

Forgiving is giving up the possibility of a better past.

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FORGIVING:
HOW WIDELY DIVERGENT METHODS
ARE SUCCESSFUL AT RELEASING DEEP INJURY

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

If we are to love anything or anyone at all, we will at some point experience the devastating loss of deep injury. The result can easily become resentment, which has been found to be not only destructive to our relationships, but very destructive to our bodies as well.

True forgiveness has been acknowledged in many camps, from religion, independent forms of spirituality and psychology, as an antidote to the resentment of deep injury.

There are several diverse paths to take in accomplishing this end. I believe after examining these in some depth that what we're going to find is that regardless of whether you choose a direct approach to forgiving, or an approach that encourages self-responsibility and amends, or hypnosis or simply meditation, each, though lacking in many aspects unique to the others, is able to bring the sufferer to the point of release and freedom – to forgiving – in direct proportion that each brings about *surrendered self-responsibility* in the injured.

How do you live with resentment? Research tells us that you don't live very well. Or very long. Resentment, and the contained hostility inherent in it, causes severe stress. Stress has been thoroughly implicated in the development of atherosclerosis, which leads to heart attack and stroke (Frank & Smith, 1990).

So, hostility is a serious danger to the healthy heart. That message is coming in from many sources. Alcoholics Anonymous, and all the programs based upon its 12 Steps, says that resentment destroys more alcoholics than anything else (AAWS, 1976, p. 64).

The cumulative experience of all of the 12 Step programs is that addiction is intensified by untreated resentment. There's no question about it if you look at the evidence in a 23-year follow-up study of 4700 Duke University college students, as to how the churning anger of resentment can cause heart disease.

By their 40s, the angriest among the 4700 were the "most likely to be overweight smokers with high cholesterol levels" (Elias, 1994).

It's pretty evident that chronic resentment results in addiction and addictive behaviors. But there is also evidence that even without over-

eating, -drinking, -smoking, or -drugging, resentment causes chemical changes that result in arterial damage. Here's a good description of how it happens from Japenga, 1998:

That heavy feeling you get in your chest when you're deeply injured and feeling very resentful is a reflection of what is happening deep inside your body. Adrenaline speeds into your bloodstream every time you rehash your anger, and it raises your pulse and blood pressure. Your arteries narrow and the blood surges through your heart.

Do that a couple of times and you're okay. But if you do it over and over for months and years, the pounding blood erodes tiny portions of your coronary artery walls. Then, platelets in your blood clump to fill the abrasions, and over time plaque accumulates in the damaged areas which leads to coronary artery disease.

And so, it seems that when we are hard in spirit and thought, we become hardened physiologically as well. Mind and body *are* one.

We don't live as long when we're resentful, and we live miserably. It appears that unless you're enjoying your experience of life, nature obeys your internal message and stops life enhancing processes and begins life destroying processes. It seems that our thoughts are carried out in the functioning of our bodies. That's pretty amazing if you think about it.

If I'm depressed, my immune system depresses too and I'm at greater risk of having a stroke (Everson, et al, 1998). Depression is a hardening of self against the world just like outward hostility. If I'm hardened with hostility and resentment, blood platelets get sticky and make plaques that plug up and harden my arteries. What an amazing system! Almost looks as if nature is willing to give you what you want, including supporting you in dying if you aren't having any fun, doesn't it?

And what if that's really true? If we're all part of a great system, as many believe we are, and the basic plan is to love the experience of being, then it would make sense to have the parts that aren't doing that stop being part of the system. My circumlocutious inductive reasoning will come to a valid point here soon. Bear with me.

Let's take that further. Gary Schwartz and Linda Russek (1997b) have published at length about the logic of a systemic memory mechanism. Meaning, cells and organs, like our hearts and livers could have stored coded information based on their interaction with each other, perhaps in a way similar to the ways our brains code and store information based upon our interactions with each other.

Perhaps our exchanges with each other are but a macrocosm of our cells and a microcosm of the universe. Perhaps what we do and how we

are with each other matters within us *and* without us, paradoxically mattering a great deal and not very much at all.

One of the most astonishing aspects of life is that we think we are so big and significant and more important than anything else. If you look at pictures of the Earth taken from space, that's very funny. And if you look at the galaxy, it's absurd! That image makes you feel as if you are a microscopic cell in a body.

But here we sit with our big minds and our big ideas and our big beliefs and our toasters and televisions and cell phones and cars walking around – or more frequently driving around – on the big blue ball in the sky, feeling somehow as if we're the center of it all. Gifted, or damned, to wonder about ourselves.

I wonder when I think of myself in these terms what great purpose there is in wondering about our existence and being caught up in our own plans. And then I realized that I like it, I enjoy it and I feel happy and joyful and awe-filled when I do, and I think how wonderful it is to be alive and how purposeful it seems to feel that way. I get the feeling that we're supposed to be having a good time doing all this stuff *and* being amazed about it at the same time.

And when I think about it long enough and quietly enough, I feel absolutely reverent that all of this has come to Be.

What, for heaven's sake, are we *in*? I mean, look at your coffee cup with coffee in it or not in it and then look at the Galaxies! What are *they* in? If all the Galaxies weren't here, what would *they not be* in? What would be sitting empty? Whatever it is that we're in would still be there.

Doesn't that realization just blow you away? Doesn't it just drop your jaw and make your eyes go wide and fill you with wonder at your next breath that you can walk around on a little blue ball that's just a tiny piece of something filling up Some Thing that can't be comprehended? And if there is a Something, what is *it* in?

Paradoxically, while sitting here at my computer and contemplating the Galaxy, I feel at once totally insignificant and totally significant.

It is not, as Becker (1973) says, the fact that I am aware of my mortality that makes me believe there is a Being of Greatness, it is my awareness that I exist at all that does it to me.

It's not that I'm trying to resolve my cognitive dissonance. It's that I realize on a cosmic scale that we *Are*. We *be*! I am *Being*. The Galaxies are *Being*. We are all *Being* and are decidedly very busy at it, too! That is totally, fantastically astounding! How can anything Be or Not Be? Not just

us. How we come to Be, figuring *that* out, is a piece of cake in comparison! Figure out what the Cosmos is *in*! That's what has me pondering the existence of a *Great Being* and hypothesizing meaning and purpose behind my own microscopically cellular existence in all of the *being* that's going on around me.

Why think about that? And what does it have to do with forgiving?

From the studies done in the past 10 years, not to mention the wisdom of the ages (which in our technological magnificence we are trying to substantiate) it appears that regardless of your health, if you love and laugh, if your life is filled with the joy of awe and wonder and gratitude, you live better and longer.

So. *We are*. And there may be some cosmic value in that, albeit with the possibility that the value's not as big as some of us tend to think it is, and the other possibility that it's bigger than the rest of us think it is. And if all of our teeny experiences of *being* are a microcosm of some *Grand Being*, then there's a strong possibility that this mechanism that makes us live better and longer when we're laughing and loving during our *being* may contribute something to the health and welfare of the *Grand Being*. Make sense so far?

Just like the cells in my body are all happy and functioning well when I'm happy and loving, so are the other people in my house when I'm happy and loving, and so are my neighbors when I'm happy and loving. You get my point. This is at a minimum an organismic system view of the world, to borrow a term from Schwartz & Russek (1997b). And we may be living in a highly integrated system of circular causality and diversity, to mix a few world views suggested in the work of Schwartz & Russek (1997b).

So, let's just suppose while considering the ideas in the pages that follow, that our jobs here on earth in our present states of *being* are to *experience* our *Being* – in whatever form or circumstance that has taken – as happy, joyous, loving and free.

Let's just suppose that we are to be life supporting – think macrocosm – through those mechanisms of love, supporting not only our own *being* but that of the lives that are *being* all around us, and that the proof of that is that our bodies as well as our relationships deteriorate severely when we don't.

What a great idea! But how do we enforce it? There's the rub! Because enforcing it just hasn't worked. That's what wars are about, enforcing *it*. Religion has been about that – at least the one that I was involved in as a child. It kind of works, if you're big enough or if your idea

of what is to be enforced isn't too far out of line with what people want for themselves. But it doesn't create joy and love. You can't enforce love and joy. They have to evolve from a particular state of *being* that permits them to flow freely.

On the other hand, maybe nothing means anything and whatever we choose to do in the direction of love and joy and freedom just helps us alleviate our misery. That works for me, too! The other idea just fills me fuller, and I like that feeling.

I don't have any new ideas for how to create that state of freedom. These that follow are all very old ideas. When you've been hurt deeply, they are all really, really hard to do, and would remain hard to do even if people hadn't been "oughted" to death with them.

The point is that we are beginning to demonstrate in classical scientific studies what some have experienced over the millinea. When you are happy and joyous and free to love, you live better and longer. But that's a hard thing to do in our world. We don't have any perfect people; far from it.

We get our feelings hurt, our stuff stolen, our hearts broken and the lives of our loved ones snatched away from us, always at the wrong time. As you live and breathe, someone somewhere will hurt you somehow.

And as you advance into the later years of your life, the unresolved pains of our injuries can accumulate. And as they do, they become an insidious filler for the losses life presents us as aging and declining health strips us of our visibility to others, our careers, our purpose in life, our friends and loved ones, the vigor and health of our youth, our sense of future, our mental acuity and our basic ability to care for our bodies.

In 1995, psychologists Myers & Diener (Fussell, 1998) reviewed 10 years worth of research on happiness. And though they found no magic formula for being happy, they did find some things that happy people have in common.

Happy people had fulfilling jobs, a satisfying spiritual life, and most importantly, intimate friends or loved ones with whom they could share their feelings.

In the final years of your life, you could easily find yourself without your fulfilling job and without the intimate friends and loved ones with whom you have always shared your feelings – or worse, with whom you figured you would one day get to share your feelings.

For many, as the years advance, all they have for sure is direct access to satisfaction from a spiritual life.

Dare I say that not one of us has got even a tiny chance at any of that – a fulfilling job, intimacy with friends and loved ones or a satisfying spiritual life – if we don't learn how to resolve our deeply disappointing injuries?

So, what do we do about it? Coming full circle to this discussion, we do something about resentment. Forgiving is the antidote to resentment, but how do we go about it?

Religion instructs us that we *ought* to forgive. Many of us consider that a hard pill to swallow. Forgiveness goes down hard, and it goes down even harder with a stiff serving of *ought*.

Psychology, in fact, is discovering that psychological balance is restored when forgiving takes place. Somewhat easier to swallow without the *ought*, but tough, none-the-less.

Medicine is telling us that not forgiving is killing us faster than we want to admit. But it's also suggesting that forgiving, by providing an antidote to resentment, may interrupt the damage to our hearts. In fact, Dean Ornish's research suggests that love and intimacy, which can only exist in an environment of forgiving, will *reverse* that damage. That might sell some of the rest of us.

But common wisdom tells us something just as powerful. When you maintain an emotional connection to an event, *you* are letting that event control your life (Gray, 1998).

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was *you!*
(Unknown).

So the rest of this discussion will be focused on what forgiveness is and isn't, and will include a few suggestions for how to accomplish that seemingly impossible end. To simplify the discussion, we're going to focus on interpersonal forgiveness. . . that situation that arises when someone we know injures us deeply. Much that is said, however, applies to forgiving oneself.

And if you can make the spiritual stretch, as did Marietta Jaeger in the story described in Chapter 9, it applies equally to forgiving crimes of intolerable violence.