

FORGIVENESS ONE TO ONE
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On Being a Spiritual Nurturer
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Forgiveness covers everything from personal, religious, or psychological forgiveness to Quaker meeting-wide attempts at forgiveness, to community-wide and nationally-based Truth and Reconciliation commissions. Because forgiveness is such a broad subject this paper will focus on the closest form of forgiveness, one person to another close to him or her. I will examine interpersonal and spiritually based forgiveness. Included will be anecdotes from the author's life as well as other anecdotes from the authors referenced.

John S. Mogabgab gave a wonderful description of the topic: "Forgiveness is a mystery. It belongs to the realm of freedom rather than the realm of necessity; it is scented with the spices of grace rather than the sweat of legalism; it delights and humbles with the impact of wholly unexpected bounty; gentler than a tender embrace, it is tougher than the bands of retribution that strap us tightly to our pain." (1) It is pain from which forgiveness springs, and freedom and grace are its fruits. I know this experientially, having enjoyed the fruits of forgiveness within my own family and extended family, and I remember the pain and hurt that prompted it.

My personal insight into the process of forgiveness is that I must examine myself fully, shining light on all my faults, self doubt, and hurts, then give those all to God, who loves me just as I am. When I have thus faced myself, I can forgive another by accepting that he or she is an imperfect human being just as I am, and that God loves him or her as well. It is not easy to admit all this to myself many times, but practice makes it easier as the years go by.

Interpersonal forgiveness is that between a person and her partner, daughter, son, parent or co-worker, in short, The Other. The closer the relationship, the more opportunities for hurts, major and minor. Contrast this with forgiveness of another for crimes of humanity, such as the request for forgiveness of the dying Nazi encountered by Simon Wiesenthal in The Sunflower. (2) The Nazi officer did not reach Wiesenthal, the person asked to forgive because the prisoner had not been hurt by the atrocities carried out by that particular officer. A further contrast is a crime against a person that requires accountability, such as criminal justice. That may give opportunities for forgiveness on the part of the victim, but it may be much more difficult.

Lewis, B. Smedes in The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How, (3) writes about the three stages of forgiving:

1. **We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.** "Eighty percent of what we see lies behind our eyes. If this is so, 80 percent of what we see when we look at a person who recently wronged us and deeply wounded us must be behind our eyes in the memory of our pain. We filter the image of the person through the gauze of our wounded memories, and in the

process, we alter his reality... As we start on the miracle of forgiveness, we begin to see our enemy through a clearer lens, less smudged by hate. We begin to see a real person., a botched self, no doubt a hodgepodge of meanness and decency, lies, and truths, good and evil, that not even the shadows of his soul can wholly hide.” (4)

2. We surrender our right to get even, When we have been wronged, it is quite a human reaction to want to get even, to make the other person feel as much pain as we feel. “ We want our enemy to suffer, yes but we only want him to *know* that he is suffering *only* for what he did to us. We don’t want him to admit he made a mistake, flip an apology in our direction like a fifty cent gratuity and go on as if he had done nothing worse than burping before dessert As we move along a step or two on the path of forgiving, we hold the right to vengeance in our two hands, take one last look at it and let it spill to the ground like a handful of water.” Smedes also points out that it is important not to surrender justice when we let go vengeance. “ The line between the two is faint, unsteady and fine.” p. 7 (5)

3. We revise our feeling toward the person we forgive. We begin to see the other person in a different light. Before we felt simple hate. “ We may disguise it so we won’t have to recognize it in ourselves. But hate is hate. It may be the passive hate that makes us feel good when we hear that bad things have happened to the person who has wronged us. Or it may be an aggressive hate screaming for the other person to feel a pain at least the size of ours. When we begin to forgive, however, we feel a real, though reluctant wish that some good might come that weasel’s way... The feeling of goodwill is likely to be weak and hesitant at the start, and we are almost bound to backslide into malice along the way.”p. 10 (6) We need to be teamed with God in the modest miracle of healing.

In an article in the August 2008 issue of Friends Journal, Lynn Fitz-Hugh lists “21 Tips on Personal Peacemaking.” (7) She notes that she has broken each one of these tips at least once in her own life! I have selected certain “tips” as they spoke to my condition. [10.] “Each person has something to teach us. People don’t arrive in our lives by mistake... God had sent this person to illuminate an area where you struggle and where you can grow.” [12.] People don’t cause each other’s feelings. When we experience a re-stimulation of old hurts and feelings it gives us a chance to look at old feelings and process them and heal. [16.] Use “I” statements of our own experiences and reactions as our own, rather than making them responsible for our own feelings. [18.] People who are very alike often have a great deal of conflict. “ This is because the behavior of the other person reminds one of oneself in some very painful ways. Perhaps we see our worst or most detested traits in the other person (but of course it looks much worse on him or her). What is helpful is not to focus on how awful the other person is but to focus back on how we feel about ourselves for our own behavior. When we can love ourselves as we are, the other person magically becomes less annoying and more an object for compassion.”

I personally have realized that the very persons who chafe me the most are most like me, including my husband. It seems that persons with similar traits to mine know just how to push my buttons, and I know just how to push theirs! It is hard work to forgive a mirror image, starkly seeing oneself in the harsh light of day. Water Wink, in “My Enemy, My Destiny” pointed out

that very process. (8)

David Augsburger in Caring Enough to Forgive, Caring Enough Not to Forgive (9) writes an anecdote about a married couple. The husband offers to help a young woman who is having financial or behavioral issues, and the couple decides to take her in to their home. The wife finds her helpful and all seems well. Then one day the wife comes home unexpectedly when she became sick at work, only to find her husband and the young woman in a compromising position. Augsburger describes her anger and rejection of this betrayal of trust between herself and her husband. He points out that she does not have to have a reunion with the husband, thereby absolving him of the hurt she feels. Yet she can work on forgiveness by seeing him as a flawed human being, much like herself is a flawed human being.

As I write this, a real life story is unfolding. The news is full of the politician John Edwards admitting to an affair with a young woman who became pregnant and had a baby. As the story unfolds, there are many questions about who, when and certainly why such a man who was a vice-presidential candidate and then again ran for president would do this. His wife has been through breast cancer and now incurable bone cancer before and during the time of this affair. Many people in North Carolina, including myself are examining infidelity, untruthfulness and also forgiveness. Can Elizabeth Edwards forgive him? She has a reason to try to keep the family together, because she has two young children. If her life is cut short by cancer, and she divorces John Edwards, who will take care of the children? The life of this family is very public, so we will probably hear one way or another how forgiveness healed that family.

In my own family, I had a grandfather who had an adulterous relationship with a woman while he was married to my grandmother. It was obvious to my mother, her sister and her mother that something was going on when my grandfather failed to show up for holidays, or other family events. My mother described to me that she and her sister overheard them talking about divorce, which my grandmother opposed because she was a Baptist. They decided to wait until the girls graduated from high school. I have heard from my first cousin that my aunt said, "Don't you ever tell anyone about this!" to my mother. They did divorce, and my grandfather married the woman who was his secretary (though she first went off and joined the W.A.V.E.S. so as to get out of the way for a while.) Over the years my mother forgave her own father and my step- grandmother, Winnie, which took a little longer. During my youth, I remember overhearing her say that she had finally made peace with Winnie. On the other hand, my aunt never forgave Winnie, and was a very unhappy woman most of her life. Both women became alcoholics, as well, which affected both of their own families.

I feel that I have grown up in a culture of forgiveness in my own family. My mother who had been so hurt as a teenager by her own parents' divorce, had me as her first child without the benefit of what we now call Parenting Classes. She never found me to be a cuddly baby, rather I was independent and more of my father's favorite. Mama was insecure and angry and she abused me verbally and physically from a very young age. The words hurt me terribly, and I have dealt with them in therapy during my adulthood. When my sister was born 3 and a half years later, Mama found her to be a sweet happy baby and bonded with her much more. As we

grew together, my sister and I would play and tease, and my mother would intervene and punish me whenever my sister shrieked, whether or not it was my fault. I learned to be defiant since the punishment did not usually fit the behavior. My sister, years later, realized that she herself had developed issues around watching me receive the brunt of my mother's anger.

My mother made another decision during her life that I believe haunted her thereafter. She, with the encouragement of her sister, decided to commit my grandmother to a mental institution. My mother told me that a doctor thought it was the wrong decision, and made her feel very guilty about it. I am not sure, myself, that it was the right decision, especially since I later saw that my grandmother was medically neglected at Bryce Hospital. But she lived independently on the campus and organized knitting circles and was generally happy most of the time. Every time she came home for a visit, she wanted to move back to her own home and there were big arguments with my parents about that. I wish I knew then what I know now about forgiveness of oneself.

After I went to college, I married for a short time, and then we divorced, rather amicably. My sister and I grew very close. She helped me understand more about Mama, having the benefit of close communication with her. Then I married my present husband, John, and Mama really liked him, so our communication became much better. All the hurts and bad memories started to fade away. Without realizing it, I was forgiving my mother, as at the same time I was becoming more secure in my own self. But life takes twists and turns. Mama's father died of a heart attack, my first cousin committed suicide, and a beloved uncle died of Lou Gehrig's Disease, all dying within about 3 years of each other. My mother was very affected by losing all these men she loved and to who she was so close. She began to exhibit strange behaviors, which were eventually diagnosed as Alzheimers. Those were difficult years for my father and my sister and I. She was put in an Alzheimers ward of an assisted living facility and died about 10 years later. I experienced severe grief, feeling that I had only about 10 years of getting to know her before she became incompetent, and missing her, but also having lingering memories of all the hurts of my childhood. Through Grief Group Counseling and journaling and the passage of time, I finally came to complete forgiveness of my mother..

In reading Augsburg's Care Enough Not to Forgive, (10) the second half of his book, I recognize in some of my past forays into forgiveness of colleagues who hurt me that I may be engaging in a certain denial. I was telling myself that since I didn't have a close relationship with that person it didn't hurt me. This was not recognizing that I did experience the hurt in a very real manner. But I have hope that I can try to work on forgiveness if only from my side. Again, what I have come to understand is that in order to forgive, I need to see all of my faults, fears and foibles in true honesty and accept myself no matter what. Those same fears, faults and foibles within me may be mirrored in the person who hurts me, so he has to prop himself up by putting me down. We are both still flawed, imperfect human beings, so I usually can forgive and move on. Still the doubts and resentments creep in at times. I guess this is what Jesus meant when he told Peter that he needed to forgive someone seventy times seven. Matthew 18:21-22.

Scripture, especially in the words of Jesus, has many references to forgiveness. While

being tortured and crucified on the cross, Jesus said, “Forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34. This is the ultimate example of forgiveness in the victory over death that Jesus has shown us. I attended an anniversary of the Iraq war at an Episcopal church that had set up a labyrinth inside a room. As I walked slowly round and round the labyrinth paths, those same words came to me in relation to the war-makers and the soldiers. It was a very powerful message of forgiveness for me.

In Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy, (11) the authors describe that the Amish live in close-knit communities where many times agriculture is their primary profession. Their culture is Biblically based as well as based on traditional cultural norms and types of worship. Their families are large and each person in the community knows each other like family. There is a mutual interdependence such as when all males come together to raise a barn, or when all women cook for a wedding or make a quilt together. There are well established rules for living: some conscious, some more unconscious, to help ameliorate conflict and promote peace and cooperation within the community.

The Amish view forgiveness as a mandate from the Gospel. They believe that God’s forgiveness of them is tied to their ability to forgive others. They know that extending forgiveness to an offender is not easy so they devote significant energy to training their children in forgiveness and learning how to practice it themselves. pp. 113-114 (12)

The authors examined the 2006 Nickle Mines School tragedy where a deeply disturbed man entered a school, held some children hostage, shot some of them, and finally shot himself. The Amish community surprised and shocked the American public by immediately reaching out to the killer’s wife and family, and expressing forgiveness toward the killer.. The authors query whether robbery victims, victims of criminals that are still living are as easy for the Amish to forgive, though the Amish people say they forgive them the same. The Anabaptist history of the Amish sheds light on the radical faith of the Amish forebears:

Out of that era [sixteenth century] of religious turbulence, which saw Reformation figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin charge the powerful medieval church with corruption, a small but feisty group of reformers called for more than just the reform of the church. These radicals insisted on a new concept of the church as a voluntary gathering of those committed to obeying Jesus’ teachings. They symbolized their commitment with adult baptism. But because all of them had been baptized into the church as infants. These new baptisms constituted, in the eyes of church and state officials, *second* baptisms. So the radicals received the disparaging nickname *Anabaptists*, which means “rebaptizers,” and found themselves condemned as heretics. p.69 (13)

Anabaptists relied on a literal and uncomplicated reading of the Bible. They renounced self-defense, the swearing of oaths, military preparation. They sometimes expelled members from their fellowship as a way of jolting them to mend their ways. They refused to rely on state support, believing that any links to the state were a sure sign that the church had compromised its primary commitment to God. They were condemned on all sides, imprisoned and even executed

for their beliefs. These stories of martyrdom are passed down through the generations in Amish families.

The roots of forgiveness in the Amish culture and theology primarily come from the Gospels. Many of Jesus' instructions about forgiveness can be found in many parts of Matthew's Gospel. "An Amish carpenter referred to Matthew 18:21-22 as his basis for understanding forgiveness. In this short passage, the Apostle Peter is asking Jesus whether forgiving an offense seven times is sufficient, to which Jesus responds that seventy times seven would be closer." p. 89. (14) Several persons the author interviewed referred to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr in Acts 7:54-60. As Stephen lay dying, he cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.' Perhaps because of their martyr history, the image of torture and death looms large in the Amish mind, so they often include Jesus on the cross saying "Forgive them; for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34. Again in Matthew, "Help us to forgive others as Jesus forgives us," Matthew 6:12. pp. 95-97. (15) The Amish people work daily and weekly with their chosen spiritual leaders to embrace forgiveness, even though it may be difficult for them. If the need arises for them to go outside the community to cooperate with law enforcement authorities, Amish persons have assisted in this manner, despite wanting to be apart from society.

A passage in A Little Book of Forgiveness, reminded me of a few comments of the Amish, and some of my own experiences: "Don't be alarmed when resentment returns after you think you have thoroughly released someone from blame. Our attachment to fear runs deep ... Then it whispers in our ear that forgiveness might steal away our old familiar world of isolation and suspicion. Whenever you find a good reason to reinforce an old grievance, ask yourself what fear has actually done for you lately."(16)

Miller, the author, became ill in his early thirties and experienced a physical and psychological crisis. He found himself on a spiritual path whether he meant to end up there or not. "It meant entering a never-ending discipline of surrendering my habits and enlarging my world view in the light of new information and insights. Finally, it meant regarding fear as a common illusion - something to be acknowledged honestly but never allowed to dictate terms."(17) He found that the bridge from his old life was forgiveness: "the complete release of my pained idea of who I was. This was the most important work I have ever done on my own behalf. In retrospect, I marvel at the victory I was earning during the time I felt I was suffering a total, grinding defeat." (18)

Miller writes about struggles over power in married couples, including his own marriage. "Accepting that we both fail, and will fail, is what might be called proactive forgiveness. This allows us to see our marriage as a mutual learning process instead of a battle over getting our needs met." (19) Miller writes that in the forgiving relationship, the struggle over power is replaced by the mutual impetus to serve. My own husband and I have identified that most of our arguments and conflicts are about power: how the other person is driving, how the other person is fixing or doing something. We constantly have to remind ourselves to lay off the other and trust them to do it by themselves. If the other makes a mistake, we need to let him learn from this

rather than try to fix it for them.

Out of all the books and articles that I read for this paper, the work that spoke to me the most deeply was Anger, Wisdom for Cooling the Flames, (20) Thich Nhat Hahn gives specific instructions about mindfully getting hold of our own anger, even taking good care of our anger that is within us all. He says mindfulness, a clear honest facing of the anger that is a part of your heart, (and he suggests meditations and retreats to open up your heart) gives you the insight and motivates you to go back to the person that hurt you, no more wishing to punish him, but to help. Your anger is transformed into compassion.

Here is a conversation Hahn suggests to start with your loved one: “Darling, I suffer. I am angry.” This expresses faithfulness to your commitment. “Darling I am doing my best. I am taking good care of my anger, for me and for you also. I don’t want to explode, to destroy myself and destroy you.” This faithfulness will inspire respect and confidence in the other party. “Darling I need your help.” This is a very strong statement because usually when you are angry, you have a tendency to say “I don’t need you.” Hahn directs to say these three sentences with sincerity from your heart, and a transformation will take place in the other person. He says her response will be that she will think that he is faithful to me. That he is keeping his commitment. That he is trying to do his best. So I must do the same.

It is very important to take care of your wounded child every day, embrace her tenderly, like a big brother or big sister. Talk to her, write to her, say you can heal her wounds. Take her to see beautiful places. Heal in mindfulness. In this he suggests journaling, writing letters to yourself, telling yourself that you can heal your own wounds.

“If you don’t have garbage you have nothing to use in order to make compost. And if you have no compost, you have nothing to nourish the flower in you. You need the sufferings and afflictions in you. Since they are organic, you know that you can transform them and make good use of them.” Anger within us is the same as mindfulness. There is no duality, just an organic whole. Don’t fight anger or evil. p. 69 (21)

In conclusion, interpersonal forgiveness starts with a hurt perceived by one or the other. The closer the relationship, the more the hurt. Power struggles may be involved. Forgiveness is hard work, requiring humility, requiring that we ask God’s help, and that we recognize our own flaws. Most of us do not live in a culture such as the Amish who practice forgiveness from cradle to grave. I believe that there is truly no duality between the hurts we feel inside and the compassion and forgiveness that we can express. It is important to recognize those hurts, those imperfections and, as Thich Nhat Hahn says, take good care of that anger, instead of denying it or letting it fester while you hurt and your loved one also hurts. Forgiveness cannot happen while you are holding on to fears and hurts. But if you can realize that there is no duality between you and the one who hurt you, forgiveness does bring freedom and grace.

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