Premature Forgiving

Marie McNeice

All my life I had struggled to live as a Christian alongside the troubles in Belfast. Nevertheless, as the riots, raids, shootings and bombings continued, so the challenges of the gospel — to love your enemy, do good to those who harm you, and forgive those who trespass against you — had become both more real and more difficult to follow. In 1974 I joined a religious congregation. With hindsight this was perhaps my way of trying to learn how to live out the gospel challenge of love and service and to be part of a movement to bring about change. As it was, I found it very hard to understand or accept that violence and death would bring anything but grief and hardship, let alone justice.

Within the community I learned to value the power of faith, prayer, the goodness of God and the need for sacrifice and forgiveness. I found an inner peace and I hoped that by sharing my faith and values with others I was somehow helping to heal the hurt and to promote peace in a non-violent way. As killing followed killing, the media presented us with the faces of many bereaved families and individuals, whose reactions to their crisis varied. For some it seemed easier to forgive than for others. Many expressed forgiveness immediately, while others swore they never could. I wondered if real forgiveness was ever possible. When given so readily, was it not premature, a voiced aspiration rather than an actuality?

Then in 1987 a friend of mine was murdered in front of his wife and three young children one Sunday morning as they drove to church. The horror experienced by the wife and children could not even be imagined. Not only were they bereaved of a husband and father, but also traumatised by the violent circumstances of his death. I was horrified and revolted by the sheer brutality of his killing. It unleashed within me thoughts and feelings that I hadn't believed I could have. Never before had I experienced such fierce anger rising in me as when I thought of his sectarian murderers.

Joe wasn't the first person I had known who was murdered, but he was the first murdered person I had seen dead. After he had been pronounced dead in the hospital we were allowed in to say our goodbyes. I was anxious about how he might look after being shot in the head at close range. I needn't have worried. He looked as though he was asleep. The only trace of the traumatic circumstances of his death was the clean white towel lying lightly over the top of his head. It didn't seem right for someone who had been killed so brutally to look so peaceful, in stark contrast to his heavily bloodstained car, his

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wife and children still spattered with his blood. It made me think about the care the nursing staff must have taken to make him look 'respectable'. I've wondered since what other subtle ways we use to cover up what might be horrible and difficult to face.

Joe's wife pleaded for no retaliation and talked about forgiving those who had murdered him. She turned to God for consolation and guidance, while I struggled to contain my anger, even going so far as to fantasise about how I could kill Joe's murderers myself. This desire for revenge seemed to be in direct conflict with gospel values and threw me into fear, confusion and guilt. I questioned my faith, values and beliefs and experienced a gap between them and the feelings of anger and revenge surging within me. The scripture challenge to 'love your enemy' and 'turn the other cheek' left me guilty about having such thoughts. It was as though in order to forgive I must turn away from everything I was feeling. A choice had to be made, to accept these feelings or to deny them, and I couldn't make it.

With hindsight my spirituality was somewhat less than integrated, but the experience did lead me to question whether 'turning the other cheek' necessarily meant denying feelings of anger and revenge — normal human emotions and responses. I came to the conclusion that, while forgiveness involves going beyond our feelings, it also means acknowledging and owning them, not covering them up or escaping to nicer and more acceptable ones in an effort perhaps to make them more respectable.

What do we usually do with our natural, spontaneous feelings of anger and hurt when, in order to forgive, we feel we have to set them aside or go beyond them? Where do these feelings and energies go? Many of us have surely experienced deep feelings of anger and revenge, and have either ignored them or tried to deny them — whereas the paramilitaries, for example, have retaliated, a life for a life. Did the violence in me continue for so long because, by choosing to deny my feelings rather than to express them constructively, I was unable to 'deal' with them? Were they subsequently displaced onto others who did express them, but destructively? Was I then 'good' because I didn't express them, while these others became 'bad' because they did? I am in no way advocating the acting out of our anger and revenge by killing and bombing, nor by trying to delegate or swap roles, but I am asking questions of myself about forgiveness, which must, if it is to be an authentic process, include an acknowledgement of such feelings.

Reconciliation

Over the years many peace and reconciliation groups have developed. Many of us have worked within these groups. Maybe our emphasis was, still is, too much on the need for forgiveness, at the expense of acknowledging and owning our raw and uncomfortable feelings. Any group dealing with bereavement would admit that a bereaved person needs to go through a whole gamut of emotions before acceptance is reached and they are able to live with their situation. Any injured party must come to terms with similar reactions; only when they are reconciled both to themselves and to the injuring party can they begin to be

open to the gift of forgiveness.

Maybe we need to change our focus, to see forgiveness, not merely as a necessary first step, but as the final target of an ongoing process of reconciliation — a process that includes as an inevitable and necessary part of the journey the acknowledgement, owning, expression and integration of all turbulent feelings.

In these days of the peace process in Northern Ireland the issues surrounding reconciliation and forgiveness give rise to many questions which must be grappled with by all who have been touched by the violence of the last 25 years. It is generally understood that to forgive is to pardon or free from penalty, to cease to blame. Following the now abandoned cease-fire, part of the paramilitary peace package was a demand for the early release of political prisoners. If governments respond positively to such a demand, does it mean that they are prepared to forgive — to cease to blame those who chose the violent path? Are the loved ones of those killed by such prisoners less forgiving because they express anger and pain at the very suggestion of an early release? Are those who seek to oppose the early release of those who killed their loved one to be judged bitter and unforgiving? Does forgiveness exclude the seeking of justice or the expectation of punishment? Will our desire for peace lead us to deny anger, bitterness and revenge and lead us to a premature forgiving? If so, will the feelings thus over-readily denied come back in five, ten, twenty years' time and demand violently to be heard? Or can we learn to acknowledge and own these feelings and work towards finding constructive and creative ways of expressing them? Rather than allowing them to remain as permanent obstacles, or alternatively denying them in a false forgiving, can we learn to value them as part of the process of opening to the gift of forgiveness?

Victims Can't Forgive

Jill Hall

I want to explore the mind-set of the victim position — a framework within which any one of us might operate. This position does have its own logic. However I believe that this logic is incompatible with the state of consciousness from which forgiveness flows. Once trapped in the logic of victimhood, forgiveness is edged out of action.

I want to make it clear that I am not claiming that everyone who has been on the receiving end of abusive action, whether from another person or persons, an institution or a political system, never forgives; I am only saying that where victims do forgive, I am pretty sure that they have not at the time of the abuse experienced themselves as victims or, at any

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