

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” — Mahatma Gandhi,

"Forgiveness and reconciliation are not just ethereal, spiritual, otherworldly activities. . . . They are real politik, because in a very real sense, without forgiveness, there is no future."

~ Desmond Tutu

Examining the Landscape of Forgiveness

As spiritual caregivers we so often encounter patients when they are facing threatening disease, uncertainty, or disability. They present with bitterness, doubt, anger at God, fear and pain they can't begin to describe. Often, they are individuals who no longer speak to one or more of their children, close family members, or old dear friends. Comforting them with the word of God is always beneficial, but beneath their surface they have the work of forgiveness to do if their spirits and bodies are to heal. But how do we get them to even acknowledge this, especially if they feel righteous in their injury?

Apology and forgiveness, by common understanding, are transactions that must have originated very early for humans as a way to balance or negotiate peaceful resolutions to injury. As people evolved emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, transgressions also became more complex and apologies more difficult to form while the art of forgiving moved toward a more obscure and tangled, maybe even impossible process. There are no clean rules for the right apology, nor are there guarantees for forgiveness. It might seem an impossible task, but it can also happen as simply as a breath. There will always be an element of mystery within this process, yet we know in our deepest places when we've truly forgiven; when we've been changed by the alchemical process that requires grace as the catalyst. When things have been made "right", and the transaction is settled, true forgiveness restores and heals at the soul level with a clear and still peace.

Getting across that bridge

From early in our childhood until our years as elders, there are times we must apologize, and there are times we must forgive. It's impossible to interrelate with others without stumbling, misunderstanding, stepping over a boundary, disregarding feelings or breaking a rule. We all suffer tragedy and loss and most of the time there is an error attached either in our own judgement or at the hand of another person. We may be at fault, or we may be the one who suffers the damage, the tasks of forgiving come with life as pathways to spiritual union. Being human means that we endure both sides and as difficult as they are, both gestures are mechanisms of transformation and growth, and no one is spared these challenges.

Even though our patient/companion may say they've forgiven, what we often hear is a cloaked version of a righteous stance as if forgiveness is currency, they've paid but will never allow the offender to cross a certain line again. In the act of never trusting or entrusting the offender, they lie in wait for another injury that they believe is inevitable, they "forgive" but the offender is exiled and the door is closed. To "forgive but not forget" means that one must continue to feed that memory of injury in order to "protect" oneself. Forgiveness without release of spiritual injury is not really forgiveness, while there can be acceptance and peace, the injury remains.

Similarly, a grudge is a construct of a hurtful event where sustained feeling of hurt and anger may dim but never disappear and can be re-ignited by triggers. But holding onto a grudge is a bit different. There is a rejection or refusal of perspective-taking and a careful tending of the injury or wound with a sense of moral superiority over the transgressor. There is power derived from the grudge and it would seem that grudge holding is on the rise and encouraged in many corners of our society today.

When one holds on to a grudge there is a commitment made to stay angry, a denial of the other's perspective, and a deep sickness of the mind and soul. The grudge holder continually elevates the degree of their suffering and refreshes the narrative with details that may or may not be true. In this process the grudge holder vows to drink their own poison and remain in a state of unforgiveness. Van Monsiou, et al., (2021) found that "holding long-term grudges has been linked to greater risk of heart disease, chronic pain, and stomach ulcers" (p.2). People who choose to reside in a state of unforgiveness essentially choose to exist in this life in a state of resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger and fear (p.3). This toxicity seeps into every relationship, narrative, and every perspective an individual has, denying them and starving them of joy. If we all look inward most of us have a grudge or two. They may be large or they may be slight and we say we hold on to them to protect ourselves from further harm. However, embracing the harm with and within these behaviors blinds us to more constructive ways to protect and nourish our hearts. Grudges block perspective-taking within the apology/forgiveness process and therefore block the flow of grace and transformation, love, soul force, and breath of life. The soul is blinded, lost, and confused by their own clouded perspective.

Humility

We see in the Bible reference to grace through humility:

"Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" - 1 Peter 5:5

If forgiving is the work that must be done, it can be found by three paths; each way different in its meandering, each involving alchemy and change, but each leading to the same center. All three invoke grace, humility, and empathy and we can lead with any one of them, in any order.

The first path is difficult because it involves setting aside ego and embracing humility. We see this happening in twelve step programs when a participant has reached “rock bottom” and can’t go any lower. Here is where they must reach for that higher power, humbly, with nowhere else to go, and learn to empathize discovering the grace to assist in this beautifully mystical act of the soul. Another path is to first reach for grace directly by way of an open heart, opening to possibility of restoration through prayerfulness, where grace arrives to help us consider the notion of forgiving, and find our humility, and therefore allowing us to empathize and understand. Lastly, by beginning with empathy (or perspective-taking). If the patient already has the capacity for empathy to begin the journey here they might suddenly understand that the offender might have been unknowing or troubled, grace intervenes on this trail to assist forgiving. As the spiritual companion, to know which path would be best and least terrifying, we need to take time and listen deeply in order to know the approach, praying for the grace needed to guide them well.

Reaching for humility means to reach lower, and for one who has reached their lowest point as a transgressor, it means setting aside self-pity, numbness, and martyrdom. In other words, their own perspective. Now in reaching lower to humility they must do so as willing participants moving to a greater depth of emptiness especially if they are in a place to make amends in the face of rejection. This is true for the forgiver as well in that it will mean acknowledging another perspective and setting aside their grudges, wounds, and shields. The critical piece is in the willingness, that they must let go and be willing to reach into true humility, a space of unknowing, and emptiness; a terrifying place that some might experience as a loss of self, especially if their injuries are deeply ingrained in their identity.

One could view the apology as a vehicle for the obtaining of God or the divine, or for recovering of a soul fragment that would move us toward completeness. Within 12-step programs, the action taken in the 9th step, making amends, appears to be the most difficult as it involves true humility. To set one's perspective aside in order to see the other's requires humility, in that we acknowledge the possibility we could be mistaken or ignorant. A formed perspective is difficult to set aside, though, as it is constructed by the fabric of our lives and belief systems and small threads that extend far back into our early days as children. It aligns us with people, people we've loved or lost, it represents our belonging. To change that perspective, even for a glimpse, means that for a brief moment we can't exist. For a brief moment that "other" stands in the empty space within us, and that can be frightening. It also means, if we are to hold on to and accept that perspective of the other person as a new truth, we must grieve the old truth, it's a loss of ourselves and a part of the glue that holds us together. Understanding this, we can gather some compassion for those who struggle with this process, it is no small effort and a terribly rocky climb.

The apologizer and atonement

In counseling those who need to find forgiveness, Shann Ferch (1998) discusses teaching forgiving behaviors and that they follow when the offender is coached to ask, "Will you forgive me?" Ferch makes it clear that the "apologizer" must name the behavior as described by the offended person, cannot make statements such as "I'm sorry, or "I apologize" but must indicate that they will discontinue the hurtful behavior and work to restore the relationship. Religious background and development should be considered as it influences the quality of repentance and atonement behaviors and the ability of the apologizer to demonstrate remorseful attitudes and "turn away from hurtful behavior". Blocks to the apology experience are viewed to be defensive

posturing, persistent denial, projection and displacement (Murray, 2002, p.195). As spiritual companions and caregivers in the atonement and forgiveness process, the apologizer can often benefit from our help.

Conciliatory actions that result in forgiveness, restored trust, and closure begin with perspective-taking, where the apologizer actively considers the feelings, experiences, impact, and damage that the offense has caused, but many times, there can be nothing done to repair damage. Still, the act of considering the perspective of the victim opens the conciliatory pathway that enables a healing exchange. Research (Berndsen, et al., 2018) supports the idea that even perceived perspective-taking by the victim, feeling that the offender makes the effort to understand, while the victim senses shame, guilt, and remorse in the offender opens the channel of possibility for true forgiveness (p. 104). By the offender's acknowledgement that the victim has suffered, the victim believes the offender has considered his perspective and has reflected on the situation.

It's important to note that both parties make assumptions during this process, the apologizer assumes he/she knows the pain they've caused, the forgiver assumes the apologizer has reflected on this injury and now feels enough remorse to try and make amends. But with each imagining and assumption the circumstances and the point of view are influenced by each party's individual emotional evolution and ability to identify feelings, their moral or religious teachings, their exposure to suffering, hardship, and loss, and their culture. Assuming the depth of remorse can be very inaccurate and it may be impossible to truly know the motivations behind these expressions. Deliberate actions and repeated actions of retribution, or corrected behavior create stronger reconciliations, but sometimes need to be tested with time.

The offender's efforts are best served by conveying their understanding of the seriousness of his/her offense regardless of whether they can imagine the exact pain and suffering. But Berndsen et al (2018) offer that if the victim senses that the offender underestimates the weight of the offense the victim is less able to forgive, and conciliatory attitudes are less accessible (p.105). The mechanism for forgiveness granting is broken. Overestimating, over imagining on the part of the person making amends has the opposite effect. Though the offender may not be able to truly feel the exact feelings of the victim, they leave space for more, and their conciliatory gestures are believed.

The circumstances that enable forgiveness are certainly influenced by culture and religion, whether the apology is perceived as sincere and genuine, politics, personality and emotional development, or financial restitution. However, I would say that though one can generalize, we can't predict the readiness and the fastness of forgiving nor can we predict the meandering of the forgiving process. If forgiveness is sought after, then the apologizer should take some responsibility for activating forgiveness in the injured person by an attempt to understand and repair with a clear commitment not to repeat the offense.

As a mystical movement of spirit, Kevin Grant offers that true forgiveness "comes through a personal transcendent experience where the [forgiver's] behavior and attitude are transformed. "[It is] not a willing act (I am going to forgive) but a profound internal transformation" (Grant, 2008, p.11). Grant shares an actual account of the spiritual experience as:

“[A]nd so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one outstretched to me and as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down

my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried, ‘with all my heart!’” (p.11)

Grant also indicates that prior to this came the words from an apologizer “will you forgive me” and an apologizer’s extended hand. The experience to the forgiver was clearly described as hallowed. The apologizer went through a huge transpersonal process to arrive at this river’s edge, ask to be forgiven and extend a hand knowing they could be rejected. Learning perspective taking that enabled the apologizer to form a pure apology (that is, one free of manipulation or personal agenda), a whole-hearted apology involved painful inner wrestling and courage to face unimaginable truths.

Cultural components of the apology-forgiveness dyad

Though the research on forgiveness is limited, there seems to be an urgency of late to better understand the solid benefit that our engaging in the process of expressing deep sorrow for causing pain to another individual, can contribute to the enormous healing potential available as both apologizer and forgiver within this process. Only since the mid 1980’s has any research been conducted to fully examine the forgiveness process. Fincham and May (2021) make note that prior to 1985 only 5 studies on divine forgiveness have been published (p.2). Those studies focused on receiving forgiveness from God or a supreme being. These studies may just “reflect religiosity” than true divine forgiveness (p. 1). Actual measuring divine forgiveness is a rather nebulous task as the single-item measure can only be the participant’s “knowing” that God has forgiven them. Though many believe that within the imaginal state of being forgiven by God, one might reach a permanent resolution, where new behaviors and emotional changes take place, this phenomenon offers a rich ground for further transpersonal research.

In Western culture we often look at the acts of seeking and giving forgiveness through a lens that is filtered through our Judeo-Christian traditions and therefore includes an element of “Divine Forgiveness”. Mullet and Azar (2009) discuss some of the cultural and religious differences in the forgiveness processes. They also make a point that individual personalities determine a degree of “forgivingness” that is hardwired. Depth of forgivingness would influence whether someone holds on to injustices and grudges or moves into a benevolent, forgiving mode to avoid being angry. Unconditional Forgiveness (p. 278), where one moves easily into forgiveness can be linked to spiritual development not necessarily influenced by outside or religious teachings. Mullet and Azar make the distinction that among the different religions, the Christian faith teaches unconditional, ideal forgiveness, while the Muslim community considers forgiveness as not just a religious function, but part of governing and therefore requires evidence of repentance, contrition, and active seeking of forgiveness from their victim. Regardless of the teachings, the true depth of understanding, sensitivity and the way it is conveyed are the aspects that influence the quality of the apology. Even in despair the sincere asking for forgiveness, and then an action of contrition, though it might only be symbolic, inspires compassion and trust between parties so both can move forward into healing. Within families, asking what is needed for forgiveness to occur can sometimes light a path and move individuals toward reconciliation faster and more efficiently.

Conclusion

There are different degrees of transgression and the terrain is wild, rocky, and dangerous. Some injustices and great wounding are intergenerational and just can’t be “forgiven” in a lifetime. Repentance and forgiveness then become working processes for lives and spirit through generations and must be walked through rather than languaged. It requires time and movement

and will undergo an alchemical change through lives lived, while being transformed to richness in history. While one person in one life may experience generational pain, we must remind them that love can exist without forgiveness.

If someone seeking forgiveness is willing to thoroughly examine their misdeeds and transgressions and they are willing to co-suffer by imagining the pain they have caused, they are willingly reaching to humility and to God's grace. Expressing their understanding of the deep suffering of the other, making amends and asking to be forgiven can create a feeling of gaining back a part of themselves, repairing their sense of wholeness. When we dare to reach past our pride, fear and limitations to a truly humble place of understanding and kindness, we find a gift waiting for us, a piece of our soul long estranged and nearly forgotten, ready for us to welcome home.

It's a beautiful synergy, grace and the human heart yearning for one another in order to fully engage human holiness. The heart very much wants to let grace in, and essentially forgive without reservation. Grace will restore the heart where it abides, and grows louder in volume from there.

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