

(Un)Forgiveness: "TO BE OR NOT TO BE"...[NOT...]

What is forgiveness anyway? Why do some conflicts go on and on, while others seem to pass away? And as for me... why am I among those who never forgive? The values, and perils, of "unforgiveness" (my term) are explored in this essay. Contained and focused—acetylene-like—unforgiveness may act as an energy source and hence have positive elements. Unrestrained unforgiveness may—does—cause problems down through the generations. One important generative element of unforgiveness is, I hypothesize, powerlessness.

by
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My Forgiveness Feeling

I do not forgive, and I do not forget. If I should forget, when I remember I also recall that I have not forgiven! My spouse feels this position is basically an improper one—it is somehow "wrong" to hold grudges. I do not really hold grudges—exactly—but I do not forget or excuse events I consider to be unfairness, serious slights, large inappropriateness, and the like, to me or to others. And, of course, there are more serious things: injustices, unethical actions, and so on merit even more earnest attention.

Let me give some examples. I recall a person named Tommy Farley—someone I grew up with (he lived down the street from us) in Kenmore, New York. Since we moved from Kenmore when I was eight, the time I am talking about is preschool and school up to the 3rd grade. Tommy was a guy I have come to recognize as seriously disturbed. But to me, then, he was a bully. He liked to hurt

things—including me. He is on my list. Then there are the boys in the grade school Lindbergh—boys who would not let me play ball because I was small. In high school I recall "Gail" who dumped me, and "Maureen" who made me wait one hour in her living room for our date. To me, these events are "only yesterday" (Allen, 1931).

Then there were offenses at college. At Oberlin I will never forget "Bernard," my French Professor (I now realize he was not much of a professor) who delighted in taunting me in class. I had French from 8:00–9:00 am, five days a week. He used an objectionable "cold call" technique and would make fun of me when I did not know the answer.¹ That was the fall of 1957. To me it was only yesterday. I will never forgive that son of a bitch.

Then, of course, in graduate school, there was the Plagiarizing Professor. I wrote a

¹Cold calling is not bad. It is the taunting and humiliation that are objectionable.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE IRISH ALZHEIMER'S PATIENT?
HE FORGETS EVERYTHING BUT THE GRUDGE
DON'T GET MAD, GET EVEN!
DON'T LIKE MY DRIVING?
DIAL 1-800-EAT-SHIT
"EMERGING FIELD OF FORGIVENESS STUDIES EXPLORES HOW WE LET GO OF GRUDGES: Research Examines Reactions to Everything From Personal Betrayals to National Disgraces" Chronicle of Higher Education, July 17, 1998

paper for his seminar focusing on a theory of his. I added a couple of key variables. He apparently did not like it because he gave me a B, and made no real comments. I say "apparently" because—*viola*—his next version of the theory had *exactly* those two variables. I confronted him about it. He denied ANY connection; when I showed him the paper I had written he allowed as how, well, there MIGHT be some connection but everything that is handed in to him is "his" anyway.

Then there was the Prevaricating Professor. I had called him to ask permission to use some of the research we had been working on for an article in a particular journal. I did not really need his permission. It had been a school project and the analysis was entirely my own. But as we had done the project as part of a research class and collected the data as a group, I thought it was appropriate to "clear" with him. He was very gracious and said "Fine... it sounds like a good idea." Apparently it was too good of an idea. I worked for about a month on my paper, sent it in, and got a quick reply: "We really like your piece; As it happens though, we have just accepted something quite similar from _____ ... [Guess who? You got it—my old gracious Prof]." I guess as he thought about it he decided he would write one. He just worked faster than I did, for whatever reason, and quickly sent his version to that magazine, depriving me of what would have been my first article.

Throughout the rest of my career there have been the usual array of dissembling administrators and hypocritical colleagues, bullies, and people who would sell you out for a free lunch, and not an expensive lunch at that! I remember every one.

Unforgiveness

"Unforgiveness"—the term I use for my orientation—comes from looking at "forgiveness" from the perspective of inanimate objects—if a "rock," for example, is "unforgiving" it means it makes no allowances for your errors. So I guess if I applied that definition to myself, I would be the kind of person who makes no allowances for the errors of others. But this is clearly untrue; I make lots of exceptions. When I don't, it is because:

- 1) The errors had a personal impact on me, directly or through something I care about;
- 2) I was unable to respond effectively because of cowardice;
- 3) The "perp" did not recognize/acknowledge her/his actions, remains in defensive denial;
- 4) The "perp" did not apologize;
- 5) It has happened more than once;
- 6) I feel that the motives of the

perpetrators are suspect (hostile, hateful) [though motive alone is not enough; clueless people hurt too] and the act itself is beyond comprehension (psychopathic/sociopathic acts—the outlaw drivers, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot).

These are the properties of acts that are "unforgivable" according to me. What is involved in the unforgiveness disposition? First, there is a wounding. Sometimes it is a physical assault—as when you get beat up. Sometimes it is a verbal assault. And sometimes it is through actions—things people do or do not do that are troubling. What is common to them all is the emotional component; over time, these assaults metamorphose into a bunch of wounded expectations—umbrage I feel... I know—is legitimate on my part. The wound remains unhealed. It becomes anger.

The physical element has long since passed. Only Farley really attacked me physically. Wounding words are as bad. There is that old saying:

*Sticks and stones can break your bones
but words will never hurt you.*

That always seemed wrong to me. Words are hurtful. I rewrote it thusly:

*Sticks and stones break only bones...
It's words that really hurt you.*

And then there are things that people do—or do not do, that are troubling. **Commission—**

actually hurting me—is one set of memories. **Omission** is another set. It involves those hurt through (often unconscious) failure to act. One particular group involves who fail to do what they promise. They are not people who “Stand And Deliver;” they are those people who “Slip Out and Do Not Deliver.” Most people do not actually *do* what they say they are going to do—so my list is getting long.

In some ways, though, I am an equal opportunity unforgiver. It does not, as the list above suggests, only have to deal with me personally or directly. There are a number of incidents involving my family and children that are unforgivable. I have a colleague who is a bully and a tease. (He will come up again in a minute.) He caused my spouse a great deal of pain one particular evening. I will never forgive him. Then there is “Randy.” He made fun of one of my daughter’s “tosis” (a drooping eyelid) when she was at school. Then there are some of her significant others—the “gadabout” and “Mr. Fear-of-Commitment.” They hurt her. I will never forgive them.

And it does not have to be offenses against people either. Those who hurt others generally are on my list. Those who fail to exercise appropriate trusteeship of institutions in their care are other kinds of examples. And offenses need not be big—people who go fifty-five miles an hour in the left-hand lane occupy a special position. My spouse calls me the Minister of Justice. I do not give things up easily. (This may be a

personality trait—I keep physical things as well—family chairs, that sort of thing.)

Some of you readers might be thinking about now, “This guy has a lot of baggage.” The author of *Repacking your Bags for the Rest of Your Life* would say my “trunk” is too full for easy travel (Leider and Shapiro, 1995). I look at it another way. I am more like a Volkswagen Beetle—my engine is in the rear! This “anger,” if that is the right word (a pile of unforgiven incidents = anger), serves as a kind of nuclear engine—it gives me lots of energy.



Is Forgiveness Important?

One might define forgiveness as a settled social or psychological state free from the pressure of “rectification” (revenge). Others have called forgiveness the ability to generally overlook slights or harm done to you, and be at peace with it. But is forgiveness important? All this ink about forgiveness may

cause one to wonder “what difference does it make, anyway?” Who cares if you forgive, or do not? Scholars are beginning to look into “forgiveness” as a topic of scholarly inquiry (Heller, 1998). One scholar—Robert Enright at UW-Madison even has a list of “how” to forgive. It is instructive to consider what he suggests [the list is presented in Figure 1].

Clearly Enright feels it is “better” to forgive. But why would that be so? One reason seems to be that “unforgiveness” is bad for you. While he may not have read the list of suggestions in Figure 1, even President Clinton is getting into the forgiveness act. He recently commented:

And so it is important that we are able to forgive those we believe have wronged us, even as we ask for forgiveness from people we have wronged... The anger, the resentment, the bitterness, the desire for recrimination against people you believe have wronged you—they harden the heart and deaden the spirit and lead to self-inflicted wounds.²

Well, gosh. The President seems to feel it is important to forgive so that, A) you do not hurt yourself, and, B) others can forgive you.

That does not do me much good. I do not WANT to

²The complete text of the President’s remarks can be found in *The New York Times*, Saturday, August 29, 1998. P. A10.

How to Forgive: One Scholar's Views

"To forgive is not to condone, to excuse, to accept, to reconcile, and certainly not to forget," says Robert D. Enright, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

A person who has been hurt must consciously choose to forgive—a moral choice that is one step along a path that takes time to complete, he contends. He lays out these steps to true forgiveness.

1. Don't deny or repress anger, hurt or shame. Accept that it's there and commit yourself to doing something to help.
2. Don't identify the person who has hurt you and leave it at that. Pinpoint the behavior that hurt you.
3. Choose not to nurse a grudge or seek revenge. Make the choice to forgive. This "heart conversion" is the crucial step.
4. Explain to yourself why you have chosen this path. This need not be for lofty reasons. It can be, for example, that letting go of the grievance will allow you to enjoy the benefits of your marriage or better concentrate on your work.
5. Think differently about the person who committed the wrong. Think about his or her own vulnerabilities. Walk a bit in the other person's shoes.
6. Bear the pain but decide not to pass it on – including to the person who hurt you in the first place.
7. Decide instead to offer goodwill, generosity, mercy, "moral love." This can, but doesn't have to, include a reconciliation.
8. Reflect on how it feels to have given up the burden or grudge. Recognize emotional relief. Find meaning in the suffering you've faced and overcome.
9. Discover the paradox of forgiveness: As you give to others the gift of mercy, you are being healed.

—Scott Heller (1998, p.A20)

forgive. My answer to the question of "so what?" is different. For one thing I do not think that forgiving others increases your chances of experiencing forgiveness from the victims at all.

Nor—and this is a kind of forgiveness I think—does it increase your chances of getting an apology from the "perp." That approach assumes that the perps are **like us** and not clueless or sociopathic. Those who offend—and it happens all the time—own up and apologize right away. We do not even consider them "perps."

It is true, of course, that in forgiving, you might not expect the "perp" to apologize to you. You might be just generating "forgiveness capital" so that others will see you as a nice guy and forgive you. The President, therefore, forgives the special prosecutor in the hopes that, in the great game of forgiveness, his wife will forgive him. As an investment, I'd prefer the 1998 Russian Stock market.

On the other hand, the business of unforgiveness as self destructive is worth some thought. It can be harmful. My view, though, lies in what you do about the anger that drives the unforgiveness. If that anger drives you to rage then it is bad. Bad here, like a fire out of control, means *you* are out of control. Societies and persons must have an "anger management system." Forgiveness is one such system. It legitimizes "letting go" and at the same time, Aikido-like, tends to disarm the perpetrator. It's true that anger (the store of unforgiven incidents) may be the most expen-

Figure 1

sive emotion (Birdsall, 1998). But that may refer to inappropriate anger—rage. Slow burning, white-hot anger may serve—for some—as an engine of ambition. If, however, you control the anger (“refiner’s fire”), this anger—appropriate anger, as D. Goleman in his work *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) says—it may serve you well.

How can this be so? How can anger become an engine? For one thing, it can be the spur to competition; anger creates motivation. It need not always be directed at some perp. The saying “Living well is the best revenge” captures this element nicely. Also, anger can create alertness, an “edge,” that increases one’s ability to adapt.

Thoughts and Acts of Forgiveness

Thoughts of forgiveness involve self-realization and the internal processes of “letting go.” Acts of forgiveness involve communicating that to the perpetrator. But so often “perps” do not know or care. So telling them you forgive them brings out comments like “For what?” You just feel foolish. False forgiveness means engaging in an

act of forgiveness that is a lie. The act of forgiveness is perhaps the “action” opposite of retaliation. The forgiveness cycle stops the retaliatory cycle.³ Of course sometimes, as in cases like mine, acts of forgiveness do not occur. We wait for revenge.

Anger/Unforgiveness: Some Pass, Some Do Not

It may be unusual—remember Ling slights and offenses over years and years. But, unusual or not, I am not alone. Bill Gamson in his paper “Rancorous Conflict in Community Politics” (1966) asked the question about why some “conflicts” are resolved and others are not. Let me define “conflict” as a disagreement over interests where the results are meaningful or fateful; that is, the outcome matters. Rancorous conflict, on the other hand, is difference in interests, fatefulness, and narcissistic wounding. This is my definition, not Gamson’s. It seems apropos because rancorous conflict cannot be “mediated.” Rancorous conflicts imply—require—retribution often thought of as rectification. But why should some “offenses” become so closely held anyway? I won-

der this about myself. Why do I remember all this stuff with outraged feeling that is ever fresh?

One reason could be that controlled anger is my energy source of choice. It could be a style, a habit—but I think there is more.

As I reviewed my “list,” one striking commonality emerged for me—forming a kind of hypothesis. The people I will not forgive are those who caused me pain when I was powerless to deal with the situation. This is the first point. I was sort of a “prisoner.” Farley was bigger than I. “Bernard” was my professor. And so on. But was I really powerless? I think not, really. In the case of the plagiarizing Professor, I could have done something—but the cost of retaliation, of “whistle blowing,” would have been large. So in some ways I was a coward. And that perhaps is what I really cannot forgive me! Focusing on others, not forgiving them, is a sort of projection, one that deflects the feeling away from me—to them. So, my conclusion is that to forgive others you have to start with yourself! And in the cases I mentioned, that is hard because, in a sense, I chose not to act. Perhaps it was the right deci-

³Forgiveness is one “social rule” for stopping the endless cycle of offense and retribution, a cycle of which society and community must tire. The rule of law is another way that this cycle may be stopped. It was this idea that Aeschylus dealt with in his trilogy *Oresteia*. After a series of seductions, murders, treacheries, the sacrificing of one’s own children and cannibalism (also involving one’s own children) the plot comes to an even more dramatic head in *The Eumenides*. Orestes is pursued by the Furies (who will not forgive him) for having killed Aegisthus and Cassandra. He appeals to Athene. “... and she, thinking the case too difficult to be judged by a single person, even her divine self-appointed court of Athenian jurors to hear the arguments and judge the case. When the votes of these resulted in a tie, Athene herself casts the deciding ballot in favor of Orestes...” The law court of Aareiopagus which had judged the case was perpetrated as a just tribunal for homicide down throughout the history of man: Lattimore, 1953. pp. 6-7.

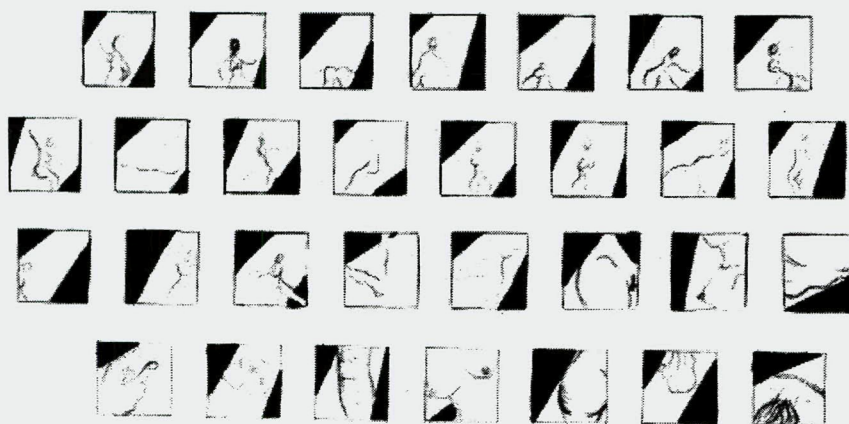
sion, or a good decision, but, because it was coerced, it felt, and still feels, wrong. So I felt "deeply wronged, and deeply right about feeling deeply wronged."

lems in retribution, as I have just said. That is why, no doubt, the ancients had curses pass down from generation to generation. I suppose I could teach my kids to "avenge" me, but that seems

that "time heals all wounds." Perhaps, but I prefer my alternative—"Time wounds all heels." I will wait. □

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That feeling (or basket of feelings, or cluster of feelings), the insulting, hurting, wronging event, and my relative powerlessness (read cowardice) became encapsulated. I think I have put it to good use. But it is still there, pulsing, waiting.

The practical problem with long lists, of course, is that the moment passes. In this respect, life's interactions are like freeway exits—you gotta go when and where you gotta go, and if you pass a "rectification exit" it may be too late. Certainly for things that happened years ago, it is. I have no idea whether Tommy Farley is even living. If he is, and I meet him, what, reasonably speaking, could I do? Would he even remember? I doubt it.

That means that I need to consider "displacement" as an answer to the question "what do you do when there is nothing you can do?" Time creates prob-

a bit extreme (for one thing, it wastes energy). So unless one turns unforgiveness into energy and consumes it, one will be consumed *by* it.

There is another problem. This one involves "the perp" and the cluelessness that perps sometimes present. Those who offend are, sometimes, quite unaware of it—being over-involved with themselves and their needs. (Often, people have told me, "I (or s/he) did not mean it." Motive to hurt, meaning to hurt, is irrelevant to me—the result is the same either way.) This cluelessness means either that, a) the "retribution" will be unconnected by the perp to her/his "contribution" and thus wasted, or, b) "getting through" the defenses will take so much more of my resource that it becomes not worth it.

So what to do? Time and again, colleagues counsel me

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