

Our survival depends on the healing power of love, intimacy, and relationships. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually. As individuals. As communities. As a country. As a culture. Perhaps even as a species.

Ornish, 1997

EXAMINING FORGIVENESS  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE UNCONDITIONAL OUGHTS OF RELIGION  
Chapter 2

Forgiveness carries a tremendous negative stigma for many people in our culture. Many, myself included, have abandoned their religions in a desperate attempt to try to find spirituality beyond the “unconditional oughts” (term borrowed from Gladson, 1992) of formal religious structure.

For people like us, the word “forgiveness” carries dangerous connotations. Some of us are deeply ashamed because we haven’t been able to do whatever it was we thought forgiving was supposed to be; others of us, confusing forgiving with condoning or reconciling, are angry at the results we’ve gotten from our methods and at the implication that we ought to forgive.

Much of our resistance to religion is a reasonable resistance to fundamentalists’ misinterpretations (or interpretations if that is your bent) to the teachings of the bible and the effect that has had on abused and battered women and children in those religions.

Vicky Whipple is a family therapist who works with battered women from fundamentalist religions. By way of explaining the bias that has

formed in the scientific community against religion's answers to life's problems, I've cited below the five distinct fundamentalist teachings that Whipple says perpetuate, either through intent or through misunderstanding, violent, abusive relationships. They are:

a) We-they attitudes, which discourage members from seeking help outside the church community. Typically, a battered wife in one of these extreme conservative religions will not seek assistance at a shelter until it is a final act of desperation. Since her religion invests her with a superiority to those outside her faith, her shame at deserving abuse through her unworthiness and prideful refusal to admit this beyond the walls of her own community will further maintain her silence when she finally does go outside for help.

Because of the we-they attitudes, outside the religious community she will feel like she is in "enemy" territory and treat help as suspect.

b) Fundamentalist churches often stress a more passive approach to living that dictates trusting God and letting *Him* take care of you. A real twist on the appropriate act of surrender, in my opinion. As a result, since faith is perceived as waiting patiently for *God* to act, attempts to control your own life, especially for women

and children, are perceived as rebellious and sinful. . . yet more cause for them to feel shame.

Since much research shows that abusive husbands don't change in response to their wives' passivity, this is a guarantee of continuing the cycle of violence and shame.

c) Forgiveness is overtly and covertly confused with reconciliation. Women and children from fundamentalist churches tend to understand forgiveness as meaning that if he beats her up and later says he's sorry, that she has to "forgive and forget." This is reinforced by admonitions against divorce and dishonoring your parents, discussed below.

d) One teaching that is most prominent in conservative churches is the definition that men have the God-given right to make all final decisions for the family. Women must submit or they risk not only their marriages – and with the wrong men, their safety – but their relationship with their God.

Research supports the obvious understanding that the more emotionally and economically dependent a woman is, the more she will tolerate abuse.

e) Divorce is a failure, so the battered woman is in a double bind. She can stay and be beaten, or she can leave and risk the wrath of God (and the church). Many of these women have a tradition of living their lives as suffering servants, and this is reinforced by the church's declaration that the sanctity of marriage takes precedence over their own lives.

Vicki Dyck from Saskatchewan recorded one of the most profoundly moving videos I've ever seen in which she tells her story of coming to terms with the damage done by believing what she calls "the lies about God".

As a woman recovering from constant incest abuse as a child, she couldn't come to terms with God until she could allow herself to be as angry at God as she really was. And that was complicated, because before, during and after her uncle's regular sexual use and abuse of her, she would pray to her God to protect her; pleading that she was being as good as she could be, and please, please don't let him do that to her anymore. And not once did God ever stop her uncle from abusing her.

And so, since everything she scrambled to put her hands on as a child, and later as an adult, told her that God takes care of you when you're good, she grew up believing that she must be really bad. And she worked

harder and harder at being good while her uncle continued to regularly abuse her sexually.

In order to believe she wasn't awful, she had to stop believing in God, which she was unable to do. Nobody had ever told her that she could be angry at God. Someone finally showed her all the places in the bible where it talked about how enraged people were at God. It was then that she realized how many lies she had been living. She says:

When I had been screaming and crying for God to tell me where He had been, I didn't see the lies. I didn't see that veil of lies that had stood between us.

The lie that God protects everyone.

The Lie that says if God doesn't protect you, you must be bad.

The lie that said you cannot be angry with God.

The lie that God only has one face. It's not true. God has many faces; some of them frighten me, some of them comfort me, some of them challenge me and some of them move me.

Dyck, 1992

So, regardless of our reasons, many of us have abandoned some very helpful "oughts" of religion that are necessary to the quality of the human condition. Gladson, (1992) a professor of biblical and integrative religious studies, says there is no other aspect of religion that assumes the importance of forgiveness to our human condition. He goes on to say that all of us long for harmony with God and with others, even if we don't

recognize it, and that one cannot achieve harmony without developing the ability to forgive. Forgiving, he says, gives us relief from the feelings of alienation that torment our lives.

Forgiveness is the one concept that connects psychology and religion (Brandsma, 1985), but they differ in one very significant way: at the core of religion, as mentioned before, is an *Unconditional Ought* which creates an objective guilt before God (Gladson, 1992).

Having an overdeveloped sense of responsibility as a result of certain situations in my childhood that objective guilt before God made love too conditional for me.

On the other hand, most techniques of psychoanalysis don't prescribe forgiveness because they tend to resolve conflict by explaining or excusing (Veenstra, 1992).

Pursuing Spirituality instead of Religion has become an easier pursuit since it has provided me with some relief from religion's negatively weighted terminology. In so doing, it has afforded me new eyes and ears for examining old disciplines.

By the way, our cultural acceptance of the term *spirituality* is as much a product of an attempt on the part of the religious to accommodate the fundamental differences between themselves as it is a new wave of

reaction (like mine) to religion's history of "abusing their moral authority by claiming political, financial, sexist, and moralistic power over their members" (Moore, 1996).

Traditionally, much religious theology has focused on morality, dogma, the interpretation of scriptures, and the philosophical underpinnings of belief, all of which, for the sake of argument, might be conceded as valid issues. But they are not always seen as relevant to an individual's search for the spirituality that brings about an improvement in *well being*. At a minimum, dogmatic religious theology has helped substantiate and validate a closed mindedness on the part of the scientific community as technology has continued to increase the progress of scientific inquiry.

Whatever our reasons for abandoning the disciplines of religion, with scientific research showing that stress leads to 60% to 90 % of our visits to physicians – and with our own awareness of how deeply resentment stresses us, we are suffering needlessly when we deny ourselves the power of anything helpful – even *if* it is encouraged by Religion.

And so, I have worked hard at finding ways to translate religious oughts into an attitudinal framework that allows me to make peace with some of these ancient ideas. One thing that always helps me adjust my mind set about my opinions is to examine the definitions of the words we

use to describe our world. Carl Jung provided me with a new view of the word "religion" with this statement:

Religion appears to me to be a peculiar attitude of mind which could be formulated in accordance with the original use of the word, "religio", which means a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors that are conceived as "powers": spirits, daemons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals, or whatever name man has given to such factors in his world as he has found powerful, dangerous, or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly worshiped and loved.

Jung, 1958

I don't know about you, but if you approached *me* with that idea, I'd think it was a good one! The actions one must take in the process of forgiving bring forth a sense or a connection to an awesome amount of power. And when you get to see the effects of forgiveness on an offender's ability to change, you can't help but be awed by its power and begin to wonder about the true nature of our Being.

Seeing things through the wisdom of Carl Jung's eyes has helped me immeasurably to soften my own stance. Through the wonder of his vision of archetypal symbols, I've come around to softening my own views of religion and religious structures and rituals.

Jung believed that our instinct for religion is as powerful as the instinct of sex or aggression, and that many of our neuroses spring from disregarding the natural religious aspect of the psyche (Todd, 1985).

Science is bearing this out as numerous research projects bring in more and more evidence that supports the physical and mental health advantages of churchgoers over non churchgoers (Harada, 1997).

The experience of forgiveness brings one into contact with one's own primitive emotional forces; a truly *spiritful* experience with profoundly positive psychological consequences. And yet, forgiveness hasn't been studied as widely in psychological literature as is warranted by the fact that good *mental* health *requires* developing the disciplines required to forgive.

Perhaps the reason for that is that the ultimate experience of having forgiven creates a numinous experience that is difficult to quantify with current measurement tools.

To not forgive is to remain to some extent resentful. Time doesn't make forgiveness happen (Gray, 1998). Resentful people are unforgiving, remorseless, ruthless and inflexible. Not a good psychological profile.

The success of Alcoholics Anonymous in helping people recover from crippling addiction is directly attributable to the resulting ingredient of genuine forgiveness that results from resolving resentment through surrendered self examination and amends. The admission of wrongdoing, acknowledgment of character defects, seeking humility, and making of

amends which are directed toward helping the alcoholic let go of resentment and fear produce forgiveness.

Should that not make sense, get ready for some more inductive reasoning. It's important to understand that according to the research literature, (McCullough, 1997, for example) people forgive others to the extent that they experience empathy for them. Empathy is achieved through identification. Identification occurs when we look closely at ourselves as scrupulously as possible. Thus, self-examination equates to forgiveness.

Forgiveness requires a change of attitude toward those who have committed wrongs, and in a sense, puts an end to some of the damaging consequences of wrong doing. It creates an emotional calm. At a minimum, it is "a psychological-spiritual force that truly enables a person to permit injustice and insult to be *constructively* (italics added) forgotten rather than forgotten out of hand" (McAllister, 1996).

I'd probably choose different words, but I understand McAllister's intent. Deep injuries aren't ever really forgotten. By *constructive* forgetting, I believe McAllister is saying that by settling our hearts and minds, we are able to set the wrong doing aside or relocate it emotionally, to steal some words from Worden (1996).

But the greater truth is, forgiveness has a powerful effect on the injurer *if* the injurer is open to being affected. This *may* be explained by Schwartz & Russek's dynamical energy systems mechanism (1997a). It's possible that we physically bind one another with our resentment. Marietta Jaeger (Chapter 9) certainly believes this to be so.

However, the mechanism works, it has been demonstrated time and again that change takes place in others when we give them space to do so, and forgiving creates that space.

For most of us who have been injured by loved ones in relatively mundane ways, this is a great bonus / side effect. For those of us who have been injured by someone we need never see again, it can still be a great side effect if you're interested in the grand spiritual scheme of the cosmos. And when you hear Marietta Jaeger's story in Chapter 9, you begin to see the ways in which it can save lives and bring justice to bear.

But it's important to remember, as McAllister (1996) says:

"Reconciliation requires forgiveness, but forgiveness doesn't require reconciliation."

The point here and throughout will remain *to forgive for the benefits that it brings to oneself*. And so the next most important thing to consider is what forgiveness is and is not.