At-one-ment and attachment

Spiritual and psychological lessons on repair

Rachel Miller Jacobs

I'm convinced that small painful things can be both moral (wrong) and non-moral (painful without being wrong). And I'm also convinced that different kinds of repair are needed for these different kinds of experiences.

Small moral wrongs include what some would call white lies, failing to keep minor promises, insults, cheating at games, et cetera. We repair these kinds of small wrongs with an apology followed by better performance in the future. I'm partial to an apology rubric that I learned from an early childhood educator: "I'm sorry I . . . This was wrong because . . . In the future I will . . . Can you please forgive me?" If you think this is an easy rubric to inhabit, think again: Its specificity requires us to name accurately the way(s) we went wrong, be explicit about our plans to do better, and ask for forgiveness. While some people criticize this request for forgiveness as manipulative or premature, what I appreciate about it is that it reinforces that we have, in fact, done wrong: that we need to be forgiven.

But how do we repair painful things that aren't wrong? What do we do with the interpersonal pain that results from misunderstandings and miscommunications, cultural differences, personality traits, and getting our buttons pushed? In this case, the task isn't to make right what went wrong. An apology is not the right remedy. We need something else, something that helps us to *feel* and *experience* again the "rightness" between us.

Drawing on the various meanings of the New Testament words translated as "forgiveness" and "forgive," and on an atonement metaphor from the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich, I suggest an enlarged understanding of forgiveness that allows us to make "right" what has gone "wrong."

New Testament contributions to thinking about "forgiveness"

The Greek word ἀφίημι (*aphiemi*) is used 187 times in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament combined. Most of these uses are in the synoptic gospels; the fact that various forms of the word *aphiemi* are used so much in these gospels suggests that there may be something characteristically Jesus-y about *aphiemi*-ing.

Aphiemi is always translated as "forgive" when something is named as a sin. On a few occasions, *aphiemi* is translated as "forgive" in the context of financial debts. Most of the time, however, *aphiemi* is translated in a variety of ways that are not specifically about forgiveness as we understand it, including "allow," "abandon," "cancel," "desert," "permit," "let," "leave," "send away," and "release." This range of meanings offers us more than one way to think about and remediate painful experiences.

Theological contributions to thinking about "forgiveness"

When she lay near death because of a severe illness, mystic and hermit Julian was given sixteen "showings" (visions). The thirteenth vision concerned a master and a servant.[1] In it, the master sends the servant off to do a job. The servant goes, but goes so eagerly, so quickly, that he falls into a ravine and gets hurt. Stuck in the gorge, he despairs because he can't get his job done. Julian looks closely: Can she blame the servant? Does his master? No. Not only does the master not condemn his servant, but he also takes pity on him, rewarding him even more than if he hadn't fallen into that ravine.

In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian records both her visions and twenty years' worth of her reflections on them. And what becomes clear for her is that God looks on sinners with love, not anger. While many atonement metaphors are built on the premise that humans ought to satisfy God, Julian's reflections make the exact opposite point. In her ninth revelation, Jesus looks at her and asks, "Are you pleased?" "Yes," she answers. Then he says, "If you are pleased, then I am pleased."[2] In Julian's view, Jesus became human not to die for our sins, but to ensure we were satisfied.[3] God doesn't need to be assuaged. We do.

Julian understands the gap between humans and God as the reality of human imperfection rather than defiance of God's will. For her, the fall is not primarily about willful disobedience. Instead, sin is something we suffer from regardless of the extent to which we're guilty.[4] Julian points out that part of what contributes to our suffering and separation from God is our focus: We are mesmerized by how imperfect we are rather than trusting God's love. We live in hells of our own making.

Julian's thinking rings true with what some contemporary psychologists have suggested: namely, that our problem is the perception of harm as

1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Grace Warrack (Methuen, 1901), 107–9 (the Thirteenth Revelation), Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION.

2 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 47 (the Twelfth Revelation).

3 Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Wipf & Stock, 2009), 21.

4 McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 17.

harm. It's this perception rather than the need to make a moral judgment about the harm that "triggers the possibility that one might respond with forgiveness."[5] Julian's focus on the relationship between Lord and servant draws our attention to the deep human need for connection and to the ways the shaking of that attachment is an experience of what I'm calling non-moral harm.

Pain and disconnection

Disconnection is part of what makes relational pain painful: Humans are built for connection. This seems so obvious that it's barely worth mentioning; I'm emphasizing it, however, because in practice so little of our energy goes to noticing and tending to disconnection.

We have several tried-and-true strategies for dealing with the pain of disconnection. The first is to blame. We can blame others: "Whatever has happened is their fault, and they should fix it right now." Sometimes this is accurate—they did do something. But not always. We can blame ourselves: "Of course I messed up; I always mess up, and I just got what I deserved." Sometimes, and perhaps usually, we did something less than skillfully. Yet blame is a blunt instrument, and few people react positively to it. Blaming ourselves or others will likely deepen disconnection rather than build connection and establish a fruitful way forward.

A second tack to deal with the pain of disconnection is to minimize or deny the harm we've experienced. "That wasn't such a big deal," we say to ourselves. "Just suck it up and move on." Or we numb ourselves with Netflix binges, stress eating, or strenuous physical activity. Denial is an effective short-term way to get a little rest and marshal our resources for work that's beyond us right now; it's okay to take a break by watching a movie (or two), having a piece of chocolate, or going on a long walk. But if we only use this strategy, denial disconnects us from our actual lives.

We minimize someone else's painful experience by emphasizing that it's no big deal and telling them they should just get over it. Or we avoid the pain of acknowledging or witnessing the pain they're reporting by moving into defensiveness: "This has nothing to do with me" or "It's not my fault." We can also move into fix-it mode, offering advice or suggesting solutions without them being requested. While advice-giving or solution-seeking seem like helping behaviors, they're often ways of distancing ourselves rather than drawing closer.

The examples above help us marinate in the reality that part of what makes pain painful is that it's an experience of disconnection. In the case of small moral painful experiences, disconnection is one result of

5 James K. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Liturgical Press, 2015), 99.

In the case of small non-moral painful experiences, disconnection isn't just a part of the harm; disconnection (or our fear of it) is the whole thing. Though nobody has done anything wrong . . . things still aren't "right."

the wrongdoing: The broken promise, the denigrating comment, or the lack of truthfulness shakes our confidence and trust in each other. Re-establishing connection closes the loop on making things right.

In the case of small non-moral painful experiences, however, disconnection isn't just a part of the harm; disconnection (or our fear of it) is the whole thing. Though nobody has done anything wrong, though nothing needs to be apologized for, things still aren't "right." So while re-establishing connection is useful in repairing small moral painful experiences, fixing small non-moral ones is all about finding ways to reconnect, reaffirm, or strengthen our shaken connection(s). And part of this reconnection involves being willing to see and appreciate as real the pain that we and others are experiencing.

Re-establishing connection as a key practice of repairing non-moral painful experiences

One of the principles that underlies this article is what developmental psychologist Per Granqvist calls "relationalism": the idea that the human mind is not only "fundamentally sculpted by relational experiences" but also that it "almost unceasingly . . . keeps searching for relational partners."[6] One of the significant ways in which relationalism has been theorized and researched is through attachment theory, which grew out of the work of the twentieth-century British psychologist, psychoanalyst, and psychiatrist John Bowlby.[7] Bowlby's early research concluded that human connection, particularly the attachment between infants and their primary caregiver(s), was as important as nutrition for children's growth and well-being. While Bowlby's research focused on the relationship between the children and caregivers, he believed that attachment characterized human experience throughout the life cycle.

If we accept that disconnection is the entirety of a non-moral painful experience, approaching attachment disruptions in search of confessions and apologies will both make things worse and fail to address our real needs. Psychologist Sue Johnson puts it even more strongly: Unless we address our

6 Per Granqvist, *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality: A Wider View* (Guilford Press, 2020), 7.

7 John Bowlby, *Attachment*, 2nd ed. (Basic Books, 1982).

"fundamental need" for connection, all other communication techniques are "misguided and ineffectual."[8]

Here's an example of a non-moral painful experience, one caused primarily and obviously by (fear of) disconnection. One time, my honey came home at midnight when I was expecting him at 9:30 p.m. I'd eaten supper, read a book, gone to bed, and fallen asleep; when I woke up near eleven to discover I was still the only one in bed, I was concerned: What had happened? I called and called and called, and each increasingly frantic call went straight to voicemail. By midnight, I was beside myself, sure he'd been in a terrible car accident or was maybe even dead. Why else wouldn't he be home when he said he'd be?

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Greeting his post-midnight arrival with a demand for an apology wouldn't have made any sense to him. The professional association dinner had run longer than expected, and everyone had been told to turn off their phones so that the program wouldn't be interrupted. Turning off your phone when asked isn't wrong, and neither is attending a dinner and program that lasts longer than you expect. Offering me an "apology lite" ("Sorry I didn't text; I figured you'd be asleep") or telling me I was needlessly worried as he walked in the door ("See? I'm fine!") wouldn't have helped me. I was glad he was all right, and I wanted a text the next time an event ran substantially longer than expected, yet I didn't need moral repair since what had happened wasn't a moral wrong. But I needed something. I needed him to see my fear and address it. I needed him to acknowledge how much he meant to me and to assure me of how much I meant to him. I needed re-connection.

If, as I'm suggesting, the entirety of non-moral painful experiences consists of our experience of pain and our fear that our pain signals disconnection, the remedy is to acknowledge that pain and re-establish or re-affirm our connection.

The connection conversation

Biblically, reconnecting with important others "forgives" by *sending away* blame and guilt and *canceling* any demands for repentance. It also helps us *release* the stories we're telling, since they reveal more about our fears and our needs than about anyone's character or behavior.

8 Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Your Guide to the Most Successful Approach to Building Loving Relationships* (Piatkus, 2011), 34.

Theologically, reconnecting with important others affirms the reality revealed by Julian's atonement story: that at-one-ment is also, and always, about the deep bodily knowledge that all is indeed well, that our connection with God is trustworthy and dependable, and that our connection with many important others is too.

Yet making ourselves vulnerable by naming our need for connection and our fear of disconnection can be both difficult and frightening. What if our request for reconnection is refused? What if our vulnerability is used against us? Because both are possibilities, it's important to weigh the relationship context, the degree to which this person can offer us what we're asking for, and our current resilience and energy. I may be willing to invest time and energy in a conversation with someone I don't know very well as a way of practicing my skill—or I may decide it's not worth it. The same could happen in intimate relationships: This may not be the right time, the right issue, or the right moment for a connection conversation. Or perhaps, for whatever combination of reasons, it is.

Re-establishing connection with someone with whom we've experienced a painful experience is also tricky because these experiences are difficult to capture in words and mean something to us based on variables that may be hard for another person to grasp. While we may have some agreement about what counts as a small moral wrong, non-moral painful experiences are so person- and situation-specific that the other person may genuinely struggle to understand why whatever-it-is matters to us, and why it matters to us to that degree. So finding a way to communicate our experience without descending into blame is especially important.

To help us do this, I'm suggesting a simple reconnection rubric that's easy to remember when we're under stress. Though this rubric doesn't guarantee success, it gives us a place to start and some guideposts to help us along the way. We can keep returning to it until we're satisfied that it's done its job or at least done the job it can do right now. It has four steps: "The story I'm telling is . . . What's the story you're telling/the experience from your end of things? . . . Here's what I need . . . What do you need?"[9]

Because non-moral painful experiences are all about the story we're telling and why that story affects us the way it does, this re-connection "rubric" is more an open-ended conversation starter than an actual rubric. And because what bothers us may be opaque to the other person, or not land for them with the seriousness it does for us, our connecting conversation may involve significant storytelling, more detail, and more patience than a brief, pointed apology to get the job done.

9 "The story I'm telling" comes from Brené Brown, who suggests clarifying "The story I'm making up" in both *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Random House, 2017) and *Dare To Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (Random House, 2018).

"When I woke up, saw the time, and found your place in bed empty beside me, the story I was telling myself was that something terrible had happened to you. You like to go to bed just as early as I do, and you always let me know when something's come up. So all I could imagine was that you'd been killed in a terrible car accident. I felt paralyzed by grief, started worrying about telling the kids you'd died, and looked in horror at the huge gap your death would leave in every part of my life. You're so important to me; imagining that you were dead was devastating. I'm so glad you're here . . . and my body and emotions are still reeling from the fear of what might have happened. I need a long, long, long hug to reassure me that everything is okay."

This is what I wish I'd said when my darling came home late. What happened was that I was so frantic and shaken and in tears when he walked through the door that all I could manage were accusations disguised as questions: "Where were you?!" and "Why didn't you let me know?!" He offered his side of the story in a somewhat prickly way; he was blindsided by my reaction and wanted to distance himself from my accusations. His clarifications (an unexpectedly long event and a request to turn off phones) seem helpful in retrospect, though I didn't find them satisfying at the time. I think I requested a long hug, but we were both too ruffled to really relax into it. I never asked him what he needed from me, though if this circumstance were repeated, I hope I would.

It's relatively easy to come up with a good conversation script when you've had time to think about it or when the stakes are low(er), but a connecting conversation doesn't have to be perfect—it just has to get the ball rolling. A conversation that falls somewhere between the bad first draft I used with my honey (accusations framed as questions) and an articulate paragraph that helps the other person live inside your experience (my after-the-fact description of what it was like to be me that evening) is good enough. That good-enough midnight conversation could have gone something like this: "I freaked out when I woke up and you weren't here, because I couldn't think of any reason you'd be this late other than being dead. I know I'd make it on my own, but wow, did I panic thinking about *having to*. Don't say anything; just give me a super long hug."

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About the author

Rachel Miller Jacobs is Associate Professor of Congregational Formation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She is a daughter, sister, spouse, parent, in-law, and grandparent of five delightful grands. She teaches in the area of Christian formation and likes to garden, read cozy mysteries, and go tandem biking with her sweetie pie.