

The Power and Magic Of Forgiveness

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Introduction

Forgiveness is the only way we have to change the past or at least our perception of the past. The past is the stake that holds the ropes that bind you to it, and stop you from becoming a future unhindered by the past and open to unlimited possibility.

Every human being has an innate desire to be free and to self-express. However, as we begin the process of growing up and fully developing ourselves, the very human process of being wrong, being made wrong, or thinking we are wrong (even if we aren't), begins to pile up as burdens of judgment and condemnation. We collect a multitude of implied and imposed sins for which we need to forgive or to be forgiven for.

If we live our lives without forgiveness, we will continue to suffer. We will live with the anger and frustrations of judgment, or the self loathing of condemnation. Tied forever to the past and unable to move beyond where we are.

From my experience, forgiveness appears to be the only pathway to true freedom. Only when you have consciously freed yourself from those bindings of the past, can you open yourself to the future and its endless possibilities.

So much of what I hear and have read about is the “process” of forgiveness. I am far more interested in the actual end result of the process. The real result of forgiveness, for me, is an experience of freedom.

Does this mean that the process is not important? No. The process is how we get to the place of freedom. What is freedom? How do we recognize it? I recognize it when I am living in a place where I do not give harmful meaning to my experience of the actions of life, or of other people, towards me.

Why Forgiveness?

All of our suffering surrounding the unjustness of life, and the unfairness of others, lives in our perception of our past. This enslavement to our past limits our ability to create our future; to live powerfully and fully self-express. Forgiveness is the pathway out of this limitation. In forgiveness we expunge the past from our present. We leave behind the burdens of judgment and condemnation. Through the act of true forgiveness, I was able to reclaim a lost childhood after more than fifty years of living with the unresolved anger and condemnation of being an abused child,

Until the age of thirteen, I lived in an abusive alcoholic environment. There was violence and anger in all aspects of life. Since the age of nine, I had been a runaway and had succeeded in ranging hundreds of miles from home before eventually being caught and returned to my abusive home. In one incident, at the age of eleven, I remained in the Carson City, Nevada, jail for several weeks. I was determined not to give them my name. In retrospect, it was the act of a not a very bright, but surely a determined young man.

At the age of thirteen (after an incident I do not remember), I decided the only solution to the ongoing state of affairs was to eliminate my stepfather. I stole a gun from our home and proceeded to look for him. Luckily, I was arrested by an alert police officer before I could carry out my solution to the problem. The authorities intervened and separated me from the situation, sending me to live with my Grandparents where I successfully completed my teenage years without further incident.

As a result, I constantly blamed my stepfather for my problems in life. I blocked out almost all childhood memories. I blocked out school, friends, everything, with the exception of the bad events. There were no good memories. No play or fun events,

simply a painful past. I now realize that had my life been that bad, it would have been totally unbearable for the whole family. Over a period of years, I reconciled with my sisters and my mother. Yet, never did I attempt to reconcile with my stepfather.

I met him again in my mid thirties. He was drunk and attempted to brain me with a bottle of wine. At this point, I allowed my physical self to lash out. I struck him. While this single act seemed to fill some cathartic need, it did not allow me to resolve my personal issues with him.

In the late 1990's (after a divorce and long bouts of counseling), I relocated back to Sacramento and my sisters. I began a spiritual journey that led me to confront my issues with my stepfather. I made the decision to enter the ministry and started by examining the question of whether I was capable of loving everyone, including Charles Manson and my stepfather.

In the process of meeting my stepfather, I recognized that he did not hate me. Rather, he loved me. He did not know how to say it to my face, but I knew it was there. During this time, he had experienced a disabling stroke and could no longer speak. Over the next several years, I would spend time with him. I would simply sit with him, and he held my hand for hours. After his passing, my sister found a box of photos. Among them were many of my happy childhood experiences. Camping, fishing or just playing. Pictures of Pop and I with a large fish I had caught, and him with a big smile. Buried in this box, one picture stands out. My two sisters and I in our early years and on it he had inscribed "I love you kids."

How Forgiveness Has Impacted My Life

As a result of these, and many other experiences, I discovered that maybe, just maybe, it was not about me. I became aware that a life lived in a context of contribution was a life worth living. Living my life in contribution has allowed me to develop and enjoy many wondrous experiences. I have worked with young people, teens and adults. I discovered I am a natural leader. I developed many friendships; something I believed was limited in life to only a few people. Those few people in some way or another had failed my ongoing tests of friendship. Consequently, I had arrived with almost no friends.

This does not mean I have conquered the secret. As I am writing this thesis, I am confronted with issues about the people in my life that I have not addressed. Out of the research and reading, I am constantly dredging up old memories; recognizing anger and incompleteness in the relationships. As this essay develops, I hope to resolve them, furthering my understanding of the power and magic of forgiveness.

Chapter 1: What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness: What is It?

In Sue Monk Kidd's book, *The Secret Life of Bees*, one of her characters describes how many people view forgiveness. "People, in general, would rather die than forgive. It's that hard. If God said in plain language, "I'm giving you a choice, forgive or die." A lot of people would go ahead and order their coffin." This sentiment is accurate when it comes to trying to find out what forgiveness really is to us.

One definition I found was that of forgiveness as one person's moral response to another's injustice. ⁴ I suppose from the viewpoint of ethics and moral actions this is true. However, I find myself looking at forgiveness as a way of giving up my view of the past rather than identifying my "moral response." By freeing myself to view the "offender" in an effort to determine if there really was an offense, I can see that person as a human being in whom I can see God being expressed. Within this context, I am free to choose not to associate with them, or to proceed within the civil or judicial system for some form of compensation or justice. Though I can see God even in a person like Charles Manson, I am not committed to unlock his cage.

Professor Blumenthal took his B.A. at the University of Pennsylvania and his Ph.D. at Columbia University. During the spring of 1996, with the support of the American Jewish Committee, Dr. Blumenthal was privileged to be in Rome to teach Jewish Studies at the Gregorian Pontifical University. In a paper from that period he writes:

"The spiritual task of interfaith dialogue requires each party to understand what the other teaches and what the other does not teach because, in reaching out to the other, we tend to assimilate what we hear to what we already know. It seems, therefore, prudent to note those conceptualities which Judaism does *not*

embrace in the hope that Catholics will, then, better be able to set aside ideas already familiar and reach out to encompass ideas that are not already-known. “⁷

While Dr. Blumenthal is speaking directly about the relationship between Jews and Catholics, I believe we should apply his tenet to all the relationships of religion (and to those of culture as well). In our constantly shrinking world, we all need to become more aware of each others base belief systems if we are to successfully communicate.

My personal experience of forgiveness tells me that it is characteristically an individual process, rather than collective. While we may collectively vote or voice a common viewpoint; we, as a society, do not collectively forgive. We may discuss or share the injustices and anger we experience, but actual forgiveness must come from each of us individually. For example, we do not forgive the Holocaust communally. Each individual must make the journey to forgiveness alone.

Forgiveness is comprised of three elements: (1) Recognition of the need for forgiveness as the result of a moral response to another’s injustice, (2) Reconciliation, two parties coming together in mutual respect ⁴, and (3) Atonement: reparation for an offense or injury.

The first recognition of the need for forgiveness is identifying that we are suffering some lack of freedom, power or full self-expression. This suffering is caused by some inauthenticity. Inauthenticity in this context is recognizing that we have an unresolved issue that we are failing to deal with. We are suffering in some way, or feeling some loss of power or self-expression, and we are not dealing with it. To be free again requires us to take some action. The action is one of forgiving someone, or seeking forgiveness from others for an action we have committed.

Forgiveness allows us the freedom of self-expression. Since we are not bound by the burden of judgment and condemnation, we are able to express ourselves in many other areas of life. We are, in essence, free to be ourselves. The limits of life that we place on ourselves are always related to the lack of freedom and self expression. During the late 1990's I took a series of self development seminars from Landmark Education. In that context, it would be said that these feelings are the result of some inauthenticity in my being. In new thought, we would say that we have a false belief in thinking that we are failing to recognize, and as a result, we are suffering and need to change our thinking. In most societies, forgiveness is directly associated with atonement or debt. An example of this is our justice system. It is completely based on debt and atonement. One must repay society for criminal acts with hard labor or financial remuneration.

Chapter II: Forgiveness In Different Religions

In order to view forgiveness on a global scale, it is necessary to understand the fundamental belief systems that different religions and cultures have about forgiveness. Our identification of the characteristics of forgiveness can be facilitated by a review of how forgiveness is interpreted in different world religions. Often, organized religion prompts the individual and the group to act in a manner that does not compromise the freedoms of others. Religions, as well as political systems, utilize fundamental belief as a method of controlling large populations. Accordingly, we need to be aware of the specific form of forgiveness. Human beings have a need for the forgiveness of religious and socio-political structures. Man must be aware that seeking forgiveness in these forums places him at risk of abuse by the structure itself as a method of control exercised by the structure for its own purpose.

Christianity

Forgiveness for sin from God is the fundamental basis of Christian belief. The belief that God gave his only son Jesus so that all individual sin could be forgiven, and with that forgiveness comes salvation and everlasting life, is the foundation of Christian theology. While the process of forgiveness varies in the different denominations of the Christian religions, the basic belief does not. The pathway to salvation is through Jesus as a personal savior.

In the Catholic Church, personal confession is heard by a priest who is recognized as a representative of Christ on earth. This priest can assign penance and give absolution for sin. This ability is unique among most of the religions of the world. Most Protestant Churches do not practice the ritual act of confession to a priestly authority, nor is ritual

penance passed out from the church leader. These acts may be recommended in counseling, but are not a specific act of spiritual practice or ritual. The quote below from the Bible defines how Christians view forgiveness:

In the Book of Matthew (18:21-23) Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times :but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

Forgiveness is clearly an obligation for Christians. Not only to forgive once, but to truly turn the other cheek. To be Christian is to be loving and forgiving in all aspects of life.

Hinduism

In Hinduism, forgiveness is the highest virtue. The following Hindu writing from the Mahabharata, Vana Parva, Section XXVIII best describes the Hindu virtue of forgiveness:

“And because it is seen that there are in the world men who are forgiving like the Earth, it is therefore that creatures derive their life and prosperity. O beautiful one, one should forgive under every injury. It has been said that the continuation of species is due to man being forgiving. He, indeed, is a wise and excellent person who has conquered his wrath and shows forgiveness even when insulted, oppressed, and angered by a strong person. The man of power who controls his wrath, has (for his enjoyment) numerous everlasting regions; while he that is angry, is called foolish, and meets with destruction both in this and the other world. The illustrious and forgiving Kashyapa has, in this respect, sung the following verses in honour of men that are forgiving.

"Forgiveness is virtue; forgiveness is sacrifice, forgiveness is the Vedas, forgiveness is the Sruti. He that knows this is capable of forgiving everything. Forgiveness is Brahma; forgiveness is truth; forgiveness is stored ascetic merit; forgiveness protects the ascetic merit of the future; forgiveness is asceticism; forgiveness is holiness; and by forgiveness is it that the universe is held together.

"Persons that are forgiving attain to the regions obtainable by those that have performed meritorious sacrifices, or those that are well conversant with the Vedas, or those that have high ascetic merit. Those that perform Vedic sacrifices as also those that perform the meritorious rites of religion obtain other regions. Men of forgiveness, however, obtain those much adored regions that are in the world of Brahma.

"Forgiveness is the might of the mighty; forgiveness is sacrifice; forgiveness is quiet of mind. Can one like us abandon forgiveness, which is such, and in which are established Brahma, and truth, and wisdom and the worlds? The man of wisdom should ever forgive, for when he is capable of forgiving everything, he attains to Brahma. The world belongs to those that are forgiving; the other world is also theirs.

"The forgiving acquire honours here, and a state of blessedness hereafter. Those men that ever conquer their wrath by forgiveness, obtain the higher regions. Therefore has it been said that forgiveness is the highest virtue."

Those are the verses sung by Kashyapa in respect of those that are ever forgiving. Having listened, O Draupadi, to these verses in respect of forgiveness, content thyself! Give not way to thy wrath! ... This has been my certain conclusion from some time before! Suyodhana deserves not the kingdom. Therefore has he been unable to acquire forgiveness. I, however, deserve the sovereignty and therefore is it that forgiveness has taken possession of me. Forgiveness and gentleness are the qualities of the self-possessed. They represent eternal virtue. I shall, therefore, truly adopt those qualities."

There is both forgiveness of offender to offende and forgiveness from the deity in Hindu culture and religion. Because of the cyclical nature of life in Hindu theology, (the fact that we have all lived many times before and done many things before), we have all probably done everything at some time in the past. Subsequently, we are all working off our Karmic debt for past misdeeds and sins. This allows Hindus to have more compassion towards sin than some other religions.

Buddhism

Buddhism does not offer belief in a personal God. It does not have specific worship, prayers or the praise of a divine being who can offer redemption. No forgiveness. No hope of heaven, and no final judgment. Buddhism is more of a moral philosophy, an ethical way of life.

Since there is no central deity that would offer forgiveness, it is not a fundamental principle of the religion. However, this does not mean that forgiveness is not a tenet of Buddhist life. To attain enlightenment, one must atone for past failures. Forgiveness is

one way of balancing karmic forces. The goal is release from the endless cycle of birth, suffering, and death by recognition that all suffering is the result of desire.

Judaism

In Judaism, there is no self-forgiveness. Forgiveness revolves around the concept of debt. The offender can only receive forgiveness from the offended. The act requiring forgiveness is solely between the offended and the offender. Only the offended can grant forgiveness. If the offender is another person, only that person can grant forgiveness. If it is between the offender and God, only God can grant that forgiveness. Judaism does not recognize confession of personal sin to a religious figure. Judaism recognizes penance as a part of the path to forgiveness. It does not recognize absolution as part of the process of sin and repentance. There is no authority in Judaism who could grant such absolution. Finally, Judaism does not recognize reconciliation as a part of the process of sin and repentance. While reconciliation may be desirable, it is not a requirement. Dr.

Blumenthal describes the steps to forgiveness as follows:

“Teshuvá is the key concept in the rabbinic view of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. The tradition is not of one mind on the steps one must take to repent of one's sins. However, almost all agree that repentance requires five elements: recognition of one's sins as sins (hakarát ha-chét’), remorse (charatá), desisting from sin (azivát ha-chét’), restitution where possible (peira’ón), and confession (vidúí). “⁷

“The most basic kind of forgiveness is "forgoing the other's indebtedness" (mechilá). If the offender has done teshuva, and is sincere in his or her repentance, the offended person should offer mechila; that is, the offended person should forgo the debt of the offender, relinquish his or her claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did. Mechila is like a pardon granted to a criminal by the modern state. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven. “⁷

Dr. Blumenthal also noted that there is no central authority that can speak for everyone. There is no specific way for forgiveness to be effected. However he goes on to

say that by seeking forgiveness through such bodies as the State of Israel (or other recognized representation organizations) and acts of restitution, there may come a point of communal forgiveness.

Islam

Forgiveness is a fundamental part of Islam. Forgiveness comes from the offended to the offender, or directly from Allah to the offender. There is no central person who can dispense forgiveness; there is no person who directly dispenses penance. Such acts would be usurping of Allah and would be a sin by their very nature. The unforgivable sin in Islam is Shirk (Polytheism).

Forgiveness can only come from one who has the power to forgive. One who has no power but forgives, is not truly forgiving but merely accepting the offence over which he has no power to seek vengeance for. When one has the power to seek vengeance and then forgives, he is far more powerful and of higher spiritual value. In the Holy Qur'an Allah has proclaimed the following:

1. "Turn to forgiveness and enjoin good and turn aside from the ignorant (7:199)".
2. "And if a false imputation from the Shaitan afflict you, seek refuge in Allah; surely He is Hearing, Knowing (7:200)".
3. "Those who spend (benevolently) in ease as well as in straightness, and those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men; and Allah loves the doers of good (to others) (3:134)."

One should also note that although Allah is the only true forgiver of sin and a man may be forgiven by Allah, on earth the offended or their family still has the right to seek justice and compensation for the worldly act.

Chapter III: Forgiveness in a Cultural Context

Our discussion of forgiveness must take into consideration the culture in which an individual lives. In a cultural context, we must look not only at the social family structure, but also at the political and judicial processes of the cultures. All judicial systems are specifically designed to extract some payment for the wages of sin.

African

Forgiveness is a natural part of African culture. Africans recognize that the forgiver is more powerful than the party that injures. We have overlooked natural African cultural ways either because of the imposition of colonialist mandated ways of being, or because it is more useful to ruling classes to utilize western (or colonialist) cultural ways.

Traditionally African society is communal. Individualism, so valued in western society, is less valued in African society. This becomes clear when you look at the African concept of Ubuntu (I am because We are). In African cultures, forgiveness becomes the most powerful way of maintaining the community.

Africans recognize that it is necessary for the injured party to confront the issue. With forgiveness as the intended outcome, the injured party resolves the issue, gaining power and respect within the community. Across Africa today, communal forgiveness is in action. Because forgiveness is a natural process for African societies, it expresses itself as a communal process. One example of this is the South African experience in transitioning from all white rule to communal rule with a black majority. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that looks into human rights violations is clearly more forgiveness directed than judgmental.

The issue of slavery and its consequences still bitterly divides Africans and African Americans and others affected by the tragedy of slavery. Within African societies we are also seeing reconciliation with the issue of slavery. We see Africans accepting responsibility for their roles in the slave trade seeking forgiveness for the acts of their ancestors. However, forgiveness in this context does not seek compensation, rather reconciliation and communal oneness.

The continued discrimination of color and race amongst people of African decent in our own society fosters more and more resentment. This is compounded by a continuous erosion of traditional African social and communal concepts by our western individualist values. Also the globalization of the world economy, and the impact of changing economic systems and values in Africa, makes it more and more difficult for people to incorporate their traditions and the values of communalism into everyday life.

Middle Eastern

The cultures of the Middle East are bound up in a theological and sociological conflict regarding forgiveness. All the major religious traditions that spring from the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have deeply rooted beliefs in the act of forgiveness.

With the majority of people living in the Middle East being Muslim, the rigid theology of Islam plays a large role in how forgiveness is perceived. In most Middle Eastern nations, there is little separation of secular and religious life because holy law supercedes secular law in Islamic traditions. This causes ongoing conflict between the

secular leadership (most of whom are dictators), and the theological leadership. All these conflicts leave little room for forgiveness.

The inability of the Jewish and Arab factions to find common ground and live in a communal state of acceptance is a prime example of this problem. There are factions committed to each others destruction. Each side is expressing a willingness to “die instead of forgiving.” The rising death toll between Palestinians and Israelis is a clear example of the willingness to die.

Asian

“The cry for no tolerance easily becomes a cry for no mercy. Make no mistake: it is essential to maintain law and order. Real peace is not possible without it. But neither is peace possible without mercy, which is the basic ingredient of forgiveness and compassion, the true basis of a civilized society. We may take sides against crime, but we should be careful that we do not take sides against the "sinners". “¹

Asian cultures are as varied as their individual people, so it is not really possible to identify a broad based context that forgiveness lives in. The theological groups of Hindu, Buddhist, and a multitude of sects based upon ancestor worship make the views of forgiveness varied. The fact that forgiveness is a part of all the religions, and even a part of Chinese ethical and moral values in the writings of Confucius, shows how deeply rooted in everyday life is the act of forgiveness.

Communalism is a fundamental part of Asian society. Forgiveness is therefore a fundamental part of the culture. It becomes apparent that in order for a communal society to function, forgiveness must be a fundamental part of the social process.

In Asian societies there is a greater self responsibility for injustice. An integral part of the family and communal structure is the individual's responsibility not to bring shame or disgrace to the family or community. For example, in Japanese society, we see this carried to the point of "Sepuku" (ritual suicide) as a method of atonement for failure or acts of disgrace. One possible reason for the process of forgiveness to be so prevalent in Asian societies is the closeness with which people live with one and other. The extended family and limited availability of physical space may contribute directly to this.

In Hawaiian society, there is a communal process for dealing with forgiveness and righting a wrong. It involves the injured party being willing to work towards forgiveness and the injuring party being willing to participate in the spirit of reconciliation. A HAKU (an unbiased mediator) that is respected by all organizes the process which will go on until a resolution is reached. The Hawaiian process is one both of a cultural and a spiritual nature since both are tightly bound in the culture. It is the willingness of all involved parties that allows the Hawaiian process to work.

Hispanic

Hispanic culture is heavily influenced by a predominately Catholic Christian base. The act of forgiveness is a moral as well as an ethical one. Of interest is the distrust of secular powers such as governments and police. The settlement of disputes in most

Hispanic cultures is always a family affair. It would not be normal to involve the police in a dispute, though it might be reasonable to involve the local priest.

I have deliberately left out Western Culture from this section since it is involved almost totally within the context of individual forgiveness. The focus of Western culture on the values of the individual make this a more complex subject than just a cultural one since it is opened up to the individual's personal view point.

Chapter IV: Forgiveness in a Western Context

In our Western culture, the individual is the center of our belief systems. This is where we hold our basic truths. We individually make decisions to accept or not accept beliefs. We individually determine our entitlements within society. We individually determine whether we deserve or are deserving of. The problem is that once we have made determined our entitlements, they are tossed out into the interactive world of other self-determinates, and conflict begins.

Within these conflicts we begin the process of accumulating our hurts, angers and suffering. We find ourselves in conflict with others or groups of others who do not accept our determinations. As a result of the conflict, one side or the other is treated unjustly. This occurs in the mind of the offender and the offended.

The reality of it all is that it is all occurring within my own mind. I decided that the act required forgiveness to begin with. Out of the mouth of others there is a disturbance in the molecules that make up our atmosphere. These molecules collide and eventually, bounce off my ear drum. Nerves transmit the occurrence to my brain. Where I “the great meaning maker of the universe” decide that they have meaning,. Additionally, the meaning is in some way harmful or injurious to me. In that moment, I assume a burden. That burden is a judgment of me, another person or structure. Here is where we begin the practice of condemnation or the experience of being condemned. All of this occurs within my mind. For here is where I experience my life. Here is where forgiveness plays its vital role, and where all the answers lie. Ernest Holmes tells us:

”The answer to every question is within man, because man is within Spirit, and Spirit is an Indivisible Whole! The solution to every problem is within man; the healing of all disease is within man; the forgiveness of all sin is within man; the raising of the dead is within man; Heaven is within man. This is why Jesus prayed to this indwelling "I am" and said: "Our Father which art in Heaven," and again he said: "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."” (SOM p.365)

Inside this is the realization that all this is human, not God. God is no receptor of an individual's actions or the outcome of their actions. God doesn't know of our supposed sins. All these things are merely those actions of individual expressions thinking. Thinking that is in or out of alignment with the Universal Mind. Again, Ernest Holmes says:

“Why should it disturb anyone to be told that God knows nothing of his sin, nothing of his want, nothing of his lack of any kind? The tragedy would be if God did know. If God knew sin, He would be a sinner, for what the Infinite Mind knows must BE! Sin or mistakes are outside the province of Reality. Jesus knew this. He also knew that while man labors under the sense of condemnation, the burden of his thought weighs him to the dust. Being able to read thought, he knew just what step to take in relieving the burden of this man's mind, before telling him to arise and walk.” (SOM p. 439)

The Burden of Judgment

The burden of judgment sucks our power away with every retelling of the story, with every remembrance of the event. It repeats itself over and over. Judgment is a constant vampire feeding on personal power and freedom. Like a tick it fattens itself on the suffering we experience, on our growing anger at the injustice of the act itself.

Condemnation

The burden of condemnation is like that of judgment. It feeds on our cycle of anger and self-righteousness. We can swirl in this until it becomes self consuming and the only thing we can express to others is indignation and self pity.

“How often we condemn when we should forgive, how often censure when we might praise! What untold grief of heart might be relieved by words of cheer and forgiveness? Especially should this lesson be remembered in the training of children, for they so readily respond to the thought of others? Remembering that the Spirit holds no evil toward man, and that God is Love, we should emulate this divine lesson and forgive all, that our hearts may be free from the burden of our own condemnation.” (SOM p. 439)

Unresolved anger

The buildup of unresolved anger that comes from these burdens can have an unhealthy effect on our bodies. It puts significant stress on our cardiovascular system and may contribute to heart attack and other stress related illnesses. Stanford University is currently studying these effects and their relationship to forgiveness. (See Stanford University Forgiveness Project)

Loss of self respect

The loss of self-respect is one of the most apparent impacts of abuse. Over time the abused begins to believe that it is their fault that the abuse occurs. They may think to themselves, “If only they had done it right.” I can remember that conversation with my self. The only problem was that in the chaos of the alcoholic dysfunctional home, what was “right” was a movable target. (A target in which you were not allowed to actually hit the bullseye.) Every time you came close to the mark, the target was moved outside your range again. If you actually hit the target, then the value of the action was eliminated with some comment such as “any idiot can do that”, and you were left with more inadequacy to fuel your lack of self-respect.

Denial

Denial is probably the most often used device to deal with the hurts of childhood. In my case, I denied that I was hurt; I was strong and overcame all those painful events. Yes I was abused, but I overcame it. I was strong, I was righteous. They needed to pay penance. They needed to be judged. For many years, I simply ignored any emotions that came up about my childhood. At best, I blamed them on my stepfather and left them at that. There was no real introspection. It was far easier to blame my stepfather than to recognize my pain and deal with the real causes.

Rationalization

Rationalization is fascinating for me. I remember telling myself that those childhood experiences of abuse were the things that made me strong. They gave me the

ability to deal with an unfair world and overcome all obstacles. I am not sure why we rationalize the acts, but I suspect we are in such need of security, and living in such fear, we have no other choice available at the time.

Other rationalizations are “he didn’t really mean to hurt me,” “He doesn’t know any better,” or “It was only the one time.” I heard one family justify the sexual abuse by their father of several of his daughters as “he loved them too much”. One of the more common rationalizations is that “he was drunk” as if this is supposed to provide some absolution from responsibility from the abusive actions.

Jacques Derrida, the best known living French philosopher, states that “only the unforgivable is forgivable.” Forgiving only the forgivable takes away any value that forgiveness might have had. For there to be reconciliation for such sins as the Holocaust, true forgiveness would be necessary. The concept that only the unforgivable is forgivable places a very high value on forgiveness. It devalues every day forgiveness. I think that these every day acts of forgiveness are more valuable than the act of forgiving the unforgivable. I do not mean to diminish the value of being able to forgive the unforgivable; I believe that all acts of forgiveness are of value to the forgiver. They are access to the personal power of placing oneself in a position to forgive.

We must learn to be able to forgive the unforgivable. For mankind to learn to live in peace and harmony, we must find ways to reconcile the injustices of the past that separate us into factions. Only when we find within ourselves the power to forgive the injustices of slavery, the holocaust, discrimination, and a multitude of ongoing tragedies that continually plague our world will we find universal freedom and acceptance.

We also must be aware that the current trend in self-help and therapy to be all forgiving as a way of completing the past and allowing us to move into some other future possibility may be a useful tool; it may well devalue our true ability to forgive.

Does forgiveness necessarily require the offender to be directly involved in the forgiveness process? No. Like love, the receiver of the love has no say in whether or not he is loved. He merely gets the experience of being loved; which he may or may not even recognize. It is the same with forgiveness. The one doing the forgiving is in total control of the process and need not require the participation of the recipient of the forgiveness.

As a part of process, it may be desirable to share the forgiveness with the one being forgiven. Sharing is for nothing else than the cathartic effect of sharing. For it must be noted that the person being forgiven may or may not feel the need for your forgiveness. They may resent it and see your forgiveness as a condescending act.

We have full control of our ability to forgive others and can take immediate action to resolve this situation. The need to be forgiven for our actions towards others is a different problem. We can make a request for forgiveness. Then we are faced with accepting the outcome of the request. If the outcome of the request is not positive, we can then take on the burden of forgiveness towards ourselves.

Self forgiveness is probably far more difficult than at first glance it may seem. We are often our own worst critics and strongest judges. We usually require far more of ourselves than others could reasonably expect. So in the act of self-forgiveness far more humility and punishment is usually required. This should not necessarily be the case. The mere act of requesting forgiveness of another is usually an extensive self-punishment. Most of us suffer greatly before we can even reach the state of requesting forgiveness.

In one of the Hindu scriptures, it says that a person who is all forgiving is one who will always be taken advantage of. With all this historical, religious and cultural background surrounding forgiveness, where do we go from here? Now that we have defined what forgiveness is, we need to define what it is not.

Chapter V: What Forgiveness Is Not

What forgiveness is not is as important as what it is. Forgiveness is not condoning, ignoring, accepting, or forgetting what has occurred.

Condoning

Forgiveness is not about condoning. The hurtful acts of others are not condonable. No one could condone the acts of the rapist or the child abuser. To forgive does not mean you are expected to forget or accept in any way that the acts that brought you to this point were justified.

Ignoring

There is no valid reason to ignore the pain and suffering that has brought you to the investigation of forgiveness. Ignoring your pain or anger will only lead to continued suffering. Ignoring is not accepting; it is a process of allowing but at the same time judging the abuse that is or has occurred and consciously deciding to set aside your true feelings about it. Because it is a conscious act, you are allowing the hurts to accumulate and eventually, they may simply overpower you with anger or despair.

Accepting

Simply accepting what occurred is disempowering. This is the act that destroys self-respect. Here you give away all your power, all your essence. Accepting is to justify to the abuser that they are in the right and they may exercise their power over you as they see fit. By accepting, you have conferred this power on them. You are now a willing participant in the process of abuse.

Forgetting

Dr. Than Day Ton, in his book *The Magic of Forgiveness*, says this about forgetting: “A wounded person cannot-indeed, should not-think that a faded memory can provide an expiation of the past.”

Chapter VI: The Process of Forgiveness

Dr. Sidney B. Simon and Suzanne Simon in their book *Forgiveness* tell us “To move on in your healing process, you must turn your attention to the needs you have now and how you will fill them now. As an adult, it is your responsibility to take charge of your own life and do what is best for your own physical health and emotional well-being, to make the choices that will enable you to heal the old wounds and create a new, more productive, and fulfilling adult life.”

The first step in the process of forgiveness is the recognition of your own suffering. It may be a sense of loss of self-esteem, a loss of power, or an overwhelming sense of shame for some act you have committed on another. It may come as a realization that some part of the past is acting as an anchor on your further progress in self-development, or self-actualization if you have progressed far enough up the spiritual ladder. It may come to you as a realization that to be one with God, we need to be whole perfect and complete, and that is not possible for us until we complete the obligations we have placed upon ourselves in the past.

Humans are very good about piling on obligations. In his book, *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel Ruiz tells us that humans are the only animals that will repeatedly punish themselves for the same offense. To have a sense of this, simply remember your most embarrassing moment in your teen years. Did you notice that you felt all the shame, and condemnation that you experienced the first time it occurred?

Only in the final acts of forgiveness, can you do away with the pain and suffering of the past. You will not forget the event, but you will be able to view it in its true light. It is what happened. The rest of the experience was your story of what happened, and it is the story part that allows you to suffer repeatedly for the occurrence.

As a young child of five or so I remember being at my Grandmothers where I lived a majority of the time, and waiting for my mother and stepfather to arrive. I have the image of standing at the front window watching for them, my little bag packed and standing beside me. After many hours, they did not arrive. The story I wrote about that child was this.

“You are not worthy of being loved. You are not a good child. If you were a good child, they would have come for you. They only come for good children, never for bad ones. Therefore since they didn’t come for me, by definition, I was a bad child. A child that was unworthy of being loved.

I carried this burden with me for most of my life. As I watched several marriages crumble before my eyes, I continually reaffirmed the story. I was unworthy being loved. After the end of a twenty year marriage, I relocated to Sacramento California where I stayed with my sister and brother-in-law. During this time, I was very down on myself and my brother-in-law engaged me in a conversation where he pointed out to me in no uncertain terms, “you are a very good person, you deserve to be happy”.

I was so struck by the comment that it was a major turning point in my life. I began to look at my self in a different light. I began to realize that I really was a good person. I had high ethical standards; I was not selfish or mean, I was merely a lonely person. I had as a part of the five year olds story, written into my life a barrier of protection that would not allow me to allow others to be close to me. I had written that if you let them in they will hurt you because you are not a good boy. I had passed through those failed relationships because I had never allowed them to love me. I made sure that I kept enough distance between me and any other person that would ensure my “safety.”

During a seminar on self-expression, I was challenged to go back in time and forgive the little boy for whatever it was he thought he had done. Since there was no longer access to my parents to ask for their forgiveness, I could be the one to forgive the little boy.

As a result of this change in status for the child in me, I was able to go back and look at the story I had written. There was what had really happened. My parents had not come to pick me up. Then, there was the story part that I had written on my own, "I was not worthy of being loved, and was a bad boy." The story part was just that, a story. It was not the truth of what happened, just a story written by a five year old that had ruled the life of an adult for over fifty years.

The pathway to forgiveness and happiness can come to you in many ways; it does not necessarily have to be in one of the cookbook ways of some of the modern self-help three minute paths to happiness.

Several years ago, I was struck by a car driven by a drunk driver while crossing the street. While I experienced only some bruising and minor cuts, I was slow in getting up and around. I needed to be able to walk at least three miles a day in the next few weeks. I was scheduled to attend Guide Dog training at San Rafael's Guide Dogs for the Blind. I stubbornly worked myself into shape and went off to school. While there, I worked six days a week learning to use the wonderful dog I was being given. It was truly a life changing event. It presented me with many new options for personal mobility. Upon completion of my training, I returned home. Over the next few weeks I became more and more homebound. I finally reached a state where I could not go out. I would harness my dog, put on my jacket and be unable to go out the door.

My loving wife contacted a local therapist and soon I was in therapy working on the issue. After a few visits, it became apparent that I held some anger and resentment towards the young driver who had hit me. Additionally, there was the obvious fear that even when you are in the right, they can still get you.

I had just begun my journey into the ministry at this time and it was quite clear that I was not being very forgiving in regards to this incident. By consciously forgiving the young man for what had occurred, I was freed of the bonds I had placed on myself. I was free to go out again, and I was also free of the repressed anger I was holding for what had occurred. I learned that by treating for his highest and best good, I was released from the ropes that were binding us together.

Chapter VII: How Do You Know You Have Forgiven or Been Forgiven?

How do you know when you have forgiven or been forgiven? In order for forgiveness to work, the forgiver must recognize some change in the relationship between themselves and their offender. There needs to be some sense of release from the burdens of being wronged, of being treated unjustly.

There is also some sense of individual power being regained. A change in the forgivers' relationship to the offender occurs. Only a person in a position of power is able to forgive another of lesser power. Sometimes by the mere act of forgiveness, one gains a reversal of positions of power. This does not necessarily occur if one is forgiving an injustice and the offender is not present or is not accepting of the forgiveness.

I think the lifting of the burden is the most powerful recognition I have personally experienced. It injects a sense of freedom, a freedom to now move on to a new uncharted direction. This is a new place where you can create new possibilities, unencumbered by the past.

The lifting of the bindings of the past on our present is the freedom of forgiveness. Only here can we be self-expressed. We are free to view the past for what it is, the past. We can remember it; we can use the memories as a resource in the future. But we are no longer tied to the burden, the judgment, or condemnations we carried before.

This ability to remember without feeling the hurt is our access to change. We learn not to step into the same situations blindly repeating the past. After all, isn't one definition of insanity, "doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result." The power of unforgiveness may well be a pathway to insanity.

The recent studies by health professionals of how forgiveness plays a role in physical health, leads us to believe that forgiving will make us feel better physically. I

believe the release of stress that occurs with forgiveness is a powerful indication that this is true. This release of stress would contribute to lower blood pressure, and fewer heart related diseases.

Our spiritual self knows instinctively that the only path to oneness with God is through forgiveness. We need to free ourselves from the bindings of our being a victim and open our soul to the true oneness we have with the Universal Mind. Here there is no need for forgiveness; here there is no act of unkindness or injury that occurs.

To follow the spiritual path is to complete our relationships with the past, to release our burdens of judgment or condemnation.

When we are able to be one with the One Mind, we recognize that we have forgiven or been forgiven. We could not otherwise be living in the present moment and be at ease with our Spirituality.

To know you have been forgiven is a different situation. One way of recognizing this is if you receive the forgiveness directly from the injured party. This, as we know, is not always possible. They may no longer be available to you to seek this forgiveness. In certain religious practices, you can receive the absolution of a priest or other cleric. You may receive it directly through your personal relationship with God.

Finally, you may forgive yourself. This may be one of the most difficult actions to accomplish. We are our own harshest judge. We practice unworthiness every day. Yet this may be the only path available to us to complete our relationship with the offended person. This will take not only acts of contrition on our part, but a conscious effort to change our life and never commit the sin we hold our self responsible for.

When you no longer punish yourself, when you look back on the incident with humility, and without shame, you will know that you have truly forgiven yourself. When you are living your life in such a way as to preclude any action that would repeat your past injustice to another, you will be free to live your life powerfully again. You will be free to self-express.

Forgiveness is the pathway to freedom. This freedom of not being bound to the past is the ultimate release from bondage.

Chapter VIII: Exercising the Power

What is the power you get from forgiveness? There is the change in relationship between the forgiver and the offender. Remember, only a more powerful person can truly forgive. To forgive from a position without power over the offender is not forgiveness, but acceptance.

There are many ways to use this power we gain from the act of forgiveness. We can use the process in an ongoing practice. Recognizing that whenever we are trapped in a conversation with our past, or whenever we are feeling injured, or shamed, we are present to the need to begin the process of forgiveness.

We need to consciously begin to examine the emotion that is causing us stress. Is it with another person? Is it with ourselves? If it is with another person, are we being judgmental? Is the injury such that we find it unforgivable? Here we can step back and examine it. It is necessary to be able to step outside of the pain and suffering, and view the incident in the light of what is best for you. Is there an emotional gain that we are fulfilling by being unforgiving? Are justifying our position with self-righteousness? If so, forgiveness may be the path we should choose as a way of ending the pain and suffering.

There is no requirement that we pursue a path of forgiveness, it is always a choice. It can be a religious obligation, or even a social obligation, but in the end it is always one of choice.

As we noted before, there is access to power in the act of forgiveness. Forgiving as an access to this power is a possible reason for doing it. However, I doubt that the resulting forgiveness is truly forgiveness. More likely, it is an act of manipulation.

Chapter IX: Living in the Magic

To live in the magic, is to live in freedom, allowed to be who you are, to choose your path. When forgiveness is present and you are free, you are present to yourself, and your true spirit.

The experience of freedom that occurs for me is one of release from the burden of carrying on the story and judgments that continually swirl around in my head about the person or event that I need to have or give forgiveness for. Note that self forgiveness is as important as forgiving others. How great it would be if we simply did not apply the act of meaning to all the events that occur in our lives. We would be free from the suffering and torment that we spend such great volumes of time and effort to resolve in our lives. The next freedom is the one of learning to avoid the pitfall of judgment and condemnation.

When we live our lives without judgment and without condemnation, we have access to power and self-expression. We have access to our spiritual selves. Only when we have access, can we continue our Spiritual Journey. If we are bound to our past, we cannot see the present moment. The One Mind only exists in the present moment. If we are locked in the past in our individuality, we separate ourselves from the Divine. This separation leaves us living in a life of fear, pain and suffering.

Live your life freely and powerfully. Use forgiveness as a pathway to your Spiritual self. Use forgiveness to free your soul from self-inflicted wounds. Use it to free yourself from the childhood stories that control your adult life. Use forgiveness as a way of not piling on meanings to the small incidents that occur between us.

In the future of mankind, we will have to come to grips with the issue of resolving the tragedies of the past. We will need to develop some methodology to allow communal

forgiveness to come into being. Only then will we find a path to world healing. We need to reach a place where we can give up the distinctions of race, class and nationality. Only when there is true forgiveness for all the past injustices that are felt and reinforced in our cultural and nationalistic communities will we find true world peace.

There we will find a reconciliation of theology, culture, race, and nationalism. In order to reach that place we will need to come to a completion of globalization, a common economy, and a balance between resources and consumption, a place where we will be able to separate our selves from the human bindings of things, and allow ourselves collectively the freedom to explore our spirituality and our relationship with God.

New Thought incorporates much of Christian thought regarding forgiveness. It is accepting of the power of forgiveness but does not require the acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior as an access to salvation. Forgiveness is seen as an access to personal freedom from guilt and suffering. We are one with God, so within that context, there is a clear need to be forgiving since it would not be God like to not forgive. God in this context does not even know of our sins, we are the ones judging ourselves as sinners. In the New Thought community, we are viewed more as spiritual beings having a human experience than as humans trying to ascend to a spiritual experience.

True forgiveness must be a conscious and deliberate act. It must be taken only in self consideration, and only with a total release of attachment to the past injustice. Any sense of continued attachment or feelings of hurt still existing indicate that forgiveness has not occurred.

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