

Forgiveness

If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.

Mother Theresa

In the dark days of the year we tend to withdraw into ourselves, perhaps following an evolutionary cue for hibernation, and reflect on the year that is past, not totally believing in the rebirth to come. Some of us start to brood, berating ourselves for resolutions not followed, kilos gained, opportunities missed. Our dissatisfaction may then extend to our family and their shortcomings, the deficits in our work environment, the failings of our politicians and the frightening state of the world. Our sack full of fears, disappointments, hurts and regrets weighs us down and threatens to pull us further into the vortex. Nevertheless, we hesitate to let go of it. Somehow we find comfort in the familiarity of this weight. We hold on in small ways like envying a friend for some quality she has rather than honoring our own strengths. We hold on in big ways like blaming our spouse's career for our own unhappiness. Perhaps we rail at God for the cruelty of a natural disaster. We are then at war with life. How can we release ourselves from this self-perpetuating misery?

Coming to peace with oneself and the world, as I suggested in my last article, requires forgiveness. What does it mean to forgive?

Here are some definitions:

- *to stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw or mistake.*
- *to stop blaming or being angry with (someone) for something they have done.*
- *to cease to feel resentment against (an offender)...to give up claim to requital .*

To forgive means to **stop** doing something, to release it. I find it fascinating that in all of the definitions the offender is in parentheses, highlighting the reality that forgiveness is a process that happens *within me*, whether or not I communicate it explicitly to the person towards whom I feel anger or resentment. Forgiveness is ultimately a gift that I give myself. I benefit most from releasing my own suffering.

As long as I split the world into good and evil and classify my offenders as evil, I am not forced to look at what Jung called the "shadow": everything in me that is unconscious, repressed, undeveloped and denied. The shadow includes the darker side of my nature that I try to disown, including my potential to commit evil acts. Have you ever noticed that the behavior in others that you find most irritating actually reflects something that you reject within yourself? The more I condemn others for their shortcomings and assess their fundamental worth as human beings based on their actions, the less I own my shadow. But as long as I project my shadow onto others, I am powerless to effect change in myself and the world. I cannot grow. Jung wrote in *Psychology and Religion*:

*... someone who is brave enough to withdraw all his projections ... is now unable to say that **they** do this or that, **they** are wrong, and **they** must be fought against ... such a man knows that whatever is wrong in*

the world is in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own shadow he has done something real for the world. He has succeeded in shouldering at least an infinitesimal part of the gigantic, unsolved social problems of our day. (emphasis mine)

How do I deal with my shadow? Jung's answer is clear: "We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses." Accepting my shadow means acknowledging that it exists and facing both the offenses that have been committed against me and those I have committed. This releases the emotional energy tied up in repression. I may cry tears that I have been holding back, but I am no longer stuck. To fully release my life energy and move forward, I then need to forgive. Forgiving an abuser and his or her weakness does not mean excusing or condoning the behavior. By recognizing the potential for evil behavior as part of the human condition and therefore part of me, I can more easily separate the person from the act and am capable of empathy and compassion. Punishment does not heal; forgiveness does.

A recent article in Newsweek's cover story Mind and Body reports that science and medicine are beginning to recognize the power of forgiveness. Many studies have shown that forgiveness positively influences health. One way is "by reducing the stress of the state of unforgiveness, a potent mixture of bitterness, anger, hostility, hatred, resentment and fear (of being hurt or humiliated again)." These feelings have specific physiological consequences, such as increased blood pressure and hormonal changes, that are linked to cardiovascular disease, immune suppression and, possibly, impaired neurological function and memory. The other benefit of forgiveness is broader in scope. Numerous studies have shown that a strong social network enhances health and longevity. People who nurse grudges tend to lose relationships on their way through life and are more likely to be socially isolated and suffer chronic unhappiness, illness and premature death.

Forgiveness is a skill that we must cultivate. Harvard psychiatrist and author of *Dare to Forgive*, Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, explains that forgiveness "goes against a natural human tendency to seek revenge and the redress of injustice." He recommends seeking help in doing so—from friends, a therapist or through prayer. We resist forgiving because the offender has no "right" to be forgiven. But by holding on to an offence I continue to give it and the offender power over me, essentially chaining myself to him, and thereby prolonging my state of victimhood. This cycle can only be broken if I am willing to forgive.

Forgiveness is a choice we make. Martin Luther King said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It is a permanent attitude." We have many opportunities to forgive. While the studies referred to in Newsweek focus primarily on forgiveness within relationships, I believe that the person I most need to forgive is myself. Most of us have perfectionist tendencies that fuel an inner litany of failures, flaws and inadequacies, outlining all the ways in which we are "wrong." Forgiveness enables us to say "yes" to ourselves and our lives with all the imperfections, not surrendering passively, but accepting actively. And only if we come to peace within ourselves can we effectively wage peace in the world. All you need to do is say "I forgive you." It is as easy as that.