changed. If we have done these things, a better choice will happen naturally. We will have taken responsibility and become more like the person we have the potential to be. If we do harm, and we do not do the work of self-reflection, growth, and repair, then even if we apologize, we are likely eventually to once again show the same tendency or behavior that caused the harm in the first place.

Danya Ruttenberg says, "In theory, it all sounds simple enough: own the pain you've caused, take steps to change, make amends, apologize, and don't do it again." But the reason she wrote a whole book about it is, as you can already see, the reality is that each of these steps can be really hard.

So... you want to explore it more, right? Or are you curious to imagine how the same process can be used on a large scale? It is possible. Even when terrible things have happened. Even in this world, right now. I encourage you to join the workshop Bob and I will be leading next

month. It will take place in the Social Hall, over three sessions. The first is from 1-4pm on Saturday March 23<sup>rd</sup>. The next two are evening sessions, Wednesdays March 27 and April 10 from 6-8pm.

You do have to read the book first. The public libraries have a few copies. You can buy it online from the UUA bookstore, or order it through a local bookstore, or another online site. You can get it on an eReader or as an audiobook.