

A new forgiveness

by Naomi Lederach

I was sitting with a middle-aged woman, listening to the well-rehearsed litany of hurts she had experienced. Parents had hurt her in many ways. Others she trusted had betrayed and violated her. Strangers sometimes innocently brought her pain. Old hurts came back with a vengeance when new events reminded her of previous experiences. On occasion, she went to friends who supported the anger and bitterness she felt.

“Where was God?” she asked, and held God responsible for allowing those profound injuries. While there were indeed reasons for feeling as she did, it was also true that maintaining her anger was destroying her. As she began to acknowledge her desire for release from the (familiar) blaming, judging and thoughts of revenge, she was able to take steps toward forgiveness.

Trust is a key to relationships. We make some presumptions, shaped from early on, that we can place our trust in and depend on those who care for us. I remember my dad held me securely in the middle of a hurricane, my parents assured me of their love even when I made mistakes. I trust my husband

without any reservations. It has seemed natural for me to think of God as loving, kind and trustworthy.

Others have had very different experiences. “Betrayal trauma,” a phrase first used by Professor J. J. Freyd in 1991, “occurs when those we have depended on for survival, violate human trust.” It is a form of deception, a loss of the capacity to trust, a collapse of prior presumptions. Today many mental health professionals accept betrayal trauma as a possible alternative to post-traumatic stress disorder. They also understand that forgiveness as healing evolves from a bruised, often cynical heart, and may require great effort.

According to independent scholars Mary Durkin and Sheila Durkin Dierks, “Deep forgiveness begins with reaching into oneself, into the core of our being, for that is where the injury resides. Deep forgiveness requires a real look at the wounds which have infected us for a long time. Deep forgiveness is a sabbath, a quieting of the heart.”



Remorse by David R. Darrow. Oil on panel, 2007.

Think back to my friend. I had heard her stories of betrayal before. But insisting that she forgive would not have been helpful. Remembering was basic to her ability to forgive, as those memories continued to permeate her current thoughts and actions. "I would like to forgive," my friend said, "but I don't even know where to begin. How do I know if I am ready to start?" Redemptive remembering occurs when there is a safe place with safe people to listen.

The following checklist, adapted from Durkin and Dierks, pro-

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vides examples of some behaviors individuals may need to consider as they attempt to begin to heal:

- * My anger has become more of an enemy than a friend.
- * Hurts dominate my thoughts, perhaps even my sleeping time.
- * I am still stuck and angry while the offender/s are getting on with life.
- * My anger affects relationships which may have nothing to do with my injuries.
- * I am weary of nursing unhealed wounds and desperately want peace.
- * I spend more time looking back than toward the future.
- * I still have thoughts of revenge or getting even, but I am willing to give up gains I had hoped to get from not forgiving.”

Forgiveness is an intentional process, a choice, something I do for myself in order to get on with my life. It means getting release from betrayal that wounded me and is rooted in me. Choosing to forgive means I can face my losses, separate myself from hurtful persons or events, and be empowered by letting go of my judgment and desire for retaliation. By forgiving, I can take back my whole self, will no longer feel like a victim, and will truly be free. I can be forgiving and forgiven.

However, people forgive in different ways. Timing differs as well. Some may come to this process gradually, in stages, forgiving smaller things first. There are those who seem able to forgive “once and done.” For others, the search for liberation is a life-long journey. Moving intentionally in the direction of forgiveness is most important.

Sometimes when I am reminded of old hurts I need to reclaim my freedom by choosing to forgive again, to reinterpret that history through forgiveness. Perhaps that's what Jesus meant when he said we are to forgive 70 times 7. It may not be new hurts, but the same old one/s that keep coming back.


It is a risk to forgive. We do not know where it may take us. Does it matter what it means to the person who has hurt me? Can I forgive someone who feels no need of forgiveness, or someone who is dead? What do I do with my anger toward God? If I can't or won't forgive, will I not be forgiven? What happens when I no longer have an "enemy" who may have defined who I am not? Does it mean I have to be close and friendly with those who hurt me? If others remember things differently, am I wrong? What would I be doing if I wouldn't be spending so much energy holding on to hurts? Answers are found and not given but articulating these questions takes us into unknown territory.

This new territory of reconciliation may take a different shape than first anticipated or imagined. I believe one can truly forgive without the relationship appearing as though nothing had happened to damage it. In a lecture in Northern Ireland in 1995, scholar John Paul Lederach said that reconciliation for someone who has been severely wounded will look different from those whose hurts have had less devastating effects. We are not asked to "forgive and forget." Our minds are storehouses of memories. We

can forgive, be freed and renewed; we can "remember and change."

Luke 23:34 tells us that in his last hour Jesus said, "Abba, forgive them for they know not what they do." He forgave those who felt no need of forgiveness. Durkin and Dierks ask, "If I knew that my last hour was upon me, what baggage would I like to set down? What heaviness of heart would I wish to let go of so that my spirit might rise?

Might I be relieved to put down that heavy weight now, if only I knew how to pry loose my fingers?"

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche community, has said, "Forgiveness is liberation which takes place over time as we cooperate with Jesus; my little efforts and his grace and power." 

Resources

Durkin, Mary C. and Sheila Durkin. *Jubilee Journal: A Workbook of Forgiving for the Millennium*. Woven Word Press, 1998.

Flanigan, Beverly. *Forgiving the Un-forgivable*. Wiley Publishing, 1992.