

# FORGIVENESS

## Introduction

Robin Shohet

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You teach what you most need to learn. Or you contribute to a special edition of *Self & Society*.

For years the word 'forgiveness' turned me off completely. It smacked of self-righteousness, moral superiority, hypocrisy, and often downright self-deception. But for two years now I have been researching a book on revenge, and gradually it has become a book on revenge and forgiveness. And this is because I have come to agree with Beverley Flanagan that, 'regardless of its source, hatred creates mean-spiritedness in the human condition. So when an individual does not forgive one who injures him, he perpetuates evil and, in the end, affects the well-being of everyone' (*Forgiving the Unforgivable*).

Forgiveness, says Flanagan, is only for the brave, because it is only for those willing to confront their pain, accept themselves as permanently changed, and make difficult choices. I agree, whilst failing frequently to meet these criteria myself. What I have discovered, as I endeavour to strip away the blame, the judgements, the self-righteousness, the victim-consciousness, is that forgiveness is more about self-forgiveness and self-acceptance than about the other person.

A while ago I was very angry with my partner and full of blame for what I considered to be an unjustified attack. About



to walk out, I suddenly realised that I did not have the courage to face my pain, and that it was this, rather than her behaviour, that was the real issue. I went back and said I was sorry we were like this. It was not what I wanted, and my own behaviour was contributing to it at least as much as hers. The argument evaporated. The external situation had not changed, but my attitude had, and in changing it I had come to realise that there was nothing and no one to forgive, except perhaps myself for my need to be right.

The son of a rabbi went to worship on the Sabbath in a nearby town. On his return, his family asked, 'Well, did they do anything different from what we do here?'

'Yes, of course,' said the son.

'Then what was the lesson?'

'Love the enemy as thyself.'

'So, it's the same as we say. And how is it you learned something else?'

'They taught me to love the enemy within myself.'

Reading accounts of people who have truly forgiven has gradually come to interest me more than all the juicy revenge stories I have collected. The forgiveness stories read so authentically that I have been forced to see my prejudice against the word as a convenient way of not tackling my own inability to forgive. I have

now read enough remarkable stories of forgiveness, and had enough experiences of the destructiveness and seductiveness of revenge fantasies, to want to break my personal addiction to vengeful thoughts.

I would like to end with a quote from Tolstoy. I do not know whether he lived this himself, but it embodies all I have come to believe: 'Whoever really knows God will not find it necessary to forgive his brother; he will only have to pardon himself for not having forgiven much sooner.'

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## *What is Forgiveness?*

*Ursula Fausset*

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For most of my life 'forgiveness' meant practically nothing to me. It brought faint echoes of being bad and confessing, of the Lord's Prayer, and a general flavour of an old distasteful puritan world. Now that I have experienced the true nature of forgiveness, I have a clear and simple method with which to keep me on purpose in my life. It is a potent key to letting go of the past, trusting the future and thus being gratefully with what is now.

Let us consider what forgiveness is not. My strongest memory of being told I was 'forgiven' is from when I was fifteen. My mother had read some 'wicked' disclosures in my private diary and said, coldly and righteously, that as she was such a rare and understanding mother, she would not throw me out; she 'knew' I was ashamed and sorry that I had let her

down. She said I was truly to apologise, not to tell my father and not to leave the house for two weeks. I was confused about the nature of my sin and was meant to feel lucky that I had been forgiven. This was not forgiveness. For the next twenty years that incident (among a host of others) justified my sexual confusion and my lack of confidence. Gradually I gained agreement from the world that my mother was to blame. That made two of us pushing each other away with judgements. This was not forgiveness, either. Now, at 85, she has become an expert blamer. It is not my job to try to change her. That has been a very hard lesson to learn. After many years of anger and tears, of comfort from my friends and guidance for the little hurt child in me, I have been able to let go of needing anything from her.

*This article is a condensed version of Ursula Fausset's booklet Forgiveness. Ursula Fausset founded the London Gestalt Centre. She now focuses on 'the lost dimension'.*