



Eric Lomax was tortured and imprisoned for making a radio and drawing a map. He used a couple of old pre-amp tubes, wires, a capacitor, an earpiece from an old phone and connected it to a car battery. This wouldn't have been a punishable offense in a normal time and in a normal place, but Eric was not in a normal time and not in a normal place. He was a 23-year-old lieutenant in the British Army, which had just surrendered to the Japanese in Singapore. It was World War II. And he and his compatriots were forced to march to Thailand and to build the Burmese Railroad.

While he was in this place, he built a radio so that he might hear the developments of the war somehow to tune in to the BBC overseas report. You can imagine first that this slave labor camp where the soldiers were forced to work in the jungle and build this railway was torture enough. But when he was found with his radio, he was beaten to within inches of his life. He was waterboarded and put in cages smaller than any human being should be put in and put in isolation. His inquisitor was named Takashi Nagase. The situation was horrible. And we have two connections to this situation in the church, or at least we did.

Once we had a member, his name was Fritz Andueg, man who I buried who was in one such prison under the Japanese and the Dutch Indonesia. He told me before he died that he received a small handful of rice for each meal and each misstep that any prisoner made was sure death. And the other connection was a member named Eric Schleier who flew a rescue mission to this very place. You know it as the River Kwai. He was a fairly famous pilot and later became LBJ's Air Force One pilot. I don't know what he would think about the new Air Force One, but Eric told me that they had to wait on the tarmac often with LBJ while LBJ sobered up before they would let him walk off the plane.

But he rarely talked about his flight into this region in Thailand, this harrowing experience of rescuing these soldiers from the Japanese. The other Eric, Eric Lomax, the British soldier is the

focus of today because this week, 25 of us watched the film *The Railway Man*, which is made about Eric Lomax's life. You might imagine that for decades after the war, the soldiers who were in these places carried the abuses and the trauma and the torture and the captivity in their hearts and souls. And Eric Lomax was among them. He lived in prison not only by what had happened to him, but by his own hatred of the man who tortured him. For 50 years, he dreamed of revenge against this man.

And then something unexpected happened. He discovered that the Japanese officer that he blamed for his torture had spent his entire post-war life carrying remorse. That Nagase had devoted himself to reconciliation work and to honoring the victims of those camps and to seeking some form of atonement for the horrors of the Burma Railway. Long story short, letters were exchanged and Lomax returned to meet Nagase face to face in 1993 at the River Kwai. Eric encountered something he hadn't expected. Not a monster, not the captor that was frozen in his memories, but an elderly man burdened by sorrow. A man carrying wounds of his own.

A broken, sorrowful man who had spent almost 50 years trying to right a terrible wrong. What happened surprised both of these men who had been fighting the war inside of them for so long. They arrived at forgiveness. After their meeting, Lomax wrote, "While we cannot forget what happened, we can resolve to live in peace and harmony." Now, Lomax did not describe forgiveness as letting Nagase free. He said that hatred had become a second prison, that the war had ended decades earlier, but his captivity had not. He said that forgiveness became the key that unlocked the door of his prison, that had freed him from this relationship to the torture and to the revenge that percolated in his heart and soul.

He also knew those words that you know, the words that have been said so many times in churches you grew up in, those words that are famous in the Bible, the ones that go love your neighbor as yourself and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. You've heard those, right? You can nod. You can actually respond to. These teachings are etched into the Christian memory. They are among the most familiar ideas in religion, yet they remain among the most difficult things any human will ever attempt.

Famously, C.S. Lewis, who you read as a child about wardrobes and magical lands, wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*, that he admitted that loving one's neighbor becomes complicated when we often struggle to love ourselves. And that forgiving others so that we might be forgiven is no small task. He wrote a whole book on those two things. Just trying to forgive your spouse, your partner, your friend, your child, your coworker for something they said this week or the person who cut you off on the way to church on the highway. Now that's real work, isn't it? Nevermind the larger wounds. Nevermind the betrayals, the abuses, the injustices, the wars, the atrocities that scar human history.

There is nothing easy here. We are treading in deep water when we talk about forgiveness. It doesn't just boil down to two easy statements you remember from Sunday school. There is nothing easy about forgiveness. And C.S. Lewis wrote to hate the sin, but not the sinner for so long. I used to think this is a silly straw splitting distinction. How could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later, he said, years later, it occurred to me that there was one

man to whom I had been doing this all my life, namely myself. Lewis realized that he could despise his own greed and cowardice and pride or selfishness while never ceasing to love himself.

In fact, the reason he hated those things was because he cared about the person committing them. Christianity, he argued in his book, does not ask us to minimize cruelty, injustice, or wrongdoing. It does not ask us to pretend evil is good. It asks us to hope that somehow, somewhere, healing remains possible. That loving another person does not mean excusing them. It means wishing for their restoration. It means refusing to surrender their humanity. Our faith invites us to think about forgiveness in pretty much the same way. Rather than imagining God as an offended authority waiting to pardon us, we might understand forgiveness as one of the ways love repairs what has been broken.

For many of us, the deepest spiritual question is not how do I satisfy God, but how do I restore relationships that are broken? How do I reconnect with myself and with others and with creation and with the sacred center of life? In that sense, forgiveness is less of a transaction and more of a transformation. It's not about earning some divine approval. It's about becoming more human and more fully human. To be honest, the church has not always handled forgiveness all that well. Too often, forgiveness is treated like spiritual spackle. Every crack and every wound and every injustice receives the same answer. Just forgive. But life is more complicated than that, isn't that? Isn't it?

Blindness doesn't require forgiveness. It requires sight, doesn't require forgiveness. It requires liberation. Hunger doesn't require forgiveness. It requires nourishment. A closed heart needs openness and oppressed people need justice. A wounded soul needs healing. Sometimes forgiveness is not the first step. Sometimes truth comes first. Sometimes safety comes first. Sometimes accountability comes first. For us in this faith, forgiveness is not acquiescence. It's not surrender to injustice. It is not spiritual bypassing. Victims are never obligated to forgive on someone else's timetable. The prophets remind us of this. They did not call for forgiveness without justice.

They called for truth and accountability and liberation and repair. And we Unitarian universalists are reminded of the inherent dignity and worth of every person that includes those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm. And holding both truths at once is difficult, if not impossible work, but it is worthy work. You see, forgiveness cannot erase accountability, but accountability need not eliminate the possibility of redemption. The question is not whether wrongs matter. The question is whether human beings are forever reducible to their worst moments. What forgiveness offers is a way forward. I'm guessing you understand this because you're sitting in this church, not some other church.

You understand that forgiveness is not a denial of what happened. Not forgetting, not pretending, but rather a way, a path, a movement from exile toward homecoming and from estrangement, toward connection, from bitterness, toward freedom, from being lost toward being found. There's a film running right now about an old Greek story that's just about that exact thing. We've been teaching this for 2,000 or more years. There are some powerful examples of healing in our world that reveal this exact truth. And it brings me to Desmond Tutu in the book I've been reading all week, his book on forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu learned these lessons in South Africa in their Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid where horrible things were done in the name of racism. Horrible things were done between neighbors. Many experts predicted that South Africa would fall into civil war and enact elements of revenge. Instead, the nation attempted something extraordinary, not forgetting, not denying, not excusing, but rather truth telling and confession and acknowledgement and where possible reconciliation. Tutu became convinced that forgiveness was not simply a religious virtue. It was a practical necessity for society because revenge keeps suffering alive.

That is why I love the reading from Tutu's book today that TJ read. Grant me the will to want to forgive. The prayer before forgiveness is often simply the prayer for the willingness to forgive. And honestly, we are being trained to live in cycles of revenge. Everything from White House policy to Netflix series. Everywhere we turn, we are listening and experiencing revenge narratives. Just pay attention for the next week to the news and what you're watching on TV. We are not being exposed to forgiveness narratives. We are being tumbled in the laundry of revenge cycles. And it is affecting our soul. It is affecting our willingness to even enter into the idea that forgiveness is possible or that it is valued.

What I appreciate about reading Tutu's book on this topic is that he says that forgiveness is not magic. It's not forgetting. It's not pretending everything is fine. It's a practice of truth. In this community, we speak of covenant rather than creed, but what binds us together is not agreement on doctrine. It's rather a commitment to right relationship. When that covenant is broken, healing requires honesty and accountability and repair and sometimes reconciliation. The key word in that sentence is sometimes because it's not always possible, but it doesn't rule out the need for forgiveness. Tutu's path honors that reality in this book. And I know some of you will ask me what the book is called.

It's called *The Book of Forgiving* by Desmond Tutu. It asks us neither to deny the wound nor become defined by it. And this is a key concept. The work begins with courage. As Tutu writes, "Do I dare to see the hurt I have caused? I can glimpse all the shattered pieces of that fragile thing, that soul trying to rise on broken wings of hope. And if I am afraid to see, how can I not be afraid to say forgive me?" I can't read you the whole book today, but if you need it's there. It outlines this fourfold path of forgiveness, which I like a lot. And the first thing is that a story must be told.

The story of what happened must be let out into the world. The healing begins when we acknowledge what happened. What remains hidden often continues to control us, it says. And the second is naming the hurt, the grief, the anger, the betrayal, the fear, the shame, the resentment. Naming the hurt keeps it from festering in silence. Is any of this making sense to you in your life right now? The third is granting forgiveness. And this could be immediate or it could take years, but as someone said in our film screening of the railway man this week, forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a choice. A decision to stop allowing the wound to determine the future.

And finally, the fourth step in Tutu's work is to renew or release the relationship. Some relationships can be rebuilt and others cannot. The important thing is you have a choice. It's a lot to unpack. Go watch the railway, man, and you'll learn more. In that film, it's been playing on me all

week. I've been thinking about what in my life needs reconciliation and forgiveness. Admittedly, Eric Lomax wins the Olympic gold for the forgiveness competition. You might just have to call your sister or forgive a dead parent, someone who's not going to talk back or something simple.

What you shouldn't try is to forgive all the unrepentant January 6th hooligans or a president of a country you might know that has literally turned the Capitol into a swamp with algae. Starting small is probably a better idea. I know there's something out there in your life that you might want to look at. We can't all be Eric Lomax, but we can be inspired by his Olympian story. And what we know about this story is that there were other people in his life that helped him. There were other veterans, and particularly there was his wife who he loved and cared for. And the whole motivation for this was because of that relationship.

And if you have to heal another relationship to heal the relationship you're in, well, then that makes it all the more important. Eric Lomax's wife was the first, her name was Patty. She was the first one who reached out to Takashi Nagase. She asked whether two wounded human beings could find a meeting place. The place Tutu described so beautifully, the place in the middle, the no man's land where you are right and I am right too, and both of us are wrong and wronged. The middle place where the healing begins, not where justice is forgotten, not where truth disappears, but where our common humanity becomes visible again.

And when Eric Lomax and Takashi Nagase finally stood together on the banks of the River Kwai, guess what happened? Nagase burst into tears and fell into Eric Lomax's arms. For years, he had carried a guilt. For years, Eric had carried a hatred. Both men were exhausted and both men needed freedom. And that's when Eric handed Nagase a letter in which he wrote, "While we cannot forget what happened, we can resolve to live in peace and harmony. I have given you my full forgiveness." And then he added something remarkable. He told Nagase that he should no longer carry the guilt of an entire nation upon his shoulders. And in that moment, two men who had been enemies became companions on the same path.

Takashi Nagase died in June of 2011 at age 93. And Eric Lomax died 16 months later at age 93. Both men died free, not because history changed or because suffering disappeared, not because memory faded, but because they found a way to forgiveness. Because they figured out what Desmond Tutu and so many would learn. What I would say to you today, that there is no future without forgiveness. There is no future without truth. There is no future without accountability. There is no future without justice. There is no future without forgiveness. Maybe for us, spiritual pilgrims, maybe not Olympians. The goal is to become a little wiser, a little more compassionate, and maybe a little more whole.

And maybe this inspires you. Maybe the journey begins where the prayer began. Grant me the will to want to forgive. Amen and amen.

