

## Faces of Forgiveness: Personal Struggles and Professional Observations

*This article is a review of the ways that forgiveness operates in the life of the author and his clients. It is a brief discussion of how the act of forgiveness can be an antidote to shame, blame, and guilt, and how it is generally a health-giving act. Andes also includes a discussion of ineffective forgiveness and phoney forgiveness and how these are not healthy.*

by  
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### Introduction

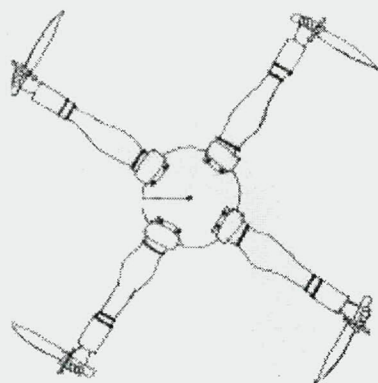
When I was a student at Ohio State University in the 1960's, I participated in a men's discussion group that met after classes on Friday afternoons. We always had plenty of food, beer, and curiosity. Each week we invited one of our male professors to be a guest, not only to go further into his field of expertise, but also to share something of his personal life experience. One of these men, a professor of psychology, said something that stuck. He told us that three of the most toxic forces operating in our culture were shame, blame, and guilt. Then he said that the best antidote to these was forgiveness. My experience shows me that there is much truth in what he said.

### Personal Issues

I know I am unhappy during those times when I wish to forgive someone and cannot do so. Sometimes it takes awhile. Wounds are often long in the making, so it is no surprise that forgiveness can also take time. I am equally unhappy when I feel I have made a serious mis-

take and haven't yet been forgiven, for whatever reasons. I have traveled long distances with a garbage bag of grudges over my shoulder. I have blamed others all too often for my own oversights and refusal to take appropriate actions: parents who had their own problems, lovers for rejecting me, friends for letting me down, clients for making demands, children for being imperfect, teachers for being human. I regret that I sometimes held on to my grudges, and that sometimes others held on to theirs.

At times I've confused forgiveness with letting someone off the hook: I let go of my resentment even though you won't take responsibility for your part. Then you'll win, I'll feel foolish, I'll be wrong. At other times I've appeared forgiving, denying my ongoing unfinished business about something, only to be unexpectedly "exposed" at a later point through an outburst or internal recognition that I still have to deal with my feelings. At other times I've indulged in making others "wrong" so I wouldn't have to come to terms with my own embarrassment, shame, or guilt.





Difficult conflicts approach resolution when forgiveness appears. People begin to heal when they begin to forgive. From witnessing the positive spiritual and practical effects of forgiveness, I give importance to it as a therapeutic process. It is often *the* central issue in a person's healing. This has certainly been so at critical moments of my own ongoing healing.

I have worked in different formats: individuals, groups, workshops. I have often seen people begin a session or a piece of work from a position of anger, resentment, judgment, or vilification toward a perceived wrongdoer. Often these feelings eventually melt into acceptance and forgiveness. Following that, there may be descriptions of states of lightness, peacefulness, profound relief. Tears flow from grief about loss, regret about judging, remorse about being untruthful, whether with oneself or another.

In the Christian tradition, followers are instructed to forgive even their enemies, to "turn the other cheek," which in my view means not to subject oneself to repeated victimization, but rather to remain open, available, and in a continuing relationship with adversaries. Followers of this tradition are instructed to look for the log in one's own eye versus fussing about the mote in somebody else's. Perhaps one's perceptions (the eyes) could be recognized as the stronger force in determining the personal "reality" of a situation where problems have arisen. Therefore,

blaming the other is not the best course of action, for this tends to perpetuate our misperceptions, diminish self-awareness, and limit personal responsibility.

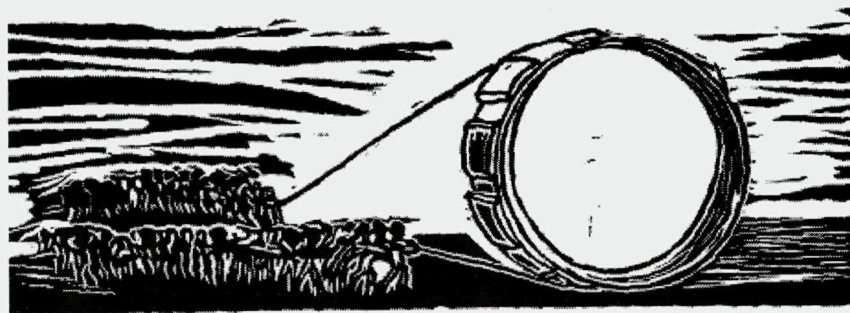
As with any therapist, I have often seen people struggle with their needs to forgive or be forgiven. These needs include forgiveness of perpetrators of various types of abuse: spouses who commit adultery, parents who were anything but perfect and whose mistakes from years ago still reverberate, others (bosses, friends, children, employees) whose offenses are perceived to be the cause of mental conflict, emotional anguish, or spiritual despair. There is the need for forgiveness of and by addicts for the messes that have been created. Finally, there is the particularly thorny issue of *self-forgiveness* for mistakes and wrongdoings committed by one's self.

Struggles around forgiveness have been present within me for as long as I can remember. My early church upbringing, along with other less visible pressures, has affect-

ed my attitudes and values about forgiveness. In both realms, personal and professional, I experience the process of forgiveness as having a special potency. I experience genuine forgiveness (either by myself or of myself) as expansive, liberating, and freeing. It's like taking off a shoe that's too tight, or getting out of wet clothes after being caught in a rainstorm.

False forgiveness, on the other hand, means continuing to bear the burden: obsessive thoughts about particular slights or mistakes, schemes and fantasies about justice or getting even, self-indulgent and partially accurate memories of what "really" happened, continued anger and resentment. There is usually an interplay between my clients' struggles around forgiveness and my own struggles. What follows is one set of reflections about that interplay.

For example, I may find myself "taking sides" with my clients when they are working out ways to forgive or to ask for forgiveness. I regret the occasions when, particularly in marital therapy, I aligned with one





partner in faulting (blaming) the other. I have also experienced strong self-doubt and self-criticism when I have been blamed by clients for one thing or another—such as not being sympathetic enough, being wrong in my interpretation of something, or expressing favoritism. As illustrated below, it is never easy (maybe not even possible) to be “objective” when this issue gets brought up in counseling work. The operations of shame, blame, and guilt force us to find another way, an antidote to the poison.

I have come to believe that one of the primary underpinnings of war, whether between nations or individuals, is the inability to forgive. I have come to believe that forgiveness is an especially human art, a uniquely human capacity, like playfulness and ritual, that can help to transform us.

### Forgiveness and Clients

There are several dimensions to the process of forgiveness that I have seen in my counseling practice. One thing seems consistently clear: there is almost always a correlation between a person's sense of successful healing and his or her capacity to break away from the resentment, hurt, and fear that typically result when wounds have been received. I think this is because the resentment/hurt feelings/continuing fears operate in a way that is analogous to physical trauma: a break, bruise, or cut both can be painful in itself as well as have a contract-

ing, limiting, and distracting effect on the person. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to move with a normal range of motion or to fulfill tasks with a sense of efficiency or effectiveness.

At times the desire to forgive can impede the healing process. For example, victims of childhood sexual abuse who feel they were at fault for the abuse may attempt to overlook their residual fear/hurt/anger and attempt to prematurely forgive perpetrators. They may continue to take their anger out internally—nightmares, depression, self-hatred. Victims with strong religious values may pursue the ideal of forgiveness and attempt to bypass their actual feelings, their unfinished emotional business. I have seen these attempts fail much more often than not. True healing may require the direct experience and expression of rage, hurt, indignation, vindictiveness, and so on.

No attempt to “rise above” will work if the wounds are too raw. I know this from an early experience with my first therapist. I tried, unsuccessfully, to give the benefit of doubt, to be charitable, toward my father for several deeply hurtful behaviors he had exhibited toward my sister and me while he was in the worst stages of his alcohol addiction. No matter how hard I tried, I kept coming up against deep resentment, even disgust and revulsion. Eventually, I had to confront what I *was* feeling—about what happened, about what I

didn't receive from him, and about the consequent deep sense of loss. After that, it became possible to un-demonize him. Now, many years after his death, I continue to remember his goodness and no longer carry the bitterness I felt for so long. I was finally able to make room for compassion.

When the actual feelings are contacted and expressed (in whatever form the client can consciously integrate: writing, talking, beating a pillow, art, dance, song...), then the nightmares diminish and stop, the depression lifts, and shame can turn into self-nurturance and self-appreciation. Now, though I have not forgotten my father's behavior, I think of him also with fondness.

To forgive, in the way I'm using the term here, essentially means to “give” or release, rather than to hold onto. It means to renounce anger and resentment, to forswear clinging to or being attached to concepts, memories, images and/or feelings that are based on past events which can never be changed. To forgive means to let go of, to “give away,” to release all or most of the “charge” or energy around painful events and the people associated with them.

Forgiving, therefore, is so often a difficult, painful process, for we may recall and relive hurtful moments; we may have to face, again, the insults or wounds that are associated with our discomfort or unhappiness. This reflects the sha-





manic maxim: "a wound can only be healed by the blood of the wound itself."

In the stories and transcriptions that follow, five themes will be explored: 1) forgiveness as a means to increased freedom for oneself; 2) forgiveness as a means to increased freedom for others; 3) forgiveness as a weapon used against others, or as a shield against confronting unpleasant personal conflicts or feelings—"false" or "phony" forgiveness; 4) self-forgiveness; and, 5) when it's healthy to refrain from forgiveness.

### 1) FREEDOM FOR SELF: The Antidote to Shame

In 1987 I was counseling a young man who had been raised in an economically and emotionally deprived home. He had memories of competing with his three older siblings for food—often a can of uncooked creamed corn was dinner for all of them. He remembers going into the bathroom where feces was piled up in a non-functioning toilet. He had to steal clothes from the school's lost and found so he would have something to wear. Within his sibling group there was a case of schizophrenia and there were incestuous relationships between the oldest brother and two of his sisters. At the age of nine he was removed by the court from this home and placed in a foster home where there was financial abundance and emotional warmth and caring. He was bright and eventually became a doctor. At the time he entered treatment, at the age of

twenty-five, he was suffering from acute anxiety and panic attacks. He felt like he was betraying his biological family by being a success and becoming prosperous. Here is an excerpt from a therapy session:

**Client:** "I never knew how much I hated them until I got away. I was embarrassed and ashamed of them, my home, my crazy sister and smelly mother and father. Mostly, though, I was ashamed of myself. I wanted to crawl away. They couldn't even begin to see how disgusting they were, how much they seemed like a throwback to the days before hot water and soap. I wanted to run, and at times I even felt like I could kill them and get away with it, since they were so foul."

**Therapist:** "What stopped you?"

**C:** "I was able, after getting sent to the foster home, to see *them* more clearly. Maybe it was from knowing other kids whose lives were messed up. Maybe it was from just getting older and not being so helpless. Finally, one afternoon when I was raking leaves, of all things, it occurred to me that I could forgive them without having to 'love' them or even ever having to see them again. I began to wonder about how their childhood's were, how they were treated, what it was like in the Depression, and things like that..."

**T:** "When you say 'forgive,' I'm not sure what you mean."

**C:** "To me it means to stop dwelling on their awfulness, their carelessness, their heedlessness... I don't know, maybe it means I stopped carrying a grudge."

**T:** "What do you feel toward them now? It's been years since you've seen them."

**C:** "I think of them almost as characters from a movie—a bad movie to be sure—but from something that flickered into and out of my life, like a movie. I had a part, but my part is over and now I'm in a different movie, so to speak. I think I could face them now without being angry or ready to take some kind of revenge. It's just... it's just over [client weeps quietly]... I don't have to be that kid anymore, and I don't have to hate them anymore; and I have nothing to be ashamed of."



*(I, on the other hand, had come to dislike his parents quite a bit. I was glad that my client was no longer burdened so much, but I felt like these kinds of parents should simply be put in chain gangs and required to carry rocks forever... maybe he could forgive them, but I had no wish to do so.)*

In our final session, after I had not seen him for a month, he told me:

**C:** "I finally got off my sour puss attitude. I never knew how much fun I could have, even though it's quiet fun. I've begun



to date, not often, but it's happening. I think I finally got those monkeys off my back; I no longer blame my parents for messing up my life. I think—and you'll probably think I should come back into therapy now—I think they did the best they could, given who they were. Now I think I will do the best I can with my life—it is *my* life—and I can let go of my tendency to feel like the world is going to turn into a disaster if I relax for a few moments... I think I've sort of 'neutralized' them, and I even remember a few good things from those days. It wasn't 100% bad."

*(I found myself feeling embarrassed at how he had forgiven them and I had not. I discovered that my own righteousness and desire to blame had made it impossible for me to see his parents as humans. I saw them as the enemy, and I wanted to see them humiliated in the way they humiliated him. It was, for me, a reminder-experience about how healing such forgiveness can be—he genuinely felt better and sustained his capacity for forgiveness.)*

## 2) FORGIVENESS AND FREEDOM FOR OTHERS: An Antidote to Blame

In early 1996 I worked with a woman in her early thirties who had just discovered that her husband, while out of town attending a conference, had a weekend fling with an old girlfriend from his college days.

My client was more than upset. Her rage was searing hot.

Her coveted assumptions about married life, trust, men, love, and sex had been tarnished in one weekend. She was completely unwilling to speak with her husband, insisting that all communications about mutual concerns (paying the rent, taking the dog to the vet, etc.) be handled by third parties. She contacted an attorney and had pressed for a divorce "by 8:05 tomorrow morning, if that's possible!" She was convinced that, like Humpty Dumpty, all the King's horses and all the King's social workers could never repair the damage to her soul.



She entered treatment complaining of insomnia, stomach pain, and an obsession with getting revenge. She wanted to make him pay. She fantasized different ways to make him suffer, including such ideas as seducing another man and getting discovered or sending her husband video tapes of her "having sex with a hunk."

The therapy began with addressing the most obvious symptoms and focussing on ways to relax, even slightly, in order to begin functioning somewhat better in the work-

place and at home (her husband moved out after discovering all of his clothing strewn over the front lawn, having been freshly laundered with a garden hose).

After a few sessions, and after returning to a less angry state, this person began to move, like a pendulum, in the other direction. Her rage was replaced by weepiness and self-pity. Her indignation was supplanted by worry and concern for her husband. Her righteousness—i.e., her tendency to avoid taking any responsibility for underlying problems in the marriage and to entirely blame her husband—was overshadowed by self-blame and guilt. Like a pendulum, she moved to the opposite position.

*(At this point, out of my desire to have her take some responsibility for the mess she was in, I found myself thinking, also rather righteously, about how men all too often get blamed and vilified. I felt relieved that he might possibly be getting a "second chance" with his spouse and felt that his "crime" was far less severe than others that I have seen. I had also been immediately reminded of my own struggles with forgiveness during an especially painful breakup with a college lover, whom I blamed entirely for our mutually created difficulties.)*

The turning point, the first step toward reconciliation, occurred in the fifth session:

**Client:** "I suppose I'm partly to blame for what he did. I told



him once that he was a lousy lover because, I suppose, I was angry at him for something or other. I told him that his way of having sex was like a yard dog looking for a quick fix.

"I said some terrible things to him... terrible and cruel things... and I kept thinking he would someday pay me back by calling *me* names, or even leaving... but I never thought he'd get into bed with another woman. In fact, in the early days I remember how good we were in bed together. We'd make love for hours, and we'd have so much fun with it, teasing and laughing and having great orgasms—the kind, you know, when you think you probably registered on the Richter Scale (she is now laughing and crying at the same time)... Maybe he wasn't all wrong in what he did..."

**Therapist:** "Well, maybe it's possible for you to find a slightly different point of view here... maybe you have some good will left, in spite of how hurt and angry you felt."

**C:** "Well, maybe I do... I feel like I was so far away from even thinking about him that he'd never be able to be in the same room with me again. He's probably gone for good, and I can't blame him. He probably would be happier with someone else, anyway, since I seem to be so out of control, so highly strung..."

**T:** "Maybe your being 'out of control' has...well, let's see a

good side to it. You know, when people get that mad, sometimes it's because they're defending something that's precious to them. Maybe he could even see it that way. I've seen stranger things happen. So... what is the next step here? Where do you go next?"

**C:** "I need to think this over. This is all new, all too crazy, all too scary. I need to think it over..."



By the time of the next session, the client was in a more relaxed state and had an impish look in her eye when she came into my office.

**C:** "Do you think you can handle a surprise? You know, you think you've seen everything, probably, but let me tell you that you haven't! Well, and I'm glad you're sitting down, I called him. I called him and asked him if I could meet him for coffee. At first he thought I

was joking (or was probably off my rocker), but I convinced him I wasn't."

The next development was that the errant husband accepted that his wife in fact had gotten through most of her rage and hurt. He saw that she was prepared to renew their relationship. He, in the meantime, had suffered from a good deal of remorse. In spite of the increased distance over the past several months, the verbal insults, etc., he wanted to maintain the marriage and address the difficulties that had been steadily increasing. He had been devoted to her for nearly ten years, and considered her to be his best friend and life companion. They had been through a battery of crises, including the deaths of both sets of parents within a five-year period, job changes, and a house fire. They had no children, by mutual consent, as they considered their professional lives to be the primary source of satisfaction and meaning.

After meeting his wife for coffee, the man reported the following exchange in a conjoint session:

**Husband:** "I didn't think you'd ever want to talk to me again. I know what I did hurt you and I felt like I deserved every bit of that anger. But I didn't ever think you would want to end our marriage over this. I know I messed up—big time—but I hoped it would work out anyway. After I did what I did, and before you



found out about it, I knew I could never do anything like that again... I felt too bad."

C: "Well, I won't forget what happened and don't think we could anyway. I probably will always be a little pissed off about it... probably always a little guilty about my part. But I thought, after ten years, nine of which have been pretty good, I'd be a fool to just walk away; I was afraid, after the scene I made, that you would never, ever trust me to be decent or civil to you again... and I wouldn't blame you for that. So I decided to call you. I see now that I have made my share of mistakes and that I just put this one in a category all by itself. I think this can be put behind us, and perhaps there are things we need to explore so that we can have the intimacy we had once, and still want to have... I forgive you, and I hope you'll forgive me. I really mean it. I still love you."

The husband reported:

"I just burst out crying right there in the restaurant. I didn't even care what people thought. I just remember thinking that I had my wife back, my lover, my pal. Somehow we made it through a test. If it took a mess like that to put us back on track, it *was* worth it. Mind you, I think I'd try another approach if things get rocky again. The funny thing is, I actually had forgiven myself, but it wasn't enough. I needed her to forgive me, and when she did, I felt like my life could start up again. It was such a relief!"

*(I discovered a great deal of pride about this man's ability to remain vulnerable and transparent in his dealings with his spouse. I felt that she was lucky to have him, that many other men would have just ducked out of the relationship. I celebrated, internally, that men, so often feebly stereotyped as unsympathetic and unfeeling, can be so deeply moved.)*

These clients had to encounter their internal "demons." They each had experienced, both in the life experiences requiring forgiveness and in the process of forgiving itself, those haunting, nagging, cruel inner voices that we all have heard inside ourselves. They had experienced the limitations that holding on to resentment inevitably produces—rigidity or wild emotionalism or devaluing one's most important relationship.

The husband, who was forgiven, was able to recognize, through his second chance, the underlying needs that catapulted him into actions (the affair) that ignited a smoldering problem into a blazing crisis. These needs included a desire for more emotional and sexual bonding, more time to just relax and hang out with his partner instead of the distractions of insanely demanding professional lives always taking priority. Significant recognitions in the conscious attitudes of each person in the marriage were made and the couple continued to thrive, in part, because of their crisis, not just in spite of it.

### 3) PHONY FORGIVENESS: Perpetuating Shame and Blame

I have at times encountered clients who are strongly identified with a religion-based assignment to "turn the other cheek" and to be forgiving, above all else. In many cases, there is a thin veneer between the external presentation of self (the persona) and an underlying unresolved anger, anger that manifests itself as anything from chronic irritability to a seething rage that can produce major somatic, and at times deadly, symptoms.

In one case that I worked with in 1994, a man appeared for therapy after being referred by the court. He had suddenly and surprisingly struck his daughter, then aged sixteen, across the face with his open hand for being a "smart-aleck" toward him. School personnel filed a report with protective services and the man was brought into court. He was given a year's probation and a one-year suspended sentence for assault. He was ordered to undergo treatment and came to my agency.

This man had been active all of his adult life in a local church and had, prior to this incident, been regarded as the archetypal "pillar of the community." He was a successful businessman, had lived in the same town all his life, and had fathered six children, all of whom were good students and eventually went to get further education in college or trade schools. His marriage was seen as stable and happy by others. For the couple, however, private expe-



rience was quite different, as it turned out.

About two years before the client came for treatment, he discovered that his wife had begun drinking to excess. She had managed to conceal this behavior through the usual devices of hiding bottles, sucking on breath mints, and so on. The discovery occurred in such a way as to cause severe embarrassment to my client. He had come home unexpectedly from an out-of-town trip (his flight had been cancelled) and discovered his wife, in a state of obvious tipsiness, flirting in their kitchen with a neighbor. Due to the "guilty behavior" and disheveled clothing of his wife, the husband deduced that "something had obviously been going on, though I don't think they got into bed." An open liquor bottle was standing on the kitchen table, along with two glasses. The husband, feeling the righteous indignation that so easily erupts from wounded pride, expressed his desire to keep up a front of respectability (a front equally maintained by his wife). He quietly got his wife to agree to stop drinking if he agreed not to mention the incident to certain people—such as the minister, her parents, and their children. In other words, emotional blackmail. She agreed. In exchange for this he told her, from one part of himself, that he knew that people make mistakes, that he was sure it wouldn't happen again, and that he "forgave her, the way our faith wanted me to."



*(I had begun to have my doubts about whether he should forgive her, for I found myself identifying with him and his hurt about being sexually betrayed. I began to want him to be angry, to reject her, to stand up for himself—in a word, to be anything but forgiving. This particular situation was extra-highly charged, due to my childhood experience of living with an alcoholic father and the anything-but-secrets I was expected to keep.)*

The therapy began with the client describing how he had a right to do what he had done to his daughter, and only later did the incident with his wife come to light.

**Client:** "I don't understand why a man can't discipline his children these days. She had been smarting off to me, and I just had to stop her. She gets the same look on her face that her mother gets when she's defying me. It's a smirk, like she's taunting me and knows she can get away with it. Well, I think she had it coming and I'm not changing my ideas about that, no matter what some court says."

*(In an instant, my supportive attitude toward this man turned to a kind of irritation—I have a daughter, and I never smacked or even spanked her—if he wants to smack his kid around, he'd better plan on a long weekend in the pokey... I felt outraged while, at the same time, I was "on the job" and wanted to find some compassion.)*

**Therapist:** "You must have been pretty angry... angry enough to smack somebody. That's an extreme way to show it, you know—you must have really been upset."

**C:** "Well, I've spent all my life being a good example, and I have even put up with some bad behavior on the part of some people, and I found it in my heart to forgive them. It wasn't easy, but I forgave them."

**T:** "Whose bad behavior are you talking about? What happened?"

**C:** "I haven't told anybody about this, you know. I haven't needed to because it all got settled two years ago. Let's just say it was a little spat with my wife."

**T:** "OK, it was 'a little spat.' But here you are two years later talking about it. Maybe it wasn't as little as you think."

[A long silence.]

**C:** "Well, I don't really want to talk about it. It's over and done with..."

[Another long silence.]

**T:** "I couldn't help notice that when you were describing the incident with your daughter, you compared her facial expression to what you've seen in your wife. Does your wife have anything to do with this?"

**C:** [Animated, flushed, in a loud tone of voice] "You bet she



does! That woman caused me more harm in one day than all my enemies combined in my whole life! She's why I moved into my own bedroom. She's why I got a transfer so I can work out of town more. She's why I hit my daughter. She's why... she's why I'm... I'm unhappy."

T: "No wonder you feel upset. Perhaps, when you're ready, she can come in here, too, and we can all talk about this. It must be complicated, you know, like a 500-piece puzzle."

C: "If she comes in here, she'll just lie about everything. She knows what happened. She just has to live with it; it serves her right."

The next session, one week later, with both husband and wife:

**Therapist:** "What do you both see as the problem here? How did things get so difficult, how did things get so frustrating?"

**Wife:** "Well, I know he had a right to be upset with me. But after a while I got tired of being reminded of what I did. I really mean it—nothing happened! I know I shouldn't have drunk and I did it because I was lonely and bored... he wouldn't let me work, and my kids were mostly grown up. But for two years he kept telling me that I was a slut, that I was disloyal,

and he couldn't ever trust me again. So I started calling him 'Mr. Christian' [she demonstrated the infamous sneer, seen also in the daughter] because he acts like he never made any mistakes, like..."

**Husband:**

[Interrupting] "I never made any like you did... I *never* even looked at anybody else!"

W: "Oh that's a lie! You love it when the women gather around you after church. You love it when my sisters call you those nicknames like 'Mr. Tarzan' and 'The Hulk.'"

H: "Well, I didn't do anything about it like you did!"

W: [Addressing the therapist] "See, there he goes: Mr. Perfect [sneering again]. This is what I have to live with... all just because I needed some companionship and some fun... [crying]... I'm getting punished because he won't admit that he needs the same things that I do..."

H: "Well, I don't think so. I never drank to make myself happy, and I never had another lover..."

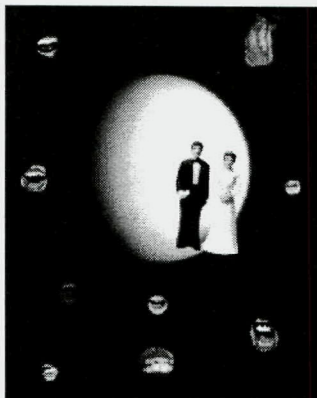
[Long silence.]

W: "I wanted so much for us to be happy [weeping]. I wanted so much for you to be happy with me. And now everything's

so tarnished... It's too late... I... I don't think I can love you anymore..."

This is not a story with a happy ending. The husband eventually moved into his own apartment, refusing to deal in subsequent therapy sessions with his needs for his wife and the hurt that propelled his desire to punish her. He had behaviorally regarded her actions as unforgivable, though he used all the right words to satisfy his consciously held religious values. He remained bitter, though outwardly jovial, whenever he was at church or in social situations. He continued to blame his wife for their "downfall" and enlisted support for his position from other men who had been similarly "betrayed." He placed his primary focus on business and the requisite out-of-town travel that it required. Instead of expressing hurt and anger toward his wife, he repressed it until it manifested itself as a slap at his daughter. He continued to convert it into hyper activity and hard work.

The client's spouse, through her own therapy, was able to move past her resentment at him. She saw him again as human, as hurting, as flawed—as she did for many years before this crisis occurred. This produced an expanded sense of freedom and enjoyment, a more energized body, a more optimistic view of her future. She began to utilize her home as a daycare center. This yielded income and meaningful work for her.





*(After it seemed obvious that he would not get off his position, I began to feel a lot of support and respect for her. She had done her best to include him in a change process. Perhaps my failure here was that I couldn't find a way for him to consider a different point of view. I also felt that she deserved credit for the risk she took in being vulnerable, while he remained "above" her, contenting himself with blame and shame.)*

She remained active in church, as well, and attempted once or twice to reconcile with her husband, though he would have no part of it. He continued blaming and shaming his spouse.

He died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-four. She remarried three years later and is happy with her life.

#### 4) SELF-FORGIVENESS: An Antidote to Guilt

Each of us carries, within, a harsh inner critic: a perceptive and relentless voice that, from time to time, reminds us of our past mistakes. It's as if the shame, blame, and guilt associated with our misdeeds have all distilled into poison that circulates in our bloodstream, gradually sapping our strength. This shaming/blaming/guilty "voice" seems to feed, like a hungry shark, on negativity and self-criticism. It seems never to get enough.

In my personal and clinical experience, self-forgiveness is the most difficult of all. This culture has its history of

guilt/shame and self-blame. Perhaps these mirror our attachment to crime and punishment and to our habits of social ostracism, emotional shunning, economic competition. To fall short is to fall victim. To fail is to fail; to fall is to fail. The price is guilt.

For anyone with even a partially developed conscience, mistakes can be costly—not just for the others who are affected, but for oneself—in the form of self-blame, self-criticism, self-hatred, or self-pity. Embarrassment and shame about our mistakes can slice through our self-esteem. No wonder sometimes we want to cover them up or deny them. Yet it seems mistakes are inevitable and are likely to occur throughout any human life.

In the case described below, there are some discrete steps and stages in the client's process of self-forgiveness that may apply to any process of forgiveness. This man appeared for treatment after having a series of nightmares in which he was being chased by a half-human, half-gorilla figure who carried a club in one hand and a flaming torch in the other. The client would awaken every night (during which this dream occurred three or four times) in a cold sweat, terrified and bewildered. He was a well-educated and sophisticated person, yet had been unable to make any sense out of his dreams. Since his disturbing dreams propelled him into treatment, it made sense to begin with the dreams and to go from there.

**Therapist:** [After the client described his dreams] "Which half of this figure carries the club... do you remember?"

**Client:** "...Yes, it was the human half, the man-like figure who carries it. This man looks a lot like me when I was young."

**T:** "Then the torch is carried by the other half, the one that resembles a gorilla...?"

**C:** "Yes... only he's not shaggy and rough, like a real gorilla. His coat is soft and he has a very delicate, soft hand... almost like a woman's hand. And the torch is made of some kind of shiny metal, like silver or gold."

**T:** "What if you let each side speak for itself... beginning with which ever one you choose? Sometimes a dream like this can represent two different parts of ourselves that are trying to somehow come together, to cooperate..."

**C:** "I would start with the gorilla. Why is he there? Why is he so unusual—not at all a real gorilla?"

**T:** "Close your eyes for a minute, OK? Ask him what he wants to tell you... what is it he wants you to know about him?"

**C:** [Eyes closed... near tears] "Hmm... it's not what I expected... He's telling me that he can shed some light on things, that he wants to light the way for me, that he can show me some things I need to know..."



T: "OK. Now, can you turn your attention to the other side, the human aspect of this image? Ask him what he wants you to know, or to understand."

C: "He has this club, like a baseball bat, but not polished. He just wants to swing it at me... he's telling me that I'm not good enough, that I'm a fuck-up, and that I deserve to be thrashed... he's telling me that [client begins to cry]... that it's my fault that my sister drowned, that if I hadn't gone to play baseball I could have seen her and saved her..."

[Note: The client's sister drowned at the age of nine; the client was twelve at the time, and knew she was a good swimmer.]

T: "Who told you that it was your fault? Did anyone do that?"

C: "Yes, my father... he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me and told me that I was selfish and irresponsible for going away from the lake when I knew my sister was swimming... my father was yelling at me... angry... red-faced..."

*(This was the most difficult point for me. I remember trying so hard to "do it right" or "be good enough." When I was a child, I would hope against hope for a crumb of recognition or approval from my alcoholic father. Even to this day, I can be instantly provoked if I feel perceived as not doing it right or not being good enough.)*

T: "Yet you were twelve and wanted to be with your friends. You were invited to play baseball, and your sister was able to swim, and there was a lifeguard... isn't this what you told me...?"

C: "Yes. I knew she could swim, and I knew there was a lifeguard, and I had never been asked all summer to watch my sister..."

T: "Have you been 'clubbing' yourself for this accident ever since then; for the past twenty three years...?"

C: [Weeping] "Yes..."

Therapist: "Perhaps the gorilla has something to tell you... Why don't you ask him?"

C: [Eyes closed] "He...he's telling me that he's really my friend, that he knows how much I loved my sister, that it wasn't my fault, that my father was beside himself with grief and just took it out on me, but knew it wasn't my fault...[weeping]... The gorilla is showing me this big torch... he's telling me that it's OK for me to look ahead now, that I can turn that club into a torch... He's telling me that he [the gorilla] is soft and a lot of fun and really likes to play and wants to play with me... [laughing and crying]...that big old monster is just a teddy bear! He just wants to cuddle and play and have fun and stop being so serious and to show me that I can let my hair down and relax."

T: "What is going on with the guy who holds the club?"

C: "He's just sort of standing there gawking, sort of smiling, sort of giggling, sort of weeping... He's dropped the club, he's just hanging out with the gorilla, well..., now he is the gorilla, except he's himself too, but without the club... I don't know...[laughing, giggling]... They're both just... just themselves, but not scary... I'm confused! But who cares!"

After just two more sessions, this client was able to recognize that he had carried a tremendous burden of self-blame and self-punishment ever since the accidental drowning of his sister. His compensatory "mask" was to be smoothly efficient and attentive to everyone around him, at great cost to his spontaneity and ability to relax and enjoy himself. Interestingly, this client literally did let his hair down (he grew it long) and, without ever using the word, was able to forgive himself for something that he had been wrongly blamed for, but for which he still felt a wrenching sense of guilt and responsibility. He loved his father and had great compassion for him. He saw years before how anguished his father was, and actually forgave his father for the outburst long before he forgave himself for the imagined oversight that he unconsciously believed had cost his sister's life. Such is the power of blame when visited upon children, and such is the power of compassion when it is visited upon oneself as well as others.



## 5) WHEN FORGIVENESS IS NOT HEALTHY

### Moving Too Fast

It is idealistic to think that "everything" can be forgiven. To let go of resentment, distrust, or self-protective wariness that stems from actual behavior in another is not necessarily healthy. We know that victims of sexual or emotional abuse, in their desire to repair damage, to restore an idealized relationship, or to get the love they never got, might attempt to prematurely forgive perpetrators: He just did what he needed to do...; He didn't know he was hurting me...; The same thing happened to him... (as a child...); My minister says I should try to understand...; It only happened once...; It was probably my fault...; It wasn't as bad as it could have been...; If only I had mentioned it sooner...

In this final case example, a woman in her late twenties came for therapy after being physically assaulted at work by a jealous ex-lover. Shortly after the threat, she experienced nightmares and insomnia.

**Therapist:** [After getting background information] "Is it possible that you may have been physically or sexually abused when you were a child?"

**Client:** [Pausing... choosing her words carefully] "Yes, it is possible. In fact, it happened. But I never told anybody."

**T:** "I appreciate your telling me. You can say as much or as little as you want..."

**C:** "I only want to get that motherfucker out of my mind... I have been angry with him ever since he touched me. I was eleven... I told him to stop and he didn't. I told my mother and she didn't believe me..."

The client attempted to forgive the perpetrator. She tried to think positive thoughts about him. She felt as if she must have caused him to assault her. She felt as if she "shouldn't get angry" because it was wrong to get angry. She felt as if she could "get over it" with the passage of time. She saw that these strategies weren't working for her. The symptoms continued.

At a subsequent session:

**Client:** "There was a funeral yesterday... He died and I'm glad he did. I'll never forgive him. I'm glad he's dead, and I'm glad he suffered. I feel safe for the first time since it happened. I think God gave him what he had coming... cancer... I'm glad he died slowly. He deserved to die that way, after what he did to me and my sister. I didn't go to the funeral. I went and got my hair done."

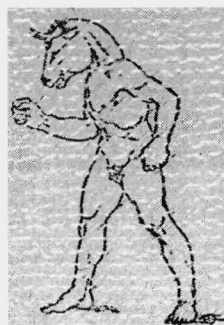
As harsh as this sounds, the relief exhibited by the client was obvious. She found, after expressing her deep rage toward the perpetrator and learning of his death, that her nightmares had diminished, then stopped. She finally felt released from her

secrets: both the assault and her desire for revenge, propelled by her unspeakable hurt and anger. Since his death, she's felt no need to forgive him. She feels it is better to remain angry. She continues to be a loving friend, mother, and spouse and has had no more nightmares. For her, there is no need to forgive the perpetrator. She seems to be happy, and she has not worried about how she's handled her feelings. In this case, the person's choice to refrain from forgiveness has helped her forgive herself, and for that reason alone it seems like a wise choice, one that allows

her to hold him responsible instead of blaming herself. She might, someday, find herself taking another step and forgiving the perpetrator for what he did.

## Conclusion

So often we remain connected to those who hurt us—friends, lovers, spouses, family members, and so on. We remain "ourselves" even when we feel we have made a mistake. In my experience, genuine forgiveness of others and/or self deepens love and respect. It is perhaps a way of offering our blessing to others—we are saying to another: you and your feelings matter, you and your situation are worthy of regard. Forgiveness is, more often than not, a necessary condition for peace: in the heart, the home, and the world. □





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