Forgiveness and Revenge

Michael Jacobs

'I won't apologise, but let's forgive and forget', said an old Coventry fire-fighter, as he reflected back upon the blanket bombing of Dresden. The moral struggle is evident: he wants to find a way to be reconciled with former enemies, but he still feels the superiority of his own position. He may even have wanted the other party to do the forgiving and forgetting, without having to give way and apologise at all himself. His words provide a example of the delicate balance there is in all relationships: he does not feel happy at the other side being left in an inferior position, but neither does he want to risk being put down himself. No wonder revenge and retaliation are such common features of human relations; they are an attempt to restore the fragile balance. If revenge is often unsuccessful it is because the balance tips too far the other way, demanding its own retaliation in return. Did Dresden balance out Coventry? Or did it put the Allies in the dock?

It is not only war that throws up the complex issues of how to respond to the horrific excesses of inhumanity. Questions of revenge and forgiveness arise from the way one individual treats another. Therapists know these questions through what they hear of the suffering some clients endure in the power imbalance of parent and child, or partners in a marriage. The wish for revenge, the impossibility of forgiveness, and the restoration of power to the client are features in these extreme cases, although forgiveness and retaliation are also relevant in many less violent or sadistic situations, where the client in some way has injured or been injured by another.

Forgiveness and retaliation are more than two sides of a coin: they are not as opposite as they at first appear. Like the two faces of the same coin they are linked. Their differences may seem more apparent because of their different religious associations. Forgiveness appears to have a strong Christian dimension to it (although it is not confined to Christianity): the Christian view is that we should forgive, because we are ourselves forgiven by God — although interestingly the Lord's Prayer reverses this by setting out the grounds for God's forgiveness in the human example: 'forgive us . . . as we forgive those . . .'

Retaliation, on the other hand, appears more Jewish in origin, coming as it does from the same root as the law of-talion — 'an eye for an eye'. Here the notion is of a measured, equal response, typified politically by the policy of the state of Israel to avenge crimes against its own people, a policy which appears to have reinforced its right to existence. But the law of talion

Michael Jacobs is the director of the Counselling and Psychotherapy Programme, University of Leicester.

appears in Christian morality too, although there it takes a proactive rather than a reactive form: the proactive is 'treat others, as you would wish to be treated'; the reactive is 'do to others what has been done to you'.

In fact forgiveness and retaliation may be even closer. The same law of talion that links them suggests that there may be a subtle link between forgiveness and revenge. 'Forgive and you will be forgiven' may be closer to 'an eye for an eye' than is immediately apparent. This possibility arises from a particular reading of one of the parables which Jesus told, a story which has at its heart problems associated with forgiveness. (It is possible of course to use such stories without having to associate them with the whole panoply of Christian theology in which they have become embedded.) The story is apparently told in response to the question 'How many times should I forgive my brother?' Jesus tells of a king who decided to call in all his debts. One of the first to appear before him was a servant whose debt to him ran into many millions, but who had no means of paying. The king ordered that he and his family and his possessions all be sold; but was so moved when the man pleaded for more time to pay that he forgave him the whole debt. The man who had been forgiven left the king, and immediately ran into a fellow servant who owed him just a few pounds; he caught him by the throat, and demanded his money back. Despite this man's pleas to be given more time to pay, he had him thrown into jail. In turn, the story concludes, the king commanded the unforgiving one to pay his debt in full after all (*The Bible: Matthew 18*;23–34).

Stories like this can be understood in many different ways, and there is no reason why the one I am going to suggest is any better than whatever interpretation the reader or the New Testament critic may put on such a slender plot. Nevertheless it is possible, if we try to look at this set of relationships from a psychological perspective, that one of the reasons why the servant who had the large debt remitted was unable to forgive his fellow servant was because he did not himself feel forgiven. On the surface he had obviously been let off his debt; his master was generous and apparently forgave him everything. Yet in doing so the master had, in a moral sense rather than a financial one, forgiven one debt only to create a different one. He put his servant even more greatly in his debt by wiping the financial state clean. In the power balance this servant was doubly obliged to his master, indebted for being let off the financial debt.

The servant's reaction accords with the law of talion, which could have gone either way. He could have forgiven the fellow servant his debt, as he himself had been forgiven, and in so doing he could have experienced some relief from his own feelings of indebtedness. As it happened, we do not know why, the law of talion went the other way, fastened perhaps more on the feeling of powerlessness towards the forgiving king. It was translated into restoring the power balance, through displacing it on to another relationship in which the servant could experience the destructive rather than the constructive power of revenge. Forgiveness, acceptance and the generosity of care can be very powerful means of exerting a hold or

pressure over another person, especially if we do not let the other forget what we have done for them, nor how selfless we have apparently been. Forgiveness can be a type of revenge. Retaliating with an eye for an eye at least creates equality, if not always equilibrium.

There is certainly much support in the behaviour of the pre-reformation church for casting a suspicious eye on forgiveness, especially where the retaliatory element has been repressed but appears in another form. Penance and absolution became an industry, a huge balance sheet in which days in purgatory meant as much to the ordinary believer then as credit card accounts mean today: 'How much do I owe? What have I got to pay off?' The forgiveness business became a way of exerting power over people, particularly over the lower orders of society, although excommunication (the ultimate sign of non-forgiveness) developed into a political weapon that could be used against princes.

The therapeutic relationship also provides possibilities for both forgiveness and revenge. Therapy is sometimes seen as the modern confessional, the therapist as the contemporary priest. If this is the case, then the equivalent of the revenge element in forgiveness may actually be present in what we call 'the therapeutic attitude'. Therapists may not pronounce forgiveness, but they do try to provide an accepting, non-judgemental milieu, in which the client may come to some sense of reconciliation with the past, with memories, with parts of the self, and with other people. This milieu is a powerful one; the power of the therapist's position is recognized by us all. 'Remember how I forgive you' does not always have to be put into words to put the forgiven at a disadvantage. 'Look what I give you' similarly does not have to be spoken to put the client in the therapist's debt. The generosity involved in each of these ways of relating can put the recipient into a humbled position, but also sometimes into a humiliated position. Therapists may claim that the client's fee (their gift to the therapist) restores the balance and enhances the client's self-respect. I doubt whether it is equal to the debt which the client owes to the good therapist.

Can we ever pay back? Can we ever forgive? Eli Wiesel seems to have been less ambivalent than the Coventry fire-fighter when he prayed at Auschwitz, 'God of forgiveness, do not forgive those who created this.'