

Forgiveness: What's in It for You?

By Robin Edgar

Opening Words:

Easter and Forgiveness

The traditional Christian celebration of Easter marks God's forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before they sat down to eat the Last Supper, Jesus washed his disciples feet to remind them how to love one another and that love requires forgiveness. During his crucifixion he pardoned a criminal being executed on the cross next to him and asked for God to forgive those responsible for his crucifixion saying in Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

The topic of forgiveness can bring about mixed feelings. Some may fear that forgiving an offense means to pardon or forget the wrongdoing. The act of forgiving, however, does not justify, excuse, or condone the offense. It may not even bring about reconciliation. What it does bring about is compassion in order to experience healing and peace.

Marina Cantacuzino is the founder of The Forgiveness Project, a UK organization that has an international speaker's bureau of ordinary people sharing their extraordinary stories of forgiveness. She says, "Forgiveness is not a single magnanimous gesture in response to an isolated offence; it is part of a continuum of human engagements in healing broken relationships."

Once you open your heart to seeing forgiveness in this light, you will understand what's in for you.

Offertory

"We make a living by what we get. We make a life
by what we give."

— Winston S. Churchill

My journey with forgiveness began after 9/11 when the Fetzer Institute initiated a campaign for Love & Forgiveness to turn the tide of reacting with hate and retribution to finding the compassion for love and forgiveness. I participated in the campaign as a facilitator and a participant for four years and it changed my life.

I learned that "Forgiveness is a conscientious willful choice to turn away from pain, hate, resentment, and wish for revenge... Forgiveness involves a willingness to see the transgression and the transgressor in a larger context, and to replace negative feeling with compassion and tolerance (Fetzer Institute Love and Forgiveness syllabus, Pg. 9)."

Different Religious Beliefs about Forgiveness

Judaism: There are three levels of forgiveness. The Talmud explains that you are expected to find the strength to forgive at least on the first level. Absence of any forgiveness whatsoever is a sign of cruelty.

- At the first level you might still be upset, feel hurt, or even angry but you do not hope for the person's downfall or feel the need for revenge. You might even pray for them.
- At the second stage you are able to move on and let go to the point where you no longer carry feelings of anger and resentment.
- At the final stage, the forgiveness is complete when you are ready to be close and have a relationship with the offender again.

Anglican Church: Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, "(Forgiveness is) the act of faith that the wrongdoer can change."

Buddhist: The Dalai Lama says, "Someone must take the initiative to move beyond the cycle of old choices and responses that brings more pain and suffering and to recognize the opportunity for a healing response to life itself."

Islam: To receive forgiveness from God, one must recognize the offense and admit it before God; commit not to repeat it; and ask for forgiveness.

Hindu: Swami Nkhilananda says, "Forgiveness is not an action or an emotion. It is a state of being."

Amish: "A typical saying in Amish culture is 'Forgive, forget, move on.'"

It has also been proven that forgiveness is directly related to better physical and mental health. "Research has shown that forgiveness can reduce depression and anger; increases hopefulness and self confidence; and helps to improve the health of marriages and families (Fetzer Institute Love and Forgiveness syllabus, Pg. 10-11)"

Another amazing thing I discovered in my work is that forgiveness is directly tied to memory. Therefore, it is important to understand how the mind forgets and remembers. Dr. Daniel Schacter states in his book, *The Seven Sins of Memory*, "We often edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences.... in light of what we now know or believe."

I experienced this phenomenon in my reminiscence workshops time and time again. Many years ago, I was sitting in a circle with about 20 residents in a senior care facility to capture some of their stories. I asked them to think of a smell that took them back to another place and time, they shared happy memories about lilac bushes under Grandma's bathroom window and fresh baked cookies in the kitchen waiting for them when they came home from school. There was even a man who said the smell of manure reminded him of his wife, because they first met when they were working together on farm.

When we got to Emma Jean, who was sitting in the corner like this (with a scowl on face and arms crossed). I knew I was in trouble! She told the group, "I don't have any happy memories; my mother was a task master and always expected us kids to work, so I married at 15 to the first man who asked me just to get out from under her roof."

I knew I had to somehow break the ice with her, so I asked Emma Jean to tell me about her mother. She told the group that her mother was an orphan and, in the late 1800s in rural Ohio, that meant she had to earn her keep sewing denim overalls in a factory from the time she was eight-years old. Later "adopted" by a farm family, her mother was treated like an indentured servant, working on the farm all day and sleeping on a horse blanket by the wood stove in the kitchen at night.

As Emma Jean told her mother's story, you could see a realization wash over and soften her face. She said, "I guess that's why my mother always expected us kids to work, since that's all she knew as a child!" I nudged my foot in the door a little further and asked her if her mother taught her something that she valued today. Emma Jean blinked and tipped her head to the side and blinked again and her face lit up as she replied, "Well I never thought of it that way, but she taught me to sew. Since I never had a standard built body and couldn't buy clothes from a catalog or wear them off the rack, I always made my own clothes and got many compliments."

Finally! At 80-something years old, Emma Jean was able to look back on her mother's story with adult eyes and was not only able to forgive her mother, but to actually be thankful for and celebrate her!

It's because of stories like Emma Jean's that I have become a female Don Quixote on a quest to get people to tell their stories to find forgiveness! Although I truly believe that everyone has a story to tell, I've also learned that it is in the telling of our stories that we recognize the people and events that shaped our lives.

I started teaching the Healing Power of Reminiscence in 1998, when I was preparing a syllabus to teach a life-writing course. As a journalist, I knew people responded with more detail when I used sense memory prompts in my interviews. Scientific research has shown that smells, sounds, even objects can trigger significant memories about emotional events. To illustrate this technique in my syllabus, I added written accounts of memories about my mother. She had passed away several years before and it amazed me that, through those stories, my sense of her loss eased as I celebrated the time we had together and recognized how much she affected me as an individual. Even more powerful was how looking back on unpleasant memories enabled me to forgive my mother, just like Emma Jean.

For example, whenever I see square linoleum tiles, it reminds me of being pigeon-toed as a child. Although we lived up a flight of thirteen steps most of my life, I never seemed to be able to navigate the uneven terrain without tripping and falling down all or part of it. Part of my awkwardness was due to being severely pigeon-toed. Rather than embarrass me with having to wear the clunky shoes that went with an apparatus my doctor prescribed, she decided to take matters into her own hands and train my feet herself. Over the summer, she had me toe the line — literally. Every morning, after she braided my hair so tightly I had a perpetual smile, she had me walk along the grid formed by the linoleum squares. Whenever my toes strayed into the center of a square, she would slap me on the back as a reminder to walk the right way. I hated those walking lessons and thought my mom was really being mean to me. Looking back, I realize she acted out of her love for me and, although I am still a klutz, at least I am no longer pigeon-toed!

After sharing my story about walking lessons in one of my reminiscence workshops, Rita realized she could work through her awful memories about her abusive alcoholic father. She recalled the family kitchen table where she struggled to finish her homework when her siblings were already done and outside playing because her left handed father insisted that she, left-handed herself, only use her right hand. Since this took her twice as long, her mother took pity on her and told her to finish her homework with her left hand while she watched out the window for her dad to return home from work. This worked great until he came in the back door one day and caught her left-handed and, as was his nature, gave her a severe beating.

As Rita recalled the beating, she saw her father's left hand coming down on her in her mind's eye. It was missing two and half fingers from being forced to use farm machinery made for right-handed people. She instantly understood that her father did not want her to suffer the pain and humiliation he had gone through as a left-handed person in a right-handed world and was able to forgive him. After going through this process with other traumatic childhood memories, Rita wrote to me that being able to forgive her father had changed her life forever!

Why is that? Well, I learned as a facilitator with the Campaign for Love & Forgiveness that, when you don't forgive, it is like taking a drop of poison everyday. Forgiveness doesn't mean you condone the wrong that was done. When you forgive, you can rewrite your story from being a victim to being the one empowered to release the bonds of anger, hurt, and resentment and find compassion and empathy. Which would you rather do? Remain a victim and slowly destroy yourself or take the time to understand the wounds that causes someone to hurt others in order to be empowered to find the compassion to forgive?

Sometimes, to find that forgiveness we have to realize that there are two sides to every story—the telling of a story and listening to a story. Listening can be tricky. Sometimes, there is so much noise coming from how we feel or what we think happened, we cannot hear what the other person is saying. Does that ever happen to you? I would like to share with you a story that illustrates how really listening can create that pathway to compassion and empathy.

I met Therese in one of my life writing retreats where she shared that she was a high school teacher when her younger brother, Steve, was shot to death in the parking lot of a bar. Sitting in the trial, she felt compelled to hear the story of the young man, Karl, who killed her brother. She decided to get a Master's in Criminal Justice to and learned about the restorative justice system, which enabled her to visit Karl in prison where she was finally able to hear his story about his unfortunate childhood. He never knew his father and, because his mother was incarcerated, he spent time in sometimes-abusive foster care situations. After hearing that young man's story, Therese was able to forgive her brother's killer, which she says made a big difference in her life as well as his.

What a gift to be able rewrite a story from being the victim to being the person that forgave! How wonderful to finally experience peace through the power of forgiveness!

Once Emma Jean was able to forgive and value her mother, we could hardly get a word in edgewise as she shared happy memories about her childhood. Now thankful to be ambidextrous, Rita realized she could guide her left-handed son to use both hands in a more gentle way by "forgetting" to buy him a left-handed mouse to play computer games.

Today, Therese speaks about restorative justice and forgiveness all over the world. As for me, my mother's walking lessons taught me that, no matter the bump in the road, I can persevere as long as I put one foot in front of the other and walk the right way.

Can you see why I am on this quest to get people to tell and listen to each other's stories? I convinced that this is the key to harmony during this time of anti-racial and anti-ethnic turmoil. I have one more story to share that illustrates how conversation brought on the metamorphosis of a Ku Klux Klan officer and staunch segregationist to become a civil rights activist as described in the 1996 book *Best of Enemies* and a subsequent documentary, "An Unlikely Friendship."

Claiborne P. Ellis grew up in poverty in Durham, NC. The son of a mill worker, he married at 17 and fathered four children, one born blind and retarded. He worked at a gas station and could never seem to make ends meet. His father blamed the blacks for taking away paying jobs from whites and urged him to join the Ku Klux Klan. Ellis eventually became a high ranking member as an Exalted Cyclops.

In 1971, the Durham City Schools faced considerable turmoil because of court-ordered desegregation and organized a series of community meetings to try to solve this problem. They created a steering committee that was representative of the community. Ann Atwater, a poor African American welfare mom and civil rights activist and the segregationist Ellis were invited to co-chair the meetings.

Ellis and Atwater had been such bitter foes that she once pulled a knife on him at a Durham City Council meeting when he suggested that they adopt apartheid-like rules to keep blacks off of Durham streets. Ellis brought a machine gun to their first 1971 discussion session.

Ellis and Atwater co-chaired the 10 days of 12-hour talks. One day, as they had lunch together and started talking about their family problems, they came to know each other as individuals instead of as stereotypes. They realized, as poor people, they were both oppressed and that their children faced many of the same issues. Ellis said, "During those days it became clear to me that she had some of the identical problems that I had, and that I'd suffered like she had and what ... had I spent all my life fighting people like Ann for?"

Forging an unlikely friendship that profoundly changed Ellis' deeply rooted segregationist thinking, he renounced his position as Exalted Grand Cyclops of the KKK, repudiated segregation, and joined Atwater in working to desegregate the Durham school system. They continued to speak jointly at civil rights seminars and meetings for three decades. Atwater came to consider Ellis as part of her family.

Ellis considered his friendship with Atwater proof that anybody can change. "People have all these preconceived ideas," he told the Herald-Sun in 1999. "When I joined the Klan, I thought every black person in the country was evil and dirty. I just assumed it. We are taught these things as children, and when we get older, we sometimes carry those thoughts with us and never get rid of them."

In closing I would ask you think about this: What's your story that you would like the chance to tell? Is there a story you need to listen to, or look back on with a different perspective, in order to find that healing pathway to forgiveness?

It is my hope that you can find the courage to begin to practice a small forgiveness. Start a conversation and listen with an open heart. Write a letter. Perhaps you have a need to forgive yourself, which can be one of the most difficult places to start.

Alexandra Asseily writes in her book *The Power of Forgiveness*, "... If we really forgive ourselves for all the wickedness that we think we have inside—all the things that we think are wrong with ourselves... we would then be so much more compassionate with others..."

Happy Easter everyone and when you leave this fellowship, please go out there and forgive!

Closing Words:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel"

Maya Angelou

"We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.