

'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.'

What is Forgiveness?

Ursula Fausset

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.

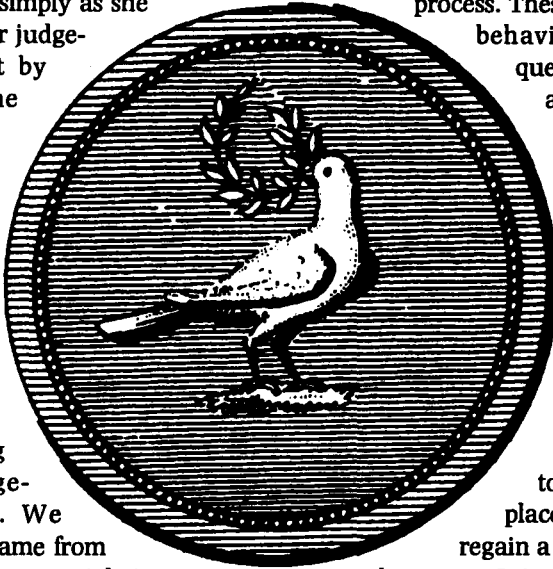
Let us consider what forgiveness is not. My strongest memory of being told I was 'forgiven' is from when I was fifteen. My mother had read some 'wicked' disclosures in my private diary and said, coldly and righteously, that as she was such a rare and understanding mother, she would not throw me out;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

Now I see her simply as she is, without fear or judgement. I see that by making everyone else wrong, she is vainly attempting to make herself right. To be right (on an ego level) is to be approved of, and behind the need for approval is a longing for acknowledgement and love. We wanted just the same from one another. Now my job is to avoid all the content of what she says and listen with my 'heart ears'; then I can treasure the moments of our meetings. It took me so long to realise that my mother was uneducated and frightened, and that her responses to that teenage Ursula were the highest expression of love she had available at the time.

Forgiveness is not being kind and tolerant, a refinement of self-righteousness, a gift from a superior to an inferior; not, 'I judge you wrong but out of my infinite benevolence I will not punish you the way you deserve' (That is a debasing false pardon. *A Course in Miracles* describes unjustified forgiveness as an attack, a false forgiveness which the world employs to keep the sense of sin alive.) And it is not letting people get away with it, for the sake of pseudo-peace. This behaviour shrouds apathy and cowardice and results in accumulating resentment until there is either an uproar or a chronic deadening



process. These 'good' and 'nice' behaviours easily masquerade as forgiveness and are its common near-enemies.

What then is forgiveness? According to *Webster's Dictionary*, forgiveness means to cease to bear resentment, to give up the desire to punish . . . to 'replace' the ill-feeling, to regain a sense of peace and harmony. It is a process in which

I take responsibility for healing myself. The experience moves from blame to pain to love. Either we carry around with us the pain of grievances and are shackled by our ill-feeling, or we are willing to experience and surrender to the pain which sets us free. Forgiveness is unconditional, a widening and a softening between people. We have to look beyond our securities and beliefs and create a new context from which to view the person or experience. All of the work we do on ourselves (through therapeutic or spiritual models) requires this specific radical shift. Help is often available (perhaps in unexpected ways) when we are willing to tell the whole truth, to step into the unknown.

The actual past is unchangeable. The purpose of forgiveness (as of every path to enlightenment) is to clean up all the effects and all the illusions in us and to make way for being fully in relationship with life from moment to moment. Whenever I am

emotionally uncomfortable my work on myself is in using what I know of forgiveness to keep myself clear. Not forgiveness regarding the distant past, the grosser and conscious aspects of which I have dealt with; but the past day, hour, minute or even second.

My inner process goes something like this: I think I know how both others and I should be; and they are not. As long as I am believing that thought, I'm its victim: trapped. I experience holding in my solar plexus. I watch my busy mind, explaining, proving how obviously right I am. I see my attachment and my pride. This inner dialogue gives me false protection against a projected lack of love and forgiveness from others. My task is to know that I am in illusion and could see it all differently. If others attack me and I know I have made a mistake, acknowledging it can bring the barriers down instantly. Often the position is very simple: I am being eaten up inside, a victim to my nagging punisher. I can choose to live in this world of regret and 'if-onlys', or I can experience the ordinariness of being mistaken. The attack can be seen as an opportunity; all I need to do is to say out loud: 'Yes, I did it. I was frightened, lonely, escaping my pain; I'm human. And I'm sorry.' Or perhaps: 'Yes. You are right; I didn't do it. I was thoughtless, lazy; I hadn't the courage. I am sorry.'

Sometimes people, through their anger, are trying to produce pain or guilt in me and I find no fault in myself. Perhaps they are projecting their guilt or upset about something else. I focus on my breathing to avoid reacting. When we know our true strength, we don't need to be defensive. I believe that all communi-

cation is either an expression of love or a call for love. Sometimes my (or another's) explosion of anger seems totally clean and appropriate, a cleansing energy; it flows without conflict and leaves no trace. And occasionally I slip back into being completely taken over by my anger; I am fascinated, excited and enjoy my power. However, identifying with my negative emotions just doesn't make me or others feel happy. I so often find that I am not upset for the reason I think, and my upset leaves me lonely. Anger is an egotistical emotion and hides our fear and pain. In the end I can never justify attack. Attack creates defence or counter-attack and of itself solves nothing.

Having given examples of my everyday use of forgiveness, let me tell you how I know it has taken place. I experience a shift in my body, a softening, and I feel better. I have let go of fear and suffering and doubt and am at peace. The result is that from a comfortable body and a clear mind, rational decisions can be made. Perhaps our issues have been with family or friend and we may even have decided to say goodbye. When we forgive someone, it does not mean we have to spend time with them. When we truly forgive there is no avoidance and no sacrifice. We are left without blame, without guilt, without idealisations and without entanglements. If we get entangled again and begin to have attacking thoughts, then the process is not complete. The more we practise forgiveness, the more rapidly do we let go of grievances. Forgiving, however, is not forgetting. The memory remains in our mind-tapes, no longer charged with negative emotion; to be used like a library of information to help us act wisely in the future.

Let us now return to forgiveness as the ultimate requirement for freeing us of our past. We usually think first of those important figures whom we have not yet forgiven: perhaps parents, or old lovers. But in so far as we harbour guilt, we need to find forgiveness for ourselves. Guilt is its own punishment and we gain nothing by continuing to punish ourselves, except perhaps avoiding the vulnerability of love. For when we are eaten up with guilt, we cannot feel love; so that the payoff for attracting guilt to ourselves is avoiding love. Guilt about specific behaviour and towards particular people is easy to recognize. If we cannot say we are sorry, we cover it up by being defensive: blaming, justifying, rationalising (probably only in inner dialogue) and we use victim language: 'if only,' 'it's not fair,' 'I can't,' 'if it wasn't for . . .'. Or sometimes we punish ourselves with sacrificial behaviour. To be willing to say 'I am sorry' is in itself a step towards giving up my position. When I say 'Please forgive me' it does not follow that I have done wrong: I am asking you to let go of your blame, or to help me to let go of my guilt. The more truly trusting we are, of ourselves and of life, the easier it is to be humble, to offer or to receive a healing of the separation within us.

More insidious than all that we have done or left undone, and less easy to recognize, is what is often called 'existential guilt'. Whether or not we believe in original sin, or that we are suffering some *karma* from a previous incarnation, is irrelevant. Some people have received an injunction very early denying their right to exist. But something can be done to shift this deeply crippling attitude. Such guilt ultimately requires forgiveness, and

this cannot happen in isolation; for the fear of being cast out and the fear of emptiness require the presence of another person to act as mediator. This other can accept the awesome terrors and then, in true compassion and humility, the healing love can be transmitted. This archetypal guilt shows most clearly how the need for forgiveness is primarily not to do with what anyone has done, but with our attitudes.

In fact our attitudes and beliefs determine our responses all the way. They will influence our experience of disappointment and even of the pain of betrayal, which, like all suffering, can be a gateway to freedom. Only when we are lost in the identification with our egos do we damn suffering. This does not permit us to be careless of our brothers and sisters. However much work we do to prevent and relieve suffering, in ourselves and in others, the nature of life is that there will be more. People who upset us provide opportunities for us to discover our projected shadows, our illusions, our attachments. The more consciousness we develop, the more responsibility we have and the more choice and freedom. Do we want to be happy, or do we want to cling to being right? We can either loop back into the wheel of blame-guilt-righteousness-fear; or we can experience that creative pain that breaks our hearts; and in the breaking opens them to love.

'The unforgiving mind is full of fear' (*A Course in Miracles*). Fear condemns and is a barrier against love. Being without forgiveness is also to be without faith and hope. To tolerate, to cling to grievances, is to lose vision and passion; to live in mediocrity, half dead and half alive. For-

giveness helps us to give up our need to be special, give up grasping for outer rewards, give up our illusions of security and give up tormenting ourselves. It is a quality of great power which can be experienced through profound heroic shifts or through little actions and gestures. It is a

natural loving response to others and to ourselves. It enables us to see ourselves through the Eternal as God sees us. She does not forgive, for She does not condemn. In this way, when we are one with the Eternal, we no longer need the bridge of forgiveness.

A Political Issue?

John Lampen

The day after the 1988 IRA bomb in Enniskillen, which injured him and killed his daughter, Gordon Wilson told a BBC interviewer that he had prayed for the men who placed it. He later wrote, 'I did not use the word "forgive" in that broadcast, but people understood that my words were about forgiveness. They were not intended as a statement of theology or of righteousness, rather they were from the heart, and they expressed exactly how I felt at the time and as I still do. Better men than I have wrestled with the whole concept of forgiveness and have failed. I believe that I do my best in human terms to show forgiveness, but the last word rests with God and those who seek his forgiveness will need to repent. At that level, such a judgement is way beyond me. All I can do is to continue not to think evil or malicious thoughts about these people and to go on bearing them no ill-will.'

This made a great impact in Ireland and around the world. The leader of the largest paramilitary group in the Protestant community said that Wilson's words

had undoubtedly prevented reprisal killings. Public reactions to Enniskillen can be recognized with hindsight as one of the factors which moved events towards the eventual cease-fires. Yet not everyone shared the same sentiments. 'If I knew the bombers had repented,' said a newly bereaved widow, 'perhaps I could forgive them. But how can I forgive someone who may be planting another bomb at this very minute?'

Wrongdoing and forgiveness raise very hard questions, as these examples show; it would be easy to conclude that forgiving is a difficult and heroic act. That may be true, but we should not overlook the fact that acts of forgiveness are happening around us all the time. If it were not so, family life would be impossible, friendships could seldom survive, workplaces would be poisoned by resentment, our mental hospital population would soar, and the world's violent conflicts could never end in peace. Among my own Irish and South African friends are people who have forgiven terrible wrongs. I do think

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