To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past

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TWO ANXIETIES DOMINATE most of our lives. We are anxious in the face of our unchangeable past; we long to recreate segments of our private histories, but we are stuck with them. We are anxious in the face of our unpredictable futures; we long to control our destinies, but we cannot bring them under our management. Thus, two basic longings, lying at the root of most others, are frustrated: we cannot alter a painful past or control a threatening future.

God offers two answers to our deepest anxieties. He is a forgiving God who recreates our pasts by forgiving them. He is a promising God who controls our future by making and keeping promises. By forgiving us, he changes our past. By promising, he secures our future.

By his grace we participate in his power to change the past and control the future. We, too, can forgive, and must forgive. We, too, can make a promise and keep it. Indeed, by sharing these two divine powers, we become most powerfully human and most wonderfully free.

Toward the end of her almost epochal book, *The Human Condition* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt turns finally to these two neglected powers of the human spirit, concluding that only when we act after the fashion of the biblical Lord can we overcome our darkest forebodings. There is, she says, only one remedy for the inevitability of history: forgiveness. And in the next chapter she says there is only one way to overcome the unpredictabilities of the future: to make promises and keep the promises we make.

These two powers of the human spirit are, I believe, two things necessary to keep life human. If we lose the art of forgiving, and if we lose the power of promising, we will let life become brutish. To the extent that we let these divine gifts atrophy, we will forfeit the right to be called children of God.

I want to take a close look at how we practice these human shares in God's powers. In the next issue I plan to poke

about in the mystery of the making and the keeping of promises. Here I shall look into the human act of forgiving—not God's forgiving so much as our own, and not being forgiven so much as the act of forgiving.

The only remedy for the inevitability of history, says Arendt, is forgiveness. She means that in the natural course of things we are stuck with our past and its effects on us. We may learn from our history, but we cannot escape it. We may forget our history, but we cannot undo it. We may be doomed to repeat our history, but we cannot change it. Our history is an inevitable component of our being. One thing only can release us from the grip of our history. That one thing is forgiveness.

Taking Arendt seriously, we have sound reason for revisiting this human potential. But Jesus, far earlier, urges a still more compelling reason, not merely for thinking about but for praying for the power of forgiving. In words that some resentful demon in me would rather ignore, Jesus tells us that if we do not forgive our fellows, we should not expect God to forgive us (Mark 11:25). Here is even more reason, then, to try to rescue forgiving from the cluster of clichés that often obscure the outrageously free and the offensively gracious act by which one human being forgives another.

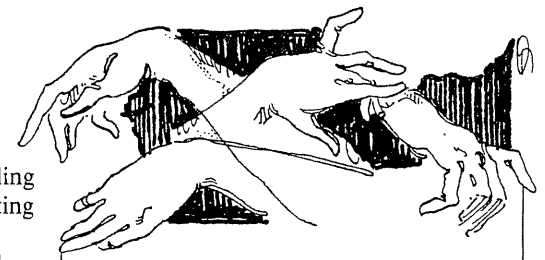
What Do We Do When We Forgive?

I see three stages in every act of forgiving: suffering, spiritual surgery, and starting over. The first stage, suffering, creates the conditions that require forgiveness. At the second stage we do the essential business of forgiveness; the forgiver performs spiritual surgery in his own memory. We complete the action and bring it to its climax at the third stage, when the forgiver starts over in a new relationship with the forgiven person.

Suffering. No one really forgives unless he has been hurt. We turn the miracle into a cheap indulgence when we pretend to forgive people who have never hurt us. I do not mean that you can forgive only scoundrels who laid a hand on you. You can be hurt when you suffer at the hands of people you love. But unless you are hurt, speak of something other than forgiving.

But not every hurt needs to be forgiven. There are some hurts that we can swallow, shrug off, and chalk up to the risks of being earthen vessels in a crowded world. We should not try to forgive when all we need is simply a little spiritual generosity. Consider the following hurts:

Annoyances. People annoy us by



being late for appointments, by telling boring stories at dinner, and by cutting in front of us at the checkout stand.

Defeats. Some people succeed when we fail; they get promotions when we are ignored; they get the glittering prizes we want; they always seem to be there ahead of us—and to make things worse, these people who beat us are our friends.

Slights. People we want to notice us ignore us; professors we adored forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not even invite us to his daughter's wedding.

These are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving. Such bits and pieces of suffering require tolerance, magnanimity, indulgence, humility—but not forgiving!

The kinds of hurts that need forgiving are both deep and moral. They are deep because they slice the fiber that holds us together in a human relationship. They are moral because they are wrongful, unfair, intolerable. We cannot indulge them or ignore them; we cannot shrug them off. We cannot just chalk them up to the human condition. The sorts of hurts that need forgiving are the ones that tend, in the nature of the case, to build a wall between the wrongdoer and the person he wrongfully hurts.

There are two kinds of hurts that must be answered with the miracle of forgiving. They are acts of disloyalty and acts of betrayal. Maybe there are hurts that need forgiveness that do not fit these categories, but most do.

What is a disloyal act? A person is disloyal if he treats you as a stranger when, in fact, he belongs to you as a friend or partner. Each of us is bound to some special others by the invisible fibers of loyalty. The bonding tells us who we are: we are who we are, most deeply, because of the people we belong to. This is why disloyalty is so serious. When someone who belongs to us treats us like a stranger, he digs a ditch, and he builds a wall between the two of us. And in doing so he assaults our very identity. Words like "abandon," or "forsake," or "let down" come to mind:

- A husband has an affair with his wife's friend.
- A partner who promised to come through with a loan reneges at the last moment when he can make a better profit with his money elsewhere.
- A friend who promised to recommend you for promotion lets you down when he discovers you are out of favor with the boss.
- Your father fails to show up when you are given a coveted award.
- Your neighbor spurns you when you, a Jew, need a place to hide from the Gestapo.

Hurts that need forgiving are both deep and moral.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who belongs to you by some spoken or unspoken promise treats you like a stranger.

Turn the screw a little tighter, and disloyalty becomes betrayal. As disloyalty makes strangers of people who belong to each other, betrayal turns them into enemies. We are disloyal when we let people down. We betray them when we cut them in pieces.

- Peter was disloyal when he denied he ever knew the Lord.
- Judas betrayed Jesus when he turned him over to his enemies.
- You betray me when you take a secret I trusted with you and reveal it to someone who is likely to use it against me.
- You betray me when you promise to be my friend but whisper my secret shame to a gossiper.
- You betray me when you are my brother but you put me down in front of significant people before whom I have no defense.
- A son betrays his father when he tells the police commissar that the father prayed for the defeat of communism.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who is committed to be on your side turns against you as an enemy.

Here are moral wrongs, wrongs people do out of evil intent, wrongs that cannot be tolerated. They are the wrongs that face us with the crisis of forgiveness. We should not flatten forgiveness to fit just any painful moment. The moment of forgiving comes when someone who ought to be with you forsakes you, when someone who ought to be for you turns against you.

Spiritual surgery. The second stage of forgiving involves the hurt person's inner response to the one who wronged him. Though it happens in the mind and heart of the forgiver, it may not even be felt by the person he forgives—at least not immediately. Here the forgiver performs spiritual surgery within his or her own memory.

When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it. You disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him inerradicably as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory.

You think of him now not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now not as the person who alienated you, but as the person who belongs to you. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs. You recreated your past by recreating the person whose wrong made your past painful.

You do not change him, out there, in his being. What he did sticks to what he is. His wrong is glued to him. But when you recreate him in your own memory, there, within you, he has been altered by spiritual surgery.

God does it this way, too. He releases us from sin as a mother washes dirt from a child's face, or as a person takes a burden off your back, lays it on a goat, and sends the goat scampering into the wilderness. The Bible's metaphors point to a surgery within God's memory of what we are.

Sometimes this stage is as far as we can go. Sometimes we need to forgive people who are dead and gone. Sometimes we need to forgive people who do not want our forgiveness. Sometimes our forgiving has to end with what happens in the spiritual surgery of our memories.

Starting over. The miracle of forgiveness is completed when two alienated people start over again. A man holds out his hand to an alienated daughter and says, "I want to be your father

again." A woman holds out her hand and says, "I want to be your wife again." Or, "I want to be your friend again, your partner again. Let us be reconciled; let us belong together again."

Reconciliation is the personal reunion of people who were alienated but belong together. It is the beginning of a new journey together. We must begin where we are, not at an ideal place for reunion. We do not understand what happened. Loose ends are untied. Nasty questions are unanswered. The future is uncertain; we have more hurts and more forgiving ahead of us. But we start over where we are.

If we keep the wonder of forgiving in our minds, we will not confuse this miracle with lesser gestures that pass as forgiveness. There are a few acts that may look like forgiving but which are, in fact, very different from that miracle of forgiving.

Forgiving is not forgetting. We forget things willy-nilly. We forget some hurts because they were too trivial to remember. We forget other hurts because they were too terrible to remember. All we need to forget is a bad memory or a compulsion to suppress. We do the miracle when we remember and then forgive.

Forgiving is not excusing. We excuse people when we understand that they are not to blame for the wrong they did us. When you understand that I have a Y where an X is supposed to be in my genetic code, you will not judge me. When you know that I got to be the way I am because I was walloped into neuroses by a wacky mother, you will not blame me. You will say: What he did was foul, but he is not to blame. This is not forgiving. Forgiving happens only when we refuse to excuse. We forgive only when we blame beforehand.

Forgiving is not smoothing things over. Some people make careers out of smoothing things over. Mothers shush us and smother our conflicts. They keep the lid on our suffering so we cannot forgive. Managers earn fat salaries by smoothing things over, manipulating people into working together even when they hate each other. Mothers and managers are the great oversmoothers of the world. They prevent forgiving because they stifle hurt. Forgiving happens only when we first admit our hurt and scream our hate.

In the creative violence of love, you reach into the unchangeable past and cut away the wrong from the person who wronged you, you erase the hurt in the archives of your heart. When you pull it off, you do the one thing, the only thing, that can remedy the inevitability of painful history. The grace to do it is from God. The decision to do it is our own.

Why Forgive?

To the guilty, forgiveness comes as amazing grace. To the offended, forgiving may sound like outrageous injustice. A straight-line moral sense tells most people that the guilty ought to pay their dues. Forgiving is for suckers. Forgiveness is a gyp.

Take Simon Wiesenthal's story, for instance. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Poland. One day he was assigned to clean out rubbish from a barn the Germans had improvised into a hospital for wounded soldiers. Toward evening a nurse took Wiesenthal by the hand and led him to a young SS trooper, his face bandaged with puss-soaked rags, eyes tucked behind the gauze. He was perhaps 21 years old. He grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and clutched it. He said that he had to talk to a Jew; he could not die before he had confessed the sins he had committed against helpless Jews, and he had to be forgiven by a Jew before he died. So he told Wiesenthal a horrible tale of how his battalion had gunned down Jews, parents and children, who were trying to escape from a house set afire by the SS troopers.

You erase the hurt in the archives of your heart.

Wiesenthal listened to the dying man's whole story, first the story of his innocent youth, and then the story of his participation in evil. At the end, Wiesenthal jerked his hand away and walked out of the barn. No word was spoken, no forgiveness was given. Wiesenthal would not, could not, forgive. But he was not sure he did right.

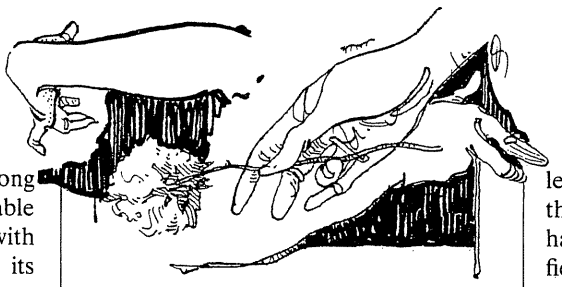
He ended his story, *The Sunflower* (Shocken, 1976), with a question: "What would you have done?" Thirty-two eminent persons, mostly Jewish, contributed their answers to his hard question. Most said Wiesenthal was right: he should not have forgiven the SS trooper; it would not have been fair. Why should a man who gave his will to the doing of monumental evil expect a quick word of forgiveness on his deathbed? What right had Wiesenthal to forgive the man for evil he had done to other Jews? If Wiesenthal forgave the soldier, he would be saying that the Holocaust was not so evil. "Let the SS trooper go to hell," said one respondent.

Many of us feel the same way when we are unfairly hurt in far less horrible ways. Sometimes our hate is the only ace we have left in our deck. Our contempt is our only weapon. Our plan to get even is our only consolation. Why should we forgive?

Why indeed? I do not think we should urge people to forgive unless we consider the superhuman task we ask of them. To get a hint of the gospel's revolution of forgiveness we need to get inside the moral skin of a righteous Pharisee with a clear eye for how wrongs really ought to be settled—according to natural, straight-lined fairness.

What is the answer to the unfairness of forgiving? It can only be that forgiving is, after all, a better way to fairness.

First, forgiving creates a new possibility of fairness by releasing us from the



unfair past. A moment of unfair wrong has been done; it is in the inevitable past. If we choose, we can stick with that past. And we can multiply its wrongness. If we do not forgive, our only recourse is revenge. But revenge glues us to the past. And it dooms us to repeat it.

Revenge never evens the score, for alienated people never keep score of wrongs by the same mathematics. Enemies never agree on the score because each feels the wounds he receives differently from the wounds he gives. How may Beiruts can ever equal a Holocaust? How many of her put-downs equal his slaps in the face? We cannot get even; this is the inner fatality of all revenge.

Forgiving takes us off the escalator of revenge so that both of us can stop the chain of incremented wrongs. We start over. We start over *as if* the wrongdoer had not hurt us at all. But we start over to begin a new and fairer relationship. We will probably fail again. And we will need to forgive again. The doorway to justice closes time and time again. And forgiveness remains the only way to open the door.

Second, forgiveness brings fairness to the forgiver. It is the hurting person who most feels the burden of unfairness; but he only condemns himself to more unfairness if he refuses to forgive.

Is it fair to be stuck to a painful past? Is it fair to be walloped again and again by the old unfair hurt? Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays. And each time it replays, you feel the clap of pain again. Is this fair?

Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiving sets you free. Forgiving is the only way to stop the cycle of unfair pain turning in your memory.

Why forgive? Forgiving is the only way back to fairness. "Let the SS trooper go to hell," is the word of someone condemned to suffer again and again the unfair pain of the past. To what end?

How Do We Forgive?

I must say something about how we forgive—but I cannot; I do not know how. Charles Williams said that pardon,

Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory.

like love, is ours only for fun; essentially we cannot do it. Maybe we cannot. But we do it anyway—sometimes! Like fumbling amateurs, to be sure, but we do it. Here are three things I have noticed about how people forgive:

They forgive slowly. There are instant forgivers, I suppose, but not many. We should not count on power to forgive bad hurts very quickly.

C. S. Lewis had a monster for a teacher when he was a boy. He hated that academic sadist most of his life. But a few months before the end, he wrote to his American friend: "Dear Mary . . . Do you know, only a few weeks ago, I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I had been trying to do it for years." Essentially, we cannot; but evenutally we do. God takes his time with a lot of things. Why should we not take ours with a hard miracle like forgiving?

They forgive communally. Can anyone forgive alone? I do not think I can. I need people who hurt as I hurt, and who hate as I hate. I need persons who are struggling as hard as I need to struggle before I come through forgivingly. I know only socialized forgiving. It is fine if you can do it all by yourself; but if you are hooked into your videotape of past pain, seek a fellowship of slow forgivers. They may help.

They forgive as they are forgiven. When it comes down to it, anyone who forgives can hardly tell the difference between feeling forgiven and doing the forgiving. We are such a mixture of sinners and sinned against, we cannot forgive people who offend us without feeling that we are being set free ourselves.

I haven't found a better example of this truth than Corrie Ten Boom. She was stuck for the war years in a concentration camp, humiliated and degraded, especially in the delousing shower where the women were ogled by the leering guards. But she made it through that hell. And eventually she felt she had, by grace, forgiven even those fiends who guarded the shower stalls.

So she preached forgiveness, for individuals, for all of Europe. She preached it in Bloemendaal, in the United States, and, one Sunday, in Munich. After the sermon, greeting people, she saw a man come toward her, hand outstretched: "Ja, Fräulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins, just as you say." She remembered his face; it was the leering, lecherous, mocking face of an SS guard of the shower stall.

Her hand froze at her side. She could not forgive. She thought she had forgiven all. But she could not forgive when she met a guard, standing in the solid flesh in front of her. Ashamed, horrified at herself, she prayed: "Lord, forgive me, I cannot forgive." And as she prayed she felt forgiven, accepted, in spite of her shabby performance as a famous forgiver.

Her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of hate melted. Her hand went out. She forgave as she felt forgiven. And I suspect she would not be able to sort out the difference.

Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last! Freed by the only remedy for the inevitability of our history.

To forgive is to put down your 50-pound pack after a 10-mile climb up a mountain.

To forgive is to fall into a chair after a 15-mile marathon.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

To forgive is to reach back into your hurting past and recreate it in your memory so that you can begin again.

To forgive is to dance to the beat of God's forgiving heart. It is to ride the crest of love's strongest wave.

Our only escape from history's cruel unfairness, our only passage to the future's creative possibilities, is the miracle of forgiving. □

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