

Meeting Ground

The Journal of The Center for Spiritual Integration

Special Interest Articles:

- An interview with the editor.
- Forgiveness Exercises
- A client's story of forgiveness.
- Forgiveness as a way of opening the heart.
- Book Reviews and Recommendations

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This is the second of a two-part newsletter on the topic of FORGIVENESS: In this issue we will be featuring stories about people's journeys toward forgiveness and at home exercises that can deepen one's understanding of how to develop a more forgiving heart.

Dialogues: A Conversation with Dr. Patricia Gianotti and the Rev. Peter Lane – How Forgiveness Can Develop Spiritual Maturity and an Open Heart

Rev. Peter Lane: Patricia, forgiveness is such an important concept in Christian tradition. I'm wondering how you, as a psychologist, would view forgiveness in terms of your work with clients?

Dr. Patricia Gianotti: I would describe forgiveness primarily as an outcome, or one of the outcomes, of a successful psychotherapy. Forgiveness is achieved through much hard work and reflection, grieving over losses, and changing how the individual comes to view him/herself in the world.

Peter: What exactly do you mean by individuals change how they view themselves?

Patricia: The evidence of change can manifest in so many ways. When people heal from pain or a broken heart they are often able to set more realistic expectations for themselves and others. They have more patience, are less naive, and more compassionate. Often clients come to unsolicited forgiveness at the end of a therapy process because they understand that the other person's hurtful behavior toward them actually came from that individual's brokenness or limitation.

Peter: Would you say that people seek counseling services for the expressed purpose of learning how to forgive?

Patricia: No, I wouldn't say that most people come into therapy with this as a primary goal. They want to feel better, to recover from suffering either past or present. However, I have found that clients are often surprised that the therapy process often leads them to forgiveness. They actually find themselves letting go of their desire for revenge and releasing and/or forgiving the person that harmed them.

Peter: Were you surprised that this was an outcome of many people's work in therapy?

Patricia: I used to be surprised but after 25 years of practice, I'm no longer surprised. You know, the psychological literature hasn't said much about forgiveness as an outcome of psychotherapy until recently.

Peter: I find that surprising.

Patricia: Yes, I do as well. Yet, if you think about it, when you heal the heart, one of the natural outcomes is often the ability to forgive. It's as if the heart has become softened and yet more wise. So, I believe that it is easier to forgive once you are able to operate from this larger perspective. How about you, Peter? Do people seek out spiritual counseling because they want to forgive, or because they feel guilty that they can't forgive on their own?



“Forgiveness of about wanting right relationship with God and with our neighbor more than we want the pound of flesh we are owed.”

-- Peter Lane

Peter: It's interesting, Patricia, that even though forgiveness is one of the basic building blocks of our faith – God's forgiveness of our sin enables right relationship with God and opens the way to healing in our interpersonal relationships – forgiveness remains a very misunderstood process. Just as in your practice, people often come to me because they are hurting; either because of the actions of another, or their own actions that have hurt someone they love. Yet, it usually takes a while before they are able to understand that the path to feeling better passes through forgiveness.

Patricia: It sounds like you view forgiveness as more of a tool or a means to an end rather than the end result – is that a fair statement?

Peter: Yes, I think that is a fair statement. For me, forgiveness is a tool, a gift really, that God has given us. At the heart of God's vision for creation is right relationship – human beings in right relationship with God, with each other and with all of God's creation. Through sin, our selfish choices, we break those right relationships causing hurt and pain and a breakdown in the healthy functioning of our communities. But rather than sending us into isolation where we can't do any more damage, God, in the ultimate expression of love and hopefulness, asks us to try again.

Patricia: So what's involved in “trying again” as you put it?

Peter: At the heart of “trying again” has to be a desire to live in healthy relationship with those around us. There's a wonderful scene in the movie *Shrek* when the main character, an ogre named Shrek has been emotionally wounded yet again. Tired of being hurt, Shrek loudly declares, as only an ogre can, that he is going to live alone, all by himself, where no one will ever hurt him again. I think that is a pretty normal reaction that we've all had at times in our lives. But that is not the way God calls us to live – in isolation.

Patricia: So part of being a spiritually and emotionally mature person is the willingness to try again?

Peter: Absolutely. I think people often turn forgiveness into a complicated process. Forgiveness is not about putting someone on trial and exacting just retribution for the hurt they've caused, or in turn, being put on trial for something we've done. Rather it is about wanting right relationship, with God and with our neighbor, more than we want the pound of flesh we feel we're owed. Over and over again scripture proclaims to us God's action of blotting out our iniquities, wiping the slate clean, if we will simply choose to make right relationship our highest priority. God shows us over and over again how to forgive and the fruit that is born of forgiveness – peace within ourselves, our families, and our communities.

THE REV. PETER LANE has been a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire for eight years. He currently serves as vicar of Trinity Episcopal Church, Hampton, NH.

At-home Exercises to Help Promote the Forgiveness Process

Because forgiveness is something that takes time, it is often helpful to make a purposeful commitment to help move the process along. There are many exercises designed to help work toward developing a more open and forgiving heart.

Often it is difficult to maintain openness and vulnerability when the feelings of pain and mistrust are raw and new. Rather than trying to move too quickly to forgiving the person who harmed you, try to feel more vulnerable and open to what I call the "neutral people" around you.

Exercise 1: Start in small ways. – For the next month take a few moments three times a day to practice "non-judgmental seeing". When you are driving, at work, with your children, at the grocery store, in a restaurant, walking down the street, try to see the person you are encountering as a child of God. Look beyond their appearance or what they are doing and try to see their inner self, their inner light.

Acknowledge that the person in front of you has a peaceful, loving, and also wounded heart like your own. See that they have their own wisdom and dignity. No words are necessary. When you make eye contact hold these thoughts in your mind. Your quiet recognition is all that is necessary.

Journaling is a useful way of keeping track of your thoughts as well as your progress as you move through the forgiveness process. Often it is helpful to have questions that you can reflect upon. Writing your thoughts helps capture and track them.

Exercise 2: Journal Questions –

1. What am I angry with myself about regarding the outcome of this situation?
2. Where didn't I act where I should have?
3. Where did I act where I should have remained silent?
4. What did I ignore about the other person hoping that I could fix...reason with...explain...excuse...minimize?
5. What is at the heart of this person's pain that may help me let go of my need for revenge?
6. Are there ways I could have responded differently? In other words, was the other person wishing either consciously or unconsciously that my strength could help them overcome their own weakness?
7. How might I have contributed to the other person's pain as well as my own?
8. How can I protect myself better in the future while remaining hopeful about people and open to new possibilities?



"To live without forgiveness is to live separated from the sacred and from the most basic instincts of our heart. To live with forgiveness is to reveal in each moment the beauty and value of life.

-----Robin Casariain

In addition to taking time for reflection and journaling, putting thoughts into actions can be a powerful step in moving the forgiveness process along. You can practice these actions with another person, by yourself, or with the offended/offending party.

Exercise 3: Action Steps

1. Verbalize or write a sentence that captures the other person's fear.
2. Articulate your own fear, or what keeps you from letting go and moving forward.
3. Identify what you think the person's underlying shame inadequacy or belief system is that caused them to act in such a hurtful manner.
4. Pick a trusted friend and discuss what you personally feel embarrassed about or are having difficulty letting go of.
5. If your aim is reconciliation with the person, articulate a statement of understanding that acknowledges:
 - a. the mutual disappointment,
 - b. the fear that still lingers,
 - c. the request for new behavior moving forward,
 - d. the love or potential that is still between you,
 - e. an apology without excuses or justification,
 - f. a promise which identifies specific behaviors that you and/or the other person will do moving forward.

Practicing these exercises over time helps release and transforms negative feelings, assumptions, and beliefs about self and other. It is a way to examine your part and the other person's part in the disappointment and/or betrayal. Letting go of the negative, painful feelings doesn't always come with reconciliation. However, personal transformation can happen none the less.

A Client's Story—Journey toward Forgiveness

"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."

"I can't believe he lied to me. He stared at me and swore that he would never have an affair. He told me I was paranoid and said that I should go get some counseling to work on my self esteem. Then one night I picked up the phone to make a call. My husband was working in the den. I heard a woman's voice speaking to my husband flirtatiously on the other end of the line. He must have heard me pick up because he quickly said he had to hang up. My heart was pounding. I began screaming and crying as I confronted him. He didn't deny the affair this time. He said he had been trying to work up the nerve to tell me he wanted to leave, that he wasn't in love with me anymore, and that he had fallen in love with someone else."

This marked the beginning of my client's journey. She came in full of pain and rage, and never felt she could trust anyone again. She hated him, but also hated herself for being so blind, for not trusting her initial intuition, for being made to feel disposable and second rate.

"I feel so stupid. How could I have been so blind? And after all I sacrificed for him. I gave up my career and moved three times to help advance his career. I had to leave my friends and family. And this is how he pays me back?"

Clearly my client was caught in the intense emotions of betrayal, feeling victimized and blaming herself for not seeing earlier, for sacrificing in vain. Working through the painful emotions of anger, self pity, self loathing, and grief took some time. She would have waves of anger followed by sadness and wishing he'd take her back.

Eventually, we were able to get to a place where she was ready to reflect on ways she sacrificed more than she wanted but expected some form of reciprocity in return. When that did not come, she became resentful and admitted that she began criticizing her husband for not doing enough around the house. She began to withdraw affection because she felt taken advantage of and the relationship felt so one-sided. She could see how she had allowed herself to become a victim and described that she felt powerless to do anything to change the situation.

We began to discuss what some of her other options might have been, speculating on what would have happened if she had taken action on her own behalf earlier. She was also able to see how much her relationship with her husband paralleled her relationship with her unavailable, distant father. My client talked about her longings to get her father to see her talents as an artist and a singer.

"I desperately wanted him to come to my performances, but he was either too busy or he would laugh in that condescending way and say, 'when are you going to take up something serious, something that will pay the rent?' He made me feel so small and foolish. My dreams weren't important; they weren't practical. I guess I never took myself seriously after that."

At that point we began to go back to discussing her childhood dreams. I was a supportive and encouraging listener. Soon her face began to light up when she remembered some of the ideas she had about her art work. The color came back to her face; her energy began to return. One day she announced to me that she had decided to go back to art school. She had been investigating schools on line and had put a small portfolio together.

We continued the therapy process while she completed the two years of art school. During that time she thought less about her ex-husband. She had heard from a friend that the relationship with his new wife ended after a year. Rather than feeling vindicated over the news she said, "I feel sad for him. He's always been the type of person who needed to find other people to make him feel special. He didn't know how to find what made him happy from the inside. I guess sooner or later everyone was going to disappoint him."

She then laughed and said, "Oh, I never thought I'd hear those words coming out of my mouth. I guess I've gotten over him, haven't I? I really don't feel angry with him anymore. Isn't that incredible? I can actually forgive him for causing me so much pain because now I see that he is as trapped as I was. Where would my life be now if he hadn't left me? I never, ever would have thought his leaving me would be a gift."

"Hatred will never cease by hatred. Hatred can only cease by love. When you make peace with yourself, you make peace with the world"

----- Mahan Gohosanna, Cambodian Refugee and Buddhist Monk

Forgiveness as a Way of Opening the Heart

By Patricia Gianotti

Open-hearted people are trusting, Candid, and a pleasure to be around. They tend to interact more spontaneously, are generous with their time and resources, and are more hopeful and optimistic about their futures. Research shows that there is a correlation between being able to forgive and an open-hearted attitude. It has been documented that people who have learned to forgive actually come to possess many of these qualities of open-heartedness.

From a psychological perspective opening the heart involves a discovery process. People come to discover how old patterns, assumptions, and behaviors adopted in childhood may actually limit spontaneity, distort thinking, and inhibit creativity. Learned behaviors that were created in an attempt to protect the self so long ago may actually cause harm or severe limitation to interpersonal relationships in the present.

For example, if a parent never allowed you to have your own opinion but would criticize or make you prove every point, you may carry some fear around expressing an opinion in adulthood. You might expect a debate or experience every question directed at you as an accusation or a threat. You may be quick to anger, or on the other hand, you may be quick to retreat from any conflict.

When people have been overly controlled in childhood, not allowed to express their feelings openly and honestly, it damages interpersonal trust and leaves scars of resentment on the heart. Conflict is often avoided, or people may over-react with anger and bitterness. Forgiveness is often difficult to achieve as people tend to keep score or secretly seek revenge.

It is important to remember that conflict (past or present) doesn't disappear. It gets buried or is usually just under the surface. Although guardedness can manifest differently in every individual, there are some typical defensive responses to watch for with regard to unresolved conflict:

- You walk on egg shells, fearing that you will offend someone. Anxiety and worry that others won't like you can be the result.
- You are anxious to please others but there is little left over for yourself. Burn-out or feeling like a martyr is often the result.
- You are often guarded or suspicious, making people prove their point to you. Lack of trust, isolation, or bitterness, anger or contempt can be the result.

Healing the heart in this situation involves releasing the parent, boss, or partner from their position of power, coming to an

understanding that not everyone in the present responds in a controlling manner. Individuals then discover that there are actually people who are kind, not shaming or combative.

Once this differentiation process begins to occur, the heart can then learn to relax. In addition when we differentiate between trustworthy allies in the present and hurtful figures from our past, it becomes easier to forgive and let go of the past.

Just as it is important to develop open-heartedness as an aspect of adult growth and maturity, it is equally important to seek out open-hearted people as friends. They tend to be more trusting and more trustworthy. People tend to gravitate toward them.

Attributes of an open hearted person include:

- the ability to set realistic expectations of self and others, guarding against perfectionist standards or trying to "save the world".
- the ability to engage meaningfully with their own corner of the world, working for the mutual goals of self and others.
- the possession of a sense of humor or a perspective that isn't deadly serious.
- the ability to allow for differences and also to respect differences of opinion.
- giving the benefit of the doubt and check assumptions before drawing conclusions.
- showing generosity with one's time and a willingness to give back in a way that works for a purpose beyond the self.
- the ability to see one's limitations with compassion and humility and to forgive shortcomings and mistakes in self and others.
- remaining conscious of the finiteness of time and limits on all of us in a way that remains hopeful not despairing.
- delivering one's own truth in a way that does not harm or humiliate others.

Learning to trust trustworthy people is liberating. It cuts through feelings of isolation, fear, and guardedness. Learning to forgive people who have harmed you can lead to releasing yourself from being trapped in the past. It may also be a gift to the offending party. Being treated with compassion and/or forgiveness often creates a situation of openness which can allow for the beginning of new dialogue and/or the other person's healing as well.

"When we forgive we need to have 'double vision,' seeing the behavior as unacceptable yet seeing the other person as precious in spite of the wrongdoing."

-----David Augsburg

Book Reviews and Recommendations

There are four books that are featured in this quarterly newsletter.

The first is On Apology, by Aaron Lazare, published by Oxford University Press. This book offers a slightly different slant on the topic of forgiveness and illustrates how forgiveness can be both connected to an apology and also quite separate from forgiveness as an outcome.

Lazare speaks to how and why apologies are useful. Specifically, he points to how apologies can open up dialogue in a way that allows the two parties (or two nations) to find assurance that they both have shared values beyond the offense that has occurred.

He also examines why people apologize. First, it allows the individual to cut through internalized feelings of guilt or shame over specific behaviors. Second, it is a way of expressing concern for the other party.

Lazare talks about apologies that are meaningful as opposed to obligatory. He states that apologies need to be specific, based on the offender's behavior or action rather than the victim's upset, that the apology needs to be sincere and heart felt, and that then must not be conditional, ie. "if mistakes were made, I'm sorry".

Finally, the book focuses on the relationship between apologies, repentance, and forgiveness. This book is a straightforward, quick read, but it contains a great deal of useful information.

The second book recommendation is entitled The New Freedom of Forgiveness by David Augsburger, published by Moody Bible Institute. I want to say up front that this book is clearly written from a Christian perspective. If an evangelical spiritual orientation is not your style, this may not be the book for you. However, I found it to be extremely well-written with many compelling stories and examples of

forgiveness from all walks of life. Stories range from the tragedies of Apartheid to prisoners on death row to the Biblical parables of Jesus. Furthermore, Augsburger is a clear, compelling, and intelligent writer who does not get overly preachy.

Since much of the forgiveness literature in Western cultures is grounded in Christian tradition, I think that understanding forgiveness from this perspective helps round out a more complete picture of the various approaches and models of the benefits and process of forgiveness.

In addition there is a study guide at the end of this book which is broken down chapter by chapter. Each section offers questions for consideration, points to reflect upon, action steps, and scriptural meditations. Therefore, this book includes its own set of exercises to help the reader move through the forgiveness process.

The third book is entitled The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict, by The Arbinger Institute, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. Although not a book on forgiveness, per se, this is a powerful narrative of one person's growth and development in terms of examining how we come to quick judgments which inform our behaviors and attitudes about others. They show how we all tend to focus on our own actions and behaviors in a way that gives us the benefit of the doubt, whereas we are much quicker to leap to negative conclusions about another person's character or motivation when they act in a similar fashion.

What is particularly useful about this book is that they offer a grid or a template illustrating how we are in the box (in our assumptions that keep us



"Out of ruins, good will come."

-----Ancient Basotho Proverb

stuck) and how to get out of the box. Getting out of the box leads to more dialogue, more generosity toward others, and more forgiveness of self and others. With very specific examples, this book demonstrates how reaching out in this way can break long-standing impasses and lead to more personal responsibility for mutual support.

The fourth book is entitled Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness by Estelle Frankel, Shambahala Publishers. This book explores personal healing a reflection by using metaphors, stories, and spiritual practices of the Jewish tradition. Its application is useful for people of any faith.

As a psychotherapist, Frankel's thesis states that the goal of both psychotherapy and spiritual practice is to open the heart fully to life. Her writing style is clear, and she does a wonderful job weaving aspects of healing with readings and meditations from Jewish writers and the Torah. She offers a number of exercises for individual practice on issues ranging from humility to brokenness to forgiveness.

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Calendar of Upcoming Events

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

Workshops: Day Long

Acts of 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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