

Forgiveness: A Gift of Remembrance

By K.R. Maddock

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Pennington, 1667

I woke up one morning with the sudden and unexpected thought that I had already forgiven my father. It was a shocking revelation because of all the anger I carried through the years on his account. I remember all too well the anger I felt as a result of his occasional beatings. I remember just as clearly the humiliation of his verbal criticisms and clumsy attempts at reconciliation, as well as the guilt I carried through adolescence because I was told that a good person

should forgive and forget. Finally, when he lay dying it was a sense of regret rather than sorrow that I felt. Though I realized some form of reconciliation was needed at that time, I was at a loss for words to bring it about and the stroke had rendered him mute.

Ironically, the most meaningful exchanges between us during those final days related to trivial matters. When I told him I had just opened a retirement savings account, he formed his thumb and index finger into a crude "o." For a man who had worried about saving money most of his life that was perhaps the most heartening news he could hear. And, although I played no significant role in helping him prepare for

death, the fact that he left behind a considerable amount of life insurance in my name seemed to speak on more than material terms.

In whatever way I interpret these memories, the fact is that the conversations between my father and myself have been more frequent since his death than before. Perhaps as a form of memorial, I now keep a photograph of my parents in my room. This benign white-haired couple has accompanied me faithfully through many changes of address and through many life transitions. They help to define me, not as oppressive memories, but as people who gave me a name and a place to belong.

I can't remember when the change in attitude or perception took place, if it did at all completely. I frequently have to relive the resentment in order to cope with unexplained movements of anger toward other people in difficult situations. Yet the conversations with my father in particular help me to move on. The residual anger has become part of the process of discovering my spiritual home.

Overcoming Resentment

One of the practical gifts my parents left me was their abstinence

from alcohol and drugs. If they had been addicted themselves, I most surely would have gone the same way long ago, and perhaps never have found the inner strength required to deal with the challenges of life. One day I discovered a book entitled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Inspired by Alcoholics Anonymous, it speaks to a wider readership through the revelation that addictions can apply to more than intoxicating substances. The very emotions that often define us in negative terms, both to ourselves and to others, can often become addictive as well. For example, the writers observe that resentment isolates us from process of healing by promoting the illusion that the world has come to focus on our victimhood, imprisoning us in the past.

"Resentment is the poison of the spiritual life," they write. (213) The word means to experience the same feeling over and over again, to dwell on past feelings, to cling to old injuries, powerlessness, rage, fear, and images of self-as-victim. Resentment is the antithesis of spirituality, which begins with the recognition and acceptance of our imperfection.

Resentment unites anger, fear, and sadness in a closed circle. *The Spirituality of Imperfection* continues, "Anger storms in the hard passage between fear and sadness; cultivated, it turns into a jagged resentment that tears rather than trims and that resists healing. Denying fear and scorning the sadness that is shared, resentment refuses the possibility of going through and beyond anger into forgiveness" (215). Resentment is the refusal or inability to break out of that closed circle and return to the fragile but essential world of relationships. The pain can be healed only through closeness, some kind of connection, through admitting the need for unity and community.

Growing into Forgiveness

Evelyn and James Whitehead, who wrote *Shadows of the Heart: a Spirituality of the Negative Emotions*, observe that forgiveness reinterprets anger allowing us to start again. They write, "In forgiveness we choose not to let the hurt we have experienced get in the way of a relationship continuing" (84).

But how can that be realized beyond the ties that bind and often grieve us in this life? There is one story in the *Gospel According to Matthew* (18: 21-22) which may suggest a clue to the mystery. Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother who has wronged him, wondering if seven times would be sufficient. He was looking for a rule that, however difficult to observe, might relieve him of responsibility for the breach in relationship. But Jesus doesn't allow him this way out, suggesting that Peter needs to forgive his

brother seventy times seven. This is intended to suggest an infinite rather than a specific number, implying that there is no way out of a continuing relationship. Forgiveness is a process rather than an act of absolution. It cannot be willed.

Forgiveness is not a conscious act, but something discovered after people have learned to lay down feelings of victimization. My own experience has been confirmed by the stories of other people who failed in their direct efforts to forgive. The more we are tormented by qualms of conscience, the more often we try to banish them through conscious acts of good will, the harder it becomes. Many addicts have discovered that the only way to find a way out of this impasse is simply to, "Pray for the son of a bitch" (*The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 217). Forgiveness comes about through openness rather than from effort. It comes about from surrendering the claim to be in control, as we do in prayer. The poignant plea, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," is a prime example.

A Spiritual Shift

I'm not introducing the subject of prayer as a religious platitude. It is not a mechanism for avoiding personal responsibility by invoking divine help. It actually involves a spiritual shift in perspective, a new experience of self that makes healing and wholeness possible.

Forgiveness is not a willed act. It is a profound inner transformation involving two discoveries that we have been forgiven and that we have already forgiven. These discoveries are united by a sense of having been reconciled with the human community through acknowledging our own limitations. Prayer is based on the discovery that we *do not forgive*, but *discover* forgiveness. Praying for the "son-of-a-bitch" that I remember my father being on significant occasions in my life enables me to accept him on a new level of relationship.

The story of the tailor in heaven is a light diversion illustrating the *givenness* of forgiving. When the tailor arrived at the gates of heaven, Peter found some discrepancies in his qualifications to enter and suggested he wait until God returned to consider his case. In the meantime, the tailor asked if he could just step inside and catch a glimpse of what he might miss. Peter didn't see any harm in this, and allowed him to step over the threshold. The tailor was awestruck. Seeing an enormous golden throne at the far end of a beautiful palace, he went toward it and climbed up into the seat. From that vantage point he could see everything in the universe and everything that was taking place back on earth. Then he recognized his former neighbour climbing over the fence into his own backyard, helping himself to the tomatoes he had planted but would never eat. The tailor was so furious he picked up the golden footstool at the base of the throne and hurled it toward the earth.

Shortly after this, God returned and discovered the tailor hiding behind the gates of heaven, looking very guilty about what he had done. But God knew, and said to him, "You haven't learned yet that I rule the earth with forgiveness and not through vengeance." The tailor was sent back to the end of the eternal lineup awaiting admittance.

To forgive means letting go of feelings of resentment and of the vision of one's self as victim that underlies these feelings. By focusing on the emotion itself, we are distracted from a more profound issue. The core of resentment is more than feeling. It is a self-centered view of the world that makes forgiveness impossible.

This hopeless perspective often comes about through confusing forgiveness with other concepts, such as understanding or forgetting. The need to understand involves exploring the causes of present situations, digging into the past with the intent to control the forces that begin there. But forgiveness has more to do with letting go of the past, giving up any claim to control it and refusing to be controlled by it.

To forgive and forget is an annoying combination of terms at the best of times. It is simply too difficult to bring about. Besides, letting go is not a form of erasure. It involves accepting the past for what it is and not allowing it to prevent us from moving on. The nineteenth century philosopher Schopenhauer, wrote "To forgive and forget means to throw away dearly bought experience."

The Whiteheads add, "Forgiveness knows that hurt has been sustained." They continue, "in forgiving we respond to the other person not in terms of the harm they have inflicted but in terms of who they are beyond that pain" (85). Forgiving is a personal affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who did it*.

To confuse forgiveness with forgetting also loses the sense of forgiveness being a gift. When that happens, we become convinced that errors and wrongs can and *should* be forgotten. Again *The Spirituality of Imperfection* authors write, "Spiritual tradition sees it as a strange delusion that our problems have to be gotten rid of; instead, the sages and saints suggest, such difficulties are best put to use" (224). An offense must not be forgotten since it is only through remembering and fitting it into whole of a person's experience that the possibility of healing is realized and forgiveness comes to fruition.

To forgive may also be described as a decision that is not completed at the moment of choice. It is a process that gradually allows healing as trust is restored. It does not allow us to go on as if nothing had happened. We simply choose not to be defined by this rupture, and try to incorporate it into a continuing relationship.

Unconditional forgiveness

Finally, there is no unconditional forgiveness. Only God can forgive unconditionally, and to claim otherwise devalues the one forgiven by implying he is not responsible for his choices. Ignoring consequences implies not caring, and everyone needs to feel that they matter and that their actions have an effect on others. What is needed, then, is a willingness to accept responsibility and not blame others for our problems.

Within families we have our first lessons in relationship. So the ultimate act of maturity is forgiveness of our parents. We must not on

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any account go through life thinking of ourselves as their victims. And yet many of us often miss the opportunities for love and companionship that life has to offer as we pick our way cautiously along this icy path.

All the relationships we enter into, voluntary or involuntary, familial or other, will necessarily be flawed. Seeing family in a different way involves gratitude. The family is first of all a gift, the setting of our earliest and most valuable lessons. In families we learn to value differences, to forgive transgressions, and to think of others before ourselves. We also discover, in trying to balance our personal freedom with our need for intimacy, that what we do affects others and what others do affects us. People are related through need and through love, as well as through blood.

The total experience of forgiveness being forgiven and forgiving involves reclaiming a dark part of the self that has been split off. It helps us to grasp a less threatening vision of self as ordinary, imperfect and limited. *The Spirituality of Imperfection* declares, "this acceptance flows into and involves an awareness of connection with others who are also inevitably imperfect, and with the world, which, because it is made up of imperfect beings, does not demand perfection of us" (232).

Today it comes as less of a surprise to me that I have forgiven my father. The simple relief I feel when I think of him is clear evidence of that. I still have trouble thinking of myself as being forgiven, however and perhaps that flaw will never be entirely healed. As I grow older, I find that I am becoming in many ways like my father. I

have picked up some of his more annoying habits, and have difficulty talking about personal feelings.

In other ways, I am more and more unlike him. I have made my own life choices, reflecting positive interests and hopes that are untainted by resentment and unresolved anger. These choices have implied personal sacrifices and opened up worlds that my father never imagined. The freedom these differences allow me suggest that I have no need to dwell on feelings of guilt for past failures. Such freedom, though coming late in life, is nothing less than a gift. It allows me to reach out to others with more confidence, even while facing the daily challenge to remember and to let go. 

References:

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