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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rate, not primarily as victims. They will have experienced themselves as *more* than victims and their abusers as *more* than their abusive behaviour. One of the striking feature of Nelson Mandela is that he does not have a hint of the victim about him, although for so many years he struggled within the horrific limitations of an appallingly victimising economic, social and political setup. By any external reckoning he qualified as a victim; yet he did not, apparently, take up the victim position on the psychological level, but chose instead to embrace a wider and more empowering perspective. Would he have been able to work closely and creatively with his former enemies (a convincing indication of forgiveness having taken place) if he had been feeling their victim?

What is the logic of victimhood? And how is it incompatible with that state of heart and mind which is a prerequisite for the exchange involved in forgiveness: the experience of openness, wholeness, connectedness and compassion?

A victim implies a persecutor. Not a helpful start. Indeed once we define someone as our persecutor not only are we unlikely to forgive them, but we will find the very idea distasteful. We will have narrowed our entire area of awareness and lost both the experience of our own wholeness and the acknowledgement of the other in their full being. It is a restricted viewpoint; the viewpoint required for forgiveness is expansive and inclusive, to allow for the activity of one whole being recognizing the wholeness (including the abusive behaviour) of the other.

Another aspect of the victim/persecutor perspective is that it is all about apportioning blame — this is what the labelling is for — and blame and forgiveness do not sit together. Forgiveness is not about being kind or 'understanding' to the one who we believe is to blame, while still holding on to the blaming. Such activity is usually a protection of some kind, from the pain of the event, if the persecutor is a loved one, or from the fear of not being loved or wanted. Or it might be a flight from blame, or a denial of blame — very different from moving into a framework where blame is not what it's all about. To enter into forgiveness we need to go beyond the partiality of blame and embrace the entirety of 'what is'. It is the ultimate in realism. (Again witness Mandela. He does not deny the wrongdoing he and numerous others suffered, but neither does he give it his prime energy, nor build a world upon it.)

The victim/persecutor perspective is a highly defined and selective viewpoint which fixes people in their 'innocent' or 'bad' place and blots out all else. It thus divides and separates the two parties as if they were different kinds of people — the sense of connectedness essential to release forgiveness is diverted. The victim/persecutor approach to life places us in different categories and tends to keep us there. Those identifying themselves as victims are not likely to know the persecutor in themselves; the mirrors of learning are not only misted, but are turned around, so that no light can be reflected from them. From such ways of seeing are generated hate, fear, blame and blind pain; not forgiveness. Not 'there, but for the grace of God, go I'; but 'Me' and 'Them' and never the twain shall see one another (or, indeed, their own selves), despite being locked together in the same dynamic.

How can this division nurture compassion? What meaning would forgiving our persecutors hold if we still felt ourselves the victim of their damaging acts? Only by stepping beyond the victim position would it attain meaning. Only by letting go of the restricted views of both victim and persecutor, by entering a state of consciousness that illuminates our essential wholeness and our interconnectedness with all others, can we make compassion both fitting and a reality. It seems to me that forgiveness is the inevitable result of the experience of oneness and is inevitably blocked by a perspective that draws from, and maintains, a sense of alienation and separation.

It is so unpleasant and unrewarding to feel a victim. Such feelings couldn't be further from those that accompany a state of forgiveness. Victimhood is the 'hard done by' position — all contraction and diminution — a far cry from the sense of peace, integration, expansiveness and freedom that forgiveness both requires and generates.

What else is implied by the victim position? It is essentially passive. A victim is 'done to' and any sense of agency is dismantled. It is the persecutor who is the dreadful but powerful one. (Indeed it gives power a bad name, which is a great disservice to the human race.) Victimhood creates and confirms a sense of impotence and insecurity and therefore breeds fear, fury, defensiveness (and thus possible attack), resentment, misery, blame and shame — hardly the climate conducive to forgiveness.

Shame is perhaps our greatest secret enemy, and any mode of thinking that feeds shame is worth challenging. It may seem extraordinary that a victim, who is after all defined as innocent, should feel shame, but the fact is that we, as victims, feel just that — and in no small measure. If we experience ourselves as powerless, if we feel helpless. if we seem to be only acted upon — if we are victims — then we tend to feel shame. Perhaps it is because we have unwittingly betrayed that fuller self which knows of our intrinsic power to be who we are, even if we have been ill-treated and abused. We sense something is wrong, out of order. So we blame, and then, to our surprise, we feel more shame. The burden is not lifted. Blame never releases us from shame; they are born from the same source and both confirm our impotence. Empowerment, responsibility and freedom elude us. Declaring that 'it's not my fault — it's theirs' may afford temporary relief, but the shame and dislike of ourselves persist.

We, as victims, are not known for our self-acceptance, although that is what we long for. Apportioning blame to a transgressor may be a necessary step in the process of healing — for self-blame breeds more shame and is more constricting than any other form of blame — but we are still stuck in less than who we really are. This is immensely painful. It is like trying to move in a very tight and shrinking shoe; difficult to stand up straight, let alone dance. The trouble with shame is that it not only paralyses us but is morally counter-productive. It doesn't help us behave better and thus gain in self-esteem. In fact the more shame we feel the more we tend to behave in shameful ways. We feel we deserve to be punished and can feel compelled to bring about our own humiliation. Then we are even more ashamed

and think we deserve more punishment. And so we devise, and continue to allow, shaming acts. The victim and persecutor in us have a heyday and forgiveness doesn't get much of a look-in.

And so I believe that it is a matter of some urgency that we let go these modes of defining and identifying ourselves. They keep us from experiencing our wholeness and interconnectedness, which alone can liberate us into forgiveness; forgiveness of self and others and the ways of the world. It is only within that same limited mode of definition that letting go of victimhood is seen to justify the persecutor. The act of transgression is not 'made all right' but seen in a larger and fuller context which has nothing to do with trading blame. Forgiveness is only appropriate, and only flourishes, when we give our attention to more than the victim or persecutor in us, while not denying either of them.

As you may have noticed, I am reluctant to define the word 'forgive'. I have simply alluded to the conditions out of which forgiveness emerges and not attempted to describe what it is in itself. I hope I have indicated something of its meaning in what I have written but, as with 'love', I believe forgiveness does not lend itself to definition — it is recognized and known when it is touched or received or entered into, and is a grace. And I deliberately use the word 'forgiveness' to include both the forgiver and the forgiven, or to refer to either. This is not a confusion but an attempt to express its essential 'we-ness' or 'us-ness'.

I hope it is clear that I have not been talking about formal acts of forgiveness or apology (although they have their place in social discourse). I am not referring to something bestowed on the malefactor, as a kind of favour or act of generosity. Nor is it a matter of trying to make the wrongdoer 'feel better'. I am writing of something that requires a shift to a more inclusive mode of consciousness (unknown by the victim part of us, which is a fragmented aspect of the self, however charged and prevalent it may be). And when we enter that willingness to see what is, in its entirety, forgiveness naturally comes forth. It flows from an inner state of heart, an integration of being, and an extended awareness. Feeling a victim obstructs access to this ever-living potential in us.