
Forgiveness... The Gift You Give Yourself



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HAVE YOU EVER HEARD a single sentence that changed your life? In 1999, at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, at a week-long Spiritual Eldering workshop, I heard Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi(1) introduce the concept of forgiveness by saying, "Not forgiving someone is like stabbing yourself in the stomach to hurt the person standing behind you." What could this mean? What about righteous indignation? What about "unforgiveable" transgressions? What would it mean to forgive? Would that mean condoning the act? This began my ongoing journey to understand, practice, and facilitate the process of forgiveness.

Why forgive and how to forgive is the topic of this article. The tools and processes it explores draw on three sources: the work of Sage-ing (originally called Spiritual Eldering);(2) research at the International Forgiveness Institute(3) (which is the outgrowth of the social scientific research done at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 1985 by Robert Enright and his colleagues); and one of Enright's books, *Forgiveness Is a Choice*.(4)

Sage-ing is an approach to conscious aging which involves life review (or life repair) and proactive aging as a way of helping us make peace with the past and with our own mortality. This inner work helps us approach aging as a journey of deepening wisdom, continued learning, and expanding possibilities. It helps us to redirect energy — energy

that is tied up in resentments and regrets about the past and in fears about death — into what I think of as the exploration of the passion and mystery of the unlived life . . . my “What’s next?”

As we age we may dwell on the past, focusing on what we see as mistakes, missed opportunities, roads not taken. When we feel consumed by the resulting anxiety, we often take refuge in distracting activities to ward off the painful memories. A friend who has an issue with weight control says, “A sandwich is my friend.” Reb Zalman writes that as we become determined to overcome this anxiety and remain present to the pain of past experiences, we discover to our surprise that the pain is eminently workable, that we can forgive ourselves. By befriending the pain, gently reviewing our past with the blessing of the wisdom gleaned in our lives, we can mend our personal history.

Time is stretchable and therefore subject to reshaping by contemplative techniques. One such process is called “Healing a Painful Memory,” in which one reaches back into the past to heal the part of ourselves that is still imprisoned there — a questionable decision, a bruised relationship — and apply the balm of our more mature consciousness. In such a process we can see our elder self saying, “I come with assurance from the future. You are going to make it. You lived through this difficulty, healed from it, and learned important lessons that matured into wisdom.”

To make peace with the past we must learn to forgive. Sage-ing offers two other processes I’ve found helpful in this regard:

“A Testimonial Dinner for Life’s Severe Teachers” (5) uses the broad perspective of time to “reframe” hurtful relationships and situations. You identify the lessons learned in an imagery or journal exercise; examine your own role, if any, in a given situation; consider the personal growth or good that might have come from the situation; forgive yourself if you had a part in causing the hurt; and then forgive the other, releasing the energy that has been tied up in resentment and redirecting that energy into your conscious growth as an elder. For me, having had troubled relationships with my father and mother, I now acknowledge the gifts they have brought to my life, my father’s gift of public speaking and my mother’s joyful, playful outgoing personality. . . traits that have served me well.

The second exercise — “Bedtime Prayer of Forgiveness” — is a preventive that uses simple contemplation before sleep to let go of and forgive transgressions of the

day. (6) I combine this with a nightly gratitude practice, (7) deep breaths of release, and a few moments to count my blessings. Emmons' research on the health benefits of a gratitude practice makes sense to me as a nurse. Here is a poem that captures the essence of this work:

The Sage Must Travel Light

Youth can carry a heavy load day after day
Without noticing the damaging effects,
But the sage must lay down the burden.
Resentments, regrets, injuries, slights,
Grudges and disappointments,
Are much too cumbersome
For a person of wisdom and contentment.
The sage must travel light.
There is a backpack in the mind
Which over the years has become
Filled with rock and stones.
You do not have to carry them anymore.
You can empty your pack
And carry only compassion from one day to the next.

— William Martin (8)

During my early research in 2000, I had come upon the home page of the International Forgiveness Institute, and there I found useful definitions that were starting points for my own thinking. Forgiveness IS a turning to the "good" in the face of wrongdoing, a foregoing of resentment or revenge even when it is deserved, a gift we give ourselves. Forgiveness IS NOT forgetting, denying, condoning, or seeking justice or compensation. Nor is forgiveness a quid-pro-quo exchange that seeks advanced compensation before its conferring.

In researching this article, I revisited the Institute, delving more deeply into the research by Robert Enright at the heart of their outreach. Forgiveness is clearly a skill that improves with practice; yet, more than a skill, it is an *attitude* of good will and a "moral virtue" that develops. It becomes a part of your identity and transforms your character and relationships as you understand and practice it. Not a quick fix — hard, sometimes painful — Enright likens his process to a road map that is checked for directions as needed.

Why do this? To get the pain to stop, to heal, and move on. He identifies the paradox of forgiving, that as we forgive the other who hurt us, we are the ones healed.

How to do this? Enright's four steps or "guideposts" for forgiving include:

- uncovering your anger — anger can be a good motivator;
- deciding to forgive — creating a change of heart with a decision to forgive;
- working on forgiveness — to "begin to bear and grieve the pain" (Reed);

- releasing yourself from an emotional prison — and thereby perhaps finding meaning or even a new or renewed purpose in life.

This process involves using a journal as a guide to help you answer specific questions. The research that supports this work is impressive. Dr. Gayle Reed, who is also a personal counselor with Forgiveness Recovery, LLC, described how “research from the University of Wisconsin has shown that internalizing, or holding on to, hurt and resentment can lead to depression, post-traumatic stress, increased anger, anxiety, illness, drug and alcohol abuse, sleep- and even eating disorders. But the challenge is that simply saying ‘I forgive you’ isn’t enough. True healing can come only when a person has committed to the process of forgiving.” (9)

Waltman and colleagues did some compelling research on the effects of forgiveness on coronary artery disease. Their work provided a ground-breaking demonstration that health may be improved by an intervention that helps people to forgive someone who has caused them ongoing stress and grief.(10) They used myocardial perfusion imaging to show that vividly recalling a time when the patient was hurt by someone resulted in less disruption of their cardiac blood flow after 10 sessions of the forgiveness intervention, whereas 10 sessions of learning positive coping strategies did not improve blood flow. Theory would predict that the effect of the forgiveness intervention should be mediated by increased forgiveness and decreased anger, and these were indeed observed in the intervention group to a greater extent than in the control group.

If forgiveness is a skill that can be learned with practice, how might we introduce it to the children in our lives so that it becomes a life-long skill? As a psychiatric nurse I wanted to help my son and myself to move through rough spots, to let go of anger and hurts, yet honor the power of the feelings. When we had a disagreement and I identified a time when it seemed we could move on, I would ask him, “Are you ready to start over?” This meant lovingly letting go and moving on, with the understanding that he could refuse if he needed more time. It worked both ways as he got older. This seemed to clear the air. Enright has written a children’s book to help a child imagine what forgiveness might look like. . . “getting in the plane, taking off, and rising above the story until you are bouncing gently on big white cotton ball clouds with the blue sky and sun ahead of you all day. Think of forgiveness this way.” (11) I will offer this book to my grandchildren....

Have you ever heard a single sentence that changed your life? Still learning . . . Several weeks ago I read a simple prayer, “Oh, Lord, please help me to forgive those who sin differently than I do.” I continue to embrace “pithy prose” on life’s journey of offering forgiveness to others and to myself. Forgiveness is a precious gift you give yourself.

Notes

- ¹ For a celebration of the life and work of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal and Spiritual Eldering movements, see the article in this issue, "Reb Zalman: Living from the Light," by Robert Atchley.
- ² The Sage-ing Guild: Visit sage-ingguild.org/
- ³ International Forgiveness Institute: Visit forgiveness-institute.org/
- ⁴ R. D. Enright, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-By-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).
- ⁵ Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision for Growing Older* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), pp. 279-80.
- ⁶ In our Sage-ing work we often, in this context, use a prayer rendered from the original Hebrew by Reb Zalman. Please e-mail me at Julia@constantsource.com if you would like to receive a copy.
- ⁷ Gratitude has long been extolled by religion and, in recent years, has drawn the attention of researchers who are amassing scientific evidence that gratitude produces health benefits. This interesting research is summarized in a fine book by Robert Emmons, *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
- ⁸ Adapted from the Tao Te Ching. William Martin, *The Sage's Tao Te Ching: The Ancient Advice for the Second Half of Life* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2000).
- ⁹ Gayle Reed, "Why learning to forgive is important to your health." Accessed May 2, 2011 at <http://www.uwhealth.org/news/why-learning-to-forgive-is-important-to-your-health/29525>. To learn more about R. D. Enright's process of forgiveness through the four guideposts, work through his book, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-By-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).
- ¹⁰ M. A. Waltman, et al., "The Effects of a Forgiveness Intervention on Patients with Coronary Artery Disease," *Psychology and Health*, 24(1), 11-27, January 2009.
- ¹¹ R. D. Enright, *Rising Above the Storm Clouds: What It's Like to Forgive* (Washington, DC: Imagination Press, 2004).

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