

Forgiving and Letting Go

by Dr. Pam Monday - Whole Life, November, 1992.

When I agreed to write this article for Whole Life, I never dreamed how I would procrastinate! I actually missed the first deadline - something I simply never do, even if it means staying up all night in order to finish an article! As I have wrestled with this topic, I have come to the conclusion that it is my very humanness that is in the way here. Forgiveness is not the stuff of being human: forgiveness is a divine concept. Too much of the time, I am out of touch with the divine.

It is human to be resentful, to hold grudges, to be full of self-pity, bitterness righteous indignation, to cling to pride, to resist letting down one's guard, to be defensive, to try to blame others for our misery, to justify our own negative behaviors. These are the hallmarks of human sin - so human, and yet so self-defeating, keeping us stuck in those comfortable, miserable ruts, consuming our energy and preventing us from using our talents and gifts optimally.

To forgive means to let go of, or to give up, these human protective devices. Forgiveness is an act of faith, a spiritual connection that allows us to transcend an act of faith, a spiritual connection that allows us to transcend our humanness.

Have you ever asked anyone for their forgiveness? When they granted it, did you feel you had earned it or that their forgiveness was "owed" to you? If so, I question whether what you received was truly forgiveness. To forgive another means to pardon, to absolve, to grant relief from payment. It means they don't owe you anymore.

Hard to fathom as a human being, isn't it? But in divine terms, to be forgiven by God means we have accepted a gift of grace (that is, help given humans by God) without having to "earn" it. It's not a question of whether we deserve it or not; it's a gift, pure and simple. Forgiveness from God is role-modeling of the highest sort, and we are called to follow that lead: "forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US.

"When I am the most judgmental toward others, angry at everyone, allowing myself to give sentiment again and again to my resentment, I am the most out of touch with God. But when I am close to God, my soul is at peace, the angry voices are quieted, serenity is close at hand, and forgiveness is in my heart. Nothing has changed, and everything has changed, for a few moments, or maybe an hour or a day. Until once again I get caught up in the business of being human.

Forgiveness is the end stage of recovery - the part that comes after all the other work has been done. It's the part that comes after the grieving is finished. It is, like grieving, a process and not an event, because the letting go has to happen again and again and again, like all of recovery. With practice, it happens faster and lasts longer.

The timing of practicing forgiveness is crucial. I am very suspicious of those who give lip service to forgiveness, claiming to "forgive" their "enemies" (or their parents, ex-spouses, bosses, neighbors, etc.) without ever having allowed themselves to fully experience the anger or hurt that is a prerequisite to letting go! We cannot let go of that which we have never experienced emotionally; we are still in denial.

Another mistake in timing is to forgive someone who has hurt us without knowing what to do differently to take care of ourselves, or to prevent ourselves from being hurt in the same way again. An example is the battered wife, who, having fully experienced the hurt and anger, "forgives" her batterer, but has not yet learned how to establish boundaries and set and enforce limits to ensure she will not be battered again.

A third timing mistake occurs when we prematurely forgive someone who is abusing someone else whom we have a responsibility to protect. For instance, it is appropriate to hold on to anger toward a non-recovering abusive parent if he/she has interactions with our children. It is appropriate to reveal the secret of sexual abuse in our families and take step to prevent continued perpetration on other family members. Sometimes feeling the anger gives us the courage and the energy to take a stand when everyone else in the family is either in denial or too afraid to break the "no talk" rule.

Before we can begin to forgive, we must go through a series of steps. The first step is awareness - we must acknowledge the pain (the reason we erected our defensive walls in the first place). The second step is actively grieving - experiencing the anger, sadness and pain that signifies grief is in process. The third stop is learning what we must do to minimize or prevent the buildup of hurts and resentments in the future. This is where, as adults, we empower ourselves to prevent the reoccurrence of abuses that we were powerless to prevent as children. Many of us look back at our childhood at those who hurt us or did not teach us how to take care of ourselves, and we place with those people the full responsibility for the problems we face now. But as adults it is our responsibility to take care of ourselves.

As adults, we have a part in every interaction; we cannot change others, but we can change our own behavior. We can learn to speak up as soon as someone hurts us; we can

learn to set limits and follow through on appropriate consequences if we feel invaded or used; we can ask directly for what we want and need; we can say "no"; we can challenge abusive power by refusing to play the victim role; we can be rigorously, but respectfully, honest with ourselves and others.

And we can learn to forgive ourselves for all the times we, as adults, have allowed others to hurt us, and for all the mistakes we have made and will continue to make as long as we are human. We can accept our own imperfections, and at the same time continue to grow and change. As we do all of these things, we are building self-esteem and self-love. Once we have found the self to love, we can begin the transcendence of self that is forgiveness of others.

There is much controversy in the recovery field about whether people who have been horribly abused "should" forgive the abuser. I can't answer that question. But remember, forgiveness is the divine act of grace - it doesn't have to be earned. It isn't about releasing the abuser from the debt that is owed. How does that help you?

(1) It breaks the intense emotional connection between you and the abuser, and in doing so, it frees you to be your own person, no longer controlled by that other human being.

(2) It breaks the cycle of destructive entitlement that gets passed down across the generations. The one who has been abused feels (either consciously or unconsciously) owed, or entitled, to emotional or physical nurturing not received from the parents. Unable to collect from the parent, he or she unconsciously turns to the next generation, collecting from their children instead - thereby perpetuating another generation of children parenting parents, instead of the other way around. To let go of being owed - to forgive the debt - means you are free to focus on living fully in the present, without having your energy zapped by the ghosts of the past.

(3) It allows new patterns of relating to emerge, if longing for family connections is still in your heart. I have been amazed and awed by the power of family ties - that ancient, indestructible call of the clan that has ensured the endurance of the family since the beginning of man's history. I have seen an adult child's feeling of deep hatred coexist side-by-side with intense love for an aging parent who, in their prime, was horribly abusive to that child. I have seen the longing for connection pull a family together at death's door, with forgiveness being granted just in time to allow healing to occur as the barrier of hatred magically dissolved.

I have heard the deep regrets from those who waited too long: "Why didn't I speak up and tell him what I felt? Why didn't I at least try to connect in a meaningful way instead of cutting off all contact? He was all I had left; I wanted to talk to him and I didn't - I missed my chance." And I have heard this: "I was glad when he died. And I have wasted 20 years since then, still hating him. I am ready to let go now." To forgive is to heal one's own spirit, with God's help. It's never too late.