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Meeting Ground

The Journal of The Center for Spiritual Integration

Special Interest Articles:

- An interview with the editor..
- The process of Forgiveness.
- Why is coming to forgiveness so difficult for so many people?
- Misconceptions: What forgiveness is not
- Book Reviews Recommendations

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This will be the first of a two-part newsletter on the topic of FORGIVENESS: In this journal we will explain the process, benefits, misconceptions about forgiveness as well as providing several book recommendations. In our next newsletter we will feature stories about people's journeys toward forgiveness and at home exercises that can deepen your understanding of how you can develop a more forgiving heart.

Laying Foundations: An interview with Dr. Gianotti around Understanding the Scope of Forgiveness

By Stan LePage, Reporter

S: Patricia, I wonder if you could define what most people mean by forgiveness.

P: The topic of forgiveness is actually quite complex, and it means different things to different people. I approach the topic of forgiveness from multiple vantage points. First of all forgiveness is a **choice**. It is impossible to *force anyone* to forgive. It is also a **process**, one that takes time and effort. This means that forgiveness requires a certain **attitude**, one that encompasses a willingness to see every person's humanness--beyond their mistakes or their limitations. This attitude is based on an understanding that the lack of forgiveness, or remaining stuck in bitterness, as a dead end street. Forgiveness embodies a **value system or set of beliefs** that encourages us to strive to forgive, even when we don't feel like it, because this is the only chance of making a better world a better place. Finally, forgiveness is an **outcome** of a journey of hard work where the individual has dealt with many difficult feelings and has come out on the other side of the injury.

S: What do you see as the benefits of doing all of this hard work?

P: There are many benefits that come when we choose to forgive. First, the person who has been hurt or betrayed is released from the burden of remaining a

victim forever. Forgiveness is also associated with the capacity for hope, and hope, according to research conducted by psychologist C. R. Snyder, is one of the key factors that enable people to envision a positive future. Furthermore, research also shows that people who forgave were able to move beyond basic coping to a place of truly moving forward and enjoying their lives.

S: But don't you think this is easier said than done? Don't you have to give something up when you forgive?

P: Forgiveness isn't easy; in fact, it's one of the most difficult challenges we are confronted with as human beings. Forgiveness takes time and considerable effort. And you're right; when we enter into a forgiveness process, we generally are faced with the loss of something. At the very least some part of the self must change in order to move to forgiveness.

S: What are some of the losses associated with forgiveness?

P: When people suffer a betrayal, one of the first losses that occur is the loss of innocence. People are often in shock. Life doesn't feel as safe, predictable, or reliable anymore. There is also a loss of control. What we thought we could rely on suddenly is shaken at its foundation.



“It is possible to forgive and release the person from his or her moral debt without ever receiving an apology.”

S: So, how does someone move on after such a betrayal?

P: One of the things I have found in working with individuals and in my seminars and retreats is that most people carry a secret hope that the person who hurt them will change. Part of the difficulty in letting go, forgiving, and moving forward with creating a new life is that people think that they either have the power to make someone change—to be the person they want them to be, or at the very least they are waiting for the offender to apologize. Many people refuse to move on until they get an apology.

S: Is it possible to forgive someone if they don't apologize or even comprehend how much they hurt you?

P: Yes, it is possible to forgive and release the person from his or her “moral debt” without ever receiving an apology. This is something that can be done on an individual level alone. However, it is often **not** possible to reconcile or rebuild the relationship without an apology on the part of the person who harmed you. We can forgive without resuming the relationship. We can walk away and never have anything to do with the person who harmed us and still forgive them in our hearts.

The Process of Coming to Forgiveness

By: Patricia Gianotti

Forgiveness is a process that takes time and effort. Immediately jumping to forgiveness is difficult if not impossible for most people. It is important to give ourselves the time we need and the time it takes to work through our hurt and pain before coming to forgiveness. Above all else forgiveness starts with a gentle, caring attitude toward the self.

Some of the steps in the forgiveness process are listed below. It is important to note that not every person goes through every step, and the steps are not necessarily approached sequentially.

- Once hurt occurs, individuals often experience a range of feelings including disbelief, anger, grief, shame, and betrayal.
- It is important to name what occurred accurately, including stating what moral rules were broken, then assigning blame where appropriate, being careful not to excuse or minimize the hurt you are experiencing.
- In instances such as rape or incest, individuals may need to work through any fear or trauma associated with the hurt and its aftermath.
- It is valuable to reflect upon any lessons the injury may have afforded you, including reflecting on whether you had any role in the offense.
- When appropriate it is important to discuss what happened with a trained therapist or ask for help or support from others where needed.
- Most of the time individuals must find a way to come to terms with the loss of control they have experienced, realizing that no person is capable of controlling everything that happens in life.
- Individuals may need to let go of the wish for things to go back to the way there were prior to the offense. (If the relationship does continue, it will have to be with a new set of rules and expectations on both sides.)
- If possible, it is important to try to see that underneath the offense, the offender is also a hurt, frightened, limited, suffering individual, not someone who is totally evil.
- Finally, the person can choose to forgive and either let go or reconcile, moving forward with renewed trust in others and yourself, and with renewed vitality for planning for the future.

In essence the forgiveness process affords us the opportunity to reconcile many competing needs, emotions and wishes. By focusing on the complexity of these opposing forces, individuals generally grow to new levels of personal and spiritual understanding and maturity.

Why is Forgiveness so Difficult to Accomplish?



“Moving toward forgiveness is a process of unlocking the door to our own heart.” .

One of the reasons that forgiveness is so difficult is that when we have been harmed or betrayed it causes our sense of **justice and fairness** to come into direct conflict with our desire to show **mercy and compassion**.

The process of moving toward forgiveness, in a sense, is a way of resolving the conflict between these two opposites.

From a psychological perspective, whenever we resolve a conflict, this affords us the opportunity to integrate various parts of the self into a more complete whole. Therefore, the act of forgiving someone helps us grow into full adult maturity. It may not be the easiest or most pleasant way to grow, but if the person trusts in the process, they generally discover strengths they never knew they had.

From a spiritual perspective, the task of forgiveness is one that forces us to confront the places within ourselves where we find an inconsistency in our spiritual beliefs and/or obligations and our actions, feelings, and secret wishes. .

For many these inconsistencies take the form of confronting the wish for complete control over our lives. For others it concerns a lesson in letting go of personal blame or taking too much responsibility. For others it involves letting go of the desire for judgment and retribution.

In terms of both spiritual and psychological growth, the question of how to forgive begins with examining how we hold our own woundedness.

One of the first reactions for many is shock—**How and why did this happen?** Many people believe that if they have been harmed, something must be wrong with them or they have failed in some way.

Others believe that bad things don't happen to people who try to do good. **What did I do to deserve this?** It is difficult for people to believe that suffering occurs in this world for reasons beyond our comprehension. We try to equate suffering with personal causality. There MAY be rare occasions when people invite trouble, but most of the time external circumstances or harm can and does happen to most of us in this life.

In addition, when we are harmed it brings up so many questions—questions about what and whom we can truly rely on. Initially, it is difficult to trust anyone again. The defensive response is to get angry, bitter, or numb because in this way at least we can protect ourselves from our own vulnerability. Many make a vow never to be hurt like this again. Others hold onto revenge or replay the instance over and over in their mind. The tragic result of this is that the person who has been harmed remains a victim forever.

Another reason that forgiveness is so difficult is that when

we are hurt, we feel that we lose face. When someone hurts us, do we think that they got the better of us? Losing face can be experienced as shameful to some people. It threatens self esteem and a basic sense of having control over their world. This in turn is experienced as a moral affront.

When our sense of morality is threatened we feel justified to assert moral authority onto the situation. Even though this is often a defensive reaction against feeling out of control or hurt, many people feel justified in staying angry when they have been wounded and thereby justify their actions of retaliation or revenge. On a feeling level, it may seem easier to demand justice or punishment than look at the opportunities and life lessons that forgiving our offenders can offer.

In this country we have slowly seen an attitude shift around the willingness to forgive. People are suspicious of forgiveness, calling it something that is cowardly or weak. Unfortunately, we have moved away from trying to give mercy equal weight with justice to the point that people now take **pride in not forgiving**. It is as if they are expressing a sign of victory over the injustice done to them by putting the other person down or getting even

However, for those on a spiritual path this is not the answer. We must confront the difficulty we all have with developing a forgiving heart. Being hurt forces us to look at the depth of our faith, our resistance to facing life's difficulties as a part of deepening own spiritual practices. All of us want the joy, peace, and hope that a spiritual life offers. However, it is when we are confronted with the pain and vulnerability of our humanity that we are forced to turn to someone or something larger than ourselves.

The antidote to our own reluctance to face pain and suffering is to remind ourselves of our obligation to spiritual growth, and spiritual growth includes forgiving as we have also been forgiven.

Misconceptions about Forgiveness: What Forgiveness is Not

“Forgiveness does not mean that you can’t name an action or behavior as wrong. Naming the wrong is often a very clear starting point for the work that leads to forgiveness.”

Many people bring resistance to considering the value and benefits of forgiveness because they often have misconceptions about what forgiveness is or what the act of forgiveness requires. Often these misconceptions clash with the basic value system of the individual, or they may feel that they are letting the perpetrator off the hook. Often the hesitation to *work toward* forgiveness is blocked because the individual erroneously believes that releasing someone from resentment, anger, hatred, and forgiving the person who harmed us will be an act of minimizing the extent of the pain, turmoil, or trauma that they suffered.

It is often helpful to clarify these misconceptions and talk about what forgiveness is not. Here is a list of some common misconceptions.

- Forgiveness does not mean you go back into an abusive or dangerous situation.
- If you choose to release someone from a debt, it does not mean you’re saying that they were right and you were wrong.
- Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the wrongful act is in any way minimized, excused or condoned.
- Forgiveness doesn’t mean that you can’t *name* an action or behavior as wrong. Naming the wrong is often a very clear starting point for the work that leads to forgiveness.
- Forgiveness does not mean that punishment through enforcement of our laws should not be given to individuals who break the law.
- Forgiveness is not necessarily about reconciling with the perpetrator. You can forgive someone and not resume the relationship.
- The act of forgiveness is not about taking responsibility for causing the other person’s bad behavior (even if they tell you it is). Every adult is responsible for their own actions and behaviors.
- Forgiveness is not about going back to the way things were before the offense occurred. The process of forgiveness requires a searching and a change in the self and in the other person if reconciliation is going to occur.
- Forgiveness does not mean that you are supposed to **forget** what happened. It means that you stop letting it affect you negatively, stop letting it immobilize you.
- Forgiveness is not assuming an attitude of superiority or self-righteousness. For example, saying that you will forgive someone because you feel sorry for them or pity them is confusing forgiveness with arrogance and passing judgment.
- Forgiveness does not necessarily require a face-to-face communication.
- Forgiveness and trust are not the same. We may be able to forgive before we can trust an individual who hurt or harmed us. Trust is something that must be rebuilt over time, based on behavioral changes in the individual.

Forgiveness is not to be confused with *pseudo-forgiveness*, where individuals rush to forgive, stuffing anger and resentment inside in order to “be nice” or keep the peace. When individuals tend to minimize or bi-pass more difficult feelings such as anger or rage, the result is often depression, low self-esteem, passivity, or dwelling on the hurt secretly. Many people’s attitudes and behaviors are based on early messages told to them from childhood. For example, you may have been told you were a bad or difficult or a belligerent person if you expressed anger, frustration, or spoke the truth about something that you found upsetting. Going on auto-pilot based on these “shoulds” is not acting in the true spirit of forgiveness but acting out of fear or an old pattern.

“The spiritual quest is not for interesting ‘spiritual experiences’ but for the expansion of our capacity for mercy, the opening of our hearts wide enough to embrace the world, and not just the fragments of it, here and there, which at present we manage to feel with and care about.”

Martin L. Smith

Book Reviews and Recommendations

There are four books that I would like to recommend. Each takes a slightly different slant on the topic.

The first is one of my favorites. It is called Forgiveness, by Robin Casarjian, and it is published by Bantam Books. Robin is a psychotherapist who also draws upon the spiritual philosophy found in *A Course in Miracles*. I like the book because of her rich examples of personal testimonials, as well as the range of the various aspects of forgiveness, such as self forgiveness, forgiving parents, spouse, or children. In addition she offers exercises, meditations and visualizations at the end of each chapter to help the reader personalize the learning points and practice ways to challenge our assumptions about forgiveness. Her writing style is clear, straight-forward and minus psychological jargon.

The second book recommendation is entitled Forgiving the Unforgivable: Overcoming the Bitter Legacy of Intimate Wounds, by Beverly Flanigan, published by Collier Books. This book focuses primarily on how one recovers from a betrayal in an intimate relationship. Her orientation to the subject matter uses a psychological approach to forgiveness. The content offers a very clear outline of the numerous steps or stages of the forgiveness process. In addition she clearly contrasts what forgiveness is *not*, how one can release and forgive an offender without resuming the relationship. Also, she discusses what is involved in the reconciliation process if an intimate relationship is to survive the aftermath of a betrayal of trust.

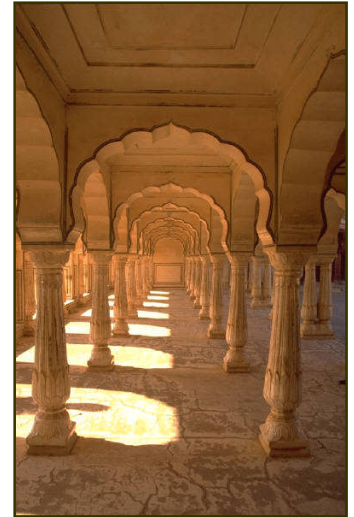
The third book recommendation is actually a two-part look at forgiveness written by both a psychologist and a minister. The book is called The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation, written by LeRon Shults, and Steven Sandage, published by

Baker Book House.

The first half of the book presents various psychological considerations on the topic, referencing different schools of psychological theory. Content areas addressed include a model for the forgiveness process, the difficulty we have with forgiving, how early parental relationships influence our ability to forgive, and how individuals experience and/or personalize disappointment based on early upbringing. All of these topics are conceptualized from a psycho-dynamic perspective. In contrast to the first two books, also written by psychotherapists, this author speaks more to an academic audience. The concepts and references may be more difficult for readers who do not possess a background in therapy or psychological theory, and it may be a stretch to easily understand the author's conceptualizations and explanations. However, this would be a good reference book for therapists and those having a psychology background.

The second half of the book, by F. LeRon Shults, offers a Christian perspective on the importance of forgiveness. The references are scripturally rich and comprehensive, but the background is strictly Judeo-Christian in its orientation. I like this book because it offers a clear example of the interface and overlap of the topic by the two disciplines.

The fourth book is entitled The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, by Simon Wiesenthal, published by Schocken Books. This book is very different from the first three in that the initial 100 pages include a true narrative by the author about his time during WWII in Nazi Germany when he was a



"The wisdom offered by others often takes us on a journey deeper within our own hearts."

prisoner in a concentration camp. The narrative is detailed in the treatment of this man and his fellow prisoners. The account is quite compelling and readable. At the end of this tragic episode he runs into one of the prison guards after the war is over. The guard asks for his forgiveness, and Wiesenthal leaves the reader with a question. He invites us to mentally change places with him and asks, "What would you have done?"

The remaining two-thirds of the book offers answers to that question by various spiritual and literary figures, ranging from the Dalai Lama to Matthew Fox, Mary Gordon, Desmond Tutu, Harry Wu, Herbert Marcuse and others.

The essays vary in their approach and address the question of whether there are certain crimes that are unforgivable.

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Calendar of Upcoming Events

We will be offering the following workshops and retreats for the 2007 season.

Workshops: Day Long:

The Path Toward Forgiveness

Renewal for Healing Providers of Cancer Patients

Spiritual Purpose in Times of Transition

Creating a Spiritual Sanctuary

Workshops: Half-Day:

Honoring the Gift of Time

Creating a Forgiveness Ritual

Creating a Daily Spiritual Ritual

Retreats:

Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Deeping Our Spiritual Practice

Leaving a Legacy: Living the Last Quarter of Life with Purpose and Meaning

Reclaiming Your Spiritual Purpose

Spiritual Gifts and Meaningful Acts of Service

To inquire about dates, costs, and locations, please call or email The Center for Spiritual Integration

About The Center for Spiritual Integration...

The mission of The Center for Spiritual Integration is to provide a space for people to gather to explore the deeper questions of life's purpose and meaning.

The center provides a vehicle or forum which allows people to take a break from the pace and pressure of life's daily demands and find renewal, refreshment, and a time for contemplation.

We offer a variety of experiences in which one can enter into the self-reflective, spiritual process. These experiences include: workshops, retreats, and individual coaching. We also offer help with designing personalized spiritual rituals or meditative practices.

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