

Thoughts about Forgiveness

By Sherry Niermann, Executive Director, Mary's Hope Workshops

The most loaded word in the healing journey for those of us, who are adult survivors of sexual trauma, is the word “forgiveness”. It is quite possible the most misused and misunderstood theological concept with which survivors deal. It struck terror in my heart.

I heard friends and family members say, “Why don’t you just forgive, forget and get on with your life?” I wonder why that question is so frequently asked of a survivor. Perhaps it is because others are uncomfortable thinking about such evil perpetrated on children. Perhaps it is because folks want me to forgive, to relieve their own feelings of disgust and horror. Perhaps they ask me to be about forgiving the perpetrators in hopes that my pain will disappear, and I’ll return to some level place, which is recognizable and familiar to them. The statement, “Just forgive!”, implies it’s simple... “Just do it. One step and it’s done”. And when I couldn’t ‘just do it’, I believed there was something wrong with me. It proved to me that I was indeed flawed, a mistake of Creation. My shame increased as my experiences of evil in my abuse were minimized. How am I to “just forgive” evil? My humiliation deepened when there was little or no attempt to understand my feelings or my reactions. I was devastated when my very integrity was called into question.

Some survivors do listen to those other voices and try to go to forgiveness immediately, before they have even begun their healing journey. They think they can start and end with forgiveness. They want to believe that if they can just forgive the perpetrators, they could escape all the painful work of healing and move on... “If I can just forgive and forget, then it won’t hurt anymore.” And, oh my, each of us wants the pain to go away!

I found myself caught up in what my faith community said forgiveness must look and sound like. I heard my faith leader say “You must forgive your abuser!” Over and over again, I asked myself the same questions: “How can I stand before my creator when I can’t forgive? How can I call myself a believer when I am unable to turn the other cheek and love my abuser? How can I say the Lord’s Prayer?” Contradiction upon contradiction surrounded me here. “How can I have any relationship with the Sacred, when I can’t do this one thing?” Survivors tell us that when they can’t forgive the way they have been taught in the faith community, they feel invisible in God’s eyes. Faced with such spiritual failures, survivors sometimes feel there is no place for them in the community of faith... and quite frequently leave.

The process of forgiveness is just that, a process, not begun and ended on any timetable. It takes as long as it takes. It is a spiral, with aspects visited and revisited over and over at deeper and deeper levels. It began before I was ever aware of it. I was drawn toward it by the hunger, the emptiness in my soul. I realize that I had resisted the very idea of forgiveness, because I could not take the first step on the forgiveness spiral. I

could not forgive myself. I had to stop blaming myself for the abuse; I had to put the guilt where the guilt belonged. I had to hear God's voice in my heart saying, "It's not your sin!" When I stopped hating myself for what had happened to me, when I stopped loathing that little child because her body responded, when I stopped viewing that child as sin-filled, I was able to view the events of my life from the creator's perspective. I was able to begin to forgive myself. When I did, then I was able to ask forgiveness for the unhealthy choices I made that arose from my abuse. As self-judgment about my past was released, there was a quiet transformation within myself. A gentleness filled me as I looked with love upon the child whom I had been and I felt love for myself for the first time in my life.

Diane, my co-director here at Mary's Hope Workshops, when she had worked on her own self-forgiveness, began focusing her efforts into forgiving her abusers. She got so frustrated with the struggle to wrap herself around what that looked like, felt like, sounded like, that finally something snapped inside, and she said, "Forget it, God! I can't do this!! It's impossible... God, you do it!" And when she said that, she said, something happened within her. "Voila.... There it was staring me in the face. I had looked at forgiveness from the wrong viewpoint. I missed what forgiving is all about! I didn't have to say 'It's okay, I forgive you.' ...to my abusers. Forgiveness is about giving my memories, my feelings, and the events of the abuse to God. Forgiveness is about my letting the Creator heal those places in me - body, mind and spirit - where Evil touched me. As I did that, I was able to give the judgment of my abusers to the Holy. I was able to let the Creator have what is the Creator's."

When I consider forgiveness this way, it was like a light was turned on in my darkness. I saw that to *forgive* really means **for me to give to the Holy**. I know that as I do that I will be freed of the hatred, the anger, and the guilt - free of those poisons that keep me separated from the Sacred. Holding onto the judgments, the anger, the bitterness and other negative feelings, leaves me no space for connection with my God Spirit, no place for integration of self, and no place for transformation. All those sacred places will remain filled with dark feelings and images, until I am able to give them away. Forgiveness is about giving away everything that pollutes my ability to receive anything divine. Forgiveness is about my being open, about being ready to receive.

So it really seems that the forgiveness piece is for me to give all that crap to my Creator ... and through doing that to set myself free. It seems necessary that I let go, release, for-give and thus free myself deeper and deeper, as I move around the forgiveness spiral. If I am open to this kind of forgiveness, then release can happen, letting go can happen, and finally grief can happen. I will be free of the stranglehold of the abuse.

I have been asked the question, "Is it necessary to forgive in order to fully heal?" I would say "Yes!" Yes, as I have described for-give-ness. I think I must give to the creator everything about that evil, and those events that have polluted my soul. I must be open to the work of the divine within me and outside me, and beyond me. But it is important to state here that forgiveness does not mean reconciliation. I do not have to

have or seek or even want a relationship with my abuser. That may happen, but it is not necessary for my soul to feel free. And isn't it interesting the word "Forgive" has a Greek derivation meaning "to let go, to set free". Here's the concept of forgiving on equal footing with both the secular and the theological communities.

I wish I could tell you that I am have done all my forgiveness work. But I cannot. However, I have begun. I have freed myself of my own hatred, and I now love the child I was and honor who I am becoming... and I'll take that for today. And as for the rest of it...fuller forgiveness is my Hope.

And I'll keep showing up and doing the work. It IS a process that I will continue to address, one step at a time