

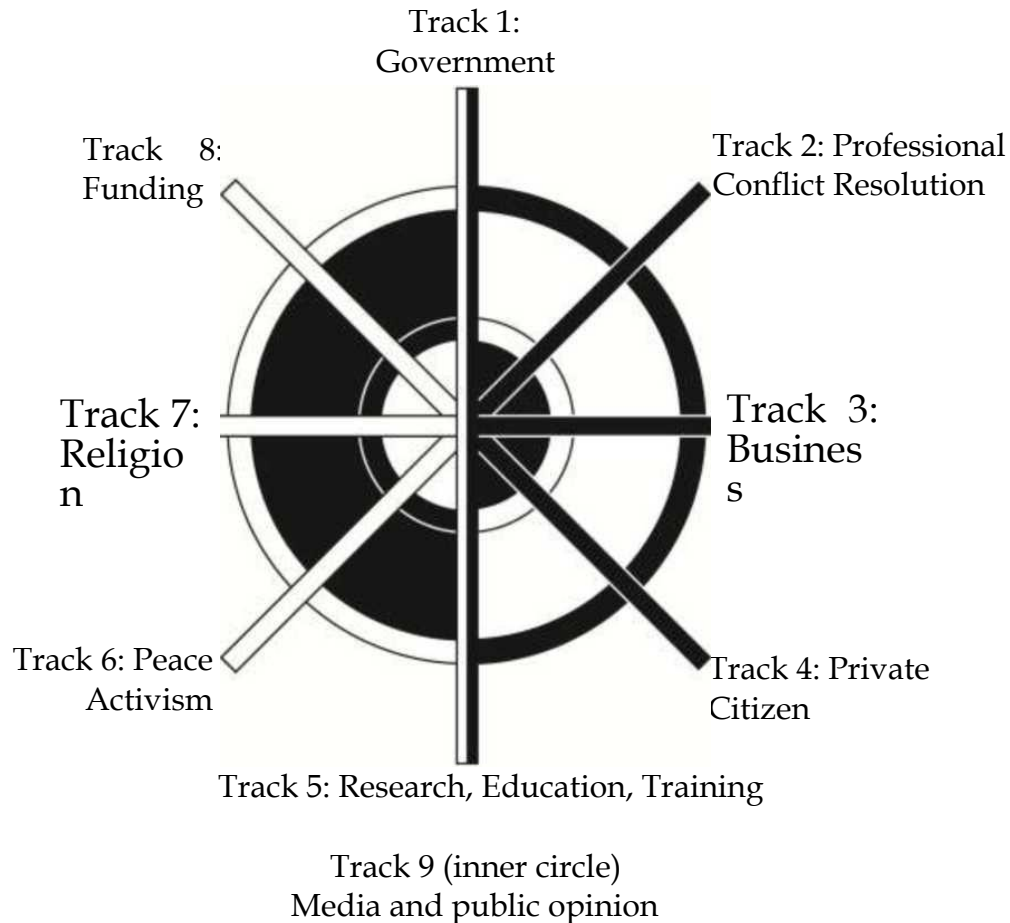
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**The Healing Power of Forgiveness**

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## Abstract

### The Healing Power of Forgiveness

There are many ways to alleviate the symptoms of suffering and pain in the world, but only one way to heal its cause. In this occasional paper, Dr. Eileen Borrís illuminates the nature of forgiveness and examines it in fine detail – as well as common misconceptions about it, showing forgiveness to be the central concept to true healing. She shows that the roots of violence, suffering, and pain are in the unhealed unforgiven wounds that so many people carry with them, and examines the psychological mechanisms by which those wounds persist.

*“Forgiveness is a focus on the present that frees us from the past and opens up the future”*

S.E. Fillipaldi (1982)

### Introduction

To practice forgiveness is one of the most difficult tasks asked of us. Difficult, yet necessary if we want to break destructive cycles of hatred, violence, and ethnic cleansing prevalent throughout the world. How else, except through processes of forgiveness, can we allow healing to occur at its deepest levels? How else can we repair broken relationships, rebuild our communities and our societies, and support diverse cultures in an atmosphere of reconciliation? Human history has witnessed time and again the difficulty of avoiding the overpowering undertow of revenge and resentment and the ensuing hostilities that can bind a society up in its own past. In the global community, there are places where the past holds such a firm grip on the present as to almost choke off the possibilities of living anew. This death grip manifests in places such as ex-Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Africa, and the Middle East. In these places, people kill one another because of their inability and unwillingness to forget the past. For some people, such as the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims of the Balkans, grievances date back to before World War I and beyond, even to the fourteenth century. It is as if the living have been transformed into indignant and vengeful ghosts of the dead. In some cases these past grievances have been artificially revived to realize a political agenda, but the point remains: people everywhere are susceptible to demagogic appeals because of the past's gaping and unhealed wounds.

Shortly after the liberation of France, the philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote:

We have learned history, and we claim that it must not be forgotten. But are we not here the dupes of our emotions? If, ten years hence, we reread these pages and so many others, what will

we think of them? We do not want this year of 1945 to become just another year among many. A man who has lost a son or woman he loved does not want to live beyond that loss. He leaves the house in the state it was in. The familiar objects upon the table, the clothes in the closet mark an empty place in the world. . . . The day will come, however, when the meaning of these books and these clothes will change: Once. . . the clothes were wearable, and now they are out of style and shabby. To keep them any longer would not be to make the dead person live on; quite the opposite, they date his death all the more cruelly. (quoted in Weschler, 1993)

Is our pain partly caused by the fear of forgetting the past, or do we need to remember the past in a different way which allows for the release of its burdens so that we can live in a fresh new way? The task of honoring the past, yet releasing ourselves from its burdens is accomplished through forgiveness.

Hannah Arendt, a Jewish philosopher who wrote a remarkable book, The Human Condition (1958), discussed the importance of forgiveness and its potential role in our public and political realms:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. (p. 237).

People are either the agents or the victims of wrong-doing, or both. Held to the consequences of the past, our lives would be chained down forever. Only through releasing each other from what we have done and a willingness to change our minds and start again can we reconstruct societies. The strength of forgiveness lies in its power to do just that. If those who hold onto grievances cannot forgive, they will never have freedom of vision to create a different society. As Brian Frost (1991) comments:

The power to say 'Enough! We condemn the evil but resume relations with the evildoers!' is a human action which belongs to the array of powers for the building and maintenance of societies. Any power that brings about a reconciliation is a very significant power. . . What more difficult task is there than to build social relationships between humans who have a history of offenses against each other?

It takes courage, strength, and spiritual struggle to rise above the battlefield of our emotions and see the world through eyes of compassion. It takes a spiritual warrior to go beyond fear and hatred to see the soul of the enemy. If we do not learn how to forgive, we will stay stuck in the quagmire of anger, pain, and grief, perpetuating mutual suffering, causing more death and destruction; civil wars in many countries are proof of that. Until we learn to forgive – not turn our back, not remain passive, not condone, but forgive – our fear and anger will be the masters whom we dutifully obey, and peace with our neighbors will always be an

illusion.

## **The Meaning of Forgiveness**

Throughout our lives, most of us have been taught about forgiveness. The word evokes many different connotations, from weakness to high moral standards. What one may not have learned is that forgiveness is an essential part of healing. Forgiveness entails and requires a personal release of anger, pain, and suffering; bringing inner peace as its gift. To forgive is not to permit someone else to get away with murderous acts. This process asks us to look at the totality of who we are, to accept the darkness within ourselves, and to embrace that truth with compassion, understanding, and unconditional love. As we face ourselves with courage and acceptance, we become aware of our humanness. The gift of self-acceptance helps us grow in understanding and compassion, which we can then, ideally, extend to others.

## **Ancient Philosophies**

One finds early expressions of the concept of forgiveness in the ancient Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the Hebrew Bible the word *salah* means "to forgive" (Vine, 1985). It has a spiritual connotation of God's gracious removal of sin or a person's "removing" the misdeeds of another by hiding them from sight (Landman, 1941). Jewish tradition from this perspective views forgiveness as a moral duty because of the doctrine of *imitatio deo*, the imitation of god as forgiver (Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, and Freedman, 1992; Newman, 1987; and Shapiro, 1978). In this light, forgiveness restores the offender to the relation formerly enjoyed with the other person or community. This rejoining involves reciprocal love (Leviticus 19:18) which impacts the affective, behavioral, and cognitive systems of the offended (Deuteronomy, 6:5; Enright, Gassin, and Wu, 1992).

From its inception, the concept of forgiveness involved a process which required a change in one's perceptions and one's judgments. The process began by subtracting elements from the three systems named above. In the affective system, so-called negative emotions such as anger, hatred, contempt, and sadness are given up (Richards, 1988). These emotions are released gradually in a slow process, depending on the individual and the circumstances. Eventually, as the healing process progresses, these emotions are released. As we proceed with our emotional healing, our thoughts and perceptions also begin to change. We stop judging, condemning, and planning revenge. The cognitive changes that take place then filter to our behavior, in which we no longer act out our revenge.

As one continues with this process there is a continuum from negative behaviors to neutral behaviors, finally ending in positive behaviors. We ultimately come to a point where we are willing to help others as a result of our own development of compassion and love regardless of whether there has been acknowledgment by the offender or not. In the cognitive system, the offended may

realize he or she has a right to negative emotions, yet is willing to let them go (North, 1987). The individual chooses to let go of thoughts of revenge and anger he or she holds towards the offender. As one moves along the continuum, more positive thoughts emerge until the offended begins to wish the other person well and ultimately can view him/her with respect and as a moral equal (Cunningham, 1985). Concerning the behavioral realm, one begins to move in the direction of developing a more harmonious community with the other. Instead of refusing to communicate with the offender, the individual is now willing to meet with the offender and develop a new relationship. As the forgiver completes the forgiveness process, he/she experiences an inner release of negative thoughts and feelings and a healed relationship (Augsburger, 1981).

Christianity, which derives many of its teachings from Judaism, views forgiveness in a similar manner. As in Judaism, a Christian imitates the divine process; as one is forgiven by God, one must forgive others (Matthew 18:21-22; Vine, 1985; Enright, Gassin and Wu, 1992). Unconditional love is the foundation of forgiveness impacting the affective, cognitive, and behavioral levels. Forgiveness demonstrates that the sins are sent away, divine punishment is remitted, and harmony between God and the formerly sinful person is restored (Enright, et al, 1992). The New Testament suggests from the teachings of Jesus that forgiveness is the center of the Christian social ethic. The disciples of Jesus understood that forgiveness was a mandate for human beings and not reserved for the divine-human encounter (Frost, 1992; c.f. Arendt).

Silvio Fillipaldi (1982) discusses the similarity between Zen Buddhist and Christian consciousness. He states that the Buddhist doctrine of nonattachment and experience of *satori*, or enlightenment, parallels the Christian doctrine of forgiveness and experience of Christ-consciousness. Both consist of a self-emptying process, of not clinging to the past, of being unattached to grievances, judgments, and rigid values (Hope, 1987). Fillipaldi describes this process in the following:

The mind of Zen is empty-mind. With deep compassion and openness and freshness and clearness of mind, empty-minded persons walk a path that is created by them and given to them as they walk. Unbound by any forms, new forms are created and then left aside. Unattached to the past or future, now the paths are broken and allowed to die. This is Zen-emptiness. As soon as we think we have it, we let it go. . .

Forgiveness is an attitude of lavishness and utter openness. In this context forgiveness of sin is the act whereby one is not bound by the broken-ness of our life together in the world. A forgiving person is not bound by the quite understandable logic of an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, a death for a death. . . . Forgiveness is a focus on the present that frees from the past and opens up the future. (Fillipaldi, 1982 p.75)

It is worth mentioning that although other ancient philosophical systems such as Confucianism do not directly speak of forgiveness, they do speak about mercy and compassion in great detail. The concept of forgiveness is implicit in the

meanings of compassion, equanimity, and altruism, between which little distinction is made. Only in Islam's Koran, which emerged 700 years after Christianity are distinctions made. In Islam, Allah forgives offenses when the person repents, has faith, and performs good works. God's love and his forgiveness are conditional just as person-to-person forgiveness is conditional (The Imrans 3:134; Enright et. al. 1991). Forgiveness in Islam is to give up resentment, blame, and punishment (Sch-he-rie 1984, abstract #12901, p.370). Forgiveness in this regard is the taking away of negative elements, but does not go beyond by adding positive elements thereby seeing the individual in a different light.

### **Modern Definitions**

According to *Webster's Third Edition*, the meaning of forgiveness is "to cease to feel resentment against on accord of wrong committed, to give up claim to requital from or retribution upon an offender." Therefore, forgiveness refers to a voluntary act in which a person makes a decision, a choice about how he or she will deal with an event concerning the past. One of these choices may be based on the belief that a person can judge events and thus can measure the magnitude of an offense and decide that to receive an equal amount of retribution somehow balances the account (Hope, 1987). Another choice is to practice an attitude of forgiveness. This attitude allows one to let go of anger and resentment by deciding to absolve what are perceived as wrongs committed by the other (Hope, 1987). This involves recognizing how one's attitudes and beliefs color the actual situation. These attitudes and beliefs form from our judgments and perceptions. Judgments and perceptions are based on our emotions, needs, and desires at the time of the event. They are not facts, although we want to interpret them as such. The attitude of forgiveness is founded on the understanding that one screens and creates the past through the process of judgment in the same way that one screens and creates the present through the process of perception, and that a person's judgments are subjective and unreliable (Hope, 1987). Therefore, it is through our dual filters of judgment and perception which dictate our reality and not our deeper understanding of the actual event.

A more complete definition, drawn primarily from the work of North (1987), is the following:

Forgiveness is the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender by denying ourselves the right to such affect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them (North, 1987).

There are a few important points to make about this definition. First, the one who forgives must have suffered a deep hurt, such as betrayal, which elicits anger and/or resentment. Although it is clear that the offended person has a right to this resentment, they choose to overcome it. Because of this choice, a new response emerges which results in a change in perception based on understanding,

compassion, and/or love. This response occurs because of their choice and not out of obligation. The paradox is that as an individual lets go of his or her feelings of anger, hatred, or the need for revenge, it is they who are healed. By accepting and coming to terms with what took place, those who can see the situation from a perspective of understanding and compassion can lay the past to rest and experience inner peace.

Some points about forgiveness compiled by Enright et. al. (1992) follow. Because of the complexities involved in understanding forgiveness these points give us a deeper understanding of the concept as described by many of the researchers involved with its study:

1. Forgiveness occurs only between you and someone else. Even though other catastrophes can create deep pain in one's life, one does not forgive a war, a natural disaster, or an inanimate object. The power and effectiveness of forgiveness lies in the fact that it transpires between human beings.
2. Forgiveness follows a deep, personal, long-lasting injury or hurt from another person (Kolnai, 1973-74; Murphy, 1982; Smedes, 1984; Murphhy and Hampton, 1988). For example, the forgiver does not forgive the Nazis for the holocaust unless he or she was personally involved (Gingell, 1984). The willingness to deal with the pain is where our growth and healing takes place. In experiencing our pain we learn to open up our heart to humanity and understand the sufferings of others at a greater level; in other words, we learn compassion.
3. There are some researchers (Enright, et. al., 1992) who believe that the offense is an objective reality and not just a perception of the offended. There are others who believe differently (Kahrhoff, 1988). Kahrhoff's belief is that the event itself is neutral and that we give meaning to the event according to our perceptions. This is an interesting point since our unconscious motivations are strong factors in how we react to the world. Our projections, those unacceptable and painful thoughts and feelings we hold about ourselves and only see in others, create our perceptions. We see the world through our chosen lenses. These lenses, which also serve as a filter for our unconscious needs and desires, give meaning to our life events. This dynamic is important to understand especially in how we create the face of the enemy. Part of the forgiveness process is to own our projections. In embracing the totality of who we are, our perceptions of the world do change. We can not change the event itself, but we can change the meaning we give to the event. This is part of the forgiveness process.
4. Forgiveness is possible only when a person first has a sense of justice. One cannot feel a deep sense of moral injury without a sense of fairness (Hunter, 1978; Kohlberg and Power 1981; Brandsma, 1982). As one gains a deeper understanding of the meaning of forgiveness, justice takes on a new meaning, for we begin to see the world differently.
5. The offender need not apologize. Otherwise, the injured party's healing



from hurt through forgiveness would rely on the offender's regret. Were the offender to die before a change of heart, the other would be trapped in a state of unforgiveness, prolonged pain, and anger (Enright et. al., 1992). If we give a gift to someone, we do not need to wait for a response to know that it was given. For some, (Cunningham, 1985; Downie, 1965; Smedes, 1984; Torrance, 1986) this demonstrates the unconditional characteristics of forgiveness. Others disagree with this premise (Dobel, 1980; Domaris, 1986).

6. Forgiveness is relational in the respect that it is possible to have an offended offender (Beatty, 1970). Victims in other words may also become victimizers.
7. Forgiveness in some cases may not only restore the relationship to its original quality, but enhance that quality (Enright et. al., 1992). This is the healing quality of forgiveness which has the ability to touch our soul and transform our relationships from that which is based in hatred to that which is based in love.

Ultimately, forgiveness can become a way of life. Its transformational power moves us from being a helpless victim of our circumstances to a powerful co-creator of our reality. We learn how to see people with fresh eyes, seeing them anew every day in terms of their future potential, not their past deeds. In becoming more loving, compassionate, and understanding human beings, we gain the ability to have a deeper relationship with ourselves and with the significant people in our lives.

### **Rethinking Forgiveness**

Before we can attain a clearer understanding of forgiveness, we have to clear up some common misperceptions which many people hold about the meaning of forgiveness. Some of these misperceptions center on the terms of "pardon-ing", "reconciliation", and "condoning" (Mawson and Whiting 1923; Webster, 1979).

*Forgiveness is not pardoning.* Forgiveness is an inner emotional release. Pardoning is a public behavioral release. To pardon someone usually involves an authority overseeing laws by which the degree of punishment is established for each violation. When a person who breaks the law has his punishment reduced or suspended, there is a pardon. When officials pardon someone for their wrongdoing, they always reassert that wrong was done. The Hebrew-Christian tradition long ago understood forgiveness in this light (Frost, 1991). It is a way of affirming norms in the very process of seeking to lift from wrongdoers the full penalty due them for their breaking of the norms. Here may lie the misunderstanding of forgiveness. *To forgive the wrongdoer does not mean that you abolish the punishment for what was done.*

*Forgiveness is not condoning:* Certain behaviors, such as unprovoked violence, abuse, and aggression, are totally unacceptable. Sometimes the most com-

passionate acts require taking action to stop the behaviors and to prevent the behavior from happening again. Forgiveness does not mean that you support behaviors which cause pain to yourself or others. It does not mean that you don't take action to change a situation or protect yourself or others. What is important to remember is that forgiveness is a process which happens internally on a personal level. *We do not have to accept someone else's behavior in order to forgive.*

*Forgiveness is not reconciliation:* Forgiveness is a personal internal release which only involves oneself. Forgiveness may be a necessary step in bringing people together to reconcile and includes a willingness to reconcile, but it only involves ourselves. Reconciliation is a coming together of two or more people. I can forgive someone and demonstrate that in my behavior, but I may not reconcile until changes in the offenders behavior take place. *We can forgive someone, but it does not mean we have to reconcile.*

### **The Process of Forgiveness:**

Forgiveness entails owning our pain and taking responsibility for our thoughts and beliefs by cutting through our psychological defenses so that we can change our perceptions. There are certain psychological tasks one must complete to accomplish the forgiveness process. (See Appendix A). This process happens over time and is determined by many factors such as the severity and history of the offense. People enter into this process at different places of readiness depending on the circumstances and the traumas involved. For example, to encourage forgiveness when someone has just been tortured and imprisoned and has not engaged in any emotional healing would be detrimental to the entire process.

The process begins when we allow ourselves to look at our own psychological defenses and to feel the anger, hurt, and pain. Until we are able to do this, we stay trapped in emotional undercurrents. Only when our pain has been acknowledged can we move on and look more closely at what is underneath. In our willingness to look beneath our pain we are taking the first step in breaking the cycle of hatred and fear. This process of self-inquiry requires a willingness to explore the workings and origins of our own defense mechanisms, especially denial and repression, even when we work with trauma, abuse, or in a conflictual situation which appears unresolvable. We use denial and repression to evade our pain and the sadness, anger and guilt which are buried deep within our psyche. Facing our pain gives us courage and strength.

As we walk through our personal psychological gateways, we approach what Carl Jung calls the "shadow": a psychological complex which is present in all human beings (C.G.Jung, 1969 ). It functions as an inner opponent with whom we struggle throughout our lives. What makes some part of our nature a shadow is not its destructiveness; it is the fact that we are unconscious of it. The shadow has an emotional charge and presents a significant moral opposition to the ego-personality. Owning our shadow is a critical step, for by denying these aspects we easily begin to perceive the world as either good or bad. This dichotomy is often

superimposed on other dualities. For example, when these judgments are superimposed on religious, racial, cultural, or national differences; the result is racism, and the prejudices that separate and antagonize people deepen the schisms between "us" versus "them." We judge and attack others, not realizing that what we have attacked in others we have condemned in ourselves. As a result, we can only see our own unacceptable parts in others, setting up situations of discrimination, scapegoating, victimization, and even war.

The role of the shadow in victimization involves a complex of mental, emotional, and social mechanisms by which a person or people claim righteousness and purity and attribute hostility and evil to the enemy (Keen, 1986). The process begins with a splitting of the "good" self, with which we consciously identify, from the "bad" self, which remains unconscious so long as it may be projected onto an enemy. The unacceptable parts of the self such as greed, cruelty, and hostility are examples of "the shadow." These parts are made to disappear and are recognized only as qualities of the enemy. By projecting these qualities onto someone else, we reduce our own anxiety and guilt by transferring to the other all the characteristics one does not want to recognize in oneself. It is maintained by selective perception and recall. We only see and acknowledge those negative aspects of the enemy that support the stereotype we have already created. As Keen (1986) discusses, our projections eliminate in advance any evidence that might contradict its basic assumption about the malevolent intent of the enemy.

A major function of the shadow's role in victimization is to escape from guilt and responsibility and place blame on others. To blame others is rooted in arrested psychological development. Again Keen comments (1986) that to blame is to deny both one's responsibility and one's potency. Blame produces blame, creating a feedback system based on shared delusions. Adversaries engage in a process of dumping their psychological waste on each other, not recognizing that all which we hate in ourselves we are attributing to "them." The process of unconscious projection onto one's enemy is universal, and it explains why we actually "need" enemies. We form a hate bond, and "adversarial symbiosis" (Keen, 1986) that guarantees that neither of us will be faced with our own shadow.

Victimization is always reactionary. It is a drama which takes place between two or more parties who feel powerless to do anything themselves except respond to aggressive initiatives of the other and to demonstrate their superiority. Yet just because we project our vices onto the enemy does not automatically mean the enemy is innocent of these projections. Nevertheless, we can never determine our own degree of complicity in the creation of evil unless we are willing to study the sources of the projections and examine our own motives (Keen, 1986).

One very important reason for working on our shadow is that when we employ our defense mechanisms, especially projection, our shadow remains hidden. An example is Jung's analysis of the phenomenon of Hitler and the Germans: It was Carl Jung's belief that because the German people denied the existence of their shadow, they did not recognize the incarnation of the collective shadow represented by Hitler (C.G. Jung, 1969). The result was that many Ger-

mans, including Jews, simply refused to believe what they heard about the atrocities Nazis committed (C.G. Jung, 1969). For individuals to be susceptible to influence by the collective shadow, there must be some correspondence with the individual's psychic constitution. This correspondence occurs when we are not willing to acknowledge our own shortcomings but instead are quick to judge others for similar faults; or when we feel hatred toward others, not realizing that it is hatred we are really feeling towards our selves. If we are not aware of these dynamics within ourselves and a person of position points to a particular group to be hated, we feel relieved because we can remain in denial about the darkness in our own heart. It is this correspondence that makes us vulnerable to psychopathic demagogues or propagandists.

The psychological defense which keeps us distanced from our feelings is denial, the refusal to accept things the way they are. We do not want to see what is true about ourselves or the situation. Our self-righteousness, pride, feelings of insecurity, or fear are some of the reasons which cloud our ability to see situations clearly. Denial is an important psychological defense to understand since one of the major psychological tasks in learning to forgive is accepting ourselves, others, and situations as they are. When we learn to accept, we learn to forgive, for acceptance is the path of forgiveness.

When we have no awareness at all of our unacceptable feelings or desires, we are using the defense mechanism of repression. We do not necessarily choose to repress our feelings, but do so on an unconscious level when we believe that it would be too unsafe or terrifying to allow those memories or emotions to surface. Unfortunately, when we repress our emotions they usually manifest themselves in other ways, such as in anxiety attacks, physical symptoms, or as negative emotions towards other individuals or groups.

One of the most difficult defense mechanisms to work with is projection. When we use projection, we are disowning our feelings and unconsciously attributing them to others. For example, if we feel hatred toward ourselves and can not accept these feelings, we place these feelings outside of ourselves and say that some person or group hates me. As Jung once said, "projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face" (C.G. Jung, 1969). What we hide about ourselves is what we attribute to the world, and what we see outside is a reflection of our inner feelings. As stated in *A Course in Miracles*, a western spiritual text,

The world you see is what you gave it, nothing more than that. It is the witness of your state of mind, the outside picture of an inward condition. As a man thinketh, so does he perceive. Therefore, seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world (Foundation for Inner Peace, 1971).

Projection distorts perception. Through this defense mechanism we view the world through the eyes of anger, fear, guilt, desires, and needs. We see people only in terms of the past and what we want them to be. Although we consider perception to be an absolute, it is only an interpretation of what we see in this world. "Perception is a continual process of accepting and rejecting, organizing, shifting, and changing" (*A Course in Miracles*, Text, p.41). We introduce psycho-

logical distortions into our perceptions. In this area, Freud was the first to show systematically that the world we experience is not the way it seems; that our perceptions and theoretical understanding of reality are affected and even drastically distorted by unresolved problems that are not even within our awareness (Wapnick p.45). These hidden complexes are projected onto the world, acting as a filter through which we see. Thus, our perceptions often do reflect our unconscious needs and fears.

Defense mechanisms are defensive postures which protect us from fear, anger, pain, and grief. The reason we use defense mechanisms is because of our underlying fear of separation. Since the purpose of defense mechanisms is to keep us from being aware of difficult emotional issues, it takes commitment and the use of our will to see our behavior more honestly. The very fact that we can be so blind to our own defenses is because we fear we would be overwhelmed. Beneath our defenses are strong negative emotions needing to be confronted and released, not harbored. When we do not justify or condemn our feelings, they lead us to an emptiness that can only be filled by love. When we do not feel our pain, our heart hardens; this inability to empathize is the beginning of the creation of the enemy. The challenge is to own our defenses and experience our feelings so we will be able to reinterpret past events and recognize how our thinking and perceptions may have been distorted.

As we move along in the forgiveness process, we eventually need to acknowledge our feelings of guilt. Guilt is the psychological experience of everything we have judged as being unacceptable within ourselves. It is the belief that there is something inherently wrong with us, and that, because of our reprehensible nature, we need to be punished. Guilt is extremely important to understand because it is a very strong motivating factor in our behavior. In this context, the meaning of guilt is not just the feeling that we did something we should not have done, or didn't do something which should have been done. Guilt is defined as all the negative beliefs we hold about ourselves, our feelings of unworthiness, our insecurities, inadequacies, self-hate, and so forth. Just experiencing the slightest tinge of guilt makes us feel so uncomfortable that we will do just about anything to avoid facing it, so we employ our defense mechanisms to hide the pain which threatens us with feelings of separateness. We deny our feelings of guilt, those painful negative thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves, and instead only see them in someone else. Thus we attack and blame others for the weaknesses we cannot accept in ourselves, becoming blind to our own shortcomings.

After we have acknowledged our anger and fear and let our pain be pain, we have to begin to look at what is it within ourselves that is preventing us from further healing. Looking within is a very difficult step because it requires that we face our denial and projections, which we have fought so hard not to see. This part of the process entails the recognition that what we have attacked and judged in another is indeed what we have attacked and judged within ourselves. When we finally can look at the guilt within ourselves, and admit to ourselves the truth of our feelings, we stop blaming others for our thoughts and deeds. We are able to

acknowledge our projections, and instead of placing our guilt on others, realize that this only serves to conceal our hurt and pain rather than to heal it. As long as we are only focused on other people or external circumstances, we will be diverted from the true source of the problem, which ultimately is our own feelings of guilt. We also add to our guilt whenever we have judged someone else, for that thought becomes internalized as a judgment about ourselves. For example, if I hate something in you, that hatred remains in me. If I cannot face you, it is because I cannot face myself. If I find you reprehensible, it is because I cannot deal with my own guilt or shame. Whatever we see in someone else is a reflection of something we have trouble accepting in ourselves. We come to realize that if we had not first projected our guilt by attacking others through our judgments or actions, we would have no reason to forgive. This way we can use our defense mechanisms for learning, especially when we recognize that the guilt we project onto others is the same guilt we nurture within ourselves.

Contained within our guilt are our wounds, the parts of us that feel very vulnerable and which tap into all the negative feelings we have about ourselves. When we feel attacked by someone, that sensitive part of ourselves is touched, but the attacking person is not the cause of the woundedness. Because perceptions and beliefs are interpretations filtered through our emotions, what we see does not really exist. It is our interpretation which is the problem, and therefore the interpretation needs to be changed. The woundedness existed long before the incident occurred. If we felt secure and loving within ourselves, the attack would have had no effect on us. Therefore, our perceptions of the attacker would be different. We would recognize his or her weakness and act accordingly. This is not to say that others do not commit wrongful acts, but we are able to see these actions in a different light, and that the attacker's actions come from an inner place of weakness.

Ken Wapnick, in his book *Forgiveness and Jesus* (1983), describes the process of projection using the image of a movie projector, our guilt being the film which runs through the machinery of our mind. Wapnick says that we see the people who move across the screen filtered through this projected guilt. Those personal attributes we find most objectionable within ourselves we see somewhere else and attack, rather than acknowledging the truth about ourselves. In forgiveness, we reverse this process. Instead of placing our negative feelings on someone else and blaming them for our miseries, we begin to own our projections by saying that the problem is not out there, but within me. Those people are not terrible monsters. I only see them through the lenses of my negative emotions, and I realize that they may also be acting from a place of weakness.

A distraction which keeps us from self exploration is holding on to the past— especially other people's past mistakes. Here again, if we focus on their guilt, we do not have to look at our own guilt. Being stuck in the past means not taking responsibility for the present. Regardless of our reasons and justifications, when we hold on to the past we are saying that we want to remain a victim and we are choosing not to have peace. We do not want to change; we are not willing

to experience something beyond our fear and guilt.

While at this point in the forgiveness process we have not come to the resolution of our guilt, we are taking the necessary first step. We are looking at our defenses, especially projection, and are beginning to question the use of our anger. Anger is used in this case to cover up our feelings of guilt by seeing the faults and shortcomings in someone else.

As the forgiveness process proceeds, we begin to re-examine the relationship we have with ourselves and our higher nature. This is the turning point in the forgiveness process. As long as we believe ourselves to be separate from our higher nature, and therefore victims to guilt and fear, it becomes psychologically impossible to experience anything else. The love that is within us and which can be given to others is hidden behind the veils of guilt and hate, just as peace cannot be experienced where there is fear and conflict.

At this point we begin to look at this relationship differently. We begin to examine the premises of the ego in relation to our spiritual Self, which is a source of our love. The idea that there is a part of ourselves which does not condemn us and is composed of love, is very threatening to our ego. This questioning also allows us to re-examine our belief in our own guilt, and to recognize that the guilt we feel is also a choice. We can abandon our investment in the thinking of the ego, and choose instead to identify with our real Self. This step thus questions our decision to be guilty, now that it has been brought to our awareness. We can decide now to abandon our investment in the ego as our self and our creator, choosing to identify instead with our real Self.

As we take responsibility for life in this way, we learn to accept life as it is. We do not look towards others for change, and we thus stop using others as an excuse for why we ourselves cannot grow. If change comes at all, it comes from within, growth being our own responsibility. Once we become more aware of our feelings and how we use our defense mechanisms, then we might begin to see how our emotions, especially our fear and our desires, influence what we believe and what we see. With greater insight, we become more aware of how some of our perceptions and beliefs developed. The more we understand desire and fear, the more we become free of their compulsions. As we begin to grow in understanding of forgiveness, we will recognize that forgiveness is about seeing through the eyes of love instead of the eyes of fear. This involves a different way of looking at the world, a more objective way, without being attached to what we see.

With greater insight and awareness we realize that there are many ways of looking at any situation – and we have only one of them. Listening to others and respecting their ideas and experiences helps us to open to a wider spectrum of reality. As Paul Ferrini (1991) says: "Forgiveness enables us to open up the doors of our conceptual prison and walk free into the light of day. It helps us understand the limits of our knowledge so that together we can move into the unknown".

This is where compassion begins to grow and has a direct relationship to the process of forgiveness. In other words, there has to be a sense of

compassion for us to want to understand the other side. Muller-Fahrenholz writes:

Compassion bears the pain of the past. It does no longer try to accuse, to suppress, to condemn, to refuse. It allows the memories to uncover the origins of shame and hurt. Such memories will bring deep sorrow. But it is through such sorrow and grief that we set each other free from the chains of past wrongs so that we may freely move towards a new future together.(1989)

Once we have come to these insights, we experience a change of heart and forgiveness becomes a viable option. As we grow in compassion and work through our own defenses, we begin to see the wrongdoer differently. We release our need to be right and walk the path of forgiveness by recognizing that we are more alike than different. Given similar circumstances, we all react in similar ways. We have all hurt people because we have reacted from our own inadequacies. The gift that compassion gives us is to absorb our pain.

Forgiveness is a process which ultimately involves both sides of any wrong- doing – the injured and the injurer. How that process begins is different for each one of us. In some cases, a third party who provides trust and protection may be the catalyst for change. Whatever the process, it is the victim who forgives, and by the act of forgiving, the victim who had been made into an object and treated as sub-human once again becomes master of his or her own destiny.

Forgiveness does not only happen between two parties, but is often of a triadic nature. Because we are so enmeshed in our ego we may need an outside "third" factor which enables us to step out of one system of thinking based in fear and guilt to a new system of thinking which allows us to see the world differently (Muller-Fahrenholz, 1989; Wapnick, 1983). The willingness to call on a "third factor" completes the forgiveness process. The "third factor" may be a specific element of strength, faith, or trust which makes us sufficiently free from the feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and distrust so we can be at peace with ourselves. This "third factor" may be characterized as the transcending and contingent element in interpersonal relationships, the spark of courage to open up, that moment of daring and trusting which causes the heart to jump over the barrier. It is this surprising energy which dismantles the dividing walls between us. Call it God, the Holy Spirit, compassion, or faith in our common humanity, we need this factor to complete the forgiveness process. We can only prepare our mind by recognizing what we do not want, and then we must invite this third factor to help us transcend our fearful ways of thinking and acting. It is in our communion with this third force that we experience an internal emotional release which frees us from the past and brings inner peace to our lives.

As we begin to see the world with a new vision, problems become learning opportunities, which in turn become our lessons of forgiveness. Through our higher nature, expressions of anger are transformed in our thinking as cries for help. Thus our view of this world begins to change. Since what we perceive is a matter of perception, not the situation itself, our experience reflects what we have



chosen to see and not a thing itself, as it is. We can choose to see the world through the eyes of anger, guilt, and fear, and stay trapped in hatred, or we can choose to see the world through the eyes of forgiveness and live a life of inner peace.

### **The Meaning of Injustice and Suffering**

As our perceptions change, so too does our understanding of the meaning of injustice and suffering. The more able and willing we are to acknowledge and understand our own psychological defenses, the greater our comprehension of the truth of the meaning of injustice and suffering. We begin this understanding by grasping the dynamics of anger.

Anger that we direct towards others indicates our attempt to change their behavior so that we do not have to acknowledge our own short-comings. We have judged our short-comings to be unacceptable to us, so we make others feel guilty in order to get them to stop what they are doing. We can recognize this behavior on a personal level when someone is directly hostile to us, and also on an international level when we see innocent people being oppressed or persecuted. No one would deny the need to intervene so that injustice is corrected and people do not suffer, but first we must understand the meaning of injustice and suffering and who the real intervening agent would be in a situation requiring external help.

Our first reaction to someone being treated unjustly, whether it be ourselves, significant others in our lives, or people living in foreign countries, is to believe that the perpetrator is bad and should be punished. The lesson we are teaching, then, is that people should not hurt others because it makes us angry, and we do not approve of it or them. These actions are "evil" and therefore, so are the people committing them. For these people to become good (so that we can approve of them), they must stop what they are doing. Therefore, once the perception of injustice is made, no alternative can follow but that of a judgment that subtly sets up the conditions of "love". Either people behave in accordance with our values, or they are denied salvation. This is an example of the arrogance of the ego; we presume to know absolutely what is right and best.

If, on the other hand, we perceive acts of injustice as arising from weakness and fear and as calls for help, we can recognize that this injustice is not necessarily evil. The lesson we wish to teach, therefore, is that everyone is worthy of our love, regardless of their actions. A person who feels love within himself would want to demonstrate this love to those who do not know it. This is not to say that you allow the injustice to continue or approve of the actions of the victimizer. It is not a command to act or not to act. It is simply a different way to think about the situation. It is a kind of thinking which recognizes the importance of expanding the circle of help to include not only those who suffer, but also the ones who seem to be causing suffering. If we begin from a starting point which excludes the victimizer, then we are manifesting an unconscious need to find a scapegoat so that our own guilt can be projected.

One of the most compelling illustrations of the power of love in the face of suffering and injustice is that of *The Hiding Place*, written by Corrie Ten Boom. In this book, Ten Boom describes her experiences with her family during their internment in a German concentration camp. The Ten Booms were a very devout Christian family who played a key role in the resistance in Holland. As the Germans took over free Holland and hatred grew, this family was motivated by love to become involved in saving Jews. They did what ever they could to provide food, shelter, and strength to those who were fleeing from Hitler's forces. Eventually, a trap was set and the family was discovered by the Gestapo. The Ten Booms paid a price for their altruism in the darkness of the concentration camps under very inhumane conditions. Confronted by the daily brutality of the German soldiers and the intense sufferings of those around them, Corrie and her sister came to the realization that if they were to be true to their Christian faith they must forgive their Nazis tormentors, seeing them as their brothers and the brothers of those who were suffering. This was extremely difficult for them to do, yet their story describes their struggles to demonstrate what the love of God truly meant. Corrie and Betsie felt that life in Ravensbruck was a faith-building experience enabling them to share God's strength and forgiveness with the other prisoners. One day, after observing a guard whipping a feeble-minded girl who had soiled herself, Corrie whispered to Betsie:

What can we do for these people? Afterward, I mean. Can't we make a home for them and care for them and love them?

Corrie, I pray every day that we will be allowed to do this! To show them that love is greater.

"And it wasn't until I was gathering twigs later in the morning," Corrie writes, "that I realized that I had been thinking of the feeble-minded girl, and Betsie of their persecutors." (1971, pp. 209 f.)

Corrie's father and her sister Betsie died in the concentration camps. Betsie's last words before her death were the words that compelled Corrie to talk about forgiveness and to share what she learned during the darkness of her experience. Corrie survived, and despite the horrific conditions she endured, she went on to teach the messages that she and Betsie taught in prison. The following is a story of an experience Corrie had after teaching this message one Sunday morning.

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy's plain-blanché face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and

bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, *Frauliein*' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

His hand thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people of Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His.

When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

The power which helps us resume relationships with the "evildoer" is grace. Grace is that inexplicable power which comes from God, by whatever name we call Him, giving us the ability to forgive when we feel that within our hearts forgiveness was humanly impossible. In an instant we are moved from a heart in bondage to experiencing a wellspring of love for our enemy. Grace is experiencing the power of God-given love working in us and through us. In these moments, we are able to accept someone for who they are, not what they have done. When forgiveness happens as a result of grace, we experience the power of something greater than our small selves working in us and through us. When it happens, we feel the power and presence of a higher intervention that transforms our relationships as we experience an outpouring of inexplicable love.

This story beautifully illustrates how we must begin to confront injustice by confronting our attitudes, for our behavior flows from our thoughts. Central to this issue is our understanding of suffering. It is one of the more convincing illusions of the world that suffering is the effect of what has been done to us; that our pain is the result of causes beyond our control (Wapnick, 1983):

Suffering is an emphasis upon all that the world has done to injure you. . . Like a dream of punishment, in which the dreamer is unconscious of what brought on the attack against himself, he sees himself attacked unjustly and by something not himself. He is the victim of this 'something else,' a thing outside himself, for which he has no reason to be held responsible. ((Foundation for Inner Peace, 1971 p.539)

People do suffer unjustly and experience psychological and physical pain, yet we think that the only cause for our suffering is what is done to us in the external world. Beyond this level of pain is another level of which we are very much unaware. Our deeper pain comes from the mistaken interpretation of reality, not from what that reality is (Wapnick, p.98). It comes from our strong identification with our limited self, and thus, our disregard of our Spiritual self. Although people and circumstances can create situations which lead to suffering, we alone are responsible for our own beliefs concerning these circumstances. Our thoughts and beliefs can cause us our greatest pain or bring us healing. There is no cause beyond yourself that can reach down and bring oppression. No one but you affects yourself.

Suffering is the *effect* of our belief in the ego or false self, which is its *cause*. Thus, whenever we choose to identify the cause of our suffering as external to us – be it another's attack, the cruel vagaries of fate, or the injustices done to us in the past – we are falling into the ego's trap of denying the true cause of our problems, the ego itself, by hiding it behind the projected causes of the world. . . . Healing, whether individual or social, that does not have as its ultimate aim the reawakening of the spiritual self will eventually fail. Therefore, when we react to suffering we should not focus on another's weakness. Rather, we should unite with his strength, the spiritual essence which is in all of us. If we don't, then we are uniting with someone's form of darkness rather than the light of the spirit which always shines. In practicing true empathy we are identifying with another's compassion and strength – the light of the soul – rather than with one's cruelty and weakness – the darkness of the soul (Wapnick, 1983).

### **Forgiveness, the gift of starting over**

Can forgiveness become a political virtue? Some people, including those in the political realms, search for new relations with each other all the time. They may not talk in terms of understanding, compassion, or forgiveness, but that does not mean that these virtues are not to be strived for. The question of what global society needs in order to recover from past sufferings so as to reach new, shared goals is repeated often. In answer to this, Hannah Arendt states (1958) that there are two primary requirements: the ability of people to make agreements to live reciprocally in new ways that contrast to the ways of the past, and the freedom to enter into these agreements with integrity, setting aside not the memory, but the continuing hostility and need for retribution associated with the memory of the painful past. This setting aside is what Arendt calls forgiveness.

Everyday, we are either victims or victimizers, creating more pain, suffering, and fragmentation in our societies. We may not want to acknowledge this, but memories are constantly being created which keep us wedded to the past, supporting out retribution. The most profound way of healing our divisions is through forgiveness. Reconciliation cannot take place unless there is repentance on the side of the guilty and a giving up of "righteousness" on the side that has been victimized. Arendt believes that

Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can humans remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new...

Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing it from its consequences both the one who forgives and one who is forgiven.

Forgiveness viewed in this light describes a process which goes beyond social integration and in addition facilitates social change.

Robert Frost once said, "To be social is to be forgiving (1979)." Getting past our past is a prerequisite for entering our future. Brian Frost (1991) comments that new justice in politics is often crippled because the agents and victims of old injustice cannot repair the breach between them. Forgiveness allows us to repair that breach. Forgiveness may not guarantee that we will survive each other, but without it, our capacity to bring greater pain only increases.

To learn how to forgive requires coming together; it cannot be done in isolation. We have created our own world and our own reality, but this creation has been done largely on an unconscious level. To survive requires that we emerge from the darkness of our own individual minds and find the courage to embrace our common true nature. The challenges we face globally are so severe that we may have to undergo nothing less than a transformation of consciousness

## **Appendix A**

### **Psychological Variables Engaged in the Process of Forgiving Another**

1. Examination of psychological defenses (Kiel, 1986).
2. Confrontation of anger; (the point is to release, not harbor, the anger)(Trainer, 1981).
3. Acknowledgment of shame, when this is appropriate (Patton, 1985).
4. Awareness of cathexis (Droll, 1984).
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal (the thoughts we repeat to ourselves) of the offense (Droll, 1984).
6. Insight that the injured party may be comparing self with the injurer (Kiel, 1986)
7. Insight into a possibly altered "just world" view (Flanigan, 1987).
8. A change of heart/conversion/new insights that old resolutstrategies are not working (North, 1987).
9. A willingness to explore forgiveness as an option.
10. Commitment to forgive the offender (Neblett, 1974).

11. Reframing, through role-taking, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context (Smith, 1981).
12. Empathy toward the offender (Cunningham, 1985).
13. Awareness of compassion, as it emerges, toward the offender (Droll, 1984).
14. Acceptance/absorption of the pain (Bergin, 1988).
15. Realization that self has needed others' forgiveness in the past
16. Realization that self has been, perhaps, permanently changed by the injury (Close, 1970).
17. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect, if this begins to emerge, toward the injurer (Smedes, 1984).
18. Awareness of internal, emotional release (Smedes, 1984).

Note: This table is an extrapolation from Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991). The references at the end of each item are prototypical examples or examples or discussions of that item.

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