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Victims Can't Forgive[1]

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I don't know how I managed to land myself with such a bold title. Surely it is wise to avoid such categorical statements about human interaction. In the favoured language of 'taking responsibility for yourself', it definitely doesn't carry weight. But the whole point is that the victim has abdicated that domain of discourse.[2]

If a victim does forgive, I am pretty sure that he or she would not at that time *experience* him- or herself as a victim, or, at any rate, not primarily as a victim. She would experience herself to be *more than* a victim, and the abuser to be *more than* his or her abusive behaviour. One of the striking features 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 set-up, and qualified as a victim by any external reckoning. He did not, it seems, take up the victim position on the psychological level, but evidently chose 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 experiencing himself as their victim? When imprisoned on Robin Island, he realised that it was necessary to treat his jailer as a fellow human being.

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 someone is defined as one's persecutor, it is not only unlikely, but even distasteful, to forgive that person for one's very persecution. We have narrowed our area of awareness here, and lost both the experience of our own wholeness as well as the acknowledgement of the other in their fuller being. It is a restricted viewpoint, and forgiveness requires an expansive and inclusive viewpoint to allow for the activity of one whole being recognising the wholeness (which includes 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 easily together. Forgiveness is not about being kind or 'understanding' to the one who 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. Again 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. Blind pain, hate, fear and blame are generated from such ways of seeing, not forgiveness. Hardly 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'. 'Me' and 'Them' and never the twain shall see each other (or themselves), although they are locked in the same dynamic together.

How can this division nurture compassion? What meaning would forgiving our persecutor hold if we still felt a victim of his damaging acts?[3] Only by stepping beyond the victim position would it attain meaning. Only by letting go of the restricted views of both victim and persecutor, and entering a state of consciousness that illuminates our essential wholeness and our interconnectedness with others, can compassion become both fitting and a reality. It seems to me that forgiveness is the inevitable result of the experience of oneness, even in our woundedness, 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 integration, expansiveness and freedom that forgiveness both requires and generates. Reaching beyond the suffering undergone without negating or denying it.

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.) Inhabiting a stance of 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 an empowering way to move into a greater state of well-being.

It is a shame that 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, then we tend to feel shame. Perhaps it is because we have unwittingly betrayed that deeper self, richer *in spite of* having been ill-treated and abused. Recycling even perfectly legitimate blame, does not release or help us expand into a greater sense of closure and well-being. Empowerment and freedom elude us.

We, as victims, are not known for our self-acceptance, although that is what we long for. Apportioning blame to a transgressor is a necessary step in the process of healing – for self-blame breeds more shame and is more constricting than any other form of blame – as well as being immensely painful. It is like trying to move in a very tight and shrinking shoe, making it difficult to stand up straight. The trouble with shame is that it paralyses us. It doesn't help us behave better and thus gain in self-esteem. We feel we deserve to be punished in some way, and thus we can 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 of these modes of defining and identifying ourselves. They keep us from experiencing a state of wholeness and interconnectedness, which alone can liberate us into forgiveness of self and others. We don't

have to, or need ever, forgive really harmful attitudes or actions imposed on us, but we ourselves are likely to feel more liberated if we come to realise that the perpetrator of this harm is a wounded being, too. However, it is worth noting that we only suffer more if we keep recycling the awfulness of their action or attitude towards us. It only blocks or diverts all hope of healing and moving into a more rewarding state of mind and being. A good therapist can be of great value in accompanying us in this process. The act of transgression is not 'made all right' but seen in a larger and fuller context. Forgiveness is only appropriate, and only flourishes, when we give our attention to *more* than the victim in us. It builds our sense of self-worth, self esteem and fullness of being, and aids our healing.

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 have 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 recognised 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. It involved relating to each other. This is not a confusion, but an attempt to express its essential 'we-ness' or 'us-ness'.

I trust it will be clear that I have not been talking about formal acts of forgiveness or apology on a national level (although they have their place in social and political discourse). Nor is it a matter of trying to make the wrong-doer 'feel better'. We have not slipped into 'Rescuer', but are empowering ourselves by expanding into a healing and creative exchange for both of us. 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). 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.

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Addendum

I wish to emphasise that none of the above applies to victims of sexual abuse – especially of children. This involves a far more complex dynamic in which the Perscecutor 'grooms' their innocent victim in order to make the child feel somehow responsible by accepting the gifts and treats, and perhaps compliments that are so craftily bestowed on them in the grooming process. It also must remain 'their secret'. It is a profoundly wounding and confusing relationship; it can cloud and divert the whole course of someone's life.

Notes and references

1 This article was originally published in *Self & Society*, 24 (2), 1996, pp. 13–16. It has been substantially re-worked and updated by the author for this issue of the magazine, and is based on an original public lecture delivered at the University of East Anglia (Norwich) in the early 1990s.

2 I explore the far-reaching implications of this phenomenon in my book *The Reluctant Adult* (Prism Press, Bridport, 1993). Once we are trapped in the logic of victimhood, forgiveness is edged out of action.

3 There are clear and stated rules with regard to wounding and killing another in battle – under order from officers – as spelled out in the Geneva Convention. And of course the considered *choice* of being a pacifist has nothing to do with victimhood.

About the contributor

Jill Hall was born in South Africa into an environment of extreme inequality and oppression, and cannot remember a time when she was not disturbed, puzzled and fascinated about what it means to be a human being. Jill moved to London in her late teens, working as an actress until becoming a mother and philosophy student. Attracted to the arena of self-development in the early days of Humanistic Psychology, she later became a tutor at the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology. She now runs weekend residential groups and has been a guest lecturer for various professional bodies and universities. She is the author of the book *The Reluctant Adult*.