

Torch Club October 12, 2010

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Must We Always Forgive?

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. I have selected as my topic *Must We Always Forgive?* I believe this issue represents a cutting edge concern in our current social, cultural and political landscape. I know I cannot, in a brief paper, address many of the nuances on this fascinating topic. My hope instead is to raise a few questions for reflection and discussion.

On the one hand, our bookstores are crammed to capacity with self-help manuals that loudly tout forgiveness as the sin qua non of healthy living. They also usually offer detailed and inspirational steps to implement this panacea for all our troubles. On the other hand, our political discourse, on all sides, is marked by coarseness, outrage, suspicion and blame. I am reminded here of the John Wayne quote from *True Grit*: “Never explain or apologize- both are signs of weakness’. So here we stand at the crossroads of these opposing, if simplistic, formulas. What is the reasonable, concerned and thoughtful person to consider when trying to comprehend what forgiveness is and, equally important, what it is not?

I hope, as I proceed, that I can offer some thoughts, vignettes and experiences that “advance the conversation” as the philosopher Richard Rorty described. Let me begin then with two passages just pages apart in the book *The Forgiving Self* by Robert Karen.

“What we do in the realm of forgiveness says a great deal about both how we mourn our losses and how well we have separated psychologically from our parents...It speaks to the magnitude of our self-centeredness and the extent to which we organize the world into a simple pattern of good versus bad, as opposed to a more mature ability to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence. In the capacity to forgive we see our largeness of heart. And, in struggling to forgive what is most difficult for us to forgive, we reveal our courage, imagination, and potential for growth.” (P.9)

These words are appealing to most of us, I suspect, because they describe how we would like to see ourselves. They speak to our inclination to be better than we ordinarily are, to rise to challenges or obstacles.

Yet...four pages later Karen writes:

A totally forgiving posture is neither desirable nor possible. Hatred, revenge, and striving for justice, not to mention the need to protest and to feel we are heard, are as much a part of us as love and the wish to make

amends. They need to be attended to. How often do we forgive mistreatment to avoid conflict? Or welcome the renewed warmth of someone who was abusing us, happy to forgo any protest, not to mention hope for better treatment in the future, in exchange for a smile? Is this forgiveness worth having? (p. 14)

Ah, this is the other side isn't it, at least for many of us? We are in conflict with ourselves as often as we are with others. I think that through these passages we can begin to grasp some of the complexity and individuality entailed in forgiving. But let me offer some brief vignettes where I would like each of you to ask yourself the question; could I, would I do the same? In all likelihood you will never be faced with such choices. Still, looking at the far reaches of forgiveness may help clarify our own ability and willingness to forgive.

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years in a small, barren cell for political reasons only. Upon becoming President and with ruined eyesight from his years in prison he invited his white jailer to attend his inauguration as his personal guest.

The Dali Lama tells of his anxiety in meeting a Tibetan Monk imprisoned for 17 years by the Chinese. Expecting bitterness

or perhaps a broken man he was instead approached by this man because he feared losing compassion for his captors.

Remarkable forgiveness... Can you, can we, if tested, to far lesser mistreatments say, "I forgive" and do so without reservation.

Then there is the evocative and, to me, intellectually arresting type of forgiveness attributed to Tomas Borge the Sandinista fighter. Borge was captured and brutally tortured by the contras. After the war ended he was permitted by the court to pass judgment on his torturer. He responded: "My punishment is to forgive you." In my first reading of this story I placed it in the company of Mandela and the Tibetan Monk. Still there was something about the sentence, "My punishment is to forgive you", and I kept coming back to because it unsettled me.

Why, I wondered, was the sentence begun with "My punishment is...?" Isn't it rather the punishment of the torturer, which then might read, "My punishment for you is...?" And do punishment and forgiveness go together? Or reversing the order of words in the sentence do we really have "My forgiveness is your punishment?" From this position "forgiveness" becomes a burden or weight the torturer would never be free from. Perhaps this is what Cynthia Ozick meant by the phrase, "Forgiveness can brutalize."

To further explore the complexities and ambiguities of forgiveness we can also consider “The Laramie Project”, a play that focuses on the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard. You may remember he was savagely beaten and tied to a fencepost and left to die overnight.

In the trial of one of the accused killers, Aaron McKinney, Matthew’s father was allowed to address the court. He said, in part: “I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney; however this is the time to begin the healing process, to show mercy, to someone who refused to show any mercy.” Dennis Shepard then asked the District Attorney not to seek the death penalty in exchange for two consecutive life sentences without the right of appeal or parole. He concluded: “I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and thank Matthew every day for it.” Forgiveness? Well yes, there was a stated plea for mercy and forsaking of revenge. Or was there?

Leigh Fondakowski the head writer of the play and who was in court that day didn’t see it as forgiveness. The defense team was about to bring up embarrassing information about Matthew during the penalty phase and a central component of the deal Dennis suggested required McKinney never tell his side of the story (which included his own abuse and abandonment). Fondakowski

believed "... it was clear when Dennis said, 'May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew ever day for it'; he believed that life in prison might be a more terrible punishment for McKinney than death."

Perhaps then like Portia, in the *Merchant of Venice*, Dennis Shepard spoke of mercy while reserving the right to mete out punishment on his own terms. From yet another vantage point we might recall Frommer's distinction of genuine forgiveness, which entails an internal psychic process of *transformation*, from *acts of forgiveness* - pronouncements in which one merely adopts a forgiving attitude in the absence of real psychic change.

I work with trauma of all kinds from single episode to complex, developmental trauma. I work with betrayals in marriages, the death of a child, chronic illness, violence and abuse. If I may I would like to conclude my talk by reading a piece of "psychic theater" from the Special Edition of my book, *Theaters of Trauma* that expresses some of my thoughts on forgiveness. I would then like to talk with you about your views and experiences in forgiving so we may learn from each other today.

For many years before I ever met her, Ceely had been on anti-depressant medication. She now wanted to discontinue the medication and I agreed that it was time to revisit the issue with her psychiatrist. Ceely, however, made the decision on as her own

and following advice on the Internet and from friends with nursing experience, she began to taper off the medication. Then a point came where her anxiety grew, and she agreed to schedule a medication review. Ceely met with her psychiatrist and a few days later, in our session, I realized it did not go well.

The session began with Ceely saying: “This is what I worried about all along but trusted you. You led me to believe that what my mother did to me was bad and that I didn’t deserve what had happened to me. You told me my anger was a healthy response to my mother’s actions. Now, I find you were wrong.”

I was stunned. What, I wondered, happened to so drastically alter Ceely’s perception of me and our work together?

I did not have to wait long as she continued: “My psychiatrist told me I was having trouble going off the medication because I still needed it. He said I would continue to need it until I forgave my mother. He told me you were wrong and the anger I feel is just another symptom of the depression.”

Upon hearing what was said to Ceely, I admit I was feeling anything but forgiving toward this physician. I took a few deep breaths to regulate my outrage at the intrusiveness of this man, so I could more effectively address Ceely.

After a pause, I said: “Forgiveness is a complicated and confusing process. There are many factors to consider and since

the subject has been broached, we would do well to explore them. Let me say this to begin. I don't believe someone can be ordered to forgive, nor do I believe forgiveness is a valid indicator of emotional health. Since I have told you what I thought before, as you point out, I will again be honest. The rabbis of old have a saying: 'Whoever is merciful to the cruel will end up being indifferent to the innocent.' I believe the conduct of your psychiatrist suggests there is truth in this saying."

Ceely reacted by asking: "Are you saying that he was indifferent to me?"

I answered simply: "Yes. He offered you a simplistic self-righteous judgment that undermined confidence in yourself, this process of therapy and me. You went there for his medical opinion about medication and you were instead greeted with a morality lesson that implied condemnation."

After a few minutes of silence, Ceely said: "We have a lot to talk about."

Yes, we did and the talking continues. In the back and forth, we discovered many lessons together, with so much more still to learn. We came to believe that forgiveness is a decision and is most authentic when it is carefully thought through and recognized as existing along side of conflicting emotions. Forgiveness is not about forgetting or allowing for abrogation of responsibility for

acts of cruelty or violence. Even without her mother's atonement, Ceely could mitigate her mother's influence by refusing to condone her behaviors, accept blame for them or continue to reside in the shame that was instilled. Forgiveness is also not about squelching ambiguity, ambivalence, anger, hurt or even the desire for justice.

We recognized it could be necessary, at times, not to forgive if forgiveness means passive surrender for the sake of acceptance or forgiveness in order to avoid conflict at the cost of self-respect or capacity for self-defense. Anger can provide healthy protection against being victimized. Such anger becomes damaging only if it is frozen as bitterness or resentment that precludes developing a responsive, emotionally fulfilling life. Someday, Ceely may forgive her mother, with or without her apology, but that is her call to make. The success of such an intimate process as therapy must never hang on only one measure.

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