

The Power of Forgiveness

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I recently had occasion to read two books: the first, *Revenge: a Story of Hope* by Laura Blumenfeld, is the story of her journey to avenge the shooting of her father by a terrorist in Jerusalem; the second, *A Human Being Died that Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, grew out of her interviews of Eugene de Kock who was serving a 212 year sentence for his crimes as the commanding officer of state sanctioned death squads in South Africa. Gobodo-Madikizela was a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I recommend both books to you—they are profound stories of the power of forgiveness.

It would be easy to relate to you some of the depth of these two books that would permit us to deal with forgiveness in an abstract way. Instead I want to share with you some sense of my own journey after reading them.

We have all been blessed with forgiveness and most of us have struggled to forgive. My mother grew up in a family that was very skilled at holding grudges. I can think of members of her family who never forgave a wrong, perceived or actual. All my life I can remember my mother's constant struggle not to hold onto a grudge. This did not mean that she did not feel the pain or anger from a deed that she could have permitted to hold a powerful grip on her life. In her life, she had more important work to do: keeping family ties strong, taking care of foster children, or working hard to make a better life possible for my brother and me.

Before I go any farther, let me say what forgiveness is not:

It is not tolerance or acceptance;

It is not running away;

It is not condoning the act;

It is not forgetting the act;

It is not inviting more bad things to happen;

It does not mean you are weak;

It does not mean you must love or care about the person who has wronged you.

Forgiveness is hard and complex work. It is many layered. Most of us have said "I'm sorry" and have had others say "I'm sorry" to us. "I'm sorry" has many dimensions. Maybe we say it in the hope that we can erase the hurt and move on. Perhaps we say it because we were taught to say it without fully understanding the deeper meanings of the words.

Forgiveness is hard to give and equally hard to receive. We do not find it easy to talk about. “The more severe the hurt that has been done to us, the more difficult it is to free ourselves from the hatred and pain that entwines us” writes Edward Hallowell in his book *Dare to Forgive*. One psychologist writes “Forgiving is about preventing the pains of the past from distorting the joys of the present and undermining the future.”

Remember it is hard, complex, and, I would add, painful work.

I think of the many stories told to me—the children who were abused emotionally, physically, and sexually, the parents of a murdered child, the injustices of our government when civil rights were abused, the child asked to leave home because he or she is gay—and you could add many more from your own personal experiences. The wounds from these experiences are deep. They are always and forever part of who we are. Laura Blumenfeld writes “You cannot always separate grudges and sort them into bins labeled rice, flour, salt. They were stored inside you, sifted together . . . They were like picking flecks of pepper once they were blended into a gray pile with salt.” In most of the trainings for *Our Whole Lives* sexuality teachers that Chris and I lead we hear stories of sexual abuse. Recently, one woman shared her journey from victim to survivor. At another workshop a woman told me her story and when I said “you sound like a survivor” her response was “I am more than a survivor, I am a thriver.” She then shared with us that she was painfully reminded once again of her abuse by a statement made by a member of the group. The events are always and forever part of who we are.

We do not have to forget, condone, or invite abuse again. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela writes “Forgiveness does not bring finality because it does not erase the past.” Closure is not always possible.

What I am about to say has not come easily to me and I suspect it may not come easily to you. Over and over again, I have discovered that forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves. I suspect our inability or wish not to forgive is our deep and abiding fear that it will diminish our pain or erase from our minds the hurt that has been done to us. Once hurt, our natural tendency is to hurt in return—perhaps it might make us feel better or even change what has happened.

In my experience, it is hard for most of us to give ourselves intangible gifts like love, care, respect, or healing. My mother must have been able to let go of the pain of the past so that it did not define her future. I learned a great deal from her but I still do not always find it easy to forgive myself—I have learned to forgive others but even that is easier said than done. I do hope that I have learned over time not to let holding on to the past define who I am or who I want to become. We are, after all, in the making still.

In the final chapter of her book, Gobodo-Madikizela writes “As ordinary people, under ordinary circumstances we are capable of far greater evil than we could have imagined, so are we capable of far greater virtue than we might have thought.”

I want to close with a true story, generously shared with me by the Reverend Patrick O’Neill, minister of the Wilmington Delaware Unitarian Universalist Church. He writes:

In the neighborhood where I spent my growing up years, there was an amazing array of people for a young boy to encounter and observe. One of the nicest and most exotic personalities of that long ago place, I remember, was an elderly immigrant French woman who lived in our building, Madame Boutellon.

Mrs. Boutellon was always very elegantly dressed, and she always carried herself with an upright posture and stately demeanor. She spoke with a very thick French accent, and for a while she was my sister's high school French tutor. Mr. and Mrs. Boutellon were both shy and reserved, and how tolerant they must have been, living next door to the boisterous racket of various O'Neill children wrestling into the building night and day.

My mother once told me that the Boutellons were Jehovah's Witnesses. This fact only added to their mystique, as far as I was concerned, for Jehovah's Witnesses sounded like a very select group indeed.

I was to have one very important encounter with Mrs. Boutellon. I was very young, first grade maybe, and several older boys—second grade thugs, I suppose—had run by me and pushed me face-first into a snow bank. It was a huge indignity, and I sat there on the stoop crying tears of outrage and frustration.

Mrs. Boutellon had witnessed the incident from her upstairs window, and she came down and collected me from the stoop and brushed the snow and tears from my face, and brought me into her kitchen for a cup of hot cocoa. She fussed over me in French-accented maternal phrases that seemed to right the universe again.

"You are angry at those boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel that way. But now you must let it go," she said. "This day has other things to give you."

It wasn't until years later, after Mrs. Boutellon and her husband had both passed away, that my mother mentioned her name in conversation, and I told her of the day Mrs. Boutellon rescued me from that hard experience on the front stoop. "That sounds just like her," said my mother. "You know, don't you, that the Boutellons were both survivors of the Nazi death camps during the War?"

I had never known that. But it gave even more power to the words Mrs. Boutellon had offered me on that cold day when I was still a young boy. "This day has other things to give you." Imagine hearing that from a death camp survivor.

Mrs. Boutellon always wore high-necked, frilly blouses with long sleeves. One day while she was hanging laundry in the backyard with my mother, I saw the number that was tattooed on Mrs. Boutellon's forearm. (It was her identification number from the prison camp.) When I innocently asked her what the number was for, Mrs. Boutellon patiently explained that the number on her arm represented her past identity as a prisoner, but now she covered it over, not because she was ashamed of it, but because that was not her identity anymore. It was not her present, and it was not going to be her future. She had moved beyond the victimhood of her past.

"This day has other things to give you." A lesson about heartspace, and survival, and liberation, from an old French Jehovah's Witness. I

hope you pass it on.

Sources:

Laura Blumenfeld, *Revenge: a story of hope*, ©2002, Simon and Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

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Patrick O'Neill, (excerpt from sermon) *Forgiveness: The Hardest Act of Love*, 1997, First Unitarian Society of Wilmington, 730 Halstaed Rd., Wilmington DE 19803-2298.

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