

Forgiveness: the blessed 'F' word

BY KATHY SPOONER

When asked by United Christian Broadcasters (UCB) to do a radio interview on forgiveness, I was struck by the interviewer's reference to forgiveness as 'the F word'. This was a term also adopted by Marina Cantacuzino, the journalist who in 2004 founded The Forgiveness Project, as the title for an exhibition of people's stories and art exploring forgiveness as a healing process. The colloquial use of the other 'F word' has expressive power and is transgressive and offensive. Why should those who are interested in forgiveness be playfully borrowing this abbreviation? Maybe because we can think of forgiveness as transgressive because it goes against ideas of natural justice, and risks giving a green light to repeat offences (if we are to be forgiven, what is to stop us doing the same act again?). We might also think of forgiveness as offensive because it is seen to undermine the experience of the victim. How can the [insert your worst idea of a crime] be forgiven? What an outrage, to ask a victim to consider forgiveness in these circumstances.

As I prepared, I was reminded of my own struggles with finding forgiveness regarding a particular situation. As a Christian, being stuck in a state of unforgiveness has been a difficult place to inhabit – and although I can desire for it to be different and pray for the ability to forgive wholeheartedly – for now I can only hold the hope that one day the stone in my heart softens. My felt sense is that I am stuck with unspent traumatic grief about a time of suffering at the hands of another. It has none of the energy or fire of desire for revenge or justice which is normally attributed to lack of forgiveness.

As I reflected, I realised that forgiveness flows easily in many other places in my life, certainly for those I love, smoothing over the various hurts and disappointments, oiling the wheels of relationships. It is a peaceful response in everyday encounters and petty slights, relying on empathy and the desire for calm in stressful encounters with others. I trust that I am similarly forgiven in return; a reciprocal flow of grace and goodwill within the caring communities I find myself in.

Awareness of these very different experiences of my ability to forgive is somewhat at odds with a religious upbringing that saw forgiveness as a moral prescriptive and understood the dynamic of forgiveness as a choice of will. There was little acknowledgement of the need to, or allowance for time to, process hurt or loss. Unforgiveness was a perilous place to inhabit – a place of shame and condemnation.

I have seen this elsewhere in church settings, where people are encouraged to make a cognitive decision to

forgive, without any space to process hurt and loss or to seek justice. There is nothing wrong with deciding to forgive, it's just that forgiveness is a multi-layered process, and it may take considerable time for the rest of the body to catch up with what can be a premature setting of the mind. Understanding more about the process is important if we are to enable and foster it.



Why does forgiveness matter? Christianity and psychology intersect on an axis which recognises the importance and value of forgiveness as a process benefitting humankind. Research suggest that forgiveness lowers anxiety and depression, enhances a sense of personal freedom, and where appropriate, heals fractured relationships. Forgiveness is deeply embedded in human and divine experience, a response of transcendent grace that moves us beyond hurt and loss, generating agency, optimism, and hope. It is a response that releases us from being bound by harm that has been done. Energy that may have been misspent in seeking revenge, for example, can be invested in supporting others who have been wounded and who grieve unjust losses, or simply in getting on with trying to live life in its fullness. Receiving forgiveness from others, and especially the fierce tenderness of loving forgiveness from God (or a person's sense of the divine) can help us, in turn, attune with our own capacity for self-compassion and self-forgiveness. Almost universally the experience of being forgiven is redemptive and restorative – and features in all major religions. Christians are encouraged to forgive without limit (Mathew 18:12) and to not hold any record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:1).

We can take on trust that there are spiritual, psychological, and social benefits in being people who forgive. It is a virtuous



process. However, the downside is that it can mute the voices of those who have been harmed, shifting the focus of empathy and understanding onto the perpetrator. Historically we can see that this has contributed to perpetuating injustice and harm especially in the contexts of domestic, sexual, racial, and church abuse. So as with the other 'F word', we need to be careful how we use it in conversations.

Forgiveness seems way down the list on the agenda of contemporary cultural discourse. There is a lot of media energy focussed with intense scrutiny on public figures in the interest of accountability. This may be a necessary counter to decades of cover-up – so that we have a rightful exposure of, and moral indignation at, wrongdoing. However, there is also a noticeable parallel in popular culture where the social media radar is set high to detect offence, and the assertion of individual rights can too easily become entrenched in a default 'victim response', where at the extreme there is no hurt too slight to be overlooked. There is little public space for those who wish both to stand in solidarity with victims of harm and to explore other responses or viewpoints, because of fears about accusations of 'fraternising with the enemy'. I exaggerate to make a point, but the glimpse this culture gives us of an unforgiving society can seem hostile and bleak.

Maybe now is a very good time to bring 'the F word' back into general and specifically therapeutic conversations as a counterpoint to these dominant narratives. We can rediscover forgiveness as something to offer those at a loss to know how to work through moral, psychological, spiritual injuries and unreconciled loss. As a Christian counsellor, because of the strong associations between Christianity and forgiveness, I have been nervous of placing forgiveness as an overt or covert therapeutic goal, as I feared that a client may receive the message that I believe that they ought to forgive. Am I however, in this hesitancy, depriving a client of the potential psychological/spiritual benefits of forgiveness, and therefore not serving them well? The literature suggests that psychologists and counsellors in secular settings feel freer to speak of forgiveness in therapeutic practice because they do not have this same fear of imposing a moral imperative; rather, they focus on its proven benefits to wellbeing.

EXPLORING FORGIVENESS – WHAT IS IT?

For those of us who, like me, wish to feel more comfortable introducing the concept of forgiveness as a therapeutic exploration with clients, I offer some helpful ways to think about what forgiveness is and isn't. These include correctives to simplistic notions of forgiveness which we may have grown up with; for example, the marrying of forgiveness with forgetting. The following are ideas widely expressed in the literature about what forgiveness is and is not, which are hopefully familiar to most readers.

Forgiveness is associated with self-preservation (i.e., it's better for us than alternatives), as well as virtue and the valuing of a greater good. It is characterised by the willingness to give up

- anger and the actions that might spring from it, such as revenge or vengeance
- resentment and negative judgement about those who have unjustly harmed us.

Forgiveness does not mean however that

- events did not happen, no longer matter and can or should be 'wiped away' and forgotten or excused
- trust in perpetrators should be restored, and reconciliation worked towards
- emotional wounds are healed and suffering ceases
- change, reparation, and safeguarding are not needed
- justice should not be pursued.

What seems most salient is getting the timing right. To speak prematurely of forgiveness can interrupt the necessary task of processing what has happened which at best deflects attention away from the person who has been harmed, and at worst can be experienced as further wounding. A person can feel they have not been heard, that what happened to them or someone they loved has been devalued; its significance overlooked.

EXPLORING FORGIVENESS: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Through the work of Marina Cantacuzino and The Forgiveness Project, we are invited, through personal stories, into a deeper understanding of the process of forgiveness and the variety of ways people have arrived at a place of forgiveness. It seems a messy, fluid, non-linear process: unique for each person and situation. For one person, for example, whose story is published on the website, there is a moment of awareness in the shower one morning, that he had forgiven those who imprisoned and tortured him. For another, a longer, slower, process was precipitated by the unexpected opportunity to meet and develop a friendship with the man who killed her father.

Forgiveness emerges in these stories as a fully embodied and emergent experience, rather than a decision-making process – although sometimes the experience starts with a person deciding to forgive (normally because instinctively they know they would be more at sea without something to anchor them), that initiates a longer process of coming to terms with what has happened to them and what it means.

After many years of curating these stories of forgiveness, and working on restorative justice programmes, Marina Cantacuzino believes that, those who can forgive tend to demonstrate the capacity for:

Curiosity – having an enquiring mind, wanting to understand why something had happened so that you can begin to make meaning from it.

Perception change – the ability to shift perspective and see the world through a wider lens or in a different way, letting go of any attachment to being 'right'.

Finding empathy – refusing to demonise or dehumanise the other person, trying to place yourself in their shoes, recognising that we are part of a shared humanity.

Letting go of resentment – setting down the heavy burden of bitterness, giving up the power of being morally superior, and the desire to collect what is owed.



Making meaning – transforming the experience of adversity into one that is significant and woven into a new narrative of your life.

Self-reflection – the above rely on a capacity for self-reflection, which can be transformative.

WORKING WITH FORGIVENESS IN THERAPY

It is always good practice to reflect on our own beliefs and experiences of forgiveness and what has contributed to these. We need to understand from a professional perspective what benefit to the client working with forgiveness will bring, and the risks involved. We need to carefully discern appropriateness and optimum timing if we as therapists are the ones to introduce forgiveness into therapeutic conversation. Some clients will of course come with struggles of forgiveness as their primary concern.

If we are to nurture forgiveness, initiatives such as The Forgiveness Project point us towards the power of narrative and creative approaches in helping clients with their experiencing of steps towards forgiveness. As we accompany clients in telling their stories we need to give space for grieving losses, processing trauma, and working through the existential concerns these give rise to, before we begin to consider the value of forgiveness. Crucially we need to be mindful of clients' safety, and challenge where necessary internal or external pressure for them to reconcile and restore relationships with those who continue to cause them harm.

As an embodied process, creative interventions that engage the body and imagination may be particularly valuable. We can for example explore with a client practising movement associated with forgiveness, factors that resonate with the client such as letting go, overcoming, re-connecting, moving on – a dance of forgiveness.

As a transcendent process, we can borrow from recovery models the concept that something that feels beyond our own power can be handed over to God (or a person's sense of the divine) and entrusted to them. With Christian clients it might be helpful, in the same vein, to encourage meditation on Jesus' request on the cross that God the Father forgive those who were crucifying him (rather than Jesus being the forgiver in that moment) (Luke 23:34).

Working with forgiveness, we need to ensure that the client has permission to be and continue in a state of non-forgiveness. However, the process of considering forgiveness may nonetheless be helpful, and pressing into resistance will unearth tensions that are helpful in understanding and working through. For example: 'if I forgive, I am saying that the death of my child does not matter?'

Another helpful frame is to separate the act from the person who committed it. A client may begin to develop some empathy for the perpetrator, without having to come to terms with their actions. An act or crime can be understood as simply evil. For example, murder, child sexual abuse, genocide, torture etc can remain as violations of what it is to be human; inexcusable acts – without the people involved being themselves evil.

THERAPEUTIC MODELS OF FORGIVENESS

The two most referenced models of forgiveness are the Enright and Worthington Models (widely available on the internet). The **Enright Process Model** has four phases (and several steps associated with each phase):

1. Uncovering – this is the time to process negative emotions: grief, loss, anger, desire for revenge etc. **2. Decision** – at some point the client will become aware that processing this negative energy is not helping them move beyond, and makes a decision/commitment to explore the concept of forgiveness to bring some relief and healing. **3. (Hard) work** – this is work associated with exploring forgiveness that utilises capabilities like those uncovered by The Forgiveness Project listed above. Enright talks about the importance of the person accepting and bearing the pain of what has happened and being willing to extend goodwill to the perpetrator. **4. Deepening phase** – this is the transformative phase where the person begins to experience the transformative qualities of forgiveness and personal growth.

The **Worthington Model** is somewhat simpler and more readily accessible as a stepped programme. It is known as the REACH model:

R – recall the hurt (time of processing feelings). **E** – empathise with your partner (using empty chair techniques to express your point of view and to try to inhabit theirs). **A** – altruistic gift (freely give forgiveness as a gift to the other). **C** – commit to this gift (remind yourself of the commitment regularly by e.g., writing a note). **H** – hold onto forgiveness (when you begin to waiver, remind yourself of the fact that you have forgiven already by reading your note).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I hope that this all-too-brief consideration of forgiveness in a therapeutic context may be a helpful starting point (or refresher) for counsellors and psychotherapists who want to explore forgiveness for the benefit of their clients.

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